

Somewhere I Have Never Traveled
by Savageland

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION



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A RED HEN PUBLICATION



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Somewhere I'll Have Never Traveled

Savageland



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SOMEWHERE I HAVE NEVER TRAVELED was my first-ever long work of fiction. Writing it was tremendous fun and, indeed, took me “gladly beyond any experience.”

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friendships come in threes

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

(e.e. cummings)

SEPTEMBER NINETEENTH, well after sunset. The sky above the Ministry for Magic Restricted Zone roiled with clouds. The air bit damply into the skins of all security personnel unlucky enough to be on broom-patrol above the Zone that night. The cobbled streets converging on the new Ministry building's dark bulk shone with drizzle. But warm lamplight glowed from the windows of the many expensive Zone flats surrounding the Ministry, and smoke purred from the many chimneys.

Doctor Hermione Granger's flat was one of the poshest, an uncharacteristic state of affairs for which Parvati Patil-Thomas was responsible. Over the years, she had managed to parlay her long-time interest in frivolities into an astonishingly successful home-décor consulting business, catering to respectable Ministry staff, apparatchiks, and members of the wizarding world who had profited from the lucrative defence-business. She'd had no trouble persuading Harmer's top magical design consultant to "do" all of Hermione's colours and furniture. 'I'll hear no argument from you,' Parvati said when

friendships come in threes



Hermione protested that this sort of thing simply wasn't "her," 'You *are* the Ministry's most senior researcher *and* an Order of Merlin First Class recipient, so you absolutely *must* entertain, and you absolutely *can't* get away with throw-cushions and that ghastly old settee you've had since your days at that Muggle university.'

'Cambridge.'

Parvati had sniffed. And Hermione had meekly stayed out of the way when Harmer's chief decorator invaded her flat.

But as it turned out, the closest Hermione came to 'entertaining' was having Ginny and Parvati over once or twice a month for drinks. This September nineteenth, her fiftieth birthday, was typical. Though Ginny had mentioned something about taking Hermione out for dinner, none of them felt like venturing into the damp once cosily ensconced in Hermione's designer living room.

'Pour us another glass, H'mione,' Ginny slurred. It was getting late, and several bottles of wine and at least half a dozen cartons of the Zone's spiciest take-away Indian food were scattered throughout Hermione's living room, somewhat spoiling the designer effect (ever since the Global Goblin Consortium had broken the Zone house-elves' nascent union, Hermione refused on principle to use elf services and routinely fired off parchments of protest to the GGC, though to no avail).

'Are you sure?' Hermione asked. She hated it when Ginny drank too much.

'Why not? It's in honour've your bloody fiftieth, right? Cheers, love.'

'Can't believe it. Fifty. I don't feel like it.'

'You don't look like it either. I don't know how you keep your stomach as flat as the fucking Dead Sea, and your legs go on for—forever.'

'Don't say "fucking," Ginny,' said Parvati, smothering a grin. 'It's so crude.'

'Growing old's a bugger.' Ginny stared at Hermione accusingly. 'How do you keep so trim? Damn it, you spend all day at a desk...'

Hermione laughed. 'Believe me, every new day's a reminder I'm middle-aged. And besides, I've earned every single grey hair and wrinkle, damn it.' She raised her glass.

Ginny snorted. 'Grey hair and wrinkles. What bollocks. A bit of silver and a tiny line or two! In dim light you could pass for eighteen.'

Hermione almost choked on her wine. 'Oh for heaven's sake, Ginny. Even if I could, why would I ever want to be that age again?'

'Was it really that bad? You started to become a bit more interesting in seventh-year,' said Parvati.

'What does *that* mean?'

'You don't remember how we teased you about perving on horrid old Snape?'

Ginny hooted with laughter. 'Oh God—I'd forgotten that!'

Hermione thumped her glass down on one of her trendy low designer tables and stared at Parvati, her expression amused and scandalised. 'And so had

I—mercifully. I still can't believe you thought I had a crush on him.'

'Well, I think you did, in a way,' said Parvati.

'I did *not*. Professor Snape was my Potions NEWT supervisor. Obviously I spent quite a bit of time in his lab. Obviously I wanted to please him. But perv-ing? That would have been—' Hermione shook her head '—impossible.'

'I remember you saying once he was fascinating,' Parvati pressed on.

'Well, he was a spy. And I remember he could duel very well. That might have a certain romantic appeal... for an eighteen-year-old. I suppose he was fascinating, in his own peculiar way.'

'In a horrible way—like any Slytherin snake.' Ginny gulped more wine.

'Professor Snape saved Harry's life,' said Hermione, and now her tone had a bit of an edge.

There was a short, uneasy silence. Then Parvati drained her glass and set it down with a thump on one of Hermione's low designer tables.

'It's late. Come on, Ginny, love—time to go.'

But Ginny just stared pensively into her wine-glass. 'So where is Harry these days?' she asked, a little too casually.

Hermione looked sad. 'I have no idea. I hoped he'd owl me. He usually doesn't miss my birthday.'

'Well,' said Parvati, 'He must be in the field again. He disappears for weeks at a time, doesn't he, he and his band of counter-terrorist Aurors. Looking for—' She shut her mouth and winced, shooting a

wry look at Ginny, who swallowed another mouthful of wine and patted Parvati on the knee.

'It's all right, love. We all know Heroic Harry's looking for Draco fucking Malfoy, my charming ex-husband.'

Hermione swallowed, dreading the prospect of Ginny derailing the evening with one of her wine-induced diatribes about the few bitter years she'd spent married, at seventeen, to Draco. 'He fascinated me. And I deluded myself into thinking he wanted me,' Ginny said long afterwards. She'd fallen in lust, in other words, but as well had bartered her vivid beauty for an oath that the Pureblood Movement would no longer hunt down the few other surviving Weasleys as blood traitors. She had escaped that travesty of a relationship only after Draco had disappeared to rejoin the Death Eaters permanently: and from that moment on, the Weasleys' lives had once again been forfeit.

Hermione had had years of experience letting Ginny vent her enormous, unending rage at Draco's abuses and her grief at how her life had been ruined... at which point, Harry's name, Ginny's symbol for something that might have been, would inevitably come up. Even though Ginny refused even to speak to Harry these days, her words would circle around him obsessively, and any attempted conversational diversions were like trying to stop a speeding train by jumping up and down on the tracks and waving.

'I'm sure I'll hear from Harry any day now,' Hermione said with as much tact as she could.

'Fuck Harry,' said Ginny fiercely. 'If he cared about you, he'd find a way to send an owl on your fucking birthday.' She swallowed the last of her wine.

Parvati got up and reached down to Ginny. 'Right, love. Time to get you home. Come on, up—up.' Between them, she and Hermione heaved Ginny to her feet and steered her over to the front door.

'Ginny, why you don't just use the Floo Secure-Net? You have clearance,' said Hermione, without thinking, and had the grace to flush when Ginny laughed a bit sadly.

'We don't all have your skinny arse, darling. Can you imagine me fitting into your fashionably tiny fireplace?'

'We'd pop over more often if we could just Apparate,' said Parvati. 'It's just a bit inconvenient of you to live in the Restricted Zone.'

'Well, it's convenient for those of us who toil in the bowels of the Ministry,' said Hermione. 'Look Ginny, why don't you leave your broom with me tonight and just take the Zone Bus to the nearest Apparation point.'

'That sodding contraption? Makes me air-sick. No, no, I'm fine to use my broom. Really.'

'Parvati, could you give her a lift?'

'Erm—' Parvati looked embarrassed. 'My broom's, you know, an older one—rated up to twenty stone.'

'Forget that,' said Ginny. 'I obviously tip the scales just a wee bit. I'll be fine, love.'

'I'll follow you, all right? I'll see you home,' said Parvati.

'Fantastic. Just stop worrying,' said Ginny, enfolding Hermione in a hug of epic proportions. 'Happy Birthday again. Thanks for having us over.'

'Yeah, Hermione, it was lovely.' Parvati's graceful, golden-brown hands cupped Hermione's face. 'Many happy returns.'

Hermione watched from the door, hugging herself against the chill, until her two closest friends got their brooms into the air. Ginny, flying low and looking a little wobbly, made a rude gesture as Parvati yelled at her to 'Pull the nose up, you silly cow!' Neither of the two security-witches hovering nearby, ready to escort them to the border of the Restricted Zone, seemed impressed with this performance. Hermione bit her bottom lip, not sure whether to laugh or worry, as the party disappeared into the moonless night.

They were, excepting Harry, the only old friends she had left, her only links to the few years at Hogwarts when her major worries—besides watching over Harry and Ron—were her OWLS and NEWTS. Yet that past was one of the only things she and her friends seldom discussed. Tonight had been an exception—an attack of mid-life angst, perhaps. What else did they talk about? Men? That always put Parvati and Hermione on the alert, ready to steer the conversation away from Draco Malfoy. Politics? Neither Parvati nor Ginny had much inclination to dissect the almost daily reports of terrorism sweeping up out of the east and south as more Pureblood Movement cells sprang up outside of Britain. Generally they ended up gossiping about various

celebrities and Ministry figureheads, some of whom they'd known at Hogwarts. Parvati had few interests outside her admittedly thriving catalogue business: 'RICH WITCHES' STITCHES: next-day delivery by secure owl post.' And Ginny? One of the many things Hermione found sad about the times in which they lived was looking at the fat, angry woman and remembering the bright, brave sixth-year. Lucid and witty one minute, then depending on how much she'd had to drink, bitter and angry the next: volatile as quicksilver and sometimes twice as poisonous, Ginny was best taken in small doses, spaced well apart.

Yet without these two women's company, her expensive living room looked sad and cold by the light of the dying fire, strewn with stained wineglasses, bottles of wine in various stages of emptiness, and containers of left-over take-away. Hermione felt too muzzy even to try a cleaning-spell. Instead, she sank into the oversized chair closest to the fire, leaned her head back, and closed her eyes, feeling a bit dizzy.

'Hermione.'

Familiar voice. She must be dreaming.

'Hermione! Wake up!'

She lurched upright, eyes wide, and found herself staring at the head of Harry Potter, floating eerily amidst the emerald flames in her fireplace. The image smiled crookedly at her.

'Happy Birthday, birthday girl.'

'Harry! God, it's been months.'

'I'm just here for a quick debriefing at the Ministry, then re-deployment. Mysterious new orders.'

I'm meeting with the Minister herself first thing in the morning. Meantime, I persuaded her to let me use her fireplace.' He grinned. 'It's nice when old friends occupy high places.'

Hermione looked dismayed. 'They're sending you away again so soon?'

'More nasty stuff developing with the Purebloods.' His face twisted. 'According to scuttlebutt, it might involve a cursed ugly festering nest of Dementors as well. All supporting Malfoy, of course.'

'Harry,' she said gently, 'you've been looking for Draco ever since we broke the Carborundorum Curse. Of course his followers would want everyone to think their leader's alive. But after all this time, how likely is that?'

'Hermione, let's not get into this discussion,' said Harry, scowling. 'You know bloody well where I stand. Just because one weapon is no longer a threat doesn't mean we can all sit back in our nice cosy flats now and say, "Right, the world's safe!"'

'Just because I do my counter-terrorism work in a lab instead of crawling around mountain caves, you think I take our safety for granted? That's rich, Harry. *Who* neutralised Carborundorum again? Remind me—I must be getting old—I can't quite remember...'

Harry glared at her. 'Bloody hell, Hermione, you know that's not what I meant.'

'No? Compared to you, most people must seem complacent. You feel you have to put your life on the line every time you hear another rumour about Draco.'

'Of course! What other choice is there? Most

people have no idea what Draco and his fanatics are capable of. They think the worst is over because the great Harry Potter killed Voldemort thirty-two years ago. They think Lucius Malfoy got what he deserved for killing Ron. And they once believed Malfoy Junior was just an innocent schoolboy abused and brainwashed by his evil daddy.'

'Ginny believed that too,' Hermione said quietly.

Harry's worn face spasmed with pain. 'One more good reason to capture Draco alive and crush him. I take full responsibility for what he did to Ginny.'

'Have you ever told her that? It might mean something if you did.'

'Forget it.' Harry's mouth twisted. 'There's nothing I can say to Ginny now, and even if I could, she wouldn't have it. It's too late. But I have to find Draco soon, and not just because of Ginny.' He fixed her with the same intense green gaze she remembered from their youth. 'The Malfoy scum's not only very much alive, but certain people who make it their business to know these things believe he'll soon have a lovely new weapon to play with.'

Hermione raised her eyebrows. 'Really? What kind of weapon?'

'Hmm. I'm not supposed to say...'

'I *do* have Bet-level security clearance. One step above you, I believe,' Hermione said coolly.

Harry gave her a wry look. 'Of course you do. Well then—it seems Malfoy has access to something new and very powerful.'

Hermione shook her head. 'We've heard these

kinds of threats before, and they never pan out. Every time the Ministry receive new threats, we end up with less freedom of movement and fewer liberties.'

'The Warlocks are working with us on this one, Hermione. They've infiltrated Malfoy's cell and found enough evidence to convince the Ministry that something very nasty's going down.'

'The Warlocks?'

'Bloody right.'

'Shit.'

The Warlocks' shadowy, ultra-sophisticated network and advanced counter-terrorism methods made the Department of Mysteries look like Hogwarts first-years. *If the Warlocks are convinced that a new weapon of mass destruction was in the works, then god help us all.* For a long moment Hermione stared at her hands, not at all surprised that her fingers were clenched so tightly.

'So,' said Harry, 'that's why I have to go away again first thing. But not before wishing you Happy Birthday.'

'Harry.' Hermione felt her throat contract. 'You can't wish me Happy Birthday properly when half of you is sticking out of my fireplace. Why not bring the rest of yourself over here and have a drink with me? Just for a while?'

Harry looked behind his shoulder as if checking something out, then his lined, tired face smoothed out a bit, and one corner of his mouth quirked in the ghost of a smile. 'Remind me to sign a memo for Tonks granting me permission to take leave for an hour or two. Okay. Step back a bit.' Emerald flames flared, and Harry stepped lightly into her living

room. With a backhand flick of his wand, he banished the fine cloud of soot he'd brought with him and subdued the flames, then wrapped dusty arms around Hermione, buried his silver-grey head in her shoulder, and held her for a long time.

'Happy Birthday again,' he finally said, his voice muffled by her shoulder.

'You're a sad bastard, Harry, but I'm glad you're here,' she murmured.

He laughed and pulled away, looking her over as if to check her condition. He hadn't worn glasses in years; they got in the way during fieldwork, he claimed. Hermione privately thought they got in the way of using his startling green gaze to seduce as many witches as possible. Worn at the edges he might be, his compact, muscular body a little battered, with a lot more scars than the faded lightning-bolt on his forehead... but women adored him.

Sometimes Hermione found the Harry Potter mystique just a bit tiresome.

'Sit down, Harry. Let me pour you some of my birthday wine.' She conjured up a clean glass and filled it, handed it to him, and found her own.

'To us three.' Harry clinked his glass against hers.

'Us three,' she echoed. To Ron, she thought, and knew Harry was thinking the same thing. Sometimes she felt nothing when remembering Ron's death; at other times, the memory cut like glass. Tonight she felt her throat tighten so much she wasn't sure she could swallow a drop. Harry downed his wine in two or three gulps, abruptly put his glass down,

and buried his head in his hands. Hermione waited this out, as she'd done many times before. After a minute or two, he took a deep, wavering breath and raised his head, looking into the fire.

'Sometimes it seems like only last week we were all together at Hogwarts.'

'You say that every time you or I have a birthday,' she pointed out gently.

'Really?' He gave a wry smile. 'I'm becoming a sodding bore, aren't I?' He aimed his wand at the wine-bottle, which floated into his hand. He poured and drank some more, but rather than relaxing, he turned his green gaze on her with an intensity she found disquieting.

'Hermione, I have a theory.'

'Oh?' she smiled.

'I think you know something about Draco Malfoy's latest weapon.'

She almost choked on her wine. 'I'd say,' she answered after a moment, 'that you're dead wrong.'

'Really? I think the weapon has something to do with time travel. That ring a bell?'

The shock of Harry's words made her stop breathing for a moment. Then she said with deliberate casualness, 'No, actually.'

Harry surged to his feet. 'Hermione, I may have only Gimmel-level clearance, but I have some talent for discovering secrets. I know you've been working with the Department of Mysteries on developing long-range Time-Turners.'

'You know how rumours fly about the Ministry these days, Harry.'

'Hermione, you've always been a terrible liar.'

She looked into the depths of her wine glass for a long moment. Then she sighed. 'What exactly have you heard?'

He sat back down and looked at her steadily. 'That you and your team have successfully extended the range of a Time-Turner so you can travel years into the past. Even decades.'

'Leave out the word "successfully" and you're part way there.' She traced one finger around the damp rim of her wineglass. An eerie vibration filled the air.

'You went back forty years. That's what I heard. From a very reliable source.'

'If I *ever* find out who that source is, I'll make him vomit Blast-Ended Skrewts.' She sighed again. Harry waited, sensing he'd won.

'We sent *frogs* back. One went back twenty years. Two went back forty.'

'And... ?' said Harry carefully.

'And... one never returned. The two that did return were dead on arrival. Not just dead. *Dissolved*.'

'Fuck me,' said Harry. 'Why? What went wrong?'

Hermione leaned back in her chair and sighed. 'The technical explanation is—'

'I'm not one of your students, Doctor Granger. Just a poor brainless Auror.'

Hermione snorted. 'The bottom line, Mr Potter, is that if you use this Time-Turner to go back more than a few years, everything that holds you together at the quantum level eventually destabilises.' She smiled grimly. 'Our too, too sullied flesh would

melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew.'

'Forget about *Romeo and Juliet* for now and tell me more about this "quantum" stuff. Use small words, please.'

Hermione winced. Despite (or maybe because of) Harry's childhood incarceration with the Dursleys, his ignorance of Muggle high culture had always been appalling.

'Small words? Well—' And suddenly she had the strangest feeling Harry was remembering with amusement the bushy-haired little swot she'd been during her first few years at Hogwarts. 'Quantum theory describes—or tries to describe—how things operate at the smallest possible levels of existence, where matter and energy are interchangeable. At that tiny scale, the properties of so-called science and so-called magic merge. In effect, everything is magic. Or it might as well be.'

Harry looked faintly shocked. 'They let you use Muggle science to mess with a Time-Turner?'

'Science is one of my specialties. What did you think I was reading in Cambridge twenty-five years ago? Divination?'

'Tell me more about this—destabilisation,' said Harry. 'How do you prevent it?'

Hermione sat upright and glared at her old friend. 'For God's sake, Harry, this is the fundamental nature of the universe we're dealing with. Not all our magic, and not Muggle science, will allow us to predict where or when the smallest units of matter and energy are going to be, or even exactly what form they'll take.' She sighed. 'My team tried



to control these uncertainties with magic. Since that's a tool Muggle quantum physicists don't have, I hoped we could create a new synthesis.'

'But the project failed,' Harry said, and now she had the peculiar feeling he was almost relieved.

'Er—yes,' Hermione said, surprised at how defensive she felt. 'Though at least we established a safe range for Time-Turners. A traveller going less than five years into the past will be fine; the quantum effects are too small to matter. More than five or six years, and you risk experiencing some quantum destabilisation. Go back decades, and it's a one-way trip to the graveyard. End of story.'

Harry leaned back in his chair. 'So someone using one of these experimental Time-Turners to travel back far enough to, say, influence the Final Battle will simply die?'

'If they even make it back that far, yes — they'll die.'

'Do they die right away, as soon as they arrive in the past, or—what?'

Hermione hissed, exasperated. 'Probably not right away, no, but they certainly won't come back intact. The bottom line is—our experiment isn't a defence option unless we get volunteers willing to commit suicide. The D.O.M. are going to lock the project up and throw away the key. So can you honestly see Draco Malfoy using one of these as a weapon? He loves his own skin too much.'

'Well, let me think,' said Harry, a bitter edge to his voice. 'How about forcibly sending recruits back to the Hogwarts of thirty-two years ago, all armed



with Carborundorum, so the Pureblood Movement can well and truly finish the job they started?'

There was a tense silence.

'Can you be absolutely sure,' Harry pressed, 'that Draco and his friends aren't interested in your little project, Hermione? Are you *certain* they have no way of getting their hands on one of your Time-Turners?'

Hermione had discovered years ago that there was little she could contribute to Harry's ongoing analysis of Draco Malfoy's cunning, depths of evil, and utter disregard for human life. But this time she raised her chin and glared at her dearest friend.

'You know our security measures well, Harry—but I know them better. And I'm telling you that unless there's a traitor in our midst that our best Legilimens or the Warlocks haven't discovered, no one can get into our lab.'

'And I'm *just* cynical enough to think that because of the recent cut-backs at the Ministry, those measures aren't as strong as they should be.'

Hermione shook her head. 'There's no point talking any more about this.'

'You're right,' said Harry. He grinned ruefully. 'It was nice to fantasise about charging back thirty-odd years and setting everything to rights. Now, it seems, I'll have to be content with simply finding and dismembering—with good old-fashioned magic—the miserable son of the fucking bastard who killed Ron.'

Hermione said nothing. It was usually best that way.

'I hope my new orders'll point us right to where he and his cell are hiding. We've been getting so close.'



She shook her head. 'Harry... whatever your orders are, please be careful.' She tried to smile. 'I want you back here for my next birthday.'

Now Harry gave a bark of laughter. 'I'm the Boy-Who-Keeps-On-Living, remember? Once I've handed Malfoy and every evil sack of shite in his Death Eaters' nest a no-time-limit, all-expenses-paid deluxe pass to a slow and painful end, I'll retire. I mean it. No more missions. I'll bugger off to the Azores. You can visit me there on my fiftieth.'

Hermione, for no reason she could fathom, started laughing and couldn't stop. She put her glass down and slumped back in her chair, hands over her face.

'Excellent,' said Harry, looking bemused. 'I've irritated the hell out of you and made you helpless with laughter, all in the same evening. Can I entertain a lady, or what?' He got up, went over to Hermione, pulled her hands gently from her face, and held her until she calmed down.

Neither of them was quite sure when the embrace morphed from friendly, to needy, to passionate, who started kissing whom first, or when laughter turned to moans of pleasure.

'I agree,' said Hermione huskily some time later, when they lay sprawled on the living room rug, bodies traced by the dying light of the fire. 'You do know how to entertain a lady.'



friendships come in threes

CHAPTER TWO

the man who died

PERSONAL NOTES: 20TH SEPTEMBER

It's happened again.

For years, I'd thought of Harry almost as a brother. He'd appear without warning in my life after months, even years, of absence. I'd listen to him, ply him with alcohol, commiserate with him about his love life, and re-live the past with him. And sometimes cry with him.

Then one night about five years ago now (after what was probably an almost lethal combination of alcohol and tears), I reached for him, or he reached for me, and by the next morning we had become lovers. Except that's not the right word at all, for as I remember it, Harry rolled away from me, scrambled into his clothes, dropped a quick kiss on my bushy morning head, and had vanished through the Floo before I had even fully woken up. I now realise he was between relationships that night, and I imagine—though we never discussed it—that he felt a bit embarrassed the morning after about shagging his old friend, the bookish Hermione Granger, spinster-witch of the North.



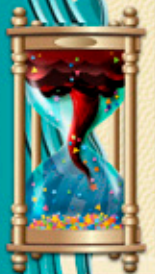
I suppose it was a good thing I didn't see Harry 'til months afterwards. After a slightly uncomfortable few minutes, we relaxed back into our old patterns of friendship.

By then, enough time had passed, and he was in another relationship—and surprisingly, so was I, for a while at least.

So I chalked up that one strange encounter with my dearest friend as a severe case of the lonelies: that disease whose symptoms sometimes strike people who've buried themselves in work and suddenly wake up one morning wondering what it would have been like to love and be loved, to share your life with a soul-mate. When the lonelies strike and an old friend like Harry drops by, and at some point you feel the tears coming and he hugs you, and you know that beneath the cynical toughness he's still the brave boy you met on the train to Hogwarts—the boy you grew up with and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with, the boy who will always love you in his own strange way... then it takes a will much stronger than mine to reject comfort from that friend when it comes your way, even if it vanishes in the morning more quickly than snow in March.

And last night it happened again. Brief, bitter

the man who died



sweet, and over too soon, and there we were, lying tangled together, breathing hard, and still entirely clothed. I sensed Harry was far away, and had a chilly feeling that none of this should be happening. It was the strangest, saddest sensation: as if, at this very moment, I was betraying a lover I'd never had. You'd think I'd have learnt from the last time this happened that this is wrong, we're friends... but as they say, you're never too old to be an idiot.

After a while, Harry pushed himself up on his elbows, captured me in his clear green gaze, and asked me if I was all right.

I made myself smile and tell him that yes, he does know how to entertain a lady. And that was no lie.

He smiled back, kissed me, helped me to sit up, pulled his clothing back together, and said apologetically that he had to run.

I smiled back, kept the tone light, said a birthday present like this ought to be illegal, and told him again to be careful. He gave me a hug and a crooked grin, reminded me to look him up in the Azores, and cast the Floo-powder.

Now I'm exhausted. And I still have a talk to finish for tomorrow. Oh, the high-flying life of a top-level Ministry researcher—heigh-ho, heigh-ho.

the man who died





'On behalf of the Society for Applied Arithmancy, I'm delighted to introduce our keynote speaker, Doctor Hermione Granger, who has served in the Ministry of Magic for over twenty-five years. She is a distinguished graduate of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She achieved her Masters degree at the London Institute of Magick, and gained a doctorate in Applied Arithmancy and Theoretical Physick from Cambridge University...'

Hermione winced. To the wizarding world, her decision to attend any Muggle university, Cambridge or not, was as mysterious as the differences between 'Arithmancy' and 'Mathematics,' or 'Physick' and 'Physics.' At least it was unlikely that anyone else in the room had recognized the session chair's gaffe.

'Dr. Granger's research focuses on neutralizing destructive curses and hexes and researching defensive magic. Her particular area of specialty is the Carborundorum Curse, first known to us thirty-two years ago when Voldemort unleashed it during the Battle of Hogwarts. This terrible weapon of mass destruction took the lives of many students and faculty—whom we now regard as heroes. Dr. Granger has dedicated her distinguished career to creating defences against such weapons. She has kindly agreed to speak to us today about the role of higher-order Arithmetical transformations in predicting the outcomes of counter-hexes. Please help me welcome Doctor Granger.'

the man who died

Hermione wasn't much surprised when, during the reception after her talk, most of the questions coming her way focused more on the Battle of Hogwarts and the gruesome effects of Carborundorum than Arithmancy. 'I can't imagine what it was like,' breathed a wide-eyed student. 'You saw Voldemort actually use it on people?'

'How long did it take for the Curse to work on a victim?'

'Is it true you saved Harry Potter's life?'

'Where on earth did you hear that? No, it's not true,' said Hermione, perhaps a bit sharply. 'It was Severus Snape who saved Harry's life.'

'Wasn't Snape a Death Eater?'

'Professor Snape was a spy for the Order and as much a war hero as anyone else who died that Hallowe'en.'

'I thought,' said the wide-eyed student, 'that he was some sort of terrorist.'

Hermione fixed the young man with the tight smile her graduate students had learnt to read as a bad sign.

'Have you actually studied the Carborundorum Curse?'

'Well,' said the student, blushing, 'not closely.'

'Of course you know that about sixty-five per cent of the adult human body is composed of water? Once cast, Carborundorum devours every single molecule of water in a victim's body. In less than a minute, nothing remains of the living human being but a few pounds of whitish powder.'

The student couldn't meet her eyes. The others gathered around her shuffled their feet uneasily.

the man who died

'It's a horrifying death, much worse than the Killing Curse because victims can feel themselves dying in terrible pain, cell by cell. It's a weapon only Voldemort, whose mind was utterly bent on death and horror, could create.' Hermione took a deep breath.

The wide-eyed student had turned white. She said a bit more gently, 'Professor Snape could never have used Carborundum. He was a man of honour who wanted only to atone for his mistakes. It would be helpful if you'd remember that.'



PERSONAL NOTES: 21ST SEPTEMBER

Severus Snape, terrorist. Good God. Is THAT what Hogwarts School for Defence-Craft and Wizardry are teaching kids nowadays? What's that old line?

DULCE ET DECORUM EST PRO PATRIA MORI. Some accounts do refer to Snape as a war-hero. Would Snape have hated or secretly enjoyed that?

Of course, Snape spent an entire career terrorising students, and he succeeded in terrifying me as well. But the Order opened my eyes about all sorts of things, including Snape. Only a month or so into seventh-year, when we knew Harry's final great confrontation with Voldemort could happen any time, it seemed to me that Snape's commit-

the man who died

ment to the destruction of his former Lord was sincere and unshakable, though not everyone in the Order thought so. I've wondered on and off for ages whether he died impulsively or allowed himself to be killed in hopes Voldemort would leave himself fatally vulnerable to Harry.

But that's when Harry had to make his choice: protect Ron or kill Voldemort.

I really don't spend that much time mourning the past. I don't think about Ron most days anymore, not even when I'm with Ginny. Only when I'm with Harry do I feel some of the tremendous loss and guilt he still struggles with. Even after all these years, I know Harry's never forgiven himself for the fact that the three are only two, just limping along.

But this is the second time in three days Snape's name has come up. Suddenly he's back haunting my thoughts again, filling them with what-ifs. Snape is like a path not taken. What if he HADN'T died that night? What if I'd been able to continue working with him? What might have happened? Would my life have been different? His?

I didn't lie the other night to Ginny and Parvati about not remembering being teased about Snape—I'd honestly forgotten that. But I certainly wasn't

the man who died



telling the whole truth when I said I may have found him a bit fascinating. I've never told anyone, and I never shall, about the nightmares I had for months and years after, about Snape. Sometimes I saw him die before my eyes. At other times he came close to me, and I'd feel him kissing me, touching, moving his body against mine—and I'd wake up with a terrible physical yearning for a man who in real life was anything but attractive. Those sex-dreams were just—horrible. Far worse than the nightmares of Snape dying.

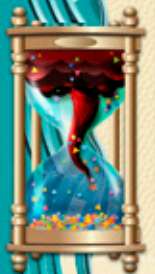
Thank God I hardly ever have them anymore.



Department of Mysteries
 Ministry of Magic
 CONFIDENTIAL MEMO—SECURITY LEVEL 'BET'
 September twenty-second
 TO: Doctor Hermione Granger
 FROM: Sebastian Alastor Moody, Department Head
 RE: Security Concerning Experimental Artefacts

It has come to the attention of the Department of Mysteries and Section Zero of the Ministry Restricted Zone Security patrol that sometime between eighteenth and nineteenth of September, between midnight and dawn, an unauthorised person or persons may have gained unauthorised access to the Time-Turner Vault.

the man who died



To our knowledge, no artefact was taken or tampered with. However, until further notice, you and your team-members must submit yourselves to thrice-daily searches, and the vault and other areas of the D.O.M. will be subjected to random security sweeps twenty-four hours a day. It is further requested that you and your team maintain constant vigilance.

P.S. Hermione, I know you and your team took every precaution. But I do need to see you tomorrow, as soon as I get back from the north.

- S.A.M



Hermione looked at the carefully immobilised Time-Turners. She and Sam were alone in the vault.

'You must have had a very good reason for not telling me right away that two of them have been tampered with,' she said in a low, controlled voice.

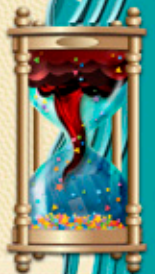
'That was the Minister's decision, taken whilst both of us were away,' Sam said, 'but I support it wholly.' He ran a hand through his short greying hair, his solemn face even graver looking than usual.

'Does anyone have a clue who might have done it?'

Sam just shook his head. 'The Minister assures me it's under thorough investigation—but it can only have been an insider.'

'Are my team and I going to be investigated?'

the man who died



'No. According to the Minister, the Warlock on the case has now cleared you and your team. In fact,' Sam looked uncomfortable, 'that's the main reason why none of you were told.'

'Oh,' said Hermione, not sure whether to be relieved that they were in the clear or furious that they'd been under a Warlock's surveillance. She turned back to the Time-Turners. 'But then, how were they tampered with? Have you used Prior Incantato?' Besides Hermione, Sam was the only other wizard in the D.O.M. able to use that spell on a magical object that wasn't a wand.

'Here's Artefact six-six-six-zero-one.' Sam tapped the bench with his wand, and silver writing appeared. Hermione bent close to look at it. 'Damn,' she breathed. 'It looks as if it went back at least twenty years, probably more, and it took—something.'

'Something small, as you can see. Something that certainly wasn't alive.'

Hermione bit her lower lip, shaking her head. 'But we still don't know anything else, do we? Not even whether this Time-Turner was taken out of the vault or not.'

Sam looked grim. 'Minister Tonks is aware of that possibility as well. But all we can do now is be vigilant for any new, unexpected developments.'

'What about the other one?'

'Six-six-six-zero-three is completely inert. It has no power whatsoever.'

'Prior Incantato?'

Sam shrugged. 'It's like doing the spell on an

the man who died

ordinary Muggle object. Nothing.'

Hermione frowned. 'I don't like the sound of that at all. Listen, guv, you'd better let me and my team—'

Sam put his hand on her arm. 'No, Hermione. Until these artefacts are neutralised in October as planned, the Minister wants no further experimentation of any kind.'

'Then why even keep them? Why not destroy them now?'

'The Warlocks may still need them as evidence for a while.'

'Then—what can I do? What should I do?' said Hermione bitterly.

Sam smiled sadly. 'How're your latest Hiding-in-Plain-Sight defences coming along?'



'Hermione.' Harry was standing in front of her. He looked ghastly pale, almost greenish. She couldn't see his eyes behind the owl-like glasses.

'Hermione, listen to me.'

He looked so young. The way he'd looked in seventh year at Hogwarts. He was even wearing his school robes.

'Go back, Hermione,' said Harry. 'You have to change what happened.'

Hermione tried to move her head. She couldn't. Her body felt nailed to the bed.

'Make everything the way it should have been.'

What are you talking about? she screamed silently.

The pale image of Harry gave a small, crooked grin. 'Take that one-way trip,' he said, 'You can do

the man who died



it, Hermione. All shall be well.' Then his smile grew, happiness beaming from his face as golden light blazed from him and reached out to embrace her.

Hermione woke with tears streaming down her cheeks. Trembling as if ill, she stumbled downstairs and huddled into her chair by the cold fireplace. When Tonks' head appeared an hour or so later, Hermione was far less surprised to see the Minister for Magic than Tonks was to see her. Tonks said something over and over, something that sounded like—Harry has been killed—but all Hermione could keep in her mind was how unsettling it was to see Tonks' eyes reddened with grief, as if the ex-Auror were crying over a smashed object far beyond the ability of any magic to fix.



PERSONAL NOTES

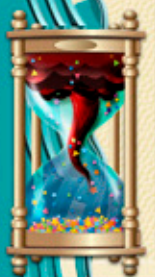
It seems Harry and a team of Aurors were about to smoke out Draco Malfoy's own Death Eater cell. They think Malfoy killed Harry. They also say that only Harry's clothes and wand could be found.



Three days later—

They held a Farewell for Harry. No body, but the Aurors brought his clothing and wand back for burning. Other than that, I don't remember much about it.

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I know Tonks presided, and Sam was there of course, looking tired and worried. Parvati and Dean came, and so did Ginny and the surviving Weasleys. What a sad lot. There were some tattered remnants of the old Hogwarts D.A. All kinds of Ministry people, of course. And a few witches I didn't know, all weeping.

A small band of field-Aurors, Harry's mates, stayed clustered together, faces drawn and grim, as if they were seeing their own futures. I heard a few of them whispering about the disappearance of Harry's body and 'a new weapon,' but as soon as they saw I was near enough to listen, they shut up.

At some point, we all stood up and said things about Harry. I said something as well, but I have no idea what. Shock is merciful. It allows you to feel only blunted edges of pain, and you can go through the motions of doing what's necessary, and mouth the expected responses to words of consolation and grief.



A week later—

I keep looking at my fireplace, expecting Harry to appear.



the man who died



A few days later—

Tonks came to see me (I think prompted by Sam, who seems to think he should be worried about me). She told me gently but in terms allowing no room for doubt that Harry is dead. What about the missing body? I kept asking. 'We found traces,' she said, her face drawn with sadness. 'Carborundorum?' I had to ask, though the thought of Harry being killed that way was nauseating. She assured me it wasn't and that whatever it was, he probably didn't suffer. How do you know that? If Malfoy killed him, he suffered all right, I said to her. Then she said she was giving me Aleph-level information, but that I had a right to know that Malfoy had been incarcerated at the time of Harry's death, and then interrogated using every technique at the Warlocks' disposal (many of them are not pleasant, but still far too merciful for Malfoy). They found evidence that Malfoy was indeed linked to Harry's death... but they couldn't say conclusively that Malfoy had killed Harry.

'When's Malfoy going before the Wizengamot?' I asked.

I remember very clearly how Tonks looked at me. 'He's not. He's been committed to the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's.'

I remember screaming at Tonks about how Malfoy

the man who died

deserved nothing less than imprisonment in Azkaban. Better yet, the Dementor's Kiss. He couldn't get off with insanity. He just couldn't.

But it seems he will.

Oh, Harry.



A day later—

I can't sleep. Over and over, I replay that dream I had the morning I heard of Harry's death, and I hear his voice saying, 'Take that one-way trip.' What the hell does that mean? When I do manage to sleep, his voice and image haunt my dreams. I'm glad I took Sam up on his offer to use some leave time. I'm good for nothing but spending days sitting at home in front of the fire, drinking wine and hearing Harry's voice, over and over—TAKE THAT ONE-WAY TRIP.



In the middle of the night—

Oh my God.

What if Harry was telling ME to go back to the past and change what happened?

Oh, this is insane. I have to get a grip.

the man who died



That afternoon—

I can't stop asking myself—what if I COULD change the past? What if I could bring those who died back to life? Shouldn't I at least try?

What if I COULD reverse what should never have happened over thirty years ago? What can I possibly lose by trying?

If dying like those frogs is the only price to pay for changing what happened, it's beginning to sound like a bargain to me.



In the middle of the night—

I have never, ever liked this bloody flat. It's a terrible flat. It's soulless and horrible. Like the Zone. Like living in these times. I could give it all up in a second.



After another night of no sleep—

Harry asked me—'Do you die as soon as you arrive in the past?' I wish I knew the answer to

the man who died



that. But I don't. So what the hell. Pay attention, class; this is a thought-experiment. Let's assume (because otherwise, I might as well slit my throat now) that Subject A will survive travelling back to the Hogwarts of her seventh year. How much time she'll have once she's there is anyone's guess. So how would Subject A get the information about the Carborundorum Curse and its counter-measures to Hogwarts in a way that's secure, believable (so they won't toss it to the Giant Squid for breakfast), and above all, FAST?

Another complication: Subject A can't reconstruct all those spells and potions alone. She'll need facilities. She'll need to work with someone. There are only two clear choices: Subject B, Dumbledore or Subject C, Snape.

It's simply another research project. Like a hundred other projects I've worked on, all requiring thought and organisation.

So let the experiment proceed. I'll code-name it 'Project Nostalgia.'

I've decided I'm not, repeat, NOT simply following instructions for my own death.



the man who died



FIRST REPORT ON PROJECT NOSTALGIA

I broke my leave today and came in to the D.O.M.—officially for one last visit to the Time-Turner vault before the project is shut down permanently later this month.

Harry was right. Despite all of Section Zero's security measures and body searches, it's still far too easy for one of my generation's most accomplished weavers of Defence spells to run rings around them. Let's just say that Artefact six-six-six-zero-one has escaped neutralisation, and it will be a very long time before anyone knows it's missing.

For good measure, once I got the thing home I performed *Prior Incantato* on it myself and found exactly what Sam showed me before: it did travel back at least twenty years, possibly more, and it carried a small, inert object back with it.

I now wonder about Malfoy and his new weapon, whatever it might be. I have the strongest feeling that my Time-Turner's involved somehow, and that Malfoy—that foul sack of Blast-Ended Skrewt-shite—has done something hideous. I have no evidence, but this 'tampering' with my Time-Turner stinks of him.

I must work faster.

A WEEK LATER

It's been a challenging exercise to conjure the

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aliases I'll need once I'm in the past—they have to be Dumbledore - and Snape-proof: double jeopardy. In any other context, I'd say I've been enjoying myself. I've had to construct spells to lay an appropriate trail of bumf, as Sam would call it: references, diplomas, and so forth—and create a high-endurance, low-level personal glamour to make it difficult for anyone to recognise me. One problem: this glamour takes energy. After a few days, if I live that long, I'll have very little to spare.

I've chosen a first name as solidly Celtic and unassuming as I can imagine. But my fake surname makes me smile—a little tribute to one of the greatest Muggle astrophysicists who ever graced a wheelchair.

Part of me regrets taking such a long and permanent journey without telling my only two close women friends how much they've meant to me. It seems such a shame to leave them only my Will. But saying good-bye, or even explaining, is not an option.



'Have you seen her or even spoken to her since the funeral?' Parvati demanded from the fireplace in Ginny's kitchen.

'Erm,' Ginny said uncomfortably, 'No. But didn't she say something like—I want to spend some time

the man who died

by myself? I didn't want to intrude.'

'Well,' said Parvati, 'I think we'd better check up on her. I heard from Lavender today, who heard from a friend of hers in the Department, that Hermione's not been at work for a while.'

'Well, perhaps she's taken a holiday. I would if I were her.' Parvati just looked at her, and Ginny sighed, shifting uncomfortably. 'All right. I'll see what I can find out from the Ministry.'

Though much marginalised by the shrunken Weasley clan these days, Ginny still had a friend or three where it counted. She found that Hermione had last been seen about a week ago, when she'd come in for a brief visit to the Department of Mysteries. The Ministry's official line was that Doctor Hermione Granger was taking an extended sabbatical and could not be reached.

Parvati frowned when Ginny reported this news. 'We need to go over to her flat.'

'Is that such a good idea? If she wants to see us, she'll let us know. If we just drop in, she has every right to tell us to sod off.'

Parvati's lips thinned. 'Fine, then at least we'll know she's all right. Look, I'm taking the Floo and I'm going over there right now. You can follow by broom or not at all.'

'Don't get your knickers in such a twist, Parvati. I'm coming with you. By Floo,' said Ginny grumpily, and the large woman's willingness to squeeze into and out of a small fireplace assured Parvati that Ginny was taking the situation most seriously.

the man who died



I Hope Not My Last Note

I can't believe I've just tidied the flat I hate so much. It's stupid, but I can't help it. I can't travel thirty years into the past, never to return, and leave an untidy flat behind.

If I'm successful, then the only record that I carried out what I'm convinced are Harry's final wishes will be here in this book of Notes, one of the only personal things I'm taking with me. I'm not even quite sure why I'm taking it, except that the researcher in me feels obliged to record the success or failure of the project.

If I am successful, will these notes still exist? I wish I knew.

I hear Harry's voice, over and over—Take that one-way trip, Hermione. I see the golden light that blazed from him in my dream, the night he died.

Here's to you, my dear one. Here's to all of you.



Hermione's flat was unwarded except for the front door. All was where it was supposed to be, except that the kitchen and main bedroom were

the man who died

preternaturally tidy. Everything was coated with a thin layer of dust, and the air throughout the flat seemed still and cold. A rolled parchment, sealed with the symbol of a Last Will and Testament, lay on the coffee table.

The women stared at each other, appalled. Parvati's face was grey.

'Oh, Hermione,' said Ginny softly. 'What in God's name have you done?'



the man who died

CHAPTER THREE

dueling powers

your slightest look easily will unclose me
though i have closed myself as fingers,
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skilfully,mysteriously)her first rose
e,e. cummings

HERMIONE,' said Ron softly. 'Class is starting.'

Her head resting in her hands, she gave no sign she'd heard him.

'Hermione!' Ron said loudly, and the young woman started, one elbow slipping off the table.

'What?' she snapped. Ron and Harry looked at each other. Harry rolled his eyes.

'Nice of you to visit us,' said Ron.

'Hmph. If you two could generate half a brain-cell's worth of intelligent conversation, I'd visit you more often.'

'Ron, I think we've been insulted,' said Harry, dead-pan.

'Aagh.' Ron screwed up his face. 'The social agony.'

'Oh, sod off,' snapped Hermione.

'Ten points from Gryffindor for swearing, Miss Granger.' All three heads snapped forward. Professor Severus Snape, who over the past year had apparently further refined his technique of creeping up on students, looked down at them with a most unpleasant smile. Hermione flushed dull red, but she raised her chin and looked Snape straight in the eye.

'I—I'm sorry, Professor. It won't happen again.'

Snape's black eyes glittered. 'I would think that goes without saying.' He turned away from Hermione and glared around at the group of sixth- and seventh-year students. Draco Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins wiped the smirks off their faces, and the subdued pre-class chatter faded into silence.

'I have the dubious honour,' Snape said in a soft voice that nonetheless filled the room, 'To welcome you to Hogwarts' first Master Class in Advanced Defences Against the Dark Arts. You may be wondering—' with a trace of a sneer '—why I'm here. Since knowledge of malignant Potions and their remedies is an integral part of defensive magic, and because I am also widely experienced in a range of defensive strategies, I have agreed to co-teach this Master Class with your Defence professor.'

'Bloody hell, Hermione,' Ron whispered. 'Double Snape all year for you.' Hermione elbowed his ribs.

'And we get double Lupin,' Harry murmured with a grin.

'Yeah, but where is he?' said Ron.

A loud bang from the doorway made everyone gasp, and someone shouted a harsh word Harry had never heard before. His hand jumped to his wand, then he froze as a cold, foul-smelling wind filled the room—a visible wind, as grey and filthy as ancient spider webs. It was heading straight for the Potions master. The hem of Snape's black robes billowed with the force of it, then the professor's wand was out and spitting golden light. With a low howl, the wind veered away from Snape and swept to the

window, whirled itself around a potted seedling on the sill, and then finally dissipated.

There was stunned silence.

'That,' said a pleasant baritone voice from the doorway, 'was a demonstration of a Blasting Curse. 'A particularly rare form.' All heads turned as Remus Lupin strolled in, smiling and perfectly collected. 'Does anyone recognise it?'

Hermione's hand shot up, and Lupin nodded at her. 'Was it the one used in the All-England Wizarding Duelling Competition of 1420?'

Lupin nodded. 'Quite right, Miss Granger. Ten points to Gryffindor.' Harry and Ron grinned at each other. Snape glowered. Draco and his cronies looked disgusted.

'The incantation is—' Lupin gestured to the blackboard with his wand, and the word '*Bleyke*' appeared in glowing silver letters. 'Literally, "to wither." Notice the plant on the window sill?'

Everyone craned heads to look. The seedling's tender green shoots were turning black and shrivelling.

'Ugh.' Parvati Patil shuddered.

'Now, Professor Snape,' and the Defence professor bowed to the Potions master, 'shall we demonstrate one or two other advanced curses?'

'It would be my pleasure,' said Snape silkily, casually transferring his wand to his left hand. '*Incendio!*' The word was soft, but the class gasped as Snape, with his free right hand, caught green fire shooting from his wand and hurled the fire in a ball toward Lupin. Harry cheered as Lupin deflected and dis-

sipated that spell, and then, grinning, switched his wand to his right hand and launched a Landslide spell at Snape, who dissipated the floor-to-ceiling wall of roaring mud into fine dust and whirled it away. Then Lupin was almost caught by Snape's Incarcerous attack, but a quick *'Limpen'* caused the thick ropes to fall harmlessly on the floor.

As Snape and Lupin circled each other, trading spells and counter-spells that in less expert hands would be deadly, it seemed to Hermione that Snape's smooth gestures belied an intense, tightly controlled exaltation. For years, she'd seen him stooped over students' cauldrons or sitting sullenly at the staff table in the Great Hall. How strangely fascinating now to see him move with such concentrated grace and power. And even stranger to find herself considering her least favourite professor in anything but the most repulsive terms.

'God,' Ginny whispered. 'Does this mean they're going to test us on two-handed duelling?'

'Nah,' said Ron, though he sounded unconvinced. 'The greasy git's just showing off.'

'And Lupin isn't?' said Hermione sharply.

'They're not even breaking a sweat,' said Dean.

'Blimey,' said Harry, deeply impressed.

Lupin finally called the class back to order and put everyone to work memorizing advanced curses and counter-measures. But for the rest of the morning, Hermione found—for reasons she couldn't fathom—that her gaze kept drifting to Professor Snape.



The mid-September night was perfect: crisp and clear, with a full moon just starting to descend. But in the bowels of the Malfoy mansion, there was only darkness, so thick and bitter Snape could almost feel it in his throat. He knew how close he was to the source of it by the throbbing of the Dark Mark on his arm. From all around him came the restless shuffling of booted feet and the whisper of cloaks as the gathered Death Eaters awaited their Lord.

'Why are we here?'

'Shhh.'

'This is unexpected.'

'Why has he summoned us now?'

'Shut your gob, Avery.'

'Filch. Some respect please.' Lucius Malfoy's low voice took on a dangerous edge. Snape could hear Filch swallow.

'Sorry, guv.'

'I have gathered you all here as our Master has instructed me,' Malfoy said tersely. 'He calls us at his pleasure, not at our convenience.'

As if on cue, a sickly green glow—like a slit cut into the dark—opened up in the centre of the room, scattering shadows before it. Snape could now see that every Death Eater was present. Though their faces were hooded as usual, he knew who almost all of them were. Filch was the most recent addition; nor, he thought grimly, was that surprising.

'He approaches,' said Malfoy, and gestured for the

Death Eaters nearest the light to back away—hardly necessary, since they were already retreating as fast as decorum would allow. The green glow pulsed and grew too powerful to look at; many cowed heads turned away. Snape, eyes narrowed behind his hood, was one of the few to see the tall, skeletally thin figure emerge.

The Dark Lord glared around his loyal circle. Though Snape had long overcome his terror of Voldemort, he still did everything he could to avoid looking into those flat, reptilian eyes. Malfoy was the first to come forward, go down on one knee, and kiss the hem of Voldemort's robe. Snape was one of the last to kneel, and as he did so, he seemed to feel the hungry red gaze burning on the back on his neck.

'The first among my servants,' Voldemort nodded at Malfoy 'has gathered you at my bidding so I might share news of interest to us. You will then receive new instructions.'

There was silence. Voldemort looked around the room. 'The news is a forthcoming victory for us. I wield a new weapon against which not even Harry Potter will be able to defend himself.'

Malfoy looked as smug as a cat with a mouthful of canary, whilst the other Death Eaters murmured.

Voldemort bared his teeth. 'Let me demonstrate. Bletchley, come forward.' His tone was almost soft, but the underlying command rang like iron. With a stifled bleat of fear, a short wizard shuffled out of the circle and stood alone. Snape could see him trembling.

'Feel free to defend yourself,' said Voldemort, with a dry chuckle. The short wizard's wand flew out

of his sleeve and into his shaking hand.

'M—Master,' gasped Bletchley, 'If—if I have done something wrong—'

Voldemort raised his own wand, almost lazily, and pointed it at Bletchley. 'On the contrary,' he said softly, 'You should be honoured.'

'Master, please—please!'

'*CARBORUNDORUM!*' Deep red fire—the colour of clotted blood—erupted from the tip of Voldemort's wand and engulfed Bletchley, who dropped his wand, flailing his arms as if trying to beat out the heatless flames devouring him. Then Bletchley screamed, and kept screaming. Though Snape had seen more than his fair share of pain and death, the strangled sounds Bletchley made as his throat and lungs burnt up cell by cell made Snape's blood freeze and his heart stammer. The ugly red flames grew brighter, their victim's form indistinct. When the hoarse, whistling screams finally faded into a death rattle, then into silence, and the flames vanished, Bletchley was gone. Marking the place where he had stood less than a minute earlier was a small pile of whitish powder.

The silence in the room was so deep that it was impossible for Snape to tell whether the assembled Death Eaters were awestruck or paralyzed with horror.

'If I may, my Lord,' Malfoy said. He turned toward the others, sweeping his hood theatrically back. His sculpted face was fierce with triumph. 'You have just seen a demonstration of the most powerful killing-curse ever devised. Like Avada Kedavra, this

one is unblockable and it has no counter-curse. But our enemies are prepared for the Killing Curse.’ He smiled. ‘They’re not prepared for this.’

‘Death-by-Fire has so many other wonderful properties,’ said Voldemort, savouring each syllable. ‘First and foremost, it not only kills, but kills slowly, inflicting pain even more unbearable than Cruciatius.’ Several Death Eaters murmured. ‘Such a spell would be completely demoralising. Second, and even better, oh so much better—’ the laugh issuing from under the cowl froze Snape’s blood, ‘—this Curse is amenable to additional spells that will allow it to kill not just one victim at a time, but up to a dozen or more, all at the same time. I’m now developing that capability.’

Another murmur filled the room.

Snape forced his frozen lips to move. ‘This is a momentous discovery, Lord.’

The reptilian eyes flared, and the lipless mouth parodied a smile. ‘I must credit Lucius for finding the parchments describing the spells. He realized that he’d uncovered a weapon that only I have the vision to understand and wield.’

‘It seems that the parchments have been in my family for—erm—quite some time,’ said Malfoy complacently. ‘No one knew their value. If I had not taken it upon myself this summer to scour my store-rooms once again for every possible resource, they might have remained hidden forever.’

A grey, scaly hand reached out to rest on Malfoy’s shoulder. ‘You did well, my chief among servants.’

Even in the midst of his horror, Snape realised something about this story sounded odd. As a Death Eater, Snape had been allowed many times into the bowels of the Malfoy mansion. He knew how meticulously Lucius organized and recorded the contents of his storerooms. Or to be more precise, how mercilessly Lucius rode his house-elves to do it. Lucius had once boasted that nothing, not even the smallest phial of poison, could escape notation. How could a set of such important parchments have remained “hidden” until only a few weeks ago?

There was only one possible answer: Malfoy had obtained them from someone, probably by force, and handed them to Voldemort. That would also help explain, Snape thought, how Malfoy had managed to maintain and even consolidate his status as the Dark Lord’s chief lieutenant so soon after his release from Azkaban. For Voldemort would otherwise have had little use for a Death Eater condemned to house arrest for the next five years.

‘You see,’ Voldemort mused, ‘it isn’t enough merely to rid the wizarding world of Harry Potter, or even Albus Dumbledore and all his sycophants. Our world must be *cleansed*. The many wounds inflicted on us by the Mudblood scourge must be cauterised. There is no crime against pure wizards—from whoredom to murder, from spell forgery to perjury, from castration to torture, from mock-trials to imprisonment in Azkaban, from poisoning to the defilement of pure-blood corpses—in which the names of Mudbloods and their spawn are not writ-

ten large as perpetrators or accomplices in the history of crimes against the purity of magic. *That—* and Voldemort placed his boot into the middle of the pile of white powder that had once been Bletchley ‘—is why it is our solemn duty to inflict Death-by-Fire. Death Eaters... are you with me?’

‘Yes, Lord!’ said several of the hooded figures.

Voldemort pushed his boot almost delicately into the pile of white powder and then flattened it like a child destroying a sand castle. Snape felt the muscles of his face go rigid and exerted every ounce of control to stop himself from vomiting.

‘Death Eaters,’ he said in a soft, dangerous voice. ‘Are you *behind* me? Are you *committed*?’

‘YES!’ This time everyone roared in unison, and the roof reverberated with the sound.

The rest of the meeting was much less dramatic: mainly humdrum regional reports of various disruptions and small atrocities, and then a discussion of Hogwarts’ defensive capabilities. Snape was almost grateful for the fact he had a relatively major role to play in this part of the meeting, for it allowed him to push the horrific image of Bletchley to the back of his mind.

But the reprieve was only temporary. When sometime around midnight, Dumbledore came to meet his chief spy for the Order of the Phoenix just inside Hogwarts’ gate, he found Snape leaning, shivering, on the wall against which he’d just been sick.

‘What has happened?’ asked the headmaster gently as he took Snape’s arm.

Snape looked at his mentor, and Dumbledore tried to disguise his shock. He had never before seen such bleak despair in the younger wizard’s eyes.



A few days later, Lupin knocked at the door of Snape’s office. The Potions master answered it, then stood aside sullenly as Lupin stepped in and looked at his colleague curiously.

‘I came to see if the Wolfsbane potion is finished,’ he said in a mild tone.

Snape gave a sharp nod. ‘Yes.’ He strode over to a low shelf, picked up a tapered black phial the size of a wine-bottle, and brought it over to Lupin, who took it, raising his eyebrows.

‘That’s enough for several months,’ the werewolf-in-remission commented.

‘In case you haven’t noticed, Lupin, I’m a spy for the Order, and lately things have been a bit dodgy. The headmaster has asked me to make enough to tide you over for a while.’

‘That’s thoughtful,’ said Lupin. ‘Has he considered having you train the brilliant Miss Granger as your back-up?’

Snape glared at Lupin, unable to decide whether he was imagining the irony or not, and then finally muttered, ‘I doubt any student has the ability to concoct an effective Wolfsbane potion. Now unless there’s something else, feel free to see yourself out.’ Turning his back on his colleague, he walked

through the other door of his office into his lab—not toward his long table but to a much smaller one tucked into an alcove right beside the door of his private rooms. Lupin followed curiously. Snape took a long-handled spoon and stirred the noxious-looking contents of a small cauldron bubbling over a burner. Also arranged on the small table were several sealed jars and bottles, a mortar and pestle, and a set of baroque measuring spoons in sizes ranging from one grain to sixteen drams. A silver paper-weight the exact size and shape of a man's severed hand was splayed over several parchments, holding them open. Lupin, who had little liking for that metal, kept a respectful distance.

'Not nearly viscous enough,' muttered Snape, bending over the cauldron to examine the bubbling substance.

'What are you working on?'

Snape removed the spoon and straightened, frowning. 'Why haven't you left?'

Lupin ignored that question. 'Does it have any kind of defensive use?'

'This is a student's NEWT project,' said Snape grudgingly.

'Really?' Lupin extended his neck cautiously and sniffed at the fumes dissipating above the cauldron. 'Good heavens. Smells like... mint.'

'The brilliant Miss Granger,' Snape said, not quite as sarcastically as he would have liked, 'is attempting to create a remedy against the Cruciatu*s* Curse.'

'She *isn't!* Merlin's balls!' Lupin's golden eyes

flared. 'That's fascinating. I wonder if she'll come up with something the Order can actually use?'

Snape's lip curled. 'Since I began teaching, only two other seventh-years have been foolish enough to try an experimental potion for their independent NEWT project. One of them produced a passable hair-conditioner.'

'Since Miss Granger isn't like most seventh-years, I'd put her odds of success at fair to middling, at least,' said Lupin. 'If you give her half a chance, that is,' he added astringently.

'Lupin, delightful as it is to exchange pleasantries with you, why the bloody hell haven't you left my lab yet?'

Lupin ran a hand through his greying hair. 'Actually, Severus, I'd like your assessment of our Master Class so far.'

'Our demonstrations seem to command their attention. A minor triumph.'

'Given your particular knowledge, Severus,' and Snape knew Lupin was not referring to his potions-making skills, 'do you think they'll be able to defend themselves if needed?'

'They'll have no choice,' said Snape, and something in his voice made Lupin's hackles rise. 'When the time comes, we'll need everyone, talented or not. Every possible measure. And even then, I very much fear that our combined forces—even with the great Harry Potter—will not be enough to stop Voldemort.'

'What are you saying? Do you—have new information?'



Snape pressed his hands against his forehead for a moment as if in pain, then looked at Lupin levelly. 'I assume you're coming to the Order meeting tomorrow.'

'Yes, of course.' Lupin took a breath. 'I take it the news is not good.'

Snape's tone, never gentle, took on a grim, despairing edge Lupin had never before heard. 'I've recently witnessed—an event that could change everything.'

Lupin thought he might be about to say more, but there was a knock on the outer door. Snape, after a glance at Lupin, moved to open it. Hermione Granger stood there, a clutch of parchments tucked under her arm.

'Yes?' said Snape harshly.

'Erm, Professor,' said Hermione, flushing. 'Is it all right if I do some work on my independent project?'

For just a second or two, Snape stood as if frozen, staring at the young woman, then took a breath and held the door open. 'Very well. Come in.'

'Hello, Hermione,' said Lupin with a smile.

She gave him a grin in return. 'Oh hello, Professor Lupin. I hope I'm not interrupting. I could come back later.'

'I was just leaving. Oh, almost forgot—' Lupin scooped up his Wolfsbane and nodded gravely to his colleague. 'Goodnight, Severus.'

Snape nodded coolly, then shut the door after him.

Hermione had learned over the past month not to bother engaging Professor Snape in small talk. Nor did she ever ask about points he might have deducted from Gryffindor on a given day. One of the condi-



tions of taking on an independent NEWT project was that house points were neither deducted nor added—allowing students more freedom to challenge their professors. She dumped her parchments on the table near her cauldron and, taking the same spoon Snape had used a few minutes earlier, stirred the steaming brew. Her face wrinkled in disappointment.

'Not viscous enough yet,' she murmured. Behind her back, Snape raised an amused eyebrow.

'Professor, would you mind taking a look at this parchment?' She unrolled it as Snape came over to her and looked over her shoulder.

'Interesting,' he said. 'You refer to a grimoire that's rarely used as a potions reference. Why did you choose it?'

'It lists the magical properties of—uh—bodily fluids,' said Hermione, and Snape could see her flush deepening. 'And I've been starting to think along the lines of adding human elements to my potion to see if that will strengthen its potential for defence.'

Snape had to admit to himself, if not to her, that this was an impressive stretch of imaginative reasoning for someone so young.

'There are a number of possible choices,' he said neutrally. 'Blood, tears, sweat, saliva, urine, semen, and vaginal lubricant.'

Hermione's face was scarlet. 'I thought I'd start using a small amount of my saliva.' She met his eyes briefly for confirmation.

'I agree. Go ahead. But I advise using no more than two minims to start.'



'Yes, Professor.'

'Carry on, Miss Granger. I'll be in the classroom, marking, if you need me.'

After Snape swept out of the room, Hermione leaned for a moment against the table, her heart pounding.

'Whew,' she said under her breath, 'How about a drachm or two of sweat instead? He likes my idea. Yes!' And her fist punched the air in triumph.



That night, Hermione dreamt she was at some sort of wizards' gathering. She didn't know anyone there. On a platform lay a coffin. When she moved over to the platform on which the body lay and looked down, she saw Harry lying there. Suddenly he looked old, far older than her father, and she knew he was dead. As she wept for him, the hands she held to her face were also those of a much older woman, skin stretched thinly over veins and bones.

Then she was down in the dungeons, standing outside the Potions classroom. *I have to get in there and work on my project*, she thought, and cracked open the classroom door. Snape was there, alone, standing in the middle of the room. He was wearing, not his dusty school robes, but a loose white shirt and black trousers, and his straggling shoulder-length hair was tied in a neat queue behind his head. Hermione could see the shadow of his lean torso through the thin shirt. He held no wand. He radiated elegance and danger.

A Dark thing materialized before him, its fiery wand raised high. Hermione stifled a gasp of warning. 'Three—two—one—go!' the thing said in a thick, gurgling voice, and red flames spewed from its wand. Snape stepped aside with the dexterity of a matador avoiding a maddened bull's charge, capturing the fire in his left hand and murmuring a spell as he did so. The flames shrank, their colour deepening, and in seconds had turned into several long-stemmed red roses.

'*Deletrius.*' Snape flicked his right hand at the Dark thing, which faded away like smoke. Then he turned toward where Hermione was standing and held the roses out to her.

'Come here,' he said. His low voice caressed her like silk, and he was smiling at her, his black eyes alight. Her mouth slack with astonishment, Hermione put one bare foot before the other and approached him.

'Will you be deducting points?' she whispered, as she stopped only inches from him. Instead of the smell of stale potions, he exuded a subtle spicy maleness, mixed with the scent of roses.

He captured her chin in his hand and smiled down at her. She noticed his teeth were even, white, and slightly pointed.

'We're not supposed to discuss points while working on an independent project, Hermione. You know that,' he murmured. Her eyes half-closed and the breath left her as the fingers on her jaw began to move, caressing her face.

This isn't Snape, she thought.

'Though i have closed myself as fingers,/you open always petal by petal myself,' she heard him say as though from a great distance. His hand moved down her throat to her breast and woke her nipple into hardness. He let the roses fall onto the floor between them, and then both his hands were upon her, fingers teasing her nipples through her thin night-robe. She moaned, arching into his touch. Hot breath moved over the crown of her head, and warm lips kissed her hair, whilst one hand slowly, slowly crept down her thigh and began to pull up her robe.

'Touch me, Hermione. All will be well,' and even as that phrase echoed strangely within her, she placed her palm flat against his chest. He covered her hand with his and—still kissing her hair—moved their entwined fingers slowly down his chest, past the waistband of his trousers. Then, too gently to alarm her, he placed their joined hands over his erection, and she spread her fingers with delight over his hardness.

Hermione woke suddenly, gasping, shivering as chilly air started drying her sweat-sheened skin. Her hand had crept under her nightgown to palm her naked breast, and her other—she felt her face flush with shame—was half-buried between her legs. Unable to stop herself, Hermione closed her eyes and, burying her face in her pillow to smother her gasps, let her body have its own way: shuddering with pleasure, guilt, and a strange, distant grief she couldn't have begun to explain.

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AS THE WARMTH of September faded into a cool blue October, a sense of expectation tightened around the school, like a bowstring being slowly pulled back. The Master Class students, some of whom had started out feeling rather chuffed at the beginning of term because they thought they were the *crème de la crème* of Hogwarts, had sobered under the unforgiving tutelage of the Snape-Lupin team. Hermione barely had time to think of anything but her studies, her duties as Head Girl, her independent Potions project... and, unbidden and interfering, the dream-image of an elegant, intense, black-haired man in white shirt and black trousers, and the ways in which his hands and mouth had opened her to pleasure.

For the first week or so after that startling, shameful dream, she had found herself so acutely embarrassed in Snape's presence that she could barely look at him in the Master Class or speak to him when working on her independent project. Fortunately Snape—who tolerated student questions only because not answering them might result in injury, property damage, or death—seemed not to notice Hermione's reticence.

The dream refused to replay, and at length Hermione began to regain some perspective. It helped that the real Snape remained deeply unpleasant: lurking around in his dusty black robes, greasy-haired, yellow-toothed, and perpetually ill-tempered looking. Soon she was able to bring her rigorous mind, schooled in consistency and parsimony, to bear on the fantasy and smile at how her unconscious could have concocted such romantic twaddle.

But her project was so fascinating. She wanted to spend hours on it. She barely wanted to do anything else. She hated that Snape would not allow her into the lab most evenings after dinner. She'd developed a real impatience for what passed for fun, intelligent pastimes in the Gryffindor common-room these days. Yes, true—instead of spending long hours dissecting Quidditch moves, Harry, Ron, and the rest now obsessively tested curses and counter-measures. But Hermione had to speak to them sharply one evening to stop them from destroying their own common room. Shortly afterward, she cajoled the Fat Lady to let them back in after that respectable House guardian changed the password and refused the lot of them entry, complaining that they might as well be a herd of wild beasts for all they cared about decent behaviour.

'You'd think we were all shagging each other senseless on the rug the way she's carrying on,' Ron grumped after the Fat Lady, still in tears, had reluctantly issued a new password.

'Oooh, Ron baby, come over here and do me,' said Harry, doubling up with laughter.

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'Eeew,' Ginny shoved Harry's shoulder hard, and he fell back into one of the overstuffed armchairs, still laughing.

'Cripes,' said Hermione, rolling her eyes. 'Just try not to do anything ridiculous while I'm gone, all right?' She headed back to the common room entrance, gathering parchments as she went, then cast a coy glance over her shoulder. 'Oh but Ron, if you do shag Harry senseless, please at least clean up after yourselves.'

'Bugger you, you tart!' said Harry, and Ginny hit him over the head. 'Ow!'

'Going off to do your independent project?' said Ron, his smile wicked. 'Or do your independent projects professor?'

'Aargh, Ron, that's disgusting,' said Parvati, burying her face in her hands.

Hermione, one foot on the threshold, paused and pretended to look thoughtful. 'Well,' she said slowly, 'I don't generally *do* my professors. I'm too busy trying to *do* my homework. But hmm—let me think. Professor Snape has a horrid temper, bad teeth, and a nasty habit of lurking in the dungeons. But he's powerful, brilliant, duels like a fiend, and could tie you up in knots with his little finger, Ron. Also, much as I hate to break it to you, he's a grown-up, and grown-up men do have a certain appeal. Good night.'

'Game, set, and match, Ron,' said Dean, breaking the deep, respectful silence following Hermione's departure.

'She *likes* Professor Snape?' Parvati couldn't get over that part.

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Harry pushed himself up and clapped Ron on the back. 'Come on, mate. She's just taking the piss. Don't forget, I know what's inside Snape's mind. Maybe he's on our side—maybe he's not—but he's one hundred percent pure poison.'

Ron shook his head. 'I know,' he said. 'So if she *has* insanely developed a soft spot for him, in no way can that be good news.'

'Well, I can't imagine perverting on Snape even in my worst nightmares,' said Ginny. 'I think Hermione's just trying to get under your skin, Ronald.'

'Like you're trying to get under mine, Ginevra?'

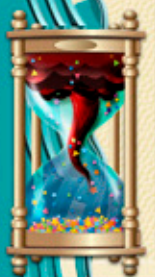
'Oh, stop it,' said Harry mildly. 'In case you've forgotten, an evil wizard with a huge attitude problem about me is planning to destroy us any day now, so why don't we—oh, I dunno—practice a few curses, just for the hell of it?'



Hermione would have died rather than show the boys how much Ron's comments had upset her. She managed to keep her fury under control until she let herself into Snape's empty lab. Then, eyes blazing and parchments flying, she unleashed her temper.

'Blast-Ended Skrewt-faced wankers!' She banged her wand down on the table where her cauldron brewed. Angry sparks flew from its tip. 'Idiots! Bollocks for brains!' She leaned against the table. 'Of course I had to give that ridiculous speech about Professor Snape, didn't I? Stupid, stupid.' She crossed her arms in front

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of her and took several deep breaths. 'Well, I'm just going to have to—oh, I don't know.'

Then the smell struck her: tart, full, strong. She swung around and stared into her cauldron, where the brew she had started in September had gradually been re-shaped by new ingredients. It was now a magnificent shade of indigo. Eyes widening with excitement, Hermione scooped up a few minims and dripped the viscous substance onto a glass slide. Pointing her wand at the sample, she murmured '*Analysis*.'

A few moments later, she threw back her hand, flung her wand-hand ceiling-ward, and cheered. More sparks shot from her wand, bouncing off the ceiling like fireworks.

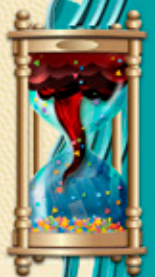
'Miss Granger!' The dark, silky voice sounded so much like the one that coaxed her to pleasure, in dream that night, that she turned her head toward it unthinkingly, like a flower following the sun. But when the man himself, wrapped in his dusty robe, emerged from the door leading to his private rooms and scowled at her, Hermione dropped her arm and her eyes.

'It is extremely disappointing,' said Snape, his voice low, 'to find you indulging in emotional outbursts during potion making. Your slightest uncontrolled gesture easily could result in injury or death. Even the rawest first-year knows that.'

'I—it wasn't an outburst, Professor,' Hermione mumbled.

'No? The sparks from your wand give the lie to that. If you're too full of teenage hormones to discipline your mind properly, then I suggest you leave,'

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Snape growled. 'Don't insult my intelligence or waste my time, girl.'

Hermione could never afterward describe how she found the courage to straighten, raise her chin so she looked Snape straight in the eye and say coolly, 'A waste of time, sir? *Prior Incantatem!*' Her wand disgorged the ghostly images of her analysis, and Snape's eyes narrowed as he leaned forward to scan them. He reminded her at that moment of a large bird-of-prey considering whether to kill and eat now, or kill and save for later.

Then he gave a single, sharp nod. 'I notice slight variations in the red end of the spectrum, signalling minor impurities. But I believe this attempt shows some promise,' and with a flick of his hand, he dissipated her analysis. 'What amount do you think would be effective for testing purposes?'

From Snape, this was nothing short of abject praise heaped upon grovelling apology, but Hermione didn't let a flicker of an eyelid betray her joy. 'Eight to ten minims should be sufficient,' she said. 'And of course it's applied externally. On the forehead is fine, but over the heart is most effective.'

'Approximate range?'

'It should be strong enough to ward off at least three or four direct blasts of Cruciatuſ.'

'Very good.' Then to her astonishment, Snape unfastened his robe and swirled it away from him. He was wearing a black silky looking shirt and—Hermione noted with great interest—black trousers. Her interest turned to shock as Snape

unfastened the collar of his shirt, opening it half-way down and spreading the cloth aside. The skin of his chest, bisected by a fine line of black hair, was so pale it was almost translucent.

'P—Professor? What are you doing?' Hermione's voice was a thin squeak.

'I believe you just said your Cruciatuſ remedy is most effective when applied over the heart? Now's as good a time as any to test that theory, wouldn't you agree?'

'Wait. Wait. You want to use it on—yourself? Now?'

Snape lifted an eyebrow, looking at her with mock innocence. 'I take it you object?'

She squared her shoulders. 'Yes. I object. Test it on me instead. It's *my* remedy. If it doesn't work, I should be the one to bear the consequences.'

'I am not subjecting a student to an Unforgivable Curse, not even in a controlled environment. As your supervisor on this project, Miss Granger, it is my privilege alone to take any risks associated with it, or else answer to the Headmaster. Now, if you would be so kind as to measure the correct dose?'

Hermione looked at him a moment longer, then sighed and reached for the measuring spoons. Her hand steady, she deposited ten minims of the thick blue substance on a small wooden spatula. For a moment, part of her wondered crazily if he would ask her to apply it. But Snape took the spatula and rubbed the substance onto his skin, which absorbed it quickly.

'I'm glad it's not turning you blue,' she murmured.

'That would be the least of our worries,' said



Snape, sounding impatient. ‘Now, Miss Granger, I know you have a dispensation to cast a Cruciatius Curse for testing purposes, under my supervision. The question is—’ and he gave an unpleasant smile ‘—are you capable?’

‘Erm—yes,’ said Hermione, shifting from one foot to the other. There was a long pause as she tried to concentrate.

‘On the other hand,’ said Snape biting, ‘perhaps we are wasting our time if you prove incapable for producing even one sincerely hateful thought.’

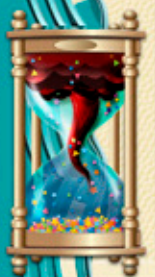
She wondered later if he’d woven a spell, so suddenly was she overwhelmed by memories of her past six years in the shadow of the Potions master. Snape: terrorising her, putting her down, ignoring her when she was desperate for his approval, sneering at her appearance that ghastly time Draco hit her with the Densaugeo curse. Something very close to hate reared up within her. Buoyed by that dark energy, she raised her wand and pointed it at Snape. Her lips drew back from her teeth.

‘*Crucio!*’

Hermione saw Snape stagger for a moment as if hit by a stiff wind, then flinch. Faint indigo light flared around him. He shifted his shoulders once or twice, but stood quietly, looking at the light with interest. *Oh my God... I think it’s working!* But with that thought, her focus on hating Snape dissipated. Abashed, she lowered her wand.

The indigo shield around Snape faded. He released a deep breath, and let his shoulders relax.

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‘Are you all right?’ she whispered.

He began to fasten his shirt. ‘The potion needs refining, as I suspected. I would say it’s about eighty percent effective. I felt some discomfort, though it was by no means debilitating. We could use it in the field now, if we had to.’ He shot her a keen glance. ‘But I believe you should take a bit more time to perfect it.’

‘What kind of discomfort? What was it like?’ Hermione said anxiously.

Snape shrugged. ‘A bit like hundreds of ants with hot feet crawling over my skin. Not overly painful, but distracting.’

Hermione began riffling through parchments. ‘Ah... I wonder if—when I was trying to synthesise the Dragon’s Tears, I ran into a problem with the purity... so maybe I should—’

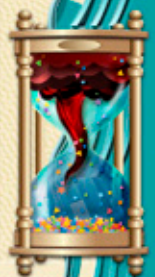
A lean hand grasped the parchment and gently took it from Hermione. She looked up, startled, into deep black eyes.

‘Miss Granger, even though the circumstances were tightly controlled and sanctioned, you have nonetheless inflicted an Unforgivable Curse. In a little while, you may notice yourself experiencing heightened emotions. You’ll need to take this potion to help you to relax and achieve a state of light meditation, so the emotional effects will work themselves through your system slowly and gradually. Then you’ll be able to sleep.’

She stared. He held out a small dark green bottle.

‘No more work tonight, Miss Granger. Go back to your dorm, dilute this potion with twice as much

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water, then sleep.'

Her fingers clumsy with surprise, Hermione took the bottle and moved to the door that opened directly out to the dungeons.

'Miss Granger,' came the dark silky voice. She shivered and turned around. Snape, his robe draped over his arm, stood half-shadowed, his hair half-concealing his face.

And suddenly the dream came back to her in full force, as if she'd been slammed against a wall. *'Though i have closed myself as fingers, / you open always petal by petal myself'*, she could almost hear that dark voice say...

No! It had to be an—emotional effect. Hermione struggled for calm.

'You did well this evening,' Snape said.

'Thank you, Professor,' she managed, and then stumbled out into the corridor.



Snape tossed his robe onto the couch and, crossing to the sideboard, poured himself a largish shot of Ogdens Old. Thus fortified, he sank into his favourite armchair and squinted into the fire. He didn't have to wait long before the head and shoulders of Albus Dumbledore took shape in the flames.

'Good evening, Severus,' said the Headmaster. 'Is this a good time?'

'Isn't it always, Headmaster?'

'Anything to report?'

Snape summarized that evening's test of Hermione's

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Cruciatus remedy, and Dumbledore's faded blue eyes lit up. 'That is good news,' he said. 'The remedy may confuse Voldemort's Death Eaters enough to buy valuable time for our fighters. What you and Miss Granger are doing is nothing short of admirable.'

Snape shook his head. 'I advised her,' he said, 'but the remedy is her own unique creation.'

'She is, I think, the most brilliant witch of her generation,' said Dumbledore, a bit sadly. 'What a great shame she lives in an age when she must cast her talents into the pit of war.'

'What a shame we all must live in this age.' Snape downed the last of his Firewhisky. 'Headmaster, I must ask you—have the Ministry acted on my information about Voldemort's Death-by-Fire?'

'They are taking your report under advisement,' said Dumbledore, with just a trace of bitter amusement.

'And just what the hell does *that* mean?'

'It means, my dear Severus, that the Ministry needs time to muster its resources. But from what they've been able to determine so far, Voldemort's boast is correct: this new Curse indeed has no known remedy.'

'If Voldemort is able to turn this into a mass-killing Curse,' Snape said flatly, 'then his chances of winning this Battle have doubled. Trebled.'

'That is by no means certain,' said Dumbledore. 'The Hogwarts and Ministry forces are well prepared and formidable. All Heads of House, including you, as I recall, have expressed confidence that our Master Class students will soon have learned the necessary skills to back us up. And Harry Potter—' the old wiz-

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ard's voice softened a bit—'has a major part to play. When we buy victory, which I think we will, the cost will be great. But now is not the time to give up hope.'

'Unless we can come up with a counter-measure, the cost to us will be far greater than anyone can imagine.'

'Severus,' said Dumbledore gravely, 'I think you know very well that there is no precedent for this Curse, no history, no clues as to its origins. To create the remedy, we must understand and re-create the Curse itself, and this would take months, perhaps even years, of research. We don't have that kind of time. So we must do what we can with what we have.'

'Which includes sending children to their deaths?' Snape spat.

Silence.

When Snape raised his eyes to the fire again, Dumbledore was gone.



Ecstasy at her breakthrough in Snape's lab, pride and horror at how easily she'd mustered the strength of will to cast an Unforgivable, frustration that she couldn't tell anyone about her triumph... and a shaky, restless anger at the way that damned dream had revisited her. Hermione should have gone quietly to her room to sip Snape's relaxation potion. Instead, so restless she felt as if she were on springs, she'd taken herself up to the Astronomy Tower where, she knew, no classes were being held this night.

She didn't want to sleep.

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She wanted to think about Snape, but the dream-image kept superimposing itself on the grim, unpleasant man whose measure she couldn't even begin to take. A man whose respect and regard she found herself craving.

It was confusing. It was exciting. Her thoughts veered from planning magnificent refinements to the Cruciatus counter-measure to wondering what she might say, what she could do, to coax Snape out of his bitterness and anger—to make him see her as a person.

Or even as a woman. She wasn't hideously unattractive. She didn't have pimples or baby-fat. Her teeth were more than acceptable. And she'd learned a thing or two about taming her long chestnut hair. When she wanted to, she could compel it to fall in waves rather than frizz around her head. When she bothered to apply her mind to trivialities like physical appearance, she believed she was capable of looking quite—well—pretty.

And she *was* eighteen—of age for over a year now. As well, mentally, she felt at least thirty or so.

'Which probably explains why the company of Harry and Ron delights me not,' she found herself muttering. 'They're only seventeen. They may as well be twelve.'

—If I'm looking for a grown-up man, I'm not going to find him anywhere near the Gryffindor common room.

—You're not going to find your dream lover in the dungeons, either, her ruthlessly honest brain told her. It's a fantasy. Let it go.

Hermione let her gaze drift upwards to the crys-

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talline stars, and took a deep breath of the chilly October night air to try and calm down. Then she heard faint noises—a low laugh, breath catching—and realized she wasn't alone up here. Snape-like, she crept over to the source of the noises. A couple, she realised, and it sounded as if they'd moved well past the snogging stage. Putting on her best Head Girl's expression, she raised her wand.

Her loud, clear 'Lumos' revealed white-blond hair falling around the sullen, handsome face of Draco Malfoy, his eyes closed as a darker blonde head, exactly level with his crotch, bobbed busily. Draco's eyes flew open, and his gaze fastened on Hermione like a cobra rising up to strike.

'Well,' he said lazily as the dark-blond head pulled back from him, squealing with outrage. 'Want to join us, Mudblood?'

'Fucking bitch,' spat Pansy Parkinson, levering herself to her feet and wiping her mouth.

'Quiet,' said Draco, not only making no effort to hide Pansy's handiwork but facing Hermione full on. With a wicked grin, he dropped his hand to caress his moist cock, fingers gliding over the swollen head. 'Want some? I know you're gagging for it.' He slowly began thrusting his pelvis.

Not even her recent dreams and fantasies could have prepared Hermione for the sight of Draco Malfoy, in all his glory, exposing himself to her. Several possible reactions waged war: revulsion, outrage, even—God help her—horrified fascination. Any of those responses would, truth to tell, have satisfied

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Draco much more than Pansy's ministrations.

The last thing Hermione expected to feel was a sense of the ridiculous.

And in response to Draco's taunting, she did the one thing few men—and certainly not a man like Draco—would forgive.

She burst out laughing.



Ron was carving a respectable hole into a vast mound of scrambled eggs, and Harry's face was buried in the DAILY PROPHET. A slight change in the quality of noise in the Great Hall made Ron raise his head. His eyes widened, and he poked Harry's arm.

'Here by popular demand, a rare personal appearance by Miss Hermione Granger!' he sang out as their friend plopped herself down beside them. A large mug of coffee appeared at her elbow. With a sigh, she sipped, staring abstractedly around the Hall. Ron followed her gaze, and saw something he hadn't seen in a while: almost every set of eyes at the Slytherin table was fixed malevolently on the three of them. Ron looked at Draco, usually the epicentre of this sort of hostility. The young blond wizard was glowering at them with an expression of such hate that it took his breath away.

'Hey, what's going on with the Slytherins?' Ron said to Hermione in a low voice. 'As soon as you walked in, they—'

'Bloody hell.' Harry had put his paper down and was

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staring across the Hall at Draco. 'What's with *him*?'

Hermione sighed. 'I was on my patrols and found him and Pansy up in the Astronomy Tower last night,' she said.

Ginny snorted with laughter, and Harry rolled his eyes. 'Yeah, he *would* do something like that, wouldn't he? So you spoiled their fun,' said Harry, shaking his head. 'I suppose that would piss him off.'

Hermione studied her coffee. *Of course, laughing at him didn't help.*

A lone owl flew into the Great Hall, circling over the staff table. Hermione, who had been far more interested in stealing glances at Professor Snape than Draco Malfoy, saw the owl slowly descend, then land with an awkward bump in front of Dumbledore. The Headmaster took two scrolls from the owl's leg, stroked its head and fed it a bit of bacon, then scanned the scrolls. Dumbledore frowned slightly as if puzzled, then reached past Professor McGonagall to hand one of the two scrolls to Snape. Each wizard unrolled his scroll and began to read.

'Hermione,' said Ron quietly into her ear. 'Did anything else happen with Draco last night?'

'What?' Hermione's gaze was still fixed on Dumbledore and Snape.

'Are you sure you're telling us everything?' Ron gave her shoulder a little shake. She jumped slightly and glared at him.

'Nothing else happened, Ron.'

Ron shot a poisonous glance at Draco. 'I wish someone would tell *him* that. I really don't like the

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way he's looking at you.'

'He just has one more reason to hate me. Business as usual.'

Ron looked uncomfortable. 'Look, what with—everything else going on these days, I think you should have me or Harry go with you on your patrols.'

'What?'

'Just for the next few nights, that's all,' Ron persisted.

'But I'm Head Girl! How's it going to look if I need you lot to escort me everywhere?'

'Yeah, Ron. Aren't you overreacting a *bit*?' said Ginny.

'Actually, I think Ron's onto something,' Harry had been covertly observing the Slytherins as well. 'Hermione, it'll be no big deal. When we're not in classes, let's all stick together as much as we can for the next while, okay? It can't hurt.' He looked at Ginny. 'You too.'

Ginny snorted derisively.

But Hermione's attention was back on the staff table. Dumbledore had finished reading his scroll. Appearing calm as ever, he leaned over to McGonagall and whispered something to her. McGonagall's chin came up, and she fixed a penetrating gaze on Dumbledore. Meanwhile, Snape was standing, clutching his scroll. His face seemed expressionless, but Hermione sensed he was in the grip of some strong emotion. She saw him exchange a sharp glance with the Headmaster, who nodded once. Then Snape left the Great Hall, walking so

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swiftly past Hermione's table that the breeze from his robes ruffled her hair.

Hermione noticed a few students other than herself watching Snape's rapid departure with interest. Draco was one of them. As she met his eyes, he opened his mouth and wriggled his tongue obscenely at her.

Without warning, she felt chilled to the bone. She shivered violently, and her hands turned so icy that not even the hot coffee could warm them. The Great Hall darkened, and before her eyes, dark flames the colour of clotted blood flickered over a battlefield. Eddies of white sand blew, hissing, between sprawled bodies. And then, borne toward her on the wind, came the cries of the dying and the dead.

They were calling her name.



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THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX—minus its student members—had rallied to Dumbledore's call for an emergency meeting. Now, as Monday evening deepened into late night and the discussions dragged on, nerves began unravelling. Not even a copious supply of Dumbledore's sherbet lemons could sweeten the mood.

'Run this past me one more time. You weren't expecting these scrolls? They just—dropped into your hands?' said Bill Weasley. He shifted in his chair as if longing to be anywhere else but here.

'They came by this morning's regular owl post, if that is what you're asking,' said Dumbledore.

'Like this mysterious "Gwen Hawking," they came out of the blue,' said Kingsley Shacklebolt, concealing a tired sigh.

'Albus, we respect the fact that you've checked the credentials of this—Hawking person,' said Emmeline Vance. 'But I'm not convinced. This is all so—unconventional.'

'Remus, dear fellow, would you pass the Hawking scrolls around the room one more time?' Dumbledore asked. Lupin nodded, took them from

the headmaster, and handed one to Bill Weasley and the other to Shackbolt. There was a brief pause as each scanned the contents.

Bill read aloud—

I am writing urgently to you about a certain self-styled Dark Lord's intention to use a new, unknown weapon. This weapon, whose correct name is the Carborundorum Curse, poses a deadly threat to Hogwarts and all whom Voldemort considers his enemies. From sources you would not have been able to access, I and my research team have obtained enough information about this weapon's origins to reconstruct it and then create an effective counter-measure.

'Now comes the part I don't like,' said Bill.

If you agree, my institution has authorised to allow me to come to Hogwarts and work with Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape. We should be able to produce results within days; if this sounds unrealistic, I assure you it is not. We need to act quickly—there is very little time. I very much hope to meet with Professor Dumbledore or Professor Snape tomorrow night. I have arranged a safe meeting-place in London...

'I can't believe you don't smell a rat here, Albus,' muttered Alastor Moody.

'How could she have so much knowledge about—er—our enemy and his plans when she's been working in—where?' said Molly Weasley.

'Montréal, mum,' said Bill.

'Where is Montréal anyway?'

'Canada,' said McGonagall, stiff-lipped.

'Good lord,' Vance said softly. 'It's no surprise we're wondering about her credentials, then, is it?'

'Why does she want to set up a meeting in London?'

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Why not come here?' said Shackbolt.

'I think,' said Dumbledore, 'we must ask ourselves two questions. First, do we at Hogwarts or the Ministry have the capability to re-create this Carborundorum Curse and a counter-measure "in a matter of days"?''

Complete silence fell.

'I thought not. Second,' continued Dumbledore, with a glint in his faded blue eyes, 'do you trust in my ability and in Severus's experience to determine Hawking's *bona fides*?''

This time the silence was punctuated with uncomfortable foot-shufflings and throat-clearings.

'La Société des sorcelleries de Montréal is not an A-list institution,' said Lupin, who all the while had been pacing back and forth beneath Phineas Nigellus. 'But,' he conceded, 'they do specialise in advanced magical research.'

'Are they good enough to do what this Doctor Hawking claims they've done?' Moody rumbled.

Lupin sighed. 'That, I can't honestly tell you.'

'I invite you all to take another look,' said Dumbledore, 'at the spells listed in these scrolls. You have all seen them, but you may not have realised they are the first complete sequence for reconstructing the Carborundorum Curse. Severus, Remus, and I reviewed these spells this afternoon. Let me say we're convinced they're genuine.'

'For the sake of argument if nothing else, let's assume she's legitimate,' said Lupin, stopping beneath Nigellus, who was all but leaning out of his portrait-frame to catch every word of this exchange.

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'What's the worst-case scenario if we take her up on her offer to help us counter this new curse?'

'That's not difficult to work out,' growled Moody. 'She pretends to help us create a remedy, then bug-gers off and presents it to Riddle, gift-wrapped.'

'Or she could just as easily nick old What's-His-Name's secrets and hand them over to us, couldn't she?' said Nymphadora Tonks. 'How do we know for sure which side she's on?'

'Albus, I think that's the question on all our minds,' said McGonagall gently. 'Yes, her credentials appear acceptable, if slightly irregular. But even I might have trouble cracking an advanced enough Bona Fides Charm—and if she wants to hide something, that's what she'll use.'

Dumbledore smiled. 'Minerva, you have—as always—hit the nail on the head. Her credentials are irregular. Born and raised in England, but trained in wizardry at The New Haven School for Witches? A respectable place, but only four hundred years old. Then voluntary servitude as an obscure researcher in the wilds of Canada? It seems to me that if she were a fraud or a spy, she would have made her profile more attractive, created a better pedigree for herself.'

'I say—call her in,' said Hagrid. 'Well, we're in a tight spot, aren't we?' he added, as heads swivelled toward him. 'An' at least this Doctor Hawkin' sounds like she knows what she's talkin' about', unlike a few in the Ministry I can think of.'

Tonks grinned, then caught Molly's scandalised look and hid her mouth behind her hand.

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'She'll need very close watching once she's in our territory,' said Lupin.

'Hang about,' snapped Moody. 'We haven't decided yet.'

'My friends,' said Dumbledore, and though his voice remained calm, a slight impatience edged it. 'We're running out of time. In my view, we have no choice but to accept whatever help Doctor Hawking offers.'

'I can't believe things are so bad we need to put our trust in an unknown outsider,' said Bill.

'Weren't any of you *listening* when I gave my first report last month?' Everyone turned to stare at Snape, who up to this point hadn't said a word. Hunched up and tired-looking, he glared at them from the chair near the fireplace, his lank hair half-obscuring his face. 'You know what Carborundum does. You know standard defence spells don't work against it. Unless we can put an effective counter-measure in place, not even Harry Potter will be able to stop what I predict will be a slaughter.'

'Your report hasn't been verified by other reliable witnesses, though, has it?' Moody said harshly, his magical eye rolling in Snape's direction.

There was a heavy silence. Snape's mouth thinned to a white line, and his eyes, locked on Moody, glittered with fury.

'The safety of Hogwarts has depended more than a few times before on what Severus has witnessed or what he knows, and I have no reason to distrust him on this one,' said Dumbledore calmly.

'What in Merlin's name do we have to lose by

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recruiting this Doctor Hawking?’ said Lupin. ‘She may be our best hope.’ He looked around at the others. ‘Do any of you have a better idea?’

‘Well, perhaps not, but we should at least come up a way to determine if she’s on our side,’ said Shackbolt.

‘Legilimency,’ said Moody, with a humourless grin. ‘You’re a dab hand at that, aren’t you, Snape?’

Snape’s jaw clenched. ‘You know perfectly well I use it only under orders.’

Dumbledore turned to Snape. ‘Doctor Hawking has asked to see either one of us, Severus. Are you willing to meet with her as soon as possible and determine—by any means you see fit—whether she will pose a threat to this school?’

The fury had left Snape’s eyes, but his whole body was tense. ‘If those are your instructions, I will do my best,’ he said, bitterness edging his voice.

‘Then, there it is,’ said Dumbledore. ‘If she passes Severus’s test, she will be welcomed at Hogwarts.’

A sigh feathered through the room. Snape made a point of not looking at Moody, who scowled, his magical eye whirling.

‘Well now,’ said Dumbledore cheerfully. ‘Minister Fudge has been kind enough to authorise four more Aurors to patrol around Hogwarts should we need them, and has sent me a number of suggestions to ensure Hogwarts’ safety...’ He flourished a parchment. ‘Let’s go over them for form’s sake, shall we? It won’t take more than a few minutes.’

Moody groaned and dropped his head into his hands.

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Hermione was discharged from the infirmary the next morning, though not without some stern words from Madam Pomfrey. ‘You are under considerable stress. My Invigoration Draught has helped restore your energy, but from now on, you must avoid overworking or skimping on meals, and you must go to bed at a reasonable hour. I think,’ she added darkly, ‘I’ll be having a word or three with Professor Snape.’

‘Why?’ said Hermione, startled.

‘It’s obvious to me he’s driving you too hard to finish that independent project,’ Pomfrey said. ‘Letting you work all hours on it is irresponsible of him.’

‘Please,’ said Hermione, ‘Let me speak with him. I’ll make a more sensible arrangement. I promise.’

When she stepped out the door, a huge dark shape moved toward her. Hermione looked up and smiled.

‘Hullo Hagrid.’

‘All righ’ Hermione?’

‘Better, thanks. What are you doing here?’

‘Yeah, well, Harry an’ Ron asked me to keep an eye on yeh this morning. Them an’ the rest’r in class till lunchtime. I had some free time, so...’

‘Right,’ Hermione sighed. ‘That’s sweet of you, Hagrid.’

‘So where to?’

‘Can you walk me to Professor Snape’s lab, please?’

Hagrid looked surprised, but said carefully, ‘I thought Madam Pomfrey told yeh to take it easy on that project.’

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'I promised her I'd talk to him about that, so I might as well get it over with.'

'Righ' then.'

Hermione knew full well that Snape spent his Tuesday morning free period marking papers—an activity that never failed to downgrade his mood from nasty to ferocious. But at least she'd be able to speak with him uninterrupted.

Despite herself, she was a little annoyed and embarrassed by the attention her unusual escort attracted—until, on the stairway leading down to the dungeons, they ran into Filch and Mrs. Norris. For a moment, the Hogwarts caretaker looked at her with such pure malice that she sucked in a breath and moved closer to Hagrid's bulk. Mrs. Norris hissed.

'Afternoon, Filch,' said Hagrid evenly.

'Hagrid. Miss Granger,' whispered Filch, and Hermione stepped well back to let him and his familiar pass without either touching her. It seemed to her that a cold, foul wind stirred in their wake.

'Hmmp.' Hagrid stared after Filch for a moment, frowning. 'Nasty piece o' work, him, and gettin' nastier by the day.' Then he turned to her. 'Yeh all righ'?'

'Yes,' said Hermione, startled that Hagrid, who'd never struck her as a sensitive soul, had so sympathetically gauged Filch's effect on her.

They stopped at the big doors leading into the Potions classroom. Hagrid knocked robustly. Hermione, shivering a bit, hugged her arms to her chest. When the doors opened, Hagrid stepped forward so that Snape, thrusting his head and shoulders forward, found him-

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self nose-to-chest with the half-giant.

'What is it, Hagrid?'

'Sorry, Professor Snape, but Miss Granger here's under orders from Madam Pomfrey to have a word wi' yeh about her work.'

Snape looked down at Hermione, his eyes narrowing 'Very well. You may come in, Miss Granger. You'—to Hagrid—'undoubtedly have other duties. I myself will see Miss Granger back to Gryffindor Tower afterwards.'

Hagrid looked at Hermione, his bushy brows raised. She nodded.

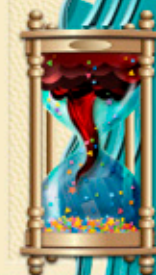
'All righ' then. Take care, Hermione.' Resisting the urge to hug her protector, she smiled at him instead.

'I will. Thank you, Hagrid.'

Closing the classroom doors, Snape moved toward his massive desk, beckoning her to follow. Hermione was suddenly visited by the image of her dream—Snape transforming the dull red fire into roses, then beckoning her to come close to him, and then—*No. Stop this.* Snape himself broke the spell he hadn't known he'd cast by pulling out a bench from under one of the front-row tables and patting it. As she sat, expecting him to barricade himself behind his desk, he surprised her by sitting on another bench a few feet away. A small gesture, but combined with his willingness to interrupt his marking and his offer to escort her, it seemed to Hermione that Snape was going out of his way to be considerate.

They looked at each other for a moment.

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'How are you feeling?' said Snape.

'Erm—' Hermione took a moment to recover from this unexpected question—'I'm fine now, thanks.'

'I understand you fainted because you've been over-worked. I take some responsibility for that. I've been encouraging it.' He said this without irony, and his gaze met hers without malice or condescension.

Hermione took a deep breath. 'Professor, I appreciate your concern. But, well, I think I know what we're going to be facing. If my project can help us against—er—Voldemort, then I want to put in as much time as possible.'

Snape straightened, and his eyes narrowed again. 'What is it you think we'll be facing?' he said softly.

Hermione looked at her hands and then raised her head to face her professor's scrutiny.

'When I fainted in the Great Hall yesterday, it wasn't because of under-nourishment or stress. I saw something—a battlefield of some sort. There were flames, and dozens of bodies. And something that looked like white sand, blowing everywhere.'

Snape's expression was unreadable. At one time, Hermione would have felt intimidated by that black gaze, but now she took comfort from its intensity. *He's taking me seriously.*

'You know I'm not given to visions or prophecy,' she said, choosing each word with care. 'I dropped out of Divination, remember? But I'm convinced—and I don't know how or why—that I saw something that might happen. A version of the Final Battle where we didn't come out very well.'

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'Miss Granger,' said Snape, again without apparent malice or irony, 'we have faced the possibility of defeat ever since Voldemort regained his power. It haunts the dreams and visions of every one of us engaged in this fight. Yes—you have a contribution to make, a potentially valuable one. But I will not countenance working until you collapse.'

'This had nothing to do with working too hard!'

'I'll make up a reasonable schedule for your project,' said Snape, as if she hadn't spoken, 'and I'll require you to adhere to it. And now, Miss Granger, if that's all, I have marking I must complete.'

This conversation wasn't going at all the way she'd hoped.

'I think,' said Hermione coldly, 'I should have some say in deciding a reasonable workload for myself.'

'Your judgement is questionable,' Snape said remorselessly. 'In fact, as long as you're a student here and working under my supervision, I am always answerable to Professor Dumbledore and to your parents for your well-being.'

Hermione shot to her feet. 'But I'm an adult in the Muggle world now as well as here—'

'What you are in the Muggle world is completely irrelevant.' Snape had risen to his feet as well, and his low voice was charged with that dangerous register Hermione knew too well from years of double Potions classes. 'Now—do you wish to continue working under my supervision or not?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then you'll adhere to a new, lighter schedule, and

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that's the end of it,' said Snape, his tone one notch lower than deadly. 'Now, I promised to see you back to Gryffindor Tower.'

Hermione kept her mouth shut and her head down during a long, tense walk whose only positive feature was not running into Filch and Mrs. Norris again. When they reached the Fat Lady's portrait, Snape gave her a curt 'Good day, Miss Granger,' then, robes billowing out behind, began striding away down the corridor.

'Professor Snape,' Hermione said sweetly. Snape stopped, but did not turn. 'I hope you don't mind if I discuss your proposed schedule with my Head of House. She may decide it's not quite challenging enough.'

Snape's back stiffened. For a moment, she wondered if she had pushed him into fury.

'You do that, Miss Granger,' he said quietly, his back to her. Then he resumed walking as if nothing had happened. Hermione glared after him until he disappeared.

'Greasy, horrible bastard,' she said under her breath.

'What was that, dearie?' said the Fat Lady. 'I'm getting a little deaf.'



Snape could understand and even appreciate why 'this Hawking person,' as Vance put it, wanted to meet him in the heart of Muggle London. Away from the usual haunts of wizards, they were much less likely to encounter one of Voldemort's minions. And if any were nearby, Snape would be able to detect them.

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At the same time, he felt rushed and resentful. After his contretemps with Miss Granger, he'd found it difficult to concentrate on his marking. What in chaos was happening to his formerly tractable student? After ruminating on that for a while, he ended up having to put aside at least a dozen essays still unmarked, then teach his afternoon classes, ending with arguably his worst batch of first-years in decades. This was bad enough, but before leaving the school, of course he had to transform his Hogwarts robes into what he hoped was appropriate clothing for a Muggle man-about-London. That took more time than he'd planned. He had a great deal of trouble with the trousers, particularly the hellish zipper.

He Apparated to the usual spot near number twelve Grimmauld Place. Once there, however, Snape realized that getting to Doctor Hawking's suggested meeting place just off the Strand without any magical help would be difficult and fraught with annoyance. Rejecting above ground transportation as time-consuming and too reminiscent of the Knight Bus, he concluded that to reach the Café Faust on time, he would have to venture into the crowded, noisy London Underground. Infiltrating a meeting of Death Eaters, he thought sourly, would be easier and marginally more pleasant.

The sheer number of people boiling in and out of the trains almost overwhelmed him, but he gritted his teeth and managed to puzzle out the best Underground route. It annoyed him a great deal to think that that silly Granger would have been able to navi-

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gate this bewildering maze with know-it-all competence and aplomb. A train arrived—he prayed the right one, because he really still had no idea—and the crowd pushed him inside it.

Hermione had startled him badly when she'd described her vision to him. Snape shivered. She had painted a picture of a battle in which Voldemort had wielded the Carborundorum Curse as an instrument for mass killing. How could she have known that's what Voldemort envisioned? Then, to make matters more complicated, Miss Granger had decided to get on her high horse about being independent and reasonable. Bloody hell. Was he reading too much into her defiance, or was she trying to impress him with her maturity?

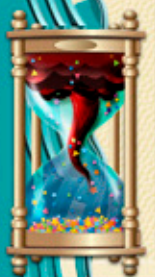
If she were trying to impress him, there could be only one reason for that.

'Not a teenage crush. Please. Not now,' he muttered to himself, earning an alarmed look from an over-perfumed woman crushed up next to him. He gave her a Snape-smile, and she looked away hastily.

At the Holborn station, he battled his way off the train with enormous relief and emerged to find himself in a street almost as crowded and noisy as the Underground. The air was polluted, of course, but free of the smell of too many Muggles in close quarters.

It turned out he was only a few minutes' walk from his destination. After asking directions, Snape found the Café Faust off the Strand, down a quiet side street, tucked away between two specialty shops. The interior turned out to be surprisingly spacious; tapestries decorated the high-ceilinged room, and

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the little round tables were far enough apart to give occupants some privacy. Candlelight glowed. For a Muggle establishment, it was almost civilized.

'Mr. Snape?' He turned, startled. An ageless, beautiful Asian woman in a black evening dress was smiling at him.

Merlin's balls... this can't be Doctor Hawking. Can it?

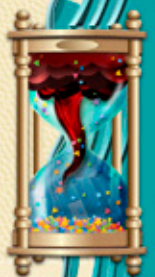
'Welcome to the Café Faust. May I take your coat?'

Definitely not Doctor Hawking. That was almost a relief. 'Oh—yes. Thank you.' Snape shrugged out of the graceless garment, and the beautiful hostess handed it to an underling before escorting him to a table in the far corner. His spy's mind classified this as an excellent vantage point. As Snape settled into his chair, a waiter appeared with a small silver tray bearing a tumbler of what looked like whisky, no ice. He placed the drink before Snape and vanished.

'Your companion will be arriving soon,' said the hostess quietly. 'She hopes you will enjoy a drink as you wait.' Then he was left alone.

Snape took an experimental sip and was pleasantly reminded that Muggles could concoct a respectable single-malt. And some, like this one, were much better than Ogdens Old. He looked around. Only a few other tables were occupied at this early hour. There were two or three couples, none of them young. Some beefy-looking men in jackets and ties presided at the bar. Gracefully moving across the restaurant floor, the hostess greeted another couple. He allowed himself a nice long look at her lithe beauty. Then he caught sight

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of a woman sitting alone in the opposite corner, her face shadowed, nursing a glass of wine. Snape noted appreciatively the long, shapely legs crossed above the knee. The dim light traced the arch of a slender foot encased in a simple black pump.

This was turning into a bit of a treat. It was perhaps ironic that Severus Snape, who spent ninety-nine percent of his time in an establishment full of underage girls wearing long bulky robes, loved the sight of grown women's bodies. He put the troublesome Hermione Granger out of his mind.

Hmm. His tumbler was almost empty. Before he could signal the waiter, a second whisky had taken its place. Excellent service. Pleasant scenery. He decided it wouldn't hurt to wait a while longer for Gwen Hawking to appear.

The woman with the long legs rose gracefully to her feet. Her face made it apparent that she was by no means in the first flush of youth, but the dark, clinging knee-length dress outlined slim hips and shapely breasts. Her thick silvering hair was pulled into an imperfect French twist, some strands loose around her face. Snape admired the sight of her, and found himself mildly disappointed that she appeared to be leaving.

Whether it was the view or the two whiskies, he was less than fully prepared for the woman to walk across the floor toward him, hold out her hand, and say, smiling, 'Hello Professor Snape. I'm Gwen Hawking.' He shot to his feet, felt his hand clasped firmly in hers, and said, not quite stammering, 'Ah—delighted to meet

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you. I'm—well, you obviously know who I am.'

Her smile broadened slightly, and he cursed himself for sounding like such an arse. And then she sat, and he sat. She caught the hostess's eye and nodded, then fixing amused brown eyes on his, said, 'I've taken the liberty of ordering for us. I hope you don't mind. I thought that would allow us to discuss business without too many—distractions.' With a small smile—'I hope you're enjoying the whisky.'

'Yes, thank you, I am.' Before he could seem rude, Snape removed his gaze from hers for a moment and studied his tumbler. He felt uncomfortably aware that he might be a tad out of his league here. Snape was used to a quiet life in the dungeons when he wasn't risking his neck being a double agent; his social skills, not very adequate to begin with, had rusted almost solid. He was rapidly realising that the combination of fine whisky, candlelight, a pair of beautiful legs, and the frank appraisal of the elegant, attractive woman who owned the legs was hitting him quite literally below the belt. A pleasantly persistent half-erection threatened to suborn all higher thought-processes.

And overriding all of that was a peculiar feeling that he should know something, remember something. A deep, strange sense of the familiar coloured her eyes and the cadences of her voice. Yet, at the same time, he knew he'd never met anyone like her before.

Focus, Severus. Concentrate. Remember what you've come here to do.

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PERSONAL NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA

As soon as he entered the Café Faust, I almost choked on my wine. Snape—and not *Snape*. Tall, dark, sallow. Hair neatly tied back. He'd overdone the black, I thought: coat, jacket, shirt, trousers, dress boots—except for the tie, a subdued dark green and not terribly well knotted. Still, the ensemble was surprisingly decent-looking. Well, what did I expect? Wizards' robes? The "greasy git" of the dungeons?

When he was seated and I could observe him at my leisure, I looked down into my wine and began to panic. It would soon be time to introduce myself. I'd mentally rehearsed this scenario over and over, but suddenly I felt as if I were making a terrible mistake... as if I were playing with disaster. All I could think was—what in the name of chaos am I DOING?

'Saving that man's life, for one thing,' said my old Granger-self. 'You have work to do, and very little time to do it.'

After a minute, I raised my eyes and saw the last thing on earth I expected. The grim, fearsome Severus Snape was leaning back, mouth relaxed, eyes gleaming, hands cradling the second glass of

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single-malt I'd had the waiter serve him. He was staring at my outstretched legs, and it appeared—oh, good lord—that he liked what he was seeing. Hidden by shadows, I looked full into his eyes, and realised I was seeing a side of Snape I'd never dreamt existed: sensuous, thirsty for pleasure.

At that moment I had the most amazing, audacious, and bloody stupid thought.

I'll seduce him.

I told myself he was already part-way there. All I had to do was carefully push him further. He might be bitter as gall and hard as nails in the dungeons—but here? I could take advantage of the fact he was out of his usual territory and exploit the vulnerabilities I could sense. My motives were entirely above-board, of course: as his lover, I could secure his loyalty quickly. The relationship might help motivate him, activate all his protective instincts at a time he'd need them most.

A strategic decision, I told myself, I convinced myself.

Of course that bossy cow Hermione Granger took over again. 'Are you mad? What if Voldemort or Lucius Malfoy find out? They won't hesitate to

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use "Gwen Hawking" to test Snape's loyalty to the limit. You'll put him in deadly danger. You might even be responsible for the very thing you came here to prevent: his death. You have a brain and it's in your head, not between your legs!

Thus, Hawking and Granger battled it out. At the end of that short, fierce struggle, the meddlesome Granger was sent packing. I became Gwen Hawking the moment I rose to my feet, gathered myself together with one long breath, and walked over to the unsuspecting Potions master. When he rose almost gracelessly to his feet and stumbled over his own introduction—then, less than a minute later, tried a little too hard not to keep staring at me—I knew.

The terror of the dungeons, the scourge of my teenage years, was ripe for bedding.



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CHAPTER SIX

deeper than all roses

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
(e.e. cummings)

A

MONGST SOME CIRCLES, dinner at the Café Faust was considered worth selling one's soul for. Yvonne Xiao, host and owner, had not stinted for the elegant woman and her rather interesting companion at the corner table. A noble merlot had accompanied a variety of small tapas-style dishes ranging from crisp asparagus stalks with slices of sweet pepper in a barely-there black bean sauce, to black risotto, to the tenderest veal decorated with sweet roasted garlic. It was too bad, she thought as the evening deepened, that much of the food on that table had remained untouched. However, the wine flowed freely, and after a while the lady nodded at Xiao to fetch a second bottle.

'Is there any possible chance—' Hawking's voice was low—'that Voldemort killed Bletchley using some other means than Carborundum?'

'I would say no chance,' said Snape curtly. 'I was almost close enough to touch the—remains.' He took a quick swallow of wine.

'Can you speculate how Voldemort got hold of the spell-sequences? They're fairly complex. From what

I know of him, he exploits; he doesn't invent.'

Snape recounted Lucius's boast the night of the demonstration. 'And that has troubled me,' he continued. 'I suspect Lucius acquired those parchments recently—possibly just weeks ago.'

Hawking's intent gaze slid away from him at that point, and her teeth caught her lower lip. Snape noted her uneasiness with a spy's interest in trivial details—and again was struck by an eerie sense of familiarity.

'I think you're right,' Hawking said after a moment. 'It seems clear someone passed that information to Malfoy.' She frowned, as if for a moment lost in an unpleasant thought.

'I may soon find myself in a position to verify that,' said Snape. Hawking looked at him and nodded.

'I think I understand what you're suggesting. But,' she added, 'since your top priority is to work with me, this really isn't the best time to be putting yourself at risk.'

Snape's eyes narrowed. 'Each time Voldemort summons me, I "put myself at risk." I apologise in advance if this causes you any inconvenience.'

Hawking let out a soft breath and put one hand in front of her face, shaking her head. Then she reached out with that hand and touched one of his, very lightly. That touch, and the open apology in her eyes, made him forget his flash of anger. Made him, in truth, forget to breathe for a moment.

'I'm sorry,' she murmured. 'When I'm working on a project, I can be so self-centred...'

'As can I,' Snape managed. Her hand left his, and

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he was left struggling once more to stay focused. Second-guessing everything Hawking said, filtering their conversation through his standing orders to keep Hogwarts safe, had taken all his considerable powers of concentration. Being pleasantly drunk certainly didn't help nor, blast it, did the constant, low-level physical arousal plaguing him since she had first sat down at his table.

Snape was under orders, and he had every intention of carrying them out. But something about her compelled him toward recklessness.

'Have we ever met before?' he suddenly asked her. 'I feel we must have.'

For the briefest moment, he thought he saw a flash of something like fear in her eyes. Then she smiled and said lightly, 'Do you think it's possible that two people who have never met can still somehow recognise each other?'

Snape raised an eyebrow. 'I don't understand what you mean.'

She laced her fingers together. 'Timeliness. The moment when things, events, or people are most open to change or opportunity. When people are most—receptive.'

They looked at each other across the table, and Snape felt the heat of her gaze directly in his groin.

It was only much later when he realized she hadn't answered his question. But by then, it didn't matter.



One of the privileges of being a prefect, Ginny

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Wesley reflected, was wandering the ancient corridors of Hogwarts after most students were in their dorms. Though she had developed into a young woman both outgoing and fearless, Ginny also appreciated a certain amount of quiet. She did a lot of thinking during her late-night perambulations.

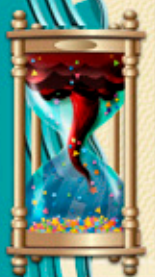
Lately, though, her thoughts hadn't consoled her much. They had centred a great deal on Harry. Over the past three years, their relationship had remained static: uncomplicated and comfortable. Harry treated Ginny like the little sister he'd never had. Ginny guessed she was supposed to think of him as a brother: but quite honestly, she already had six brothers, and the last thing she needed was a seventh.

She wanted to be something more to Harry. Unfortunately, she had little idea how—or even whether—to communicate that basic truth.

But if she didn't do something soon, she'd remain "Hey Ginny" forever. The good-natured friend-through-thick-and-thin, the confidante, the jolly sidekick who'd smile bravely at Harry's wedding—to someone else.

Without warning, she began to feel a familiar and unwelcome light-headedness. Hell's bloody bells—one of her migraines coming on. She'd been plagued by them ever since second year: a little souvenir of her ordeal in the Chamber of Secrets. Not even Madam Pomfrey had been able to get rid of them. Ginny changed course and headed to the greenhouse. She knew from previous experience that if she could nick some of Professor Sprout's feverfew and chew a couple of fresh leaves within

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minutes of her first symptoms, she might get away with just a bad headache.

The greenhouse was dark, of course. Ginny—calling forth a dim golden light—navigated confidently through the extensive herbal remedies section. She found the feverfew, plucked two leaves, and popped them into her mouth (grimacing at the taste) whilst turning to retrace her steps.

Then she heard low, whispering voices from the direction of the entrance. She froze, her heart trip-hammering. Whatever lurked ahead was blocking her way out.

Wait. Hang on. She was a prefect, and nothing was blocking her way except some brainless kids being arses. As if anything she might encounter here and now could equal the horror of Tom Riddle holding her in thrall and sucking the life-force from her. After surviving that, she felt equal to anything.

She doused her light and crept forward, preparing to deliver fire and brimstone.

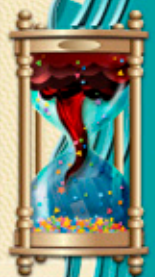
'Aah... aah...'

Cripes. Sounded like someone in pain. Maybe a student had fallen ill?

'Ohh... yeah. Ohh. *Fuck!*'

Though Ginny had not (quite) had sex yet, she recognised those sounds. *Now* what was she supposed to do? As she wavered, she heard the voice gasp 'Lumos,' and a greenish light flared from a wand-tip held by a clenched fist. Illuminated in that diseased glow were Draco and a dark-haired girl Ginny didn't recognise. The Malfoy heir stood with his back braced against the

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wall, whilst his date knelt before him, her face buried in his crotch. As the girl worked him energetically, his hands clutched stone and his head rolled, white-blond hair falling across his face.

Ginny's vision twisted, and it looked to her for a moment as if Draco were suffering the tortures of the damned.

Then Draco, growling, reached the sweet end. His date must have been coached to swallow, for she latched on gamely as his body jerked. Only when he stopped moving did she pull away and sit back on her haunches, looking up at the Slytherin ringleader for all the world as if she were a beagle waiting to be petted. A sixth-year, Ginny realised. So those rumours about Draco were true—though apparently he drew the line at actual fucking. Also true, it seemed, were some other things she'd heard about Draco, things about which those giggling whispers in the girls' lav had been rather explicit.

Suddenly and against all reason, she thought how tempting he looked: hair dishevelled, clothing askew, his exposed cock moist and still semi-hard. Ginny's senses twisted again, and it seemed she was spread against his body, her thighs parting, feeling his cock slide between her legs, her mouth opening, her tongue playing against that perfectly shaped mouth. She swayed, close to falling.

'Ahhh... Do I smell students long past their curfew?'

Filch sidled into the greenhouse, Mrs. Norris weaving beside him. The sixth-year bit back a scream and scrambling to her feet, shrank against Draco. Her gal-



lant date pushed her away from him, covered himself, and unhurriedly straightened his robes. Then with a smug smile, he turned to face the caretaker.

'What kept you, Filch? I was getting bored waiting.'



Helping this evening's two most under-fed customers into their coats, Yvonne Xiao caught a most telling look between the tall sallow man with the burning eyes and his assertive dinner companion. It didn't take someone with her vast experience in observing human dynamics to conclude that this woman and this man would end up in bed together before the night's end.

'I hope you enjoyed yourselves. Come back again soon,' she said softly. The woman turned back to her and smiled. It was one of the saddest expressions Yvonne had ever seen.

Stepping outside the Café Faust was like leaving a sanctuary. The damp heavy air, mixed with petrochemicals, caught at Snape's throat. For a moment, they both stood there awkwardly, not quite looking at each other.

'I'm sure you realise I haven't yet told you everything you need to know,' Hawking said, her breath smoking in the chill.

'I look forward to hearing more,' said Snape.

'We're just a minute or two away from the Embankment. Why don't we take a walk there? I'm sure it won't be crowded at this time of night.'

'As you wish.'





The walkway was almost deserted. The lamps with their elaborate carvings of entwined fish cast a soft light, and glare from the city wavered in the black river. The wrought-iron benches, set back from and above the pavement, looked cold, hard, and damp. But Hawking didn't seem interested in sitting where countless lovers and tourists had watched the Thames. She walked restlessly, setting a brisk pace. Snape put up with this for a while, then stopped and folded his arms.

'You promised me more information.'

Her stride faltered. 'Yes, I did.' She moved over to the railing and leaned her elbows on the stone. After a moment, he followed her. They both stared at the water flowing dark and bright beneath them.

'As a gesture of good faith, I brought the complete spell-sequences for Carborundorum with me tonight,' Hawking said conversationally.

Snape reacted almost without thinking. He straightened and turned, his gaze sweeping the now-deserted walkway, then cast a Disillusionment charm on Hawking and himself. As its effects trickled like cold water down his neck, he rounded on Hawking, his eyes furious.

'Didn't you consider the risk of walking around with something so dangerous?'

'Do you honestly think I'd shove notes for making a weapon of mass destruction into my coat pocket?' Her tone was rich with sarcasm.

'Then,' said Snape, striving for calm, 'where are the spells?'

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'Quite safe.'

'Where?' His tone was edging toward danger-level one.

'In my hotel room. Don't worry,' she added quickly. 'My wards are superior to anything a Death Eater could break.' She sighed. 'I know it's asking a lot, but please trust me.'

'That is asking a lot.'

'I know,' she said a bit sadly, still looking out at the river. 'But you need to evaluate the information I have to offer, don't you?'

'Which reminds me of another small matter,' said Snape harshly. 'How did you gain access to this information? How is it you have knowledge that the entire Ministry needs months or longer to compile?'

For the first time since leaving the Café Faust, Hawking looked directly at him.

'I'm willing to tell you that, but not here and now. I'll say only that the knowledge I have was very dearly bought and paid for with the blood of people I loved.'

The despair in her eyes silenced him.

'I'm putting this power into your hands because I suspect you've earned the right to be entrusted with it. Because I believe two people can recognise they are allies even if they've never met before,' she said softly. 'I know we live in dangerous times. But I know when and whom to trust.'

'And you trust me?' Snape said, trying for sarcasm. It sounded almost like despair. 'Why? You've only just met me. You know almost nothing about me.' His throat felt as if it were closing up.

'I trust you to evaluate fairly what I offer. I know

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enough about you to believe you will do that much, Severus.'

The passionate intensity of her words and the way her mouth shaped his given name sent his anger flying into the night. All the other impulses tugging at him since he'd first laid eyes on her re-vivified, and he understood that he had no choice—from the first moments of this evening, he had already committed himself to following wherever her instincts led him.

And all his instincts led him to her.

But he knew, as well, that he would carry out his orders.



As Filch watched, eyes glittering, Draco grabbed the girl by one arm and shoved her toward the entrance of the greenhouse.

'Get out.'

'But—but—'

'Get the fuck out, you slag!' The girl gave a sob and stumbled away into the dark. Mrs Norris growled, and Filch reached down to stroke her.

Draco folded his arms. 'You said you had something to show me, Filch. Well?'

'I know a certain passageway,' said Filch, still stroking the cat.

'What?'

'Leading from Hogwarts' dungeons to a place well outside Hogwarts' gates.'

'Where, exactly?' Draco looked confused and annoyed, and Ginny wondered whether Filch was

toying with him. Then the caretaker straightened, his rheumy eyes darting around, and Ginny shrank back behind the foliage.

'A passage to somewhere nice people don't like to visit,' said Filch as he scanned the greenhouse.

Draco's expression grew cunning as he put two and two together.

'Ah. The Shrieking Shack!'

Filch raised his eyebrows, smirking.

'Who else knows about this passageway?'

'No one knows. Not even Snape,' said Filch with a snort.

'Dumbledore must know about it.'

'Must he? I don't think he must. It's very old. It's not in any of the maps.'

'This is all lovely, Filch,' said Draco, folding his arms and regaining his swagger, 'but how does it help me to know about some slimy unguarded tunnel leading to the Shack? Partying at Hogsmeade's pet haunted house isn't high on my list of priorities.'

Filch looked at the young blond wizard with an expression that might have been contempt if he'd had the spine to show it.

'Let's just say you might want to hide things. Things you wouldn't want anyone to find.'

'Ah.' Draco finally added it up. 'Could that include people?'

'Things. People. All the same to me,' said Filch, his tone careless. He reached down again to stroke Mrs Norris. 'I hear,' he added, 'that the Granger girl recently offended you again.'



'So?'

Filch's voice sunk to a raspy whisper which Ginny had to strain to hear. 'If I may be so bold, guv, this "slimy tunnel" strikes me as the perfect place to teach her a lesson or two.'



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA:

Category—Personal

I don't honestly remember what we ate. I'm sure whatever we did eat was delicious. I do know there was plenty of good wine. And of course I remember the conversation... sly attempts to extract information without giving too much away... careful words counterpointing the slow, fiery dance of seduction.

But something Snape said shook me to the core: his almost off-hand description of how Lucius Malfoy apparently gifted Voldemort with long "undiscovered" Carborundorum spell-sequences. Snape, of course, wasn't able to put together the horrific equation that now falls into place for me. I didn't, couldn't, let myself ponder it at the time.

But I'm thinking about it now. I'm now certain Draco Malfoy used the experimental Time-Turner to send the Carborundorum information back to his father. An

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inanimate object—like a bundle of parchments, for example—wouldn't destabilise in the same way that a complex, living organism would. And even if it did, of course a copy would be made long before.

My well-intentioned experiment effectively MADE IT POSSIBLE for Voldemort to GET the Carborundorum Curse.

No, wait. It's worse than that. Consider this equation, Doctor Know-It-All: if my team and I had not amassed all that knowledge about Carborundorum and presented it at conferences—yes, we did—and then if another team and I hadn't later fooled around with Time-Turners, then Draco would have had nothing to send back to Lucius and no means to send it, and Voldemort would never have been able to create the Curse. It might never have existed at all.

Ergo: the Carborundorum Curse that slaughtered so many, including Ron Weasley and Severus Snape, exists because I CREATED the conditions allowing it to exist.

No. I don't want to think about this right now. I can't bear it.

It's time to record everything else about this evening. Everything that was amazing. Everything I wish I could re-live. And then—how it turned against me.

During dinner, I stretched my legs out under the table so that occasionally they touched Snape's. I

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held his gaze and let the black heat of his eyes penetrate me. At one point I said something stupid and felt him pull back. In apology, I touched one long-fingered hand.

At that moment, I realised my plans to seduce Snape were starting to spiral out of control, for touching him was like touching a live electrical circuit. Lightening forked between my thighs, as treacherously pleasurable as it was unexpected. I looked at him—plain, angry-faced, yet magnetic beyond words—and I found myself thinking that all I really wanted to do was slide my fingers up along the skin under his sleeve. I removed my hand quickly. I was shaking inside.

My plan had been to control the evening: slowly whetting the knife-edge of my seduction. But by the time we were ready to leave the Café Faust, that blade had turned back on itself, and I was good and stabbed with it.

On the Embankment, Snape could barely meet my eyes. I wasn't sure how to read the tension in his arms and neck as he leaned on the railing beside me.

Then he threw that Disillusionment charm over us and began his interrogation. That move didn't so much surprise me as remind me sharply that the

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man I'd set out to seduce was a Death Eater and seasoned spy. If he saw me as a threat, he was certainly not going to relax in my presence. Could I—and I'm no Mata Hari—seduce a man who half-expected me to attack him? I began to get so tangled up in those questions that I was in danger of second-guessing my own strategies.

So in defence, which I'm fairly good at, I did attack. A two-pronged move. First: a speech about loss of lives, about payment in blood, about trust—though God knows I meant every word of it. Then I used his first name.

As we stared at each other, I saw how surprise had unsettled him. Surprise—and something else.

Second: I leaned into him and pressed my mouth against his cool cheek, my hot breath filling the air around us with fog.

I wouldn't recommend making any unexpected moves when you're less than six inches away from a Death Eater—even a reformed one. Under other circumstances, I might have ended up hanging from one of those fishy-looking lampposts.

Snape froze. I still wonder whether, in that moment, my life hung in the balance.

Then he moved as fast as a striking snake, turning his head so his mouth met mine, turning his

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whole body to slide one hand around my waist and cup the back of my head with the other. His lips were warm and silky, and when I opened my mouth under his, I felt the darting touches of his tongue. I pressed up against him, demanding more, hungry for him, and his arms tightened around me.

When he laid his harsh mouth against mine, I devoured him without mercy.

Hopeless. Ridiculous. Glorious.



The feverfew had quieted Ginny's migraine to a dull roar, but she wished she could think more clearly.

Part of her had yearned to follow Filch and Draco when they left the greenhouse, lurking until the traitors revealed the hidden passage, and then, of course, going straight to Hermione and Dumbledore to warn them. Ginny Weasley: hero. Quite possibly even the saviour of Hogwarts.

A more sensible part of her said—not likely. She relished a good fight, but those odds were too great. She was brave, but not foolish enough to swim out of her depth.

Harry. He'd know what to do. *I have to tell Harry.* That was her single blunt thought as she stumbled out of the greenhouse and made her way up to the Gryffindor common room. She hoped to find Harry alone, or just with Hermione and Ron, but at least a

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dozen sixth- and seventh-year Gryffindors were, with untoward hilarity, practicing spells and hexes whose effects seemed far more gross than dangerous. Ginny leaned against the entrance, eyes narrowed against the light, concentrating on thinking through the pain in her head and finding Harry in that mob.

'Hey Ginny! Glad you're back. Check this out.' Ron pointed his wand at Seamus. '*Arduus Leviosa Habilus!*' Seamus' robes levitated and wrapped themselves so tightly around his arms and head that he staggered, making strangled noises.

'And I had you down as a boxers man,' said Dean with a smirk.

'I invented this spell myself.' Ron was beaming. 'How cool is *that?*'

'Very cool—for a twelve-year-old,' said Hermione. She was curled up in one of the deep squashy chairs, parchments scattered around her.

Ron looked hurt and muttered '*Finite Incantatem.*' Seamus' robes loosened and draped around him normally. His face scarlet, he took a couple of steps toward Ron.

'Weasley.'

The two young men stared at each other expressionlessly. Then Seamus' face split into a huge grin.

'That was fucking brill!' He clapped Ron on the back, and they both started laughing.

'Armies of Voldemort, flee in terror or suffer death by embarrassment.' said Hermione, sounding bored.

Ron turned on her. 'You know what, Hermione? You should think of dropping the Ice Queen Who's

deeper than all roses



Too Good To Mingle With The Commoners act. It's getting really old.'

'Come off it, you two,' snapped Harry, who had been off in a corner with Neville trying with mixed success to teach him how to control a cold fireball. 'Why can't you—oh, shit, Neville, *no!*' Harry's wand flicked and the fireball, which had been about to engulf Harry's head, vanished.

'Remember to use your wand to control the direction, Nev,' continued Harry more patiently.

'Right, Harry. Sorry about that, mate.'

'Harry.' Ginny had picked her way through the riot. Harry looked at her, and his casual 'Hey, Ginny' died on his lips.

'God, you look awful. Are you okay?' and he put out one hand to touch her shoulder.

'Ginny...?' Ron was by her side, peering into her face. 'Oh no. Not another migraine.'

'Harry. I need to talk to you right now,' said Ginny with effort.

'We'll take you right up to the hospital wing,' said Ron firmly. Ginny shook him off.

'No. I need to talk to Harry.'

Harry and Ron exchanged puzzled looks. By this time, Hermione, noticing something amiss, had joined them.

'Ginny? What's wrong?'

Harry put a hand on Ginny's arm.

'It's all right. Come on, Ginny. Let's just go down the corridor a bit and we can talk there.'

Dean whistled as Harry steered Ginny toward the



common room entrance. 'Oi, Harry—found something more interesting to do tonight?' he sang out.

'Go bugger yourself, Dean,' said Ron wearily. Hermione touched his arm, and he looked into her concerned face and tried to muster a smile.

'I'm sure she's okay,' he said.



Much later, Severus reflected that even if a dozen Death Eaters had surrounded them on the Embankment, armed to the teeth with the Carborundorum Curse and accompanied by a brass band, it was possible he wouldn't have noticed. He certainly wouldn't have cared. It wasn't that it had been far too long since he'd touched a woman. It wasn't even that most of his previous sexual experiences had been chillingly clinical—unlike the Death Eaters who saw Voldemort's Pureblood Movement as a perfect opportunity to glorify in the worst kinds of gang behaviour. Snape had always done his best to disengage himself from their vandalism, pillage, and increasingly, murder and rape. Careful crafting of a sexless, ascetic persona hadn't helped him as much as making his dangerous allegiance to the Order, after which Voldemort had decided he was much more useful as a double-agent than a thug.

As an unmarried teacher, Snape found celibacy conveniently ethical; it allowed him to stay above reproach. As a spy, he found celibacy essential; he couldn't afford to be any more vulnerable than he already was. He broke discipline only when well



away from Hogwarts, and only with women he knew he'd never meet again. Women, for example, who made it a rule never to kiss.

But *this* woman—this woman actually *wanted* him, all of him: his mouth, his arms, the hardness of his body pressing against hers... and he *was* human, God damn it, all too human. She wrapped herself around him, her mouth and tongue alive under his, and the moans coming from deep in her throat made him dig his fingers into her hair and press her back against the railing. Under her coat, he felt her thighs part, and her hands grasped his buttocks and pulled him against her. Even through their layers of clothing, he could feel the way she moved against his painfully hard erection. He groaned.

Wait. Not like this.

With an effort, Severus pulled his mouth from hers and straightened, letting his hands fall gently away from her hair. Her French twist had, not surprisingly, come undone, and thick silver-brown waves tumbled around her shoulders.

Gwen Hawking's eyes opened. She looked dazed. The air between them filled with the steam of their rapid breathing.

'How far away is your hotel room?' Severus said raggedly.

Gwen smiled, and her hands released his buttocks. She pushed herself up from the railing, wincing a little. 'Ouch. Not far. Just off the Strand, two streets away from the Café Faust.'

'Did I hurt you?'

deeper than all roses

She chuckled. 'No, Severus. Not possible. It's just that I'm not young any more.' She looked at him, a wicked gleam in her eye. 'I hope we can make it back to the hotel.'

'Why?' said Severus, alarmed. 'Do you sense danger?'

'Most decidedly. The danger is that if you touch me, or even look at me—' she took a breath—'*that* way, I shall have to drag you down some dark alley.'

Severus stood there for a moment, looking at her. Then he almost smiled—an expression warmer than his usual ironic twist of the mouth. Gwen tossed her head, grinning back and straightening her coat.

'This might be a good time,' she said, 'to remove the Disillusionment Charms...'

'Oh. Quite.' As the warmth of the charm's reversal moved down his body, Severus fell into step beside her. He did not touch her, and he certainly tried his best not to look at her *that* way.

He failed, since he could think of and look at nothing but Gwen Hawking. A few times, as they walked back toward the crowded Strand, she stole glances at him too, and each eye contact sent a shock down into his groin. He was beginning to think he should start noting the locations of dark alleys when Hawking led him down a cul-de-sac. They stopped at a tidy but non-descript door on which the words 'Hotel Elysian' were lettered on a brass plaque. Gwen pressed a buzzer.

After a moment, the door clicked open and she led him inside. Severus raised his eyebrows, surprised and impressed by the understated blue and pale

deeper than all roses



yellow elegance of the lobby. He was no expert, but the stylised geometric lines and curves of the décor suggested Art Deco. A young woman, looking coolly efficient in a severe navy-blue dress, looked up from her seat behind a curved counter and smiled.

‘Good evening, Doctor Hawking.’

‘Good evening, Cheryl.’

‘Will you be needing anything this evening?’

‘I’m fine, thank you,’ said Gwen, with a not-quite-suppressed smile.

‘Then goodnight, Doctor Hawking.’

‘Goodnight, Cheryl.’

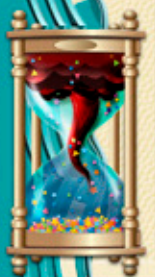
Gwen led the way to a lift. A dial above the lace-like wrought iron doors indicated the building had four floors. She pushed the doors apart, ushered Severus inside, closed the doors, then pressed the button marked “4.” With a slight lurch, the lift ascended. Under normal circumstances, Severus might have enjoyed this close encounter with quaint Muggle technology. But the lift moved with such excruciating slowness that he found himself grinding his teeth and counting the seconds.

Though Gwen was standing so close to him their shoulders almost touched, he didn’t dare even look at her. He had the feeling that having sex in a semi-public lift was probably a Muggle felony, and he didn’t care to test that theory.

Finally, *finally* the bloody lift stopped at the fourth floor.

The hallway was dim with rich blue carpeting. Seashell-shaped wall-sconces glowed beside each

deeper than all roses



door. As they stopped outside the door at the end of the hall and Gwen reached into her coat pocket for her key, Severus touched her face with one hand. When she looked at him, he covered her lips with his. Her hands clutched his shoulders as he opened her mouth with small flicks of his tongue. When Gwen tried to press herself against him, her key dropped to the carpet. Severus drew back, smiling slightly.

‘Wh—why did you do that?’ said Gwen a bit shakily. Severus stooped to retrieve her key.

‘I want us both to be very clear about what’s going to happen once we’re inside that door.’

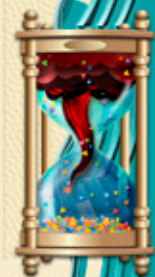
She looked at him and held out her hand for the key. Severus dropped it into her palm. Without a word, she unlocked the door, stepped inside, and flicked a switch. A soft light glowed. Severus followed her inside, catching a quick impression of the same luxurious carpeting and a room redolent, like the lobby, with Art Deco finery. After closing and locking the door, she drew her wand from her sleeve and murmured incantations that coaxed fiery symbols from its tip. The symbols sank into the door and vanished.

‘Wards?’ asked Severus.

‘And a Silencing Charm.’ She threw him a wicked look.

Severus, not taking his eyes from hers, reached for the switch on the wall and turned the Muggle light off. As he’d suspected, the city glow diffusing through the window provided more than enough illumination for him to see her unbuttoning her coat and then letting it fall to the carpeted floor. She came up to him, and he breathed the scent of her hair as she undid his coat

deeper than all roses





and peeled it away, then loosened his tie and dropped it to the floor. He sensed she would have been quite content to unlayer him at her leisure. In theory, he had nothing against that pleasant notion.

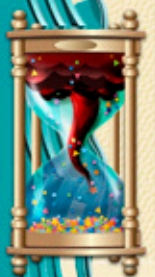
But the moment Severus felt her fingers moving on his chest, undoing the buttons of his shirt, the wildness he had barely been able to control on the Embankment reared up and took him. He caught her in his arms, pressing his mouth against the line of her jaw, her cool cheek, her neck, before she captured his lips with hers and pushed her hips against his groin, moving insistently against an erection that had never really subsided.

She lifted her mouth from his just long enough to gasp ‘Damn Muggle clothing! Sorry—’ then ripped his shirt open, sending buttons flying. She fumbled with his zipper; much to his relief, she took care of that hellish device easily and pushed his trousers down. Boots! Bloody hell. Severus stopped kissing her just long enough to kick them off and step out of the trousers, then he caught her hard against him again. After a moment, he half-carried her backwards until they fetched up against the door they had just entered.

A door he hoped was well soundproofed because, by chaos and damnation, they were going to need it.

‘How do you get this dress off?’ he growled into her neck, and she gave a breath of laughter.

‘Like this.’ She reached behind her, shimmied, and the dark dress slithered down her shoulders. She stepped out of it like a snake shedding its skin, and his hands traced the thin straps of a bra, a tiny

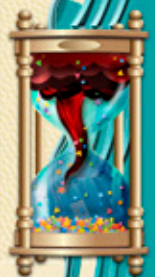


half-slip, and the tops of stockings against smooth thighs. Moving his mouth down the curve of her neck, he used his teeth to pull one bra strap slowly off her shoulder. He felt as well as heard her shuddering gasp as he flicked his tongue against her nipple, feeling the bud swell and harden. In sympathy, his cock pulsed, straining. Gwen’s hand reached inside his pants, and when her fingers curled around his hot, hard flesh he moaned.

He wanted to bury himself inside her, to feel her heat. But not yet. Oh, not yet.

Mustering what little shreds of control he had left, Severus unclasped her bra and cupped a breast in each hand, letting his thumbs trace her erect nipples. As she let out a small cry, he moved his lips back up her neck and found her mouth again. She groaned deep in her throat as he laid the entire length of his body over hers, pushing her hard against the door, triumphing in the feel of her skin against his. Her hand left his cock only long enough to push his pants down, then he was free and her fingers were moving up and down the length of him.

This time when her thighs opened, there was no impediment. When she spread herself over his cock, her juices soaked him. He didn’t try to enter her just yet. Trembling, gasping, groaning, she rubbed herself against his hardness. His harsh breathing matched the speeding rhythm of hers. He sensed the storm gathering within her, then felt her hands dig into him, and the cords of her neck went rigid against his mouth as she cried out and convulsed against him.



He'd heard once that women wanted to be held tenderly and soothed after orgasm. To bloody hell with that. As Gwen slumped against the door, Severus put his hands under her buttocks, lifted her up, and sheathed himself inside her with a ferocity that would have surprised him if he'd been able to think. He thrust into her, again, again, with no other goal than his own release. As his control spiralled away, and he knew he could hold back no longer, he heard Gwen gasping *yes, yes* and felt her fingers driving like hooks into his lower back.

Part of him felt amazed that his own selfish drives could give her such pleasure.

And then—oh yes *then*—his climax devoured him.



deeper than all roses

CHAPTER SEVEN

collateral damage

THE HOG'S HEAD, as Alastor Moody described it in a parody of bureaucratese, was 'heretofore and forthwith designated the unofficial meeting place for post-Order of the Phoenix-mortems.' Long after darkness had fallen on the same evening Severus Snape was to meet Gwen Hawking, several cloaked figures slipped into the dim and dirty-looking bar and gathered around a table in the darkest corner. The balding, scruffy-looking barman slouched over to them. 'Butterbeers all round, please, Mr. Scree,' said Bill Weasley. The scruffy man grunted and turned toward the bar to get them, but before he could move, a long black staff shot out and blocked Scree's passage. 'And make sure,' Moody said softly, 'that the bottles are *clean*. Understood?'

Scree mumbled something and nodded. The black staff vanished, and the barman made good his escape.

'Blimey,' said Tonks. 'Did you have to scare him like that?'

Moody scowled. 'He's been here for what—at least two weeks now? And he still doesn't know what the hell he's doing.'



Tonks said, with a wicked grin: “One of Mundungus’s cronies?”

Bill, wincing, “Not funny, Tonks.”

‘I wonder,’ Lupin said a bit wistfully, ‘if we should’ve hired a room above The Three Broomsticks instead.’

A tabby cat stalked toward their table, swarmed up onto the one empty chair, and transformed into Minerva McGonagall. She peered at them over the tops of her square glasses, as unruffled as if presiding over tea at Parents’ Day.

‘Ah Minerva. Thank you for coming,’ said Moody, nodding at her.

‘You said you had a complaint. I want to hear it,’ said McGonagall, her expression grim.

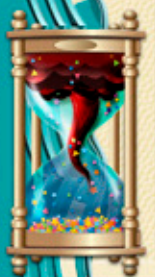
Moody, Lupin, Tonks, and Bill looked at each other. Then Bill leaned forward, elbows resting on the grimy table. ‘The thing is, we wanted to talk about Albus’ decision yesterday night.’

‘With all due respect, Minerva,’ Moody rumbled, ‘we feel Albus pressured the meeting into agreeing to an exceptionally high-risk undertaking.’

‘Albus is quite aware of your objections,’ said McGonagall, frowning.

‘I’m not one to turn my back on risk,’ Bill added. ‘And I can sort of understand where Dumbledore’s going. But don’t you think Hawking’s offer is just too damn—convenient?’

‘Not to mention that none other than Snape is doing the reccy on her,’ said Moody, his magical eye whirling restlessly under his low-brimmed black hat.



‘Just have out with it, Alastor,’ said McGonagall, her lips thinning. ‘You don’t trust Severus.’

‘I’ve *never* trusted that young snake, period,’ said Moody, then fell silent as Scree, trying to stay as far away from the old Auror as possible, slid butterbeers onto the table before scurrying away. Moody picked up his glass and peered at it darkly.

‘Look,’ he continued, ‘let’s just think straight about this for one bloody minute. We have a double agent and active Death Eater who now has Dumbledore’s blessing to meet with the one person who just so happens to have access to exactly the information we need most badly! It stinks to high heaven!’

McGonagall, glaring at Moody, almost seemed to bristle like a cat confronting a raccoon.

‘Alastor, you at least owe Albus the courtesy of speaking to him frankly instead of skulking around behind his back.’ She looked around with disdain. ‘Why meet here, of all places?’

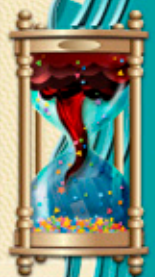
‘We’ve noticed Death Eaters haven’t been frequenting the place over the past few weeks. So strangely enough, it’s fairly safe,’ said Bill, smiling without mirth.

‘Not that that’s a *good* sign,’ said Moody darkly.

Tonks laid one gentle hand on McGonagall’s arm. ‘We know you’re as bothered as we are about letting Hawking into Hogwarts. You said it yourself, right? A really good Bona Fides Charm might be impossible to break.’

McGonagall’s eyes flickered.

‘All we’re asking,’ said Bill, ‘is that if Hawking must





come to Hogwarts, you and Dumbledore and Remus don't let her out of your sight for one second.'

'And keep Snape under constant vigilance too,' growled Moody. 'Albus's too soft on him. Always has been.'

'We have every intention of watching Doctor Hawking very closely,' snapped McGonagall. 'As for Severus, he's risked his life repeatedly for Hogwarts. I think he's proven himself time and again. I stand with Albus on this one.' She glared at Moody again as if daring him to contradict her.

'Snape is—hardly a close friend,' said Lupin, 'but I respect his abilities, and my instincts tell me there's no reason to doubt his commitment to our side.'

'Well, Remus, I hope your instincts are in good order,' growled Moody. 'I have a nasty feeling that even if Snape can be trusted, he's in over his head this time.'



Ginny felt like screaming, and not only from the pain of her almost-migraine. Why wasn't Harry listening to her? She tried again.

'No, Harry. The DA can't handle this. You have to tell Dumbledore. Or McGonagall at least.'

'Listen to me, Ginny,' said Harry, and his voice had that brittle edge of someone trying very hard to be patient. 'First: Malfoy can't get away with harming Hermione. As soon as he tries—if he can even pull it off—Snape or Lupin will know about it and serve his arse for breakfast. Second: no way am I going to Dumbledore because we can't deal with the ongoing Draco-Hermione hate-fest. We'd look like a bunch of wankers.'

collateral damage



'Is that all you're worried about? Looking like a wanker? Harry—'

'Bloody hell, Ginny, that's *not* it. It's just that the DA—I mean, we're supposed to be training for combat, aren't we? If we can't even protect Hermione without running to a teacher, then I say we're well and truly fucked.'

'What about Filch?'

'What about him? He's a Squib.'

'He could still do a hell of a lot of damage. Do you want to take that chance just because you don't want to look like a wanker?'

Harry's green eyes blazed. 'It's much more than that, Ginny, and you know it.'

Ginny closed her eyes and pressed both hands to her throbbing head. 'Yelling at me won't help.'

She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. 'I'm sorry,' Harry said quietly. 'Look, let me take you up to see Pomfrey, okay? Please?'

What if I told you, Harry, about what I saw Draco doing with that sixth-year? What if I told you what I was thinking when I watched them? Would it shock you?

'All right, Harry,' she said, too exhausted to argue any more, and let him steer her down the corridor.

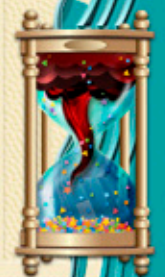


NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Personal

After Severus and I withdrew from each other, he moved a couple of feet away and sat with his back

collateral damage





against the wall, his long legs stretched out in front of him. I leaned against that damned uncomfortable hotel door, groaned as my abused muscles protested, and regarded his sharp profile.

'I've just remembered something very important,' I said.

He turned his head toward me. In the dimness, his eyes looked wary.

'What?'

'This hotel room comes with a bed, you know.'

'OK?'

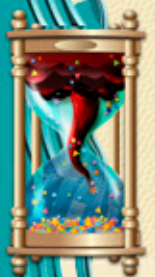
'Yes. Would you like to try it?'

'I'll consider it.'

I pushed myself to my knees. 'If you hate the bed, you have my permission to sleep on the floor.'

Severus chuckled, reached over to the tangled pile of clothing nearby, somehow extracted his pants (silky, black) and his now buttonless shirt, and slid into them. Then, surging to his feet (oh to be thirty-eight again!), he reached down, helped me up, and tactfully moved down the hallway toward the living room as I tried to put myself in order. In the end, it took a quick trip to the toilet and a soft, roomy bathrobe before I considered myself fit to join him.

At which point, Severus had had plenty of time to



turn back into Snape.

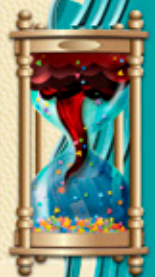
'I believe you originally invited me here for a purpose other than testing your bed,' he said, with the faintest undertone of the sarcasm I remembered from my teenage years.

It gave me no end of satisfaction to explain and demonstrate that the spell sequences were hidden in plain sight: on the bed. (Why would I have any other reason to steer him in that direction?)

The bed had been turned down several hours ago, and a single red rose and two dark chocolate truffles had been placed on one pillow. I offered Snape a truffle; at his mistrustful look, I took a slow bite out of one.

'It's harmless. Open your mouth.' To my surprise, he complied. As I placed the chocolate between his lips, his mouth trapped my fingers, his eyes gleaming with amusement. While I relished the feel of his lips and tongue, my own eyes must have glazed over, for my untamed lover smiled. I remembered to take my fingers from his mouth. And to resume breathing.

'Watch.' I pointed my wand at the rose on the pillow. 'Germinate.' A warm red glow surrounded the rose. Each petal carefully opened and expanded to





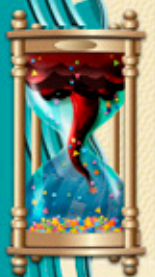
ten times its original size. When the glow faded, a thin stack of parchments lay flat on the pillow.

Snape had raised his eyebrows. 'An elegant charm,' he commented. 'I haven't seen anything quite like it.'

'We've quite a range of research projects going at La Société these days,' I mumbled, not sure whether I was pushing Snape's limits of disbelief.

Snape made himself comfortable on the bed but insisted I examine the parchments with him. I'm still not sure whether he wanted me in his sight—a prudent move for a spy—or whether he intended all along for us to test the bed properly.

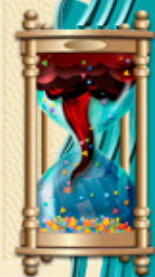
Either way, it came to pass that the very first time the dread *Carborundorum* sequences were reviewed for the purposes of using them against the Dark Lord, the brave warriors planning the counter-measure were reclining on a fluffy eider-down and sharing a delicious truffle. So perhaps it's not surprising that, after we'd reviewed several of the sequences and I was getting tired of the sound of my own voice explaining them, I found my hand straying to his naked thigh. Severus looked at me sharply and accused me of trying to distract him; I suggested I was doing nothing of the kind and invited him to carry on reading as if I weren't



there. A moment later, I circled his waist with my arms and started running both hands along his thighs. I placed my open mouth against the smooth pale skin of his neck and felt more than heard his involuntary 'hmm' of pleasure.

Severus could have sat there all the rest of the night reading (or trying to), and if all I'd been allowed to do was encircle him with my arms, I would have been content. But he let his head tilt back, let his eyes close and the parchments droop, as my hand moved under his open shirt and travelled up his chest. As I slid my other hand under the waist-band of his pants, he sighed. I teased him a bit, circling around but not touching his rapidly hardening cock, but as I cupped and gently squeezed his balls, he gasped. Groping for my hand, he wrapped it around his now rigid cock. My fingers travelled up to its tip and found moisture there, which I slowly spread over his length. At that, my lover moaned, and that sound stabbed me with need.

I hated to take my hungry hands away from him for even a moment, but in the interests of greater rewards, I shed my bathrobe and straddled his legs, sweeping parchments out of his lap. His eyes, half-opened, were languorous as I slowly pulled the silky black pants down his legs.





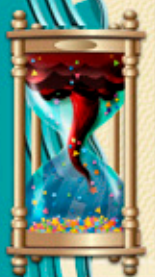
'Why don't you just make them vanish?' he murmured thickly.

'What kind of a challenge is that?' I growled as I peeled his damaged shirt away, and he laughed.

'Ah... you like a challenge, do you?' As the dark silk of his voice caressed those words, I almost came then and there. Sensing my weakness, he tried to pull me down to him, but I resisted, holding back and looking at this strange, dangerous man spread out against the bed beneath me. The warm, subdued light was kind to him, making him pale rather than pallid. I traced the fine black hair that circled his nipples and ran in a thin, straight line down his flat stomach to join the more luxuriant growth surrounding his erection. As I shamelessly feasted my eyes on that sight, he laughed deep in his throat.

I didn't think about it then, but now I wonder: what was he seeing? What was he thinking as he looked at me? I'm no fresh youthful package. A woman who's lived two-score and ten on this earth—even a well-preserved witch—is going to show it here and there. Did he suspect I'm a good dozen years older than he? And does it even matter?

But I wasn't thinking about anything then except finally letting him draw me down into a long, long

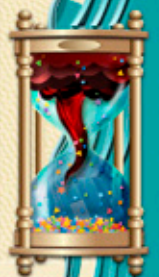


kiss... and then wrapping myself with exquisite slowness around his cock, surrounding him, finally taking all of him. As I rode him, his hands cupped my breasts and his thumbs brushed my nipples, sending lightning right down to my clit. That, combined with the sensation of moving slowly, then faster, faster up and down his rigid cock, undid me. I didn't want to come so soon, but he brought me there relentlessly, my body bending backwards in sweet agony whilst his hands steadied me.

After a while, I looked down. His mouth: half-open, hair spread like a dark wing over the pillow, eyes heavy and black with lust. I had never in my life before seen anything so sexual. I'll remember that sight until every particle of my body dissipates.

I pinned his arms to his sides and fastened my lips on his neck to taste him. The movements of his cock inside me sped up slightly, and his breathing grew more ragged—but far from losing control, he freed one hand and unerringly found my clit, his other hand locking onto my hips as he thrust deep and hard into me, first slowly, then more quickly, his intelligent fingers never ceasing their movements.

How long? I have no idea. It could never be long enough, but my orgasm finally gathered me up





and thundered through me, then left me collapsed on top of my lover, breathless and limp with the aftermath of pleasure. I felt both his hands clamp onto my hips; his thrusts grew rapid and arrhythmic as his control began breaking down. Then seconds later, I had to cling like a drowning swimmer to a log as he bucked, head thrown back, groaning, surrendering himself violently. To me.

If wizarding folk like me have souls, and if those souls ever travel restlessly across time and space, then at the moment we lost ourselves in each other, mine found its rightful place.

Or so I thought.

But as my old guv Sam would have said, I failed to maintain constant vigilance.



In the Gryffindor common room, now empty and blessedly peaceful, Hermione had immersed herself deep in a parchment detailing the extraction and use of certain bodily essences for potion making.

‘Hermione?’

She jumped. It was Ginny. She looked pale, but her eyes were steady and clear. ‘Sorry for interrupting.’

‘No—it’s all right.’ said Hermione warmly. ‘Are you feeling better?’

‘Yeah, a bit. Pomfrey gave me something. Head-



ache’s down to a dull roar now.’

‘Want me to ask the kitchen for some tea?’

‘No thanks. S’okay.’

‘So...’ said Hermione after an awkward pause. ‘About earlier. What on earth happened? Why did you need to talk to Harry?’ She smiled. ‘Lavender’s reactivated the rumour mill about you two.’

Ginny made a face. ‘About me and Harry the wanker? No thanks.’

Hermione looked wide-eyed at her younger friend. ‘Ginny, what’s wrong?’

‘He just wouldn’t bloody listen to me.’ Ginny put a finger in her mouth and pulled at a shred of nail. ‘Hermione—listen. I was in the greenhouse an hour or so ago, and I saw Draco Malfoy sneaking around there.’

Hermione couldn’t help seeing how Ginny’s face flushed, and despite herself, she smiled.

‘Don’t tell me. He wasn’t alone. Someone was rendering services, right?’

‘A sixth-year. Angelica Larsen.’

‘Oh, *super*.’

‘Not nearly as super as what happened right after.’ Tersely, Ginny described the conversation she’d overheard between Draco and Filch, and her attempts to persuade Harry to warn Dumbledore.

‘Well,’ said Hermione. ‘Filch and the passage sound very serious, but that aside for a second, I think Harry’s right that Draco won’t get a chance to do any real harm. I can see not bothering Dumbledore about that.’

Ginny looked at her, eyes narrowed in suspicion. ‘But why do you think Draco has it in for you all of a sudden?’





Hermione grinned. ‘When I caught him with Pansy, Draco tried to impress me with a little display of his—erm—equipment. He think he honestly expected I’d be horrified. Instead,’ and she started to giggle, ‘I laughed in his face.’

Ginny covered her mouth to stifle a shriek of laughter. ‘Oh shit. No wonder he’s so pissed off.’

‘So,’ Hermione took a deep breath, ‘that’s why I’m not taking this Draco thing too seriously. Oh, I’m watching my back, but honestly, it’s getting tedious being escorted everywhere by the DA and friends. As if I can’t take care of myself!’

‘Well, never fear. Harry and my big brother will protect you against Draco whether you want it or not!’

Hermione sighed. ‘Save me from their protection. But—’ and she sobered, ‘—what you say about Filch does worry me a bit. I can’t believe Harry won’t talk to Dumbledore about it.’

Ginny sighed. ‘You know how weird Harry can be about Dumbledore. I know he admires him, but he also resents him. Going to Dumbledore about something like this might make it look as if he can’t stand and fight on his own.’

Hermione shook her head. ‘As if Harry has anything to prove.’

‘I know. And Dumbledore would at least *listen* to him.’

‘Look,’ said Hermione briskly. ‘I think we should go to Dumbledore ourselves.’

Ginny looked panicked. ‘No way!’

‘Why not? I think he’d listen to me.’

‘Hermione—think! “Guess what, Headmaster.

collateral damage



Ginny overheard Filch and Draco talking about a secret passage in the dungeons somewhere. So Filch is a conspirator. And of course you should expel Draco immediately.” Draco, as in Mister Pureblood *Malfoy*? And Hogwarts’ faithful *caretaker*?’

‘Ginny.’ Hermione’s voice was hushed. ‘I’m wondering something.’

‘What?’

‘Could Dumbledore already know about this passageway? Or even about Filch?’

There was a long, horrible silence.

‘If,’ Hermione finally said, ‘Malfoy and Filch are co-conspirators, if Dumbledore may or may not be in the know, and if Harry’s determined to do things his way...’

‘Then,’ said Ginny, ‘the men of Hogwarts are fuckwits.’

Hermione gave a peal of laughter. ‘Which means you and I will have do this *our* way.’ She looked at Ginny intently. ‘We need to get proof.’

Ginny’s answering grin was wicked. ‘Sounds like a plan to me.’

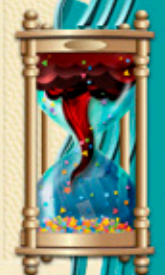


NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Personal. (These are supposed to be scientific notes, not a sex-diary. Still—for the sake of honesty and clarity...)

Severus let me rest on top of him for a long time afterwards. We spoke not a word. Finally, I slid away

collateral damage





gently and padded off to the toilet again. When I came back, he had turned on his side and was asleep.

I felt curiously awkward about curling up beside him. And besides, I couldn't sleep. So I spent about an hour or two writing the notes above (I use a Muggle fountain pen, not one of those ghastly Quick-Quotes Quills!). Then I heard the rustle of parchments. Curious, I crept to the bedroom. Severus had clearly been awake and reading for a while, finishing the spell sequences. I could see by the narrowing of his eyes and the grimness of his mouth that he understood, almost as deeply in his bones as I did, the profoundly evil nature of the weapon we now held in our hands.

A weapon to cleanse the wizarding world of "impurity."

A weapon made possible by my own stupidity and pride.

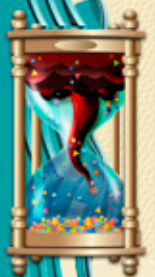
Severus looked up and saw me watching him. He put aside the parchments and looked at me gravely.

'You said earlier this evening that you've paid for this knowledge in blood. It's time to tell me more.'

'It's something I'd rather not re-live if I can help it.'

He patted the bed, but this time there was no trace of lust in his expression. I sighed and sat beside him. Not the actions of a vigilant woman.

collateral damage



'Tell me.' The words were inviting, but the tone held the flat finality of an order.

'All right.' I made myself look at him. 'You've heard about the Warlocks, haven't you?'

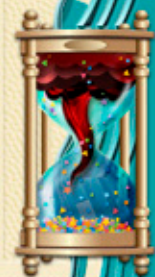
Let me state for the record: the Warlocks don't, repeat DO NOT, officially exist. Even during my days in the future as a top D.O.M. boffin, I didn't work, will not have worked (God, time travel buggers up verb tenses!) directly with that elite group of Aurors. They're spies, assassins, and counter-terrorists. Let me be clear: someone like Harry could never be a Warlock; he had far too high a profile. The grey little man in the corner cubicle in the Ludicrous Patents Office? Much more likely. Compared with Warlock operations, the highly secretive D.O.M. might as well install a revolving door with 'Come On In' floating above in fiery letters.

Warlocks take a vow to keep their affiliation hidden on pain of death.

I suspected Severus Snape had heard of this group. In fact, I counted on it. He might even be one of them. I'll probably never know.

But I knew—or thought I knew—how to deal with spies. Never actually lie to them. Just stretch the truth. So the tale I now spun involved an Auror very

collateral damage





dear to me who'd recently lost his life. In my tale, he'd infiltrated the Malfoy mansion and stolen information about Voldemort's latest and deadliest weapon.

'And you obtained this information—how?' The dark eyes were hard and sceptical. My lover had vanished, and Snape was back in full force.

I explained that La Société's department of research, where I'd worked, was a front for the development of Warlock counter-measures against rare Dark magic (La Société will categorically deny this, which of course means it's true. Give me credit for preparing my alibis meticulously). In that way the Carborundorum spells had come to me and my team, and working round the clock for weeks, we had eventually developed a remedy.

Again, that was the truth. Just the names, places, and times were changed.

As soon as our team realised Hogwarts was in immediate peril, I, with no real ties remaining, volunteered to travel here and share our knowledge. 'For,' I told Snape, 'this school and Harry Potter'—to my amusement, Snape winced at the name—'are cornerstones of the wizarding world. If Voldemort compromises Hogwarts or kills Harry Potter, the rest of the magical community will be utterly demoralised.'

collateral damage



When I mentioned Harry's name, a bizarre thing happened. Even though I was sitting beside and almost touching the warm, naked body of a man I'd dreamt about for years and thought I'd lost forever as a casualty of war, I allowed myself a moment to remember the lover I should never have had: the Harry Potter I'd reminisced with, fought with, and embraced—sometimes with passion, sometimes with grief. The man who died.

I've done as you asked, Harry. I took that one-way trip. My eyes filled with tears.

Snape got out of bed and left me for a minute or two. When he came back and sat beside me, he was neatly clothed, all shirt buttons restored. His finger traced my jaw, and I leaned my cheek into his palm.

At length I looked at him, my eyes still blurred with tears. He was holding his wand in his left hand. The wand was pointed at me.

I heard, but couldn't quite believe, the word that came softly from his lips: 'Legilimens.'

The man who had revelled in my body now, without hesitation, attacked my mind.



The late October dawn had just begun to spread

collateral damage





faint fingers of light across the grounds of Hogwarts when Hagrid, patrolling the grounds with Fang panting by his side, spotted a dark figure slipping in through the little-used, overgrown back gates. Moving with a speed and grace that would have surprised most of his students, the half-giant circled around the figure to cut him off.

'Stop righ' there,' he growled, moving to block the invader's path. Fang rumbled.

The figure lifted its head, and black hair fell back from a pale, tired face.

'Oh.' said Hagrid, startled. 'I didn' recognise yer in those clothes. Sorry about' that, Professor Snape.' The big man stepped back to let the Potions master pass.

Snape paused, looking down at himself.

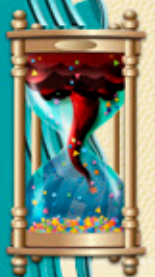
'If anyone asks, you did *not* see me, Hagrid. Do you understand?'

Hagrid looked evenly at Snape. 'Righ'. Unless it's Dumbledore doin' the askin', o' course.'

Snape's eyes flickered in acknowledgment. 'Of course.'

Hagrid watched Snape until the shadows of Hogwarts swallowed him up. 'I've seen dragon-crap that looked better 'n he does. Rough nigh', I'm imaginin'. Righ' Fang?'

Snape let himself into the school through the kitchen door, sweeping past the house-elves who were just starting breakfast preparations. The more experienced elves either ignored the intrusion or sternly cuffed any of their colleagues who stopped and stared, jaws dropping, at the tall thin figure clad in alien Muggle clothing. 'Not to stare. So rude!'



hissed one. Snape loftily pretended he hadn't heard.

Once in his rooms, he conjured away the Muggle clothes, replacing them with soft black pyjamas. It was now less than two hours before breakfast. He knew he should try and sleep for an hour, but instead he slumped into his armchair, waved his wand to start a fire, and then stared into the flames.

I was following orders. I had no choice.

Suddenly a soft 'pop' came from the fireplace, and the head and shoulders of Remus Lupin appeared. Snape sat bolt upright and glared.

'Who invited *you* here at this hour?' he snarled.

'Good morning to you, too. May I come in?'

'Get the fuck out of my fireplace.'

'Happy to oblige.' The flames leapt high and turned emerald green, and Lupin stepped into the room. Snape pushed himself to his feet, scowling, as the fire subsided.

'Is there anything I can do or say to make you leave?'

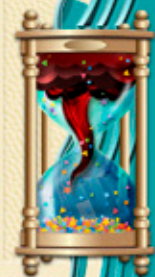
Lupin showed his teeth in a grin and sat down in a nearby straight-backed chair.

'Tell me what happened with Hawking tonight, and then I'll go.'

Snape sat down as well. 'Since when do I report to you?'

'Bear with me. I have good reasons for asking. Now tell me about Hawking.'

Snape pushed his hair away from his face and sighed. 'I'm satisfied Hawking is the person she says she is. She certainly has all the information we need about the Carborundorum Curse.'



'So you've established her *bona fides*.'

'What you want to know,' Snape rubbed his face wearily, 'is whether I used Legilimency as ordered.'

A strange expression—part satisfaction, part sympathy—crossed Lupin's face. 'And—?'

Snape shot him a look of pure venom. 'And? Yes. I entered her mind without warning or permission.' He rose to his feet and paced. 'Yet she still intends to come to Hogwarts and share her findings even after what I did to her. She said that she understood why I had to test her.' He smiled bitterly. 'In fact, she passed the test with flying colours.'

'Is there any chance she's simply a very skilled Occlumens?'

'There's always a chance, of course. But I have—have good reason to believe she's not.'

The slight stammer didn't escape Lupin's attention. He raised his eyebrows and regarded his colleague sharply.

'This isn't just about using Legilimency, is it? Something more is eating at you. Something...' He leaned forward, his golden eyes widening, his nostrils flaring. 'Merlin's pickled balls. Severus—you *shagged* her, didn't you?'

Snape stared hard into the fire.

'Did you perform Legilimency before or after?' Lupin said very quietly.

Snape's whole body tensed.

'After, I hope. It would have been more polite,' Lupin continued relentlessly.

Snape, his eyes blazing, whirled to face Lupin,

collateral damage

who moved his hand toward his wand. Their eyes locked. Neither man moved.

Then Snape looked down at the floor and his shoulders slumped. Lupin, letting his breath out, leaned back in his chair.

'So now she's coming here,' Lupin said softly. 'What happens next?'

'Oh for fuck's sake, Lupin, what do you think?'

'All I know,' said Lupin gently, 'is that the timing couldn't be worse. I have to tell you: some of the Order are wondering just where your loyalties lie these days—and they think bringing Hawking in here could be disastrous.'

'Some? You mean Moody,' spat Snape. 'He's never trusted me.'

'A few others too. Severus—' Lupin got to his feet and went over to his colleague, not quite daring to put a hand on his shoulder. 'Do what you must to make sure Hawking succeeds, but for your own sake, keep as much distance from her as you can. You're putting yourself in grave danger otherwise.'

At that, Lupin stepped back into the fireplace and departed, taking with him any last hope of catching any sleep before breakfast. Snape leaned his head against the back of his chair and gave a short, bitter laugh.

'I was in grave danger the first moment I saw her,' he said to the ceiling.



collateral damage

the power beneath the power

H

ERMIONE WAS having a horrible morning. She felt as though she'd been dropped from the Astronomy Tower and then hit by a Bludger. For a moment, she considered not going down to the Great Hall for breakfast, but realised this would put Pomfrey on high alert, and that was the last thing she needed right now.

And besides—what would she say if she had to explain exactly what was wrong with her?

That before dawn, some sort of violent mental attack had awakened her? That her mind had been force-fed images and sounds of loss and death? A battlefield—the aftermath of slaughter—agonised cries carried by the wind. Then an abrupt change to something even worse in its own way: vivid, almost solid, sensations—as if she were *right there*—of making love to the man whose dream-image had, she thought, finally stopped haunting her. Everything: his hands on her breasts, the visceral slipperiness of his wiry body, the startling fullness as he thrust into her, and the sight of his closed face helplessly open beneath her, drinking in the pleasure she was giving him.

As this living, breathing image of Severus reached

the power beneath the power

his climax, Hermione had reared up, still half-asleep, aware of her hand between her legs and the wetness seeping through her nightgown—just in time stifling an agonised moan of release. And then she lay gasping, her eyes filling with tears of frustration and shock, as the images faded.

Except one remained after all the others. The face of a woman, not young, a few fine lines around her mouth and eyes, greying hair falling past her naked shoulders. Her mouth was slightly open, her face flushed and her brown eyes half-lidded with satiation.

Hermione had never seen this woman before in her life. And yet...

As the woman's mouth moved and Hermione read the name forming on her lips—*Severus*—the vision finally and mercifully vanished.

For some minutes afterward, Hermione lay huddled in her four-poster, her mind circling around that image as warily as an animal pacing in its cage, and came to the only conclusion possible. This older woman had seduced the Potions master. The same woman had somehow managed to invade Hermione's thoughts. Whoever she was, she knew too much. And that could mean a clear and immediate threat to Hogwarts.

But *now* what? She certainly couldn't go to Professor Snape and warn him about a mysterious woman with whom she seen him make love. She would, in all honesty, prefer being subjected to Cruciatius. And she certainly couldn't go to the headmaster.

After all, it might only have been a disturbingly vivid erotic dream.

the power beneath the power

She couldn't tell anybody. Not even Ginny.

All she could do, as old Mad-Eye Moody might say, was maintain her own brand of constant vigilance.

With that resolution, the Head Girl dragged herself to her feet. The ordeal of breakfast in the Great Hall would be bad enough. But how could she bear even to look at Professor Snape? For one rueful moment, she wondered which was worse: to die of unrequited lust or to die of shame.



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Embarrassing

I'd expected some kind of test. I thought I was prepared. I'd taken care before my travels to ensure—as best I could—that my alias was water-tight and my defences in place. So it's not as though I was shocked to find myself on the receiving end of an attack. Especially from Snape, one of the most talented Legilimens of his time.

I just wasn't expecting my attacker to have such a rotten sense of timing.

Although from the viewpoint of a double agent on a mission, the timing was perfect. I had relaxed my guard, made myself open and vulnerable, and like a seasoned spy, Snape took advantage of the circumstances.

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Of course he was under orders. I'm sure I'd have done the same thing in his place.

Ordinarily, no one without special training in Occlumency could withstand a sophisticated attack like Snape's. But by the time my team and I had neutralised the Carborundorum Curse, the field of defensive magic was in the midst of a research renaissance, rather like the computer revolution in the Muggle world. One of the many advances was a series of spells "inoculating" high-risk subjects against even a high-strength Legilimency attack, letting subjects resist and deflect without having to go through years of training.

I knew some of the researchers who came up with that handy invention. I found out over drinks that they called it "Defence Against the Dark Mind-Fuck."

So. Hawking's First Rule for effective use of Defence Against the Dark Mind-Fuck: reveal the truth whenever possible; lie only if you have no other choice. Hawking's Second Rule: when Mind-Fuck inevitable, lie back and defend. So I tried to relax and allow certain vivid, but true images to rise to the surface for inspection, along with a few carefully embedded false memories.

The entire attack couldn't have lasted more than

the power beneath the power



thirty seconds, but as far as I was concerned it lasted for hours. Defending myself without Snape knowing I was doing so was damned tough and tiring, like suddenly having to run flat-out after ambling for hours.

And then something strange happened. I felt some of my most vivid personal memories, both distant and minutes old, parting company with me and spinning away. Not dissipating—oh God, the thought of any part of me dissipating terrifies me—but sort of arrowing into the night. Going somewhere else. I'll have to ponder that some more because I really don't know what happened, but I think those memories bypassed Snape's inspection.

After a while, I realised the Mind-Fuck ordeal had ended. I was still sitting upright, my earlier tears cold on my cheeks. Snape was sitting beside me, staring straight ahead, his back rigid.

When I was sure I had enough control over my voice, I said, 'So. Did I pass your little test?'

'Yes.' His voice was colder and flatter than ice. He got up and moved to the doorway, looking out into the living room.

'Good.' I got up, wrapping my robe around me, feeling old and used and very tired, and listened



without interruption as Snape, not looking at me, his voice still flat and cold, said that details concerning my journey and escort to Hogwarts would be owled to me later this morning '—if,' and here he paused as if uncertain, 'you're still willing to come.'

I assured him, my tone equally icy, that I intended to keep my promise.

Though I could tell Snape wanted nothing more than to vanish like smoke into the burnt-out ends of the night, he finally turned to look me in the eye.

'I can't apologise for subjecting you to Legilimency. I had no choice. But as for its timing...' His voice wavered.

'From an intelligence perspective, Snape, your strategy was excellent,' I said as dryly as I could. 'It was a valuable lesson in defence, one I was stupid to forget. Better coming from you, I suppose, than Lucius Malfoy or Voldemort.'

There was a nasty silence.

'I wish you a safe journey to Hogwarts,' Snape said in that quiet, dangerous tone I remembered well from first-year. I shivered. Then he turned and walked into the living room, snatching his coat off the chair where he'd put it before his attack—no, manoeuvre. I heard him stride down the short hall—





*way, fling open the door, and then slam it behind him.
And that was that.*

*And now here I am, in my robe, sitting on a crumpled
bed. I should be getting ready to go to Hogwarts. I
have a mission to complete. I have very little time.*

*I can't BELIEVE I thought I could seduce Severus
the-Snake and not get bitten.*



'Chocolate-covered ants,' said McGonagall with a grimace to the stone gargoyle. The hidden door behind it opened, revealing a spiral staircase into which the Head of Gryffindor House stepped. As the stairs corkscrewed upward without undue haste, McGonagall moved up to the top stair, her neck stretching and fingers clenching as if she couldn't wait for the ride to end.

'Minerva,' Dumbledore greeted her, his voice kind but his face unsmiling. He gestured her to an armchair, waited until she was seated, then chose another armchair almost opposite hers.

For once, McGonagall didn't allow herself to be distracted by the spindle legged tables holding all the delicately beautiful instruments of measurement that Dumbledore loved—his toys, as she thought of them. She took a deep breath and said without preamble, 'You know, of course, about Alastor's little meeting last night at the Hog's Head.'

'Yes,' said Dumbledore. 'I understand you were placed

the power beneath the power



in a somewhat awkward position. I'm sorry about that.'

'I'm really not concerned about my position, Albus. It's yours that worries me. Do you realise that Alastor, Bill, Tonks, and the others are criticising your decision to allow this Hawking person into Hogwarts?'

'That doesn't surprise me, Minerva. In fact, I rather expected it.'

'Did you indeed, Albus? And did you expect some of the Order to question Severus's motives as well?'

'What are they saying?'

'That the ex-Death Eater won't be able to resist the temptation to sell Hawking's knowledge to Voldemort. And shall I be blunt?'

Dumbledore smiled ironically. 'When are you not?'

'They're saying you've let your judgement be swayed by over-confidence. By arrogance.'

At that some of the headmasters' portraits stirred, several pairs of eyes opening in mild shock. The world-weary Phineas Nigellus managed to yawn and look slyly intrigued at the same time.

'At least they're not saying I've succumbed to old age,' said Dumbledore. 'That's some comfort.'

'Albus, why on earth are you allowing Hawking to come here?' McGonagall burst out. 'This flies in the face of every decision you've made to preserve the safety of Hogwarts.'

'Minerva, you know the situation. You understand, better than most, that we have very few alternatives.'

McGonagall pressed her fingers to her forehead. 'I shall support you, no matter what. But the risks...'

'...are enormous, yes, but overwhelming if we don't

the power beneath the power





act.' Dumbledore reached over and took her hand. 'Minerva, I don't ask you to agree. All I ask is that you trust me. I know,' and his faded blue eyes suddenly blazed, 'that Hawking *must* come here. Everything depends on it. More than we can imagine.'

McGonagall snatched her hand away. 'Don't you dare speak to me in riddles! Tell me honestly what's going on.'

Dumbledore looked down at his gnarled, clasped fingers. 'If I could, Minerva, I would. All I can tell you now is that we must see this decision through.'

McGonagall shot to her feet. 'Not good enough, Albus. *Not* good enough, damn you!' She whirled away, the breeze from her robes making some of the silver instruments shiver. Fawkes gave a small sad cry as the headmaster's door thudded shut after her.

'Women,' Phineas drawled from the safe confines of his portrait. 'Such temperamental, volatile creatures. Wholly unequipped to guide the minds of young wizards.'

'Enough, Phineas.'

'But she made a valid point about speaking in riddles. Why do you persist in being so abstruse?'

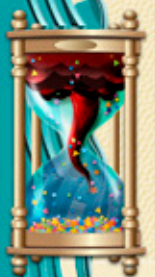
'Phineas, shall I cover you up?' said Dumbledore in a dangerous tone few would have associated with their benevolent headmaster.

The long-dead wizard gave Dumbledore an evil look and subsided without further comment.



During dinner, the atmosphere in the Great Hall

the power beneath the power



seemed pocked with tension. Hermione, her senses on edge, noticed every interaction at the high table, every movement. How Dumbledore kept his eyes on his plate. How McGonagall sat stiffly beside him and didn't look once in his direction, let alone speak to him. How Lupin kept shooting worried glances at Dumbledore and McGonagall. And how Snape, scowling more ferociously than usual, pushed peas around his plate.

At one point Snape looked up, and Hermione found herself staring into a pair of eyes so cold and flinty that she shivered and looked away.

Things weren't much more relaxed at the Gryffindor table. Ginny made an elaborate show of being terribly interested in *THE QUIBLER* and ignoring Harry and Ron. However, the young men were so absorbed in a whispered argument about whether a 'Bleyke' curse or 'Avada Kedavra' would most quickly destroy a Creeping Spider Plant that they ignored the fact that Ginny was ignoring them.

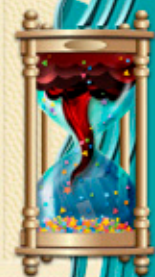
Finally, the youngest Weasley threw down her magazine. The figures in the front-page photos squawked in protest.

'Why are you even *talking* about using an Unforgivable, you wankers? You're not allowed!'

Ron rolled his eyes. 'Ginny, do you think someone's going to be standing on the sidelines when we're fighting Voldemort, blowing a whistle and saying "All right, everybody. Fair play. No Unforgivables?"'

'Besides,' said Harry, 'Last time I looked, a Creeping Spider Plant wasn't human. Blast it, fry it, curse it, whatever it takes.'

the power beneath the power





'Why are you wasting your time with plants when you could be dealing with real live creeps?' said Ginny, throwing Harry a dark look.

'Bloody hell,' said Ron. 'I guess we can't do anything right, can we?'

Hermione kicked Ginny on the shin and at the younger woman's startled look, rolled her eyes in the direction of the Slytherin table. Draco, Pansy, and Crabbe were getting to their feet. Draco said something to Pansy, who broke into a wicked smile, then spoke to Crabbe, who nodded once. The three moved toward the doors of the Great Hall.

'Ginny,' Hermione whispered, 'this might be a good time to go hunting for proof. Care to join me?'

'How can I resist?' Ginny whispered back with a grin. She and Hermione rose from the table.

'Oi, you two... where d'you think you're going?' said Ron.

Hermione folded her arms and glared at him. 'Back to our dorms.'

'And,' said Ginny, 'we can make our way there without the bleeding DA escorting us, so—' she grinned at him cheerfully '—sod off.'

Not waiting for Harry's and Ron's reactions, Hermione and Ginny strolled out the double doors into the entrance hall where they stopped and looked, not too obviously they hoped, for Draco and company.

'Look,' Ginny said, pointing past the wide marble staircase. Three figures were disappearing through the door down the stairs leading to the first dungeon level. Hermione hesitated.



'I wish we had Harry's invisibility cloak.'

'Hurry up. We'll lose them!'

Hermione followed Ginny about halfway down the stairs and then tugged on the younger woman's arm. 'Let's try a Disillusionment Charm,' she whispered. 'It won't be perfect. But if Draco and company aren't paying too much attention to their surroundings, we might be okay for a while.'

'I can't Disillusion very well,' said Ginny, shamefaced.

'I can manage it. Hold still.'

Ginny nodded and let Hermione cast the charm on each of them, shivering as the sensation of cold trickled down her spine. Before her eyes, Hermione seemed to fade, quite literally, into the stonework.

'Hell's bells. How will I know where you are?'

'If we can see each other, so can Draco,' Hermione reminded her. 'I'll stay right behind, so don't worry.'

'Okay,' Ginny whispered and led the way into the dungeons. But in the chilly corridor leading to the Potions classroom, she hesitated, and Hermione ran right into her.

'Ow.'

'Sorry. Why did you stop?'

'I'm not sure which direction they've gone. Surely not Snape's classroom.'

'God, I hope not. Let's try the other way.'

They'd left the Potions classroom well behind and had just passed Dungeon Five, when, just before a sharp turn, the young women heard Draco's voice. Ginny found Hermione's arm and grasped it. They



peered around the corner to see Draco, Pansy, and Crabbe standing before a blank stone wall.

'Where the fuck is Filch? He was supposed to meet us here.' Draco sounded less than pleased.

'Ugh. Filthy old Squib,' shuddered Pansy.

'Stuff it, Parks. We need him. And he's useful to my father. So be nice.'

Soft shuffling footsteps sounded behind Ginny and Hermione. Without thinking, they shrank against the dank wall, and not a moment too soon, for Filch and Mrs. Norris passed within two feet of them. The cat hesitated, her lamp-like eyes glaring straight at the spot where they stood, frozen, not daring to breathe. She hissed.

'Come along, my darling,' said Filch. 'Leave the sweet little mice alone for now. Plenty of time later for that.'

After a few seconds that seemed like an eternity, Mrs. Norris slunk away. Ginny let out a slow, careful breath.

'You're late,' said Draco sullenly.

'Am I?' Filch's voice took on a dangerous edge. 'I'm sorry if I've inconvenienced you and your friends, Mr. Malfoy.'

'The animal stays here,' said Pansy, her tone icy. 'I'm allergic.'

'If Mrs. Norris stays here, *I* stay here,' said Filch. The cat leapt into her owner's arms and fixed Pansy with a look of pure malice.

'Then we'll find the passage ourselves. Draco knows the way, don't you?'

'Do you, Mr. Malfoy? The route is complicated,

and I showed you only a little of it last night. But if you're quite certain you don't need me—' The caretaker turned as if to walk away.

'Look, Pansy, Filch has to come with us,' said Draco quickly. 'Just keep your distance from, er, Mrs. Norris.'

'If you're quite sure,' said Filch with a smirk. Pansy's mouth twisted.

Filch turned to the wall and ran his hands over the damp stone. With a hiss of satisfaction, he found a spot and pressed it. The wall opened with a grinding sound, revealing blackness and unleashing a brief, foul-smelling wind. Pansy grimaced.

Filch gestured in a parody of old-world courtesy. 'Wizarding folk first—we'll need your wands for light.'

Draco, Pansy, and Crabbe looked at each other.

'Well?' said Draco to Crabbe. 'Go on, then.'

Crabbe, looking most unhappy, hesitantly stepped through. After a moment, Draco and Pansy followed. Filch waited, stroking the cat.

Ginny's fingers dug into Hermione's arm, pulling her toward Filch. As he crossed the threshold, they came up behind him as close as they dared and slipped in just as the stone door shut. Hermione whisked her robe out of the way barely in time to avoid getting caught.

The light flaring from the tip of Crabbe's wand showed a small chamber that Hermione guessed might, at one point, have been some sort of potions room. A long bench against one wall and several tall, sagging cases may once have held the tools of



the trade, but dust and cobwebs covered the bench so thickly it was impossible to tell. Which might, Hermione realised a moment later, have been a good thing. For Filch headed straight to the only case in the room free of dust, a case filled with jars whose contents looked distressingly like shrunken heads.

'Hmmm,' the caretaker murmured. He touched several of the jars as if counting them before pulling one forward: the third jar from the left on the second shelf from the top, Hermione noted carefully. With a grating sound, the case slid to one side, revealing an unlit passage scarcely tall enough for an adult of average height. A cold breeze smelling of dank earth rushed into their faces.

'You see?' Draco smiled with enormous satisfaction.

'We've a way to go yet,' said Filch. 'Mr. Malfoy, your light please...'

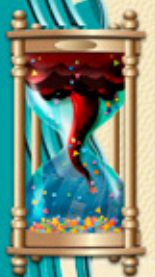
'Lumos.' Draco's wand-tip flared green, and he and Filch stooped to enter the passage. Crabbe, tallest and broadest of them all, almost had to double over. The camouflaged Hermione and Ginny stayed a little way behind. The floor was hard-packed earth, but occasional small stones made it difficult to move quietly; if they dislodged even one pebble, the game might be over.

'Why is this passage so small?' Pansy whispered.

'People were shorter once. This passage and one or two chambers are all that remain of a fortress whose ruins were ancient long before Hogwarts was built,' said Filch, his voice flat.

In the bowels of the earth with only twisting shad-

the power beneath the power



ows around them, the walk seemed to take hours, though Hermione thought later that less than five minutes passed before they reached a T-junction. Filch turned left without hesitating.

'Are we nearly there?' said Pansy, not quite whining.

'Not much farther along is something I think you should see. Something I hinted at when I met you and your little friend in the greenhouse last night, Mr. Malfoy.'

'Little friend?' Pansy's tone was chilly.

'Quiet,' Draco growled. Hermione wasn't sure whether he meant Pansy or Filch.

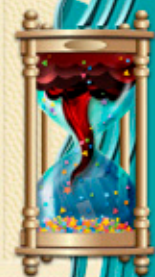
'Aaah,' said Filch after a short period of stumbling through chilly semi-darkness. He called a halt and began running his hands over a patch of earthen wall that looked indistinguishable from any other patch.

'How do you know this is the right place? I can't see any markers,' Draco complained.

'We're exactly one hundred and eleven steps from the junction. Hold your light closer and help me find a star-shaped stone.'

'There!' Draco pointed to an irregular stone level with his chest. Filch hissed with satisfaction. 'That was at eye-level for those who built this,' he muttered, and pressed his hand against the stone. A low groan shook the air and the outline of a doorway, glowing red, appeared on the wall. As the door began to open inward, dull red light began creeping into the passage, and a small round room revealed itself, dimly illuminated by three dull crimson globes. Each globe was attached to a thin black

the power beneath the power



pole embedded in the centre of the floor. The light seemed to pulsate, like the beating of a heart.

'Oh shit,' said Crabbe. Draco froze. Pansy drew in a sobbing breath and stuffed her fist into her mouth. Ginny and Hermione groped for each other's cold hands.

Spaced at precise intervals against the wall were eleven throne-like stone chairs. Sitting in each was a dried, twisted, mummified corpse. All were robed in what had once been finery—brightly coloured silk, cloth-of-gold, cloaks trimmed with ermine—now long since disintegrated into rags that exposed blackened, leathery flesh. Yellow teeth gleamed between shrivelled lips; eye-holes glared at the crimson lights. The ruined remains of fingers, many with heavy rings hanging from them, clutched the arms of each chair.

'Meet the Eleven,' Filch crooned, stroking Mrs. Norris. 'The Lords of Disorder. The power beneath the power. Don't you agree, Mr. Malfoy—' and his head swivelled toward Draco, '—that this would be a perfect place to teach the Mudblood slut a lesson in respect?'

Ginny felt more than heard Hermione let out a shocked, hissing breath. Filch, then Draco, turned their heads sharply toward the sound. As Ginny reached out to pull her friend back down the passage, away from the pulsing crimson light, she stepped on a stone and stumbled, throwing her hands out for balance. She fell against Hermione, who tried to steady her.

Draco, his face fierce, pointed his wand straight at them. Hermione let Ginny go.

'*Petrificus Totalus!*' yelled Draco as Hermione shrieked

the power beneath the power

'*Protego!* Run!' Ginny turned and sprinted into the dark. Behind her Filch shouted 'Get them!' Then a flailing hand grabbed Ginny's robes. Before she could scream, Hermione hissed in her ear, 'Lie down flat against the wall. *Now!*' Ginny threw herself to the cold ground, and a few seconds later Crabbe, Draco, Filch, and Pansy pounded past, their feet only inches away, three wands blazing. 'Fucking *bitch!* She's *dead!*' she heard Draco spit. Mrs. Norris yowled.

As their pursuers moved away down the corridor, Hermione rolled to her feet. 'Come on, Ginny. We have to follow their lights to get out of here. Quick!'

They stumbled forward, eyes fixed on the irregular green glow ahead. Neither dared look back at the crimson light crawling out into the passage behind them.



the power beneath the power

NAPE USUALLY EXERTED as much discipline over his alcohol intake as he did over his commitment to celibacy. His life might depend on maintaining iron control over both. But tonight... he didn't bloody well care. His regular intake of whisky—usually no more than a shot—had at least tripled within the past few hours.

And why the hell not? It was less painful to contemplate when drunk that he'd mind-raped a woman after having sex with her. Yes, yes—he could justify his actions. Yes, he could swear before the Wizengamot that this wasn't the first time he'd agreed—for the greater good, mind you—to invade the mind of someone less powerful. He shuddered, remembering that disastrous interval less than two years ago when Dumbledore had asked him to teach the Potter brat how to defend himself against Voldemort's incursions.

Snape could tell himself until he shrivelled and died that last night he'd been acting under orders to protect Hogwarts.

And he had indeed confirmed Gwen Hawking's *bona fides*. The mind, as he'd said on more than one occasion, is complex and many-layered. Hers was as

sophisticated and disciplined as he might expect from a mature and highly intelligent witch. Yet few wills could stand against his, especially in a surprise attack. Ultimately her mind had yielded enough memories of loss, years of research, cracking the Carborundorum Curse, and a sharp sense of urgency—of time running out—to convince him almost without doubt that her mission was genuine.

Almost. A part of Hawking's mind had kept eluding him. He'd had it almost in his grasp, like a Golden Snitch he could never catch. The feeling was akin to that strong sense of familiarity he'd experienced all night, from the moment she'd sat down at his table in the Café Faust. Perhaps she had more power than he'd yet discovered and was somehow preventing him from seeing—whatever it was about her she didn't want him to see. That elusive “almost.”

Or, more likely, his strange attraction to her had blunted his edge.

His mental edge, at any rate.

It was vexing in the extreme. Snape couldn't put his finger on any solid reason why she shouldn't be allowed into Hogwarts to begin their work on Carborundorum. Yet he couldn't shake off a deep feeling that subjecting Hawking to mind-rape, and then having to struggle for days afterwards with the monster of his own guilt and anger, was all for naught.

It was going to take more time and more Ogdens Old—and another shot would not go amiss right now, would it?—to convince himself that what he'd done last night was, in principle, no different than



any other time he'd followed orders, whether on behalf of the Light or the Dark.

Except last night, of course, he hadn't been under orders to fuck his victim first.

He tried, and failed, not to contemplate how that brutal verb didn't begin to describe the experience of opening himself as he never had before, letting her skilful fingers unfold him molecule by molecule. Not only taking pleasure for himself, but giving it back to her. Oh yes. She'd wanted him just as much—perhaps even more, if such a thing were possible. And that astounded him.

When I touched her, she blazed like a star. She moaned and melted into my skin. She howled and clawed my back. By all that's dark, she loved everything I did. I gave her enough pleasure to more than compensate for what I did to her after.

Fuck, I was GOOD.

Yes, and now you're scraping the bottom of the cauldron for justifications, so wipe that stupid smug grin off your face, Severus.

Indeed, down that path stupidity lurked, and Snape despised stupidity—his own most of all. If Lupin, damn his snout, hadn't pointed out the glaringly obvious, Snape would have soon arrived at the same conclusion on his own. An affair with Gwen Hawking was out of the question. Too dangerous. Too distracting. Not to mention grossly inappropriate within school walls, with so many bright-eyed students and swarming teenage hormones. The success of the Carborundorum Project depended on maintaining a stringent objectivity. And celibacy.



As well, much as he despised most of the holier-than-thou members of the Order, it would be foolish to snap their fragile faith in him if he appeared to be entangled with an outsider they didn't trust.

He would make it clear to Gwen—no, *Doctor Hawking*—from this point on that their relationship must remain professional. He could even insist that a third party work with them. McGonagall, Dumbledore... even Miss Granger.

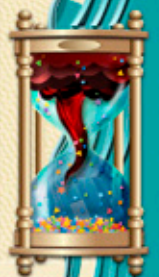
Excellent decision. Sensible. Time to celebrate it with just one more small shot and then welcome the oblivion of sleep, perchance not to dream, not to remember the way her gaze had warmed him, the citrus smell of her hair, the sweet saltiness of her sweat, her slick thighs clamping around his aching cock... *No! No. Stop this. Stop.* He shifted uncomfortably in his chair and unbidden, a fragment of a poem he had once read during a phase of investigating Muggle literature floated to his forebrain: 'Down, wanton, down! Have you no shame?' The poem had made him chuckle at the time.

Now he groaned, his brain befuddled and his body hungering.

The next few days were going to be hellish.



Minerva McGonagall had essays to mark this evening, but she could not focus her formidable mind on that task. Instead, elbows on her desk, gaze fixed on nothing in particular, she replayed her uncomfortable conversation with Albus. She had argued





with him countless times, but never before had she walked out on him. Part of her yearned to rush back up to his tower, tell him she was sorry for doubting him, assure him he had her complete trust. But at supper in the Great Hall, she had felt him withdrawing—not in anger but in sad acknowledgement that their paths, at least for now, had diverged. He would walk his way with or without her. She had found herself unable to turn to him and break the impasse.

Never could she bring herself to distrust Albus's loyalty to Hogwarts; that would be like distrusting her own.

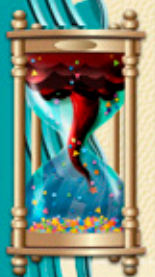
But what if he were losing his judgement?

It happened, sometimes, to very elderly wizards: a slow shutting down of the higher faculties until, in the end, darkness took their minds. Minerva's head sank into her hands. Oh, by the Light... let that not be.

She couldn't think about that now. But she had to do something. Every one of her protective instincts stood on edge at the thought of allowing any stranger through the school's safety-net at such a dangerous, uncertain time: let alone a stranger who knew enough dark magic to destroy Hogwarts and her Gryffindors several times over.

In the morning, members of the Order would meet Doctor Gwen Hawking and be briefed about the Carborundorum project. Would she gain further insights from that exercise? Possibly. But somehow, she doubted it. The only way to get a good, honest first impression of Hawking was to confront the woman by herself, alone.

On the other hand, it would be helpful first to get



Severus's impressions. Though she'd heard unofficially from Lupin (and Dumbledore might have told her the same thing if she'd stayed to listen) that Severus had confirmed Hawking's credentials, McGonagall wanted to hear his report first-hand and without the rest of the Order breathing down their necks.

McGonagall stood up, strode to her fireplace, and cast the Floo powder. For politeness' sake, she didn't step into straight into Snape's rooms, but knelt and thrust her head and shoulders into the emerald flames, keeping her eyes shut until the nasty spinning sensation stopped.

In short order, it became apparent that Snape was unprepared to receive visitors. Frowning, she stepped into his rooms and shook his shoulder, wrinkling her nose at the sour alcoholic smell of him. An empty bottle of Ogdens Old lay beside his chair.

'Severus.' Her stern features softened with a sympathy she never would have permitted herself to show had he been awake.

But now what? She couldn't just leave him folded over in his chair.

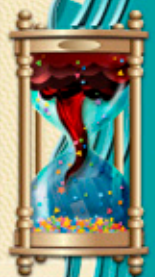
'Mobicorpus.'

She floated him over to the couch, settled him into the classic side-position in case he vomited, and whisked a blanket over him.

And that was all she could do for Severus. Now, as to Hawking...



It had taken every bit of courage Hermione and





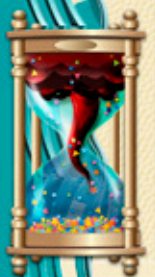
Ginny could muster between them to remain in utter darkness in the passageway on the other side of the sliding case until they could feel certain Filch, Draco, Pansy, and Crabbe were no longer in the ancient potions room on the other side. They leaned against the cold wooden surface, listening to the deep silence. Ginny, unable to help it, looked over her shoulder constantly, eyes straining into the blackness, her skin crawling, half-expecting to see a thin finger of crimson light inching toward them. They didn't dare speak, but she knew Hermione was doing the same.

Finally Hermione whispered in Ginny's ear, 'I think we can go back out now, but we need light. Watch your eyes. *Lumos.*' The tip of her wand flared, making Ginny squint and sending shadows racing away behind them. As she had seen Filch do earlier, Hermione placed her hand on the middle of the wooden surface at a point a few inches below her own eye level, and pushed firmly.

Nothing happened.

'Hell,' Ginny whispered. Calling light from her wand, she brought it up close to the wood. The faint, carved outline of a strangely irregular five-pointed star revealed itself. It was a little higher than Hermione's hand.

This time, as it had for Filch and the Slytherin gang, the case slid to one side; Ginny's quick '*Silencio*' quelled the shrieking sound of long unused mechanisms. After the young women slipped through and Ginny called light from her wand, Hermione reached up to push the third jar from the left on the second shelf from the top back into its proper place. Still



in silence, the case returned to its normal position. After Ginny whispered '*Finite Incantatem*' to erase any signs of their magic, they crossed the dust-shrouded room to the blank wall that they knew opened out to the corridor. Another star-shaped outline was carved into the stone. Ginny found her eyes sliding away from the disturbing irregularity of its lines.

'What if Filch is lurking on the other side?' she breathed.

'I know. I'm going to try a Sensing spell,' Hermione murmured back.

'We haven't studied that one yet!'

'I've studied it.' With a confidence she didn't quite feel, Hermione raised her wand and waved it in the direction of the corridor. '*Exploro.*' From her wand-tip, a faint green mist grew and spread out like a blackboard. On it, images formed.

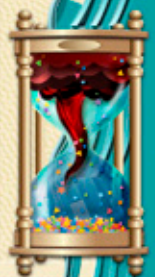
'Look—that's a picture of the way we came, going all the way back to the Potions classroom. It looks empty.'

'You'd better lead our next DA meeting,' said Ginny with a grin. The mist dissipated.

'Just in case, I'm going to cast another Disillusionment Charm.' After a moment, Ginny felt a thin cold trickling down her neck as the spell settled over them. Then Hermione's hand pressed firmly on the star-shaped carving, and the wall opened.

It was a huge relief to be back in the dungeons. The dank corridors looked downright friendly and welcoming compared to the ancient passageways through which they'd stumbled in terror.

'We've got to tell someone about the passageway and





the room, Hermione,' Ginny said in a low shaky voice as, clutching each other's hands, they began the long walk toward the stairs leading to the first floor. 'Whatever this is, it's way more than we can handle.'

'I know,' murmured her friend. 'I'm going right now to Professor Snape.'

'Snape? Are you sure? Don't you think—McGonagall?'

'Well, yes, but Professor Snape needs to know about this right away; after all, they're his Slytherins. And I have access to his lab, remember? If I alert the wards on his rooms, he'll come out.'

'All right,' said Ginny, though she would have preferred going to McGonagall.

'Look, Ginny, the Disillusionment will wear off in a little while. You go back to your dorm. Don't talk to anyone. Don't tell anyone.'

'Don't worry,' said Ginny, shuddering. 'Are you sure you'll be all right down here alone?'

'I won't be alone, and I'll be fine.' Hermione wrapped her arms around Ginny, and they held each other tight for a moment. After Ginny pulled away, Hermione could see the slight shifting of light and dark as her camouflaged friend continued down the corridor.

Within a minute, Hermione had let herself into the Potions classroom, shed the Disillusionment Charm, and then entered the adjoining lab. With a pang of guilt, she was suddenly conscious that she hadn't made any progress on her counter-Cruciatius potion since her breakthrough, when she cast the Unforgivable and then, filled with an unnatural elation against which Snape had provided a remedy



she'd ignored, ascended to the Astronomy Tower. Where she'd stupidly ridiculed Draco. And now the skein of events leading from that moment to this terrifying evening had knitted itself together.

Beside her little worktable was the door to Snape's rooms. Firmly closed, as always. In most of her daydreams starring a romantic, virile Severus, she envisioned a fantastical suite with an enormous comfy bed to which he pinned her with delicious force. In reality, Hermione had no idea even how to ring the doorbell, so to speak.

'*Alohomora.*' She knew that wouldn't work, but she hoped it would at least trigger the wards.

Five minutes later, Hermione felt panic crawling up her throat. The wards must be clamouring now; when she laid her hands on the door it vibrated unpleasantly, like a low-level electric shock. But none of her attempts at breaking-and-entering had called Snape out. Even a furious Snape would have been welcome. Had something happened to him? Had Voldemort summoned him?

Or worse—was that silver-haired witch who had invaded her mind preying on him? Here and now?

Hermione put her hands up to her face, fighting back tears, and slumped against her little worktable.

'Steady, Granger,' she breathed. 'Ginny's right. Time to go to McGonagall.' *And maybe she'll know if Professor Snape's all right.*

Pushing herself away from her table and casting one last longing look at Snape's door, she made her way without incident to McGonagall's office on the first floor.





She waited and knocked again. And again, harder.
No answer.

Oh bloody, bloody hell. She felt tears rising up again.

Stop snivelling, Granger. Think!

There was only one sure way to find people in Hogwarts: the Marauder's Map. But that meant finding Harry, swallowing her pride, and asking him for help.

Well, she'd managed more difficult feats than that over the past few hours.



It didn't take long for McGonagall to find out where Doctor Hawking was billeted. A trip to the kitchens and a quick conversation with Winky proved most informative. Retracing her steps and passing the Potions classroom, she stopped outside the usually empty guest suite not far down the corridor. Aside from the fact the nearest neighbour was Snape, and he seemed unable to keep an eye on anything or anyone right now, no particular effort had been made to ward these rooms more than usual. This seemed like inexcusably lax security, and her frown deepened.

Minerva had prepared herself for several possible reactions to her unexpected visit: surprise, neutral politeness, impatience, even hostility. After all, Hawking would realise from the moment she came to the door that Hogwarts' Deputy Headmistress wasn't dropping in at such a late hour for tea and a nice chat. It was possible that the conversation could become... tense.



Ah well. No use delaying the inevitable. Taking a deep breath, Minerva knocked. Then after about ten heartbeats, she knocked again, and almost right away the big wooden door opened a few inches.

The room inside was dim, lit only by the fireplace. Inside the room, nowhere near the door, Minerva could see a female figure wrapped in a thick robe, her hair down around her shoulders, standing a few feet away from the flames. She was holding her hands out as if to warm them.

'Er—Doctor Hawking?' said Minerva.

'Hello, Professor McGonagall. Please come in.'

'I don't believe we've met. How do you know my name?'

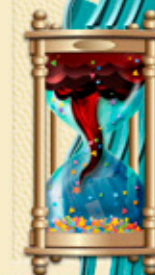
Keeping her eyes fixed on Hawking, Minerva entered the room and shut the door behind her. When Hawking didn't move from her position near the fire, Minerva pursed her lips and moved across the room to join her, folding her arms stiffly. Hawking was in profile, much of her face hidden by thick, waving hair whose colour was hard to determine.

'I'm sorry. It's so cold down here. I feel if I move from this fire I'll freeze into a solid block of ice, which would be no use to anyone.'

'You didn't answer my question.'

The profile gave a quick smile. 'Your reputation for thoroughness precedes you, Professor McGonagall. If I were in your place, I'd have wanted to check me out immediately. See how much of a threat I might pose, even though I've already—shall we say—demonstrated my credentials to Professor Snape.'

'Ah,' said Minerva. 'Quite. Well, I'm sure you can





appreciate that the situation is unusual. And if you know anything at all about the threat we face from—' she hesitated.

'Voldemort,' said Hawking flatly. 'Believe me, Professor, I know more about this threat than you can imagine.'

More than you can imagine. It irked Minerva to hear such close variations of that phrase twice in one day, both times addressed to her in a tone she could most charitably describe as patronising. It was time to go on the offensive.

'Is there any reason in particular why you're not looking at me, Doctor Hawking?'

Hawking turned to face her, and Minerva frowned again. It was hard to tell the age of wizarding folk, but this visitor appeared to be about forty or so. Framed by that thick hair, which Minerva could see was shot with silver, Hawking's face looked calm, imperious, the dark eyes compelling. Fine lines around the eyes and mouth betrayed either laughter or loss. Minerva suspected the latter.

But what occasioned her frown was the strong sense, resonating from this woman whom she had never seen before, that something seemed familiar. She sensed the aura of someone known to her, even dear to her. A compelling feeling that this woman could be entrusted with the lives of everyone at Hogwarts.

Hawking must be casting a powerful glamour. No other explanation would hold.

Though it was like raising a hand against her own sister, Minerva brought her wand out, levelled it at



the other woman, and cried—'*Aperio praestigias!*' A blue-white bolt enveloped Hawking, who flung her hands up to cover her face. When the light faded and vanished, Hawking didn't lower her hands, nor did Minerva lower her wand.

'It's time for truth,' Minerva said calmly, though her heart raced. 'If you're here to help us against Voldemort, if your allegiance is to the Light, you have nothing to fear from me. Otherwise, I'm prepared to fight you to the death. Now look at me.'

Hawking's hands slid away from her face, and she faced Minerva without expression.

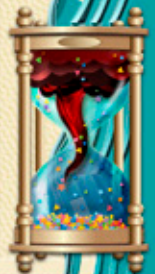
For a moment, the elder witch couldn't breathe. The physical features hadn't changed from a moment ago: the hair was still untamed; the eyes still forceful, the mouth firm, though the skin now looked paler, and shadows underlined the brown eyes.

But for the Deputy Headmistress, who saw a much younger version of that face almost every day, recognition was inevitable.

'Hermione Granger,' Minerva said, though she had no breath to speak. And then she found she had no strength to stand. Her wand fell from her fingers. As she sagged towards the floor, she felt arms supporting her and a familiar voice snap '*Accio chair!*' Gently, she was lowered into a sitting position.

'Breathe, Professor,' said her former student. As she breathed, her vision began to clear. A hand held out a glass of water to her. 'Drink it, please.' She took a few sips, and the dizziness and weakness faded.

'I'm so sorry, Professor.' This impossibly older





Hermione now crouched before her, both hands on the arms of the chair, her face drawn with concern. 'I didn't want this to happen.'

Minerva cleared her throat. 'You may be the most brilliant witch of this age or the next, Miss Granger—or is it Doctor now?—but I have a bit of a talent myself for uncovering the truth.'

'And now that you've done so—what next?'

In the short silence that followed, Minerva stared down at her glass of water, then back at the woman whose face was so familiar, yet so different. A face etched by loss, toughened by events Minerva didn't care to imagine.

'Am I correct that you've travelled back in time?'

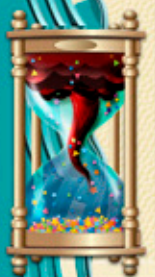
'Yes.'

'How many years?'

Hawking-Hermione grimaced. 'Too many.'

'Why?' The younger witch sank down onto the carpeted floor, tucking her feet in and clasping her arms around her legs.

'In my timeline, or should I say my time-loop, Voldemort unleashed an unknown mass-killing curse during the Final Battle. There was no warning. There was no defence. Voldemort was destroyed, but not before many from Hogwarts died. Don't ask me who.' Minerva heard the bleakness in the visitor's voice and felt her heart contract. 'Years later, I helped devise a way to counter the Carborundorum Curse so it's no longer a threat. Better late than never, I suppose. It won me and my research team an Order of Merlin, First Class.' Hawking-Hermione gave a mirthless grin.



'And now you've found a way to bring us this knowledge,' said Minerva. Part of her still couldn't believe this conversation was happening.

Hawking-Hermione nodded. 'I've studied time from magical and Muggle perspectives. I spent several years experimenting on Time-Turners, hoping they could be adapted for long-range travel.'

'You always did want to use time efficiently.' Minerva smiled. The younger woman grinned, this time with humour, then she sobered again.

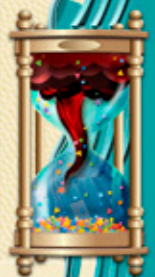
'But to make a long story short, my work with Time-Turners was flawed. The reasons are—technical—and beside the point, really. The upshot is that I was able to come back to the past, but I can't return. Ever.'

That sympathy McGonagall would never allow herself to show in public softened her face for the second time that evening. 'If you must begin a new life here, I'll do whatever I can to help.'

Hawking-Hermione looked up at her mentor, her eyes brilliant. 'I can't thank you enough for saying that. I wish I could. But that can't be. It's impossible.'

Minerva looked hard at her. 'I don't understand. If you can't go back...'

'I don't belong here in this time. Everything that comprises me, right down to the smallest particles, wants to be in *my* time. So one possibility is that sooner or later, I'm going to destabilise. I'm not quite sure how. Maybe fly apart. Maybe sort of—dissolve. And this could happen any moment. Another possibility—' she continued, without apparent emotion, as Minerva stared at her in shock '—is





that, if we're successful and we manage to change what happened, then this time-current breaks apart, and this version of me ceases to exist because the conditions that caused me to travel won't exist. Oh dear—' catching sight of McGonagall's stiff face —are you all right?'

'Yes, yes,' said Minerva, remembering to breathe.

'Sorry. I have a tendency to lecture. But I thought it would help you to know why I'm in such a hurry to start work on the Carborundorum project.'

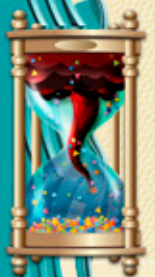
Minerva forced herself to speak through numb lips. 'Are you saying you're on a suicide mission?'

The younger woman's face took on such a bitter expression that Minerva's throat closed up. 'Voldemort's death opened up a new age of terrorism. The Ministry of Magic has become an armed fortress, and those who work for it live in a security-protected zone. Hogwarts is... well, a military school. It trains witches and wizards for never-ending wars against the Dark. Every year magical citizens lose more freedoms, give up more liberties.'

'How appalling.'

'But that isn't the real reason I travelled here. What made me decide I had to try and change the past was something much more selfish. I recently—lost someone very dear to me.' The hands clasp the knees tightened, knuckles turning white. 'After that, I had nothing left, really. I'm no martyr, Professor. I just had—well—no where else to go.'

Her head drooped. After a moment, Minerva laid her hand on the greying bushy hair.



'Miss Gra—Hermione,' she said, in a gentle voice few had heard her use. 'It will not be in Hogwarts' best interests to reveal your identity to anyone except, I think, Professors Dumbledore and Snape. They need to know.'

The younger witch's head snapped up at that. The dark eyes burned in her pale face.

'Professor Snape subjected me to Legilimency last night.'

'Yes. He was under orders,' said Minerva, a bit defensively.

'I don't believe Snape knows who I really am as yet.'

'I'd hoped to talk with him about that before coming to see you.' Minerva sighed. 'But I can only assume that something about carrying out his orders proved—a bit difficult for him to deal with. When I visited him a while ago, he was incapable of speech.' Her eyes gleamed behind the square glasses.

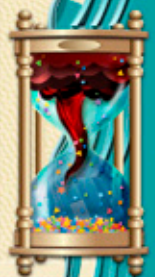
'What do you mean, incapable? Is he all right?'

Minerva didn't miss the anxiety edging the visitor's voice, but merely said, 'He consumed a large quantity of firewhisky. I found him unconscious. But yes, he'll be all right.'

'Oh dear.' The younger woman stifled a sound that was half-laugh, half-moan.

'Even if Professor Snape doesn't yet know your true identity, I feel he should. In fact, he must. You and he will be spending much time together, and maintaining an advanced glamour like yours takes a great deal of energy. That's energy you shouldn't squander.'

Hawking-Hermione took a deep shaky breath. 'I



thought I could do this without revealing myself to anyone. But if anyone at Hogwarts has to know, there's no one I trust more than you and Professor Dumbledore.'

Minerva raised an eyebrow. 'What about Professor Snape?'

At that moment, her door vibrated with a series of hard thuds, and a muffled voice cried, 'Professor McGonagall! Are you there? Please—I need to speak with you!'

It was the voice of young Hermione Granger. Minerva's head jerked toward the door, and the visitor surged to her feet.

'What's *she* doing here?' Hermione-Hawking hissed.

'Re-assume your glamour,' Minerva said in a low voice, 'and answer the door.' She leaned back in her chair, the picture of propriety. As she watched, the visitor straightened, pushed her shoulders back, and... became that other person, the alias, without altering a single physical feature.

Gwen Hawking threw an appealing glance at Minerva, who nodded. Then Hawking walked to the door and opened it.

The young Miss Granger, her hair wild and her robe smudged with dust, stared at her in shock, her mouth open. Beside her, his arm protectively around her shoulder and his brilliant green eyes burning with anger, stood Harry Potter.



under no illusions

CHAPTER TEN

playing dice with the universe

NOTES ON PROJECT NOSTALGIA—in a set of VERY cold rooms on Hogwarts' dungeon level

It seems that back when I was planning this one-way trip, I didn't think of making my alias McGonagall-proof. Or maybe no alias or glamour exists that can fool a powerful woman determined to see what a man can't see. Or won't. Even so, I thought my old Head of House might faint when she recognised me, though I hadn't imagined anything could undo the tightly pinned Professor McGonagall.

Then a few minutes later, I opened my door to confront my worst nightmare—my own younger self and a young, vibrantly alive Harry Potter. I understood what my old teacher must have felt. For a moment I couldn't breathe. I had to hang onto the doorjamb and wait for the dizziness to pass.

I'd thought a great deal about this meeting. As with Snape's Legilimency attack, I'd tried to anticipate it. I thought I was ready. But when I finally stood face to face with my own self, all I could feel was utter panic, a sense of terrible wrongness. I found myself thinking I've gone way beyond playing



dice with the universe. I have royally fucked with it.

McGonagall came up beside me and a firm hand rested on my shoulder—both support and an implicit command to pull myself together. I heard her inquiring tartly what the matter was. Harry said something about helping Hermione find her. And then Hermione spoke (I cannot think of her as 'me'—that will drive me insane). She was so sorry they'd intruded but it was important, they had something very important to tell her.

Oh bloody hell, I thought. SHE knows about me too. I came close to panicking.

'Very well,' said McGonagall. 'Go on ahead to my office and I'll meet you there presently.'

After a few deep, slow breaths I found the strength to let go of the doorjamb and face my past square on. Harry looked just like the young image of him I'd dreamed (or been visited by) on the day he'd died at Draco's hands: his black hair untidy, the green eyes blazing behind his glasses, the scar vivid on his forehead. A lump rose in my throat. But he wasn't smiling. He looked tense as a bow ready to loose an arrow.

Without quite meeting Hermione's eyes, I inspected her with intense curiosity. I couldn't believe I had ever been so young. I remember myself

playing dice with the universe



as a stack of books with legs and bushy hair. Yet I—she—wasn't hideous. The hair looked a bit nicer than I remember, the figure more mature. And I'll never have skin so fresh-looking ever again.

But when I looked directly into her face, I saw such intense dislike that I almost recoiled. If Harry were a bow, she was an arrow ready to let fly and pierce my heart. Before I could look away and say something polite, her fierce brown eyes suddenly kindled, and without warning I felt a shock of memory. Images suddenly tumbled through my mind: a black passage, a skein of crimson light, the smirking face of young Draco Malfoy, a dark blue potion swirling lazily in a cauldron, Ginny, young and vivid, sitting next to me, her head thrown back in laughter... and Severus Snape, his face pale with anger and his robes swirling, walking beside me as we climbed the stairs up toward Gryffindor Tower.

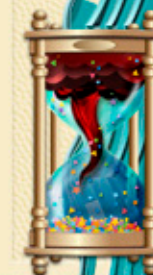
Those were not my memories.

It was as if something were invading my mind.

Whatever the nature of this onslaught, I simply withstood it. In a matter of seconds the storm of images weakened and passed away.

'Er—this is Doctor Gwen Hawking, a visiting researcher who'll be assisting us with defensive

playing dice with the universe





measures,' said McGonagall, evidently thinking introductions might help move things along.

Though Harry didn't relax, his eyes flickered with interest, and he nodded coolly. 'Harry Potter,' he said, not extending a hand. I inclined my head, not trusting myself to speak. Hermione said nothing, but her eyes narrowed and her hostility remained at Aleph-level.

'Now, please go on to my office, and I'll be right there,' said McGonagall. Harry turned, putting a hand on Hermione's elbow, but she lagged a moment, piercing me with that narrow-eyed glare, until Harry tugged on her arm.

When the sound of their footsteps had faded, McGonagall turned to me, the eyes behind the square glasses sharp with anxiety.

'I think you'd better maintain your glamour after all for now, even when you're alone. It's safest.'

I nodded, chilled by the thought that it was too late. The dice had already been cast.

'The house-elves will bring you an early breakfast, then I'll come for you and take you up to the Headmaster's office. He wishes to see you a few minutes before the Order meeting.'

'Doesn't Professor Dumbledore know about me



already?' A childish thing to say, but I couldn't help asking it. McGonagall frowned.

'He told me earlier that you must come to Hogwarts. He said everything depends on it. I had no idea what he meant by that, and I'm still not sure. But if I were you, I would not try to conceal myself from him.'

I nodded again. Then the strangest thing happened. The prim Professor McGonagall, whom I remembered as a powerful and fearless protector but not as someone given to displaying the softer emotions, put her strong wrinkled hands on each side of my face.

'You shall have all the help I can give. May the guardians of Light open your path and protect you,' she whispered. Then, with a rustle of robes, she was gone.

Was McGonagall meant to discover my identity? Is Dumbledore? God forbid, is Snape? Is this a sign that my self-made time loop is starting to break apart? Or is this my first clear warning that nothing, once made, can be unmade?

I never was any good at dice.



'Harry,' Hermione choked out as they climbed up the marble staircase to the first floor, 'I've seen that woman before.'



'What? Where?'

'I've never met her before tonight, but—oh, it's hard to explain—'

Harry stopped them both in the hallway leading to McGonagall's office, putting his hands on her shoulders and looking into her face. 'Tell me.'

Hermione took a deep shaky breath. 'This is going to sound insane, but I had some kind of dream or vision early this morning. I saw that woman's face.'

Harry tried to smile. 'You don't sound like the rational witch who dropped out of Divination.'

'Damn it Harry!' She shrugged his hands off her shoulders. 'I told you—I can't explain why or how it happened. But it happened. I saw her, just as clearly as I see you.'

'All right. You saw her. So what do you think that means?'

'I don't know, but I have a very bad feeling about her. Harry, I don't think she's at all trustworthy. I think she means us harm.'

Harry stared at her. 'Bloody hell, that's quite an accusation. I mean, there she was with McGonagall.' He frowned. 'Though there *was* something strange about the way her name showed up on the Map.'

'Yes!' said Hermione excitedly. 'The letters were fading in and out. I couldn't focus on her name.'

Harry frowned. 'You think so? I thought the letters were kind of shifting around. Would that happen if someone tried to Apparate and Disapparate, over and over?'

'But that's not possible within the school.'

playing dice with the universe

'I bloody well know *that* by now, don't I? Look, Hermione, besides seeing this woman's face in your dream or whatever, does anything else make you think something's wrong?'

Hermione looked miserable. 'Well... twice I saw horrible images of a battle, and then the second time, right afterwards, I saw her face.' *And other things I will never tell you.* She swallowed. 'It's as if she's invading my mind.'

Harry winced in sympathy. 'I know what *that's* like,' he said. 'But if she's—I dunno—an agent of Voldemort, then why would she be invading *your* mind?'

'To use me. So I can get to you.'

'That doesn't add up, though. Why wouldn't Hawking just—go for me directly? The way Voldemort did two years ago?'

'I don't know, I don't know. But something about Hawking feels—wrong!' Hermione's eyes filled with tears.

Harry's green gaze softened at his friend's distress. 'Look, Hermione, it's not that I don't believe you, but...' Firm footfalls echoed below. 'Come on, McGonagall's coming.' They walked down the hallway toward McGonagall's office door, Hermione angrily wiping her eyes.



QUICK NOTE—a bit later

After McGonagall left, I spent a long and miserable interval dissecting all the many ways I had not

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planned this mission properly. The many things I hadn't thought through. The many stupid ways I could be discovered. The interesting combinations of means by which I could manifestly bugger up everything.

Then I made myself calm down and record everything about this evening whilst it's still fresh—especially those unwanted images invading my mind. Just what the hell happened when I looked at Hermione? How could that young witch have done that to me? I—she—was no Legilimens! But that wasn't Legilimency. Those images were too chaotic.

Chaos. Wait a bit. Did Hermione even intend that invasion? Or had some odd leap occurred, some quantum probability becoming a certainty? The main reason why the quotidian reality of the Muggle world and the reality of the magical universe are indistinguishable at the quantum level is that particles aren't particles at all, really: they're waves of pure probability. And my weird, wrong presence here could be doing god knows what to the usual mathematically governed predictions of probable outcomes. If a particle-wave might predictably be at Point A (Hermione), my presence could throw things off to the point where that particle-wave might take it into its head (if it had one) to 'leap' over to Point B (me).



Which means that it's possible that my much younger self and I are somehow sharing energy. Which also means my presence is changing my younger self—will change—has already changed my younger self, no matter what I do or don't do. That's a truly disturbing thought.

It also means I might now have a source of energy to tap into...

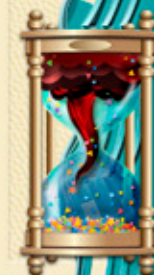
A house-elf has just brought me tea. I've added a small dollop of my own whisky—good Muggle stuff, not that ghostly Ogdens Old.

Calmed down some more. Finished my notes.

Had another tiny dollop of whisky.

Thought about going to bed. Which made me think about the previous night at the Hotel Elysian with Severus. Paradise indeed. But dammit, I can't dwell on those images. I can't cool that fire with memories (MY memories, thank you) of his eyes, his mouth, his skin sliding over mine, the feel of him inside me, and the fact that I—I—made him lose control. No. I have a heavy feeling it's over between us before it even really began.

Just looked back over my sex-soaked notes from last night. I cannot believe I thought bedding



Snape was a sound plan. Such convoluted rationalisations! I was just being selfish and greedy, wanting to squeeze every moment left to me.



Snape's rooms are just along the corridor from here, aren't they?



Harry and Hermione, their faces pale and set, were waiting outside McGonagall's office. As soon as the Deputy Headmistress arrived she ushered them inside, pointed them toward chairs, and busied herself making tea. After presenting the two young people with a steaming mug each, she took one herself and sat behind her desk.

'Camomile,' said Hermione appreciatively after sniffing the steam. She took a sip.

'How did you find me?' McGonagall asked without preamble.

'I asked Harry to use his Marauder's Map,' said Hermione. 'I'm sorry—it was the only thing I could think of. I had to talk to you right away.'

'Has something happened?' the Deputy Headmistress asked in a low voice. She folded her hands, and Harry noticed how her knuckles whitened.

With remarkable calmness, Hermione recounted what she and Ginny had done, heard, and seen earlier that evening. Harry, having heard an abbreviated and

playing dice with the universe

more emotional version when Hermione had come to him earlier asking for the Map, listened without comment, keeping his eyes carefully on the Deputy Headmistress. When Hermione told how Filch had opened a passageway behind the ancient potions room, McGonagall's lips thinned. When, keeping her voice flat, Hermione described the pulsing crimson light and the wizened remains of the Eleven, it seemed to Harry that McGonagall's shoulders tensed.

When Hermione finished speaking, Harry leaned forward. 'None of those rooms or that passageway show up on the Marauder's Map,' he pointed out.

'With all due respect to your father and Professor Lupin, the Map's creators were schoolboys,' said McGonagall dryly. 'The Map is designed to display all *recorded* knowledge about Hogwarts, its people, and its passageways, but it cannot show the unknown. To chart all passageways and chambers and add new ones to existing maps, Hogwarts has always relied on its caretakers,' she finished with a bitter twist to her lips.

'Well it seems pretty clear that Filch is a Death Eater toady!' Harry spat. 'How could Dumbledore not know that?'

'I suspect he's hoping Filch will inadvertently reveal a vulnerability we can exploit,' said McGonagall, though at that moment she wasn't at all sure of that.

'Well, it seems to me the exact opposite has happened,' said Harry with disgust. 'Now *we're* vulnerable.'

'Professor, who are the Eleven?' said Hermione. 'Are they—what Filch said? Some sort of unknown power?'

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‘Legend. Nothing more,’ said McGonagall.

‘They seem pretty bloody solid for a legend, don’t they,’ said Harry, his mouth twisting in an ugly smile.

McGonagall icily ignored the disrespectful language. ‘Some ancient magical texts tell the story of a powerful mage, the First Wizard, who had eleven sons, though he desperately wanted twelve—one son to rule each of the twelve clans of the known world. Whilst he lived, all was well: each son and the father had his own fortress and ruled his own clan. But when the father died, the eleven fought over who should take over the twelfth clan. The prize was great: whoever won would rule two clans, making him the most powerful of all mages.’

‘This isn’t in *Hogwarts: A History*,’ said Hermione. Harry snorted.

‘The legend of the First Wizard is hardly a topic for the serious study of history,’ McGonagall reproved her. ‘At any rate, as the story goes, all eleven sons killed each other in a magical war the like of which the world has not seen since. Many of their clansmen also died. Some say that caused the long Diaspora: it is a fact that for centuries, if not millennia, magical folk were scattered the world over, surviving only by assimilating—not always successfully—into Muggle cultures. As you know, only after the founding of schools like Hogwarts did witches and wizards begin to establish large-scale autonomous communities.’

‘That still doesn’t explain what we saw in that room,’ said Hermione.

‘Legend again has it,’ McGonagall’s lip curled,



‘that in his old age the First Wizard did sire a twelfth child: a daughter much younger than her brothers. After the war, which she could do nothing to prevent, she preserved and kept within her father’s fortress the bodies of the eleven sons, displaying them as a warning against jealousy and discord.’

‘There are—eleven bodies in that room. Mummified.’ Hermione’s voice was laced with horror.

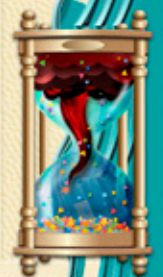
‘I’m sure there are,’ said McGonagall, striving to keep mysticism at bay with rationality, ‘but not even the most powerful magic could keep bodies preserved for *that* long. I suspect you’ve stumbled on some sort of—erm—homage. The Hogwarts community has seen more than its share of true eccentrics, and I wouldn’t put it past one or two of them to have thought it charming to put their dead relatives on display *à la* the Eleven Sons. The early nineteenth century was famous for tastelessness of that sort.’

‘Still, Filch said something about “the power beneath the power,”’ said Hermione, her voice calmer as she responded to her teacher’s hard logic. Her tea was almost gone. Harry had touched little of his.

‘Mysticism and cant,’ scoffed McGonagall. ‘Filch must be one of those misguided souls who believes in the existence of supernatural forces even more powerful than Old Magic. Ironic, since he’s a Squib. It’s rubbish, at any rate.’

‘I see,’ said Hermione, her voice still even, though she chewed her lower lip.

Harry frowned. ‘Don’t you think we ought to take some of the Order down there and see for our-



selves? At least you and Professor Dumbledore?’

‘I don’t see “The Eleven” as a threat, but I do take this unknown passageway and Filch’s suborning of young Mr. Malfoy very seriously. In fact, I will take your news to Professor Dumbledore right away. But whether or not we’ll involve the rest of the Order just yet, I can’t say.’

Hermione looked at McGonagall without expression. ‘Is it possible Dumbledore already knows about this passage?’

‘For the same reason you suspect he *might* know about Filch?’ added Harry, and though his tone couldn’t quite be considered sarcastic, a thin flush crept up McGonagall’s neck, and the eyes behind the square glasses flashed with anger.

‘I said I will speak to the Headmaster, Mr. Potter. And now—it’s getting very late, and since both of you are expected to attend tomorrow morning’s Order meeting, I want you back in your dorms and in bed.’

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then put their mugs on McGonagall’s desk and got slowly to their feet.

‘Professor McGonagall,’ said Hermione.

‘Yes, Miss Granger?’

‘I know you said the Marauder’s Map doesn’t know everything, but it certainly showed something strange about Doctor Hawking,’ said Hermione.

‘Yes?’ McGonagall sat very still.

‘The name “Gwen Hawking” appeared on the Map but sort of faded in and out—as if she weren’t really there. None of the other names has ever done

that before, right Harry?’

‘No, never.’

‘Well, I’m not privy to all the Map’s eccentricities,’ said McGonagall, ‘But I can say—and our visitor will, I’m sure, confirm this tomorrow—that for security reasons she must shield herself at all times, even within the school. This may be affecting your Map’s accuracy.’

‘Huh,’ said Harry. ‘You’d think she was here to work on some kind of secret weapon. Well, I’m certainly looking forward to hearing what she has to say.’

‘Me too,’ said Hermione grimly.

‘And you shall,’ said McGonagall. ‘But for now, please—go to bed.’ The two young people looked at each other then, after a moment’s hesitation, walked over to the door and opened it.

‘Oh—and Miss Granger.’ Hermione stopped. ‘You and Miss Weasley did a very foolish, reckless thing by venturing alone into an unknown part of the dungeons and putting yourselves in danger. Fifty points each from Gryffindor.’ Harry bit down on an astonished retort. Hermione looked sullenly at the floor.

‘But,’ said McGonagall, ‘It’s also true that you and Miss Weasley gathered invaluable information and displayed a level of courage and resourcefulness above and beyond Gryffindor standards. One hundred and fifty points to each of you. Now, good night.’

‘Well,’ said Harry a few minutes later, as they ascended to Gryffindor Tower toward the Fat Lady. ‘Voldemort and his minions may blast us off the face of the earth, but at least we’re ahead on house points.’

Hermione looked at him. Harry looked at her. Then they broke into waves of hysterical laughter.



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA: Stage One not what I expected

I'd been warned on arrival that I'd have to pass muster at next morning's Order meeting before getting authorisation to use Hogwarts' Floo network. For someone who'd lived for years in the Ministry's Restricted Zone, it seemed more of a security risk to let a visitor wander the corridors than to Floo. But of course this was still a school, thank God, not yet a magical boot camp. I threw on jeans and a jumper, wrapped myself in a shawl for warmth, tucked my wand up my sleeve, and let myself out into the gloomy stone hallway.

Remembering how to find the Potions classroom was not difficult, nor was letting myself in. In my mind the dim, icy-cold room filled with faces, parchments, ingredients, cauldrons... and the image of Snape, stalking and tormenting his helpless students. But from where I stood now, so many years removed, I could understand he was teaching them—us—in the only way he knew how: deliver

playing dice with the universe

ing a series of hard knocks in hopes of making the minds in his care strong and resilient. I didn't agree with the technique, but I could understand it. No time for that kind of nostalgia now.

The wards guarding Snape's private stores, office, and lab were easy to placate, and I smiled as I looked around. Over there was where he kept the Boomslang skin I'd stolen in second year. At this little worktable beside the door to his rooms, I'd worked on a remedy for the Cruciatius Curse as my seventh-year NEWT project.

I'd even been given permission to invoke 'Crucio' in a controlled test—with Snape as the subject. We'd tested it exactly once, as I remember. What a surreal experience that was—all of eighteen and hurling an unforgivable Curse at my professor. I'd been floundering through a maze of feelings and fantasies about Snape, feelings that might one day have matured if given time. How interesting, then, that I managed to summon enough hate to make the test semi-successful.

The wards guarding Snape's private rooms were somewhat more potent than those controlling access to his lab. After a few minutes' concentration (well, to be honest, after using a lock-picking spell or two courtesy of the good old Department

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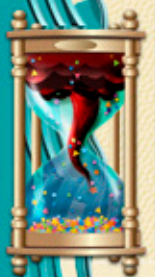
of Mysteries), I disabled the wards. After that, a simple 'Alohomora' did the trick.

Well, well, well. Snape's private rooms. The subject of rampant speculation amongst some of the Hogwarts female set—myself included, I admit. I won't spare time for description except to say that clearly, he has NOT consulted Parvati, nor has Harmer in any way influenced the décor and colours.

Snape himself was indeed incapable of speech or anything else. The smell of stale firewhisky overwhelmed the room. Sprawled on his side beneath a blanket (supplied no doubt by McGonagall), he had that greenish, stubbly, near-death look of a man who'd travelled well past the borders of Oblivion. Some of my best friends have visited there often.

Right. Hair of the dog first. I took a new bottle of firewhisky from a shelf and returned to Snape's lab. I found ginseng, curry, dried guarana berries, and a few other odds and sods, mixed it well in with the rot-gut, then waved my wand and charged the brew with a sober-up spell that Harry and his hard-drinking Auror mates had used more often than they should. I went back to Snape, used "Mobilicorpus" to help me get him to a sitting position, pointed my wand at him, and uttered this time-honoured incantation:

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'Wake UP, you sod!'

Snape's eyes fluttered open. His head rolled back and he groaned. I grasped his jaw, forced his mouth open, poured down a good portion of my ghastly brew, then stepped out of the way.

The choked silence of a man too shocked and astonished to breathe lasted almost ten slow seconds. Then Snape shot to his feet with a ragged gasp and bolted for a door at the far end of the living room. I hoped the door led eventually to a toilet, since he would need one during the next few minutes.

I went back to the lab and mixed up a new non-alcoholic infusion, this time adding enough ginger to make a grown man cry. Then I returned to his living room, vanishing the empty bottle of rot-gut and folding the blanket. After refreshing the fire, I made myself at home on his settee.

After a longish interval, Snape—pale and haggard—appeared in the far doorway. He'd removed his stubble, smoothed his hair back, and changed the white shirt he'd been wearing to a black one. He spread both arms, bracing himself against the doorframe, and whispered, 'Just what the bloody hell did you do to me?'

'I call it Waking-the-Dead. It's my own special formula.'

playing dice with the universe





'A moment ago I wished I were dead. Even Crucio doesn't produce those after-effects.'

'I have something else here to help with that. Don't worry; you'll recover in no time. Much more quickly, I might add, than if you'd left it up to nature.'

Snape closed the door behind him, came over to the armchair without a word, and sank into it with great care. I passed him my cup of tincture. He looked into it mistrustfully and sniffed.

'Ah. Ginger.'

'Yes, but—' He tossed down a mouthful. I winced as he took a deep, gasping breath and blinked rapidly.

'Small sips would be best.'

'Thank you, Doctor Hawking,' but he obeyed. After a few moments he looked at me, and I could tell he was feeling better because his expression was baleful.

'May I ask how you disabled my wards? Or is that classified Warlock information?'

'Highly classified, so don't even bother asking,' I said lightly.

'You're lying, of course,' said Snape.

My temper reared up, and I spoke without thinking. 'Really. Why not try another mind-fuck and find out.' As Snape's expression slid into appalled fury,

playing dice with the universe



I raised both hands to my mouth as if I could take the words back.

'I'm sorry. That was uncalled for.'

'No. What I did was uncalled for. Using your body and then attacking your mind when you were—most open. That was vile. No—vile doesn't even begin to describe it.'

'Professor Snape, please be clear. I understand why you did what you did. The effect on my feelings? Some of my colleagues would call that "minor collateral damage."'

'It's not the first time I've done such things.' His voice was low and bitter.

I put both hands on my knees and leaned forward so I could see his face more clearly. Firelight slid along one sharp cheekbone and glittered in his eyes.

'Look,' I said. 'Please stop agonising. Last night was nothing like—whatever you may have done as a Death Eater. But I do take issue with one thing.'

His eyes were pools of blackness, unreadable. I ploughed on.

'You said you "used my body." Do not think that. Don't ever think that. What happened between us was something I wanted even more than you did.'

Silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire. We

playing dice with the universe





stared at each other. Then Severus Snape leaned forward in his chair, the fingers holding the cup suddenly tightening, the firelight flaring in his eyes.

'Wanted it more than I did?' His voice was a low purr. 'I seriously doubt that.'

Against all my wishes, desire stabbed into me and tried to pry me apart.

'I suppose it would be a bad idea to pursue... that topic further,' I said, feeling like a small planet spiralling toward a black hole's deadly event horizon.

'I've been warned,' said Snape, his gaze not leaving my face, 'that the Order will be scrutinising my every move and yours from this moment on. Except for Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Lupin, they don't trust me, and they are deeply suspicious of you. Even a hint of something untoward will make life unpleasant for both of us.'

'When I produce the results they want, I guarantee that'll shut them up,' I said with an arrogance I didn't quite feel. 'The rest I don't give a fig about.'

'Then have you considered that Voldemort will soon know you and I are working together? He will want to debrief me, try to determine through me how much you know about the Carborundorum Curse. He will try to get to you through me.'



'Yes, of course I've considered that.' I felt my patience ebbing. 'I've spent years thinking about bloody Voldemort and his assorted bloody followers and—do you know what? I'm sick to death of being afraid to take a step or breathe in case I expose myself to danger. Aren't you sick of it too?'

'I don't have that luxury,' said Snape, his voice rough with tension. 'I have others to protect. I am... a gatekeeper. A defender. If I fall, the entire structure weakens.'

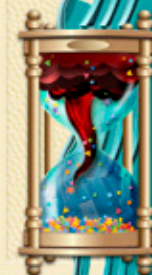
'And I'm—what? Boomslang skin?' I sighed and rubbed my eyes. 'Never mind. Good night, Professor Snape. I'll see you in a few hours.' I pushed myself to my feet and took a step toward the door to the lab. Give me credit; I really did intend to leave. I was fed up with him and his unique brand of alpha-wizard fuckwittage, and all my sexual desire had vanished.

He reached out and grasped my arm, pulling me toward him. Correction: my sexual desire had NOT vanished. At even this rough touch my stupid, treacherous body howled YES! YES!

'What the hell?'

'We haven't finished our conversation,' he said silkily.

'Yes we bloody well have. Good night.' I tried to disengage my arm.



Without letting go of me, Snape rose to his feet, putting his cup on the chair cushion. 'Oh I don't think so,' he murmured, letting the fingers of his free hand trail lightly down my jaw line. I lost interest in leaving.

'There's something I'd like to ask you.' His breath tickled my ear. I shivered.

'Last night...' His voice sank to a whisper.

'Hmmm?'

'There was one part of your mind I couldn't grasp. A part that seemed sectioned off. Usually, only an experienced Occlumens can exercise enough control to accomplish that. Are you an Occlumens, Doctor Hawking?'

As his hand bit into my arm, my eyes flew open in shock. His gaze was hard as iron.

'What is it you're not telling me, Doctor Hawking?'

I seem to be cursed with bad timing. The moment Snape spat that question, I felt the glamour protecting me from recognition flickering, weakening, like a Muggle torch whose batteries are dying.



playing dice with the universe

CHAPTER ELEVEN

this slender chain

DUMBLEDORE ALWAYS seemed to know when Minerva McGonagall was coming up to see him. Though the headmaster wore a comfortable looking robe with red and purple stripes over a white nightshirt, it wasn't at all apparent he'd been roused from bed, despite the lateness of the hour.

'It seems my suspicions about our visitor are misplaced,' Minerva said without ceremony and without sitting down.

Dumbledore rose to his feet, his eyes wary. 'Have you spoken with her?'

'Yes, but in the meantime something else more disturbing has occurred.'

'Tell me.'

As she summarised the recent adventures of Hermione and Ginny, Dumbledore listened without expression. Only when Minerva reported Filch's suggestion that the room where the Eleven sat would be a perfect place to teach "the Mudblood" a lesson in respect did his faded blue eyes darken, turning the colour of smoke.

'Ancestry will out,' he muttered.

'I beg your pardon?'

Dumbledore sighed. 'Just under two centuries ago, a half-blood wizard named Aleister Argus served briefly as headmaster here. It turned out his character was less than stellar. In less than six months Argus' excesses had created such a scandal that he was quickly and quietly replaced and all records of his headship removed.'

'Argus. As in...?'

'Exactly. He had married into the pureblood Filch line and produced a son by then: our current caretaker's great-great grandfather, who understandably decided to adopt his mother's name.'

Minerva's mouth tightened. 'You've never mentioned this.'

Above her, the portrait of Phineas Nigellus snorted. 'Up until now, only headmasters have been informed.' As Minerva and Dumbledore turned toward him, the deceased headmaster continued smugly, 'I was the one who replaced Argus. Pathetic, prating fool. Fancied himself quite the Dark Mage. He used to hold silly orgies in that crypt-room you've been discussing. I attended one once and laughed myself almost sick.'

'Thank you, Phineas,' said Dumbledore mildly.

'Oh, you haven't heard the really interesting part,' said the portrait. 'Those eleven corpses belong to Muggle whores, ruffians, and workhouse widows whom Argus kidnapped and sacrificed to—what did he call it?—"the power beneath the power." Then he dressed up their remains—why, only Merlin knows.' Phineas looked disdainful. 'Tasteless display. I remember it well. Don't tell me no one's removed it.'

'Albus,' said Minerva quietly, turning away from the portrait. 'Even if the so-called "Eleven" pose no threat, Filch is clearly a menace. The Order will want to see him removed from his position before he can do any more damage. Some will want to see him imprisoned. I confess to finding that option rather attractive myself.'

Dumbledore frowned. 'Minerva—consider. If we single out Filch now, we risk perturbing our enemies. Severus's position might be compromised and his life forfeit, or Voldemort might feel pushed into attacking immediately, before we're ready for him. I want the Carborundorum counter-measure in place before we make any unexpected move.'

'But Filch knows—at least from what Miss Granger told me—that someone was spying on him and the Slytherin students. What's to stop him from alerting our enemies? Albus, there's every chance Hogwarts has already been compromised!'

Dumbledore tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling. Always mirroring the one in the Great Hall, it was now spangled with the brilliant stars of a frosty autumn night.

'Again, consider,' he said. 'Would Filch have so quickly confessed what his principals would see as an abject failure of vigilance? I doubt it.'

Minerva snorted, a sound the Headmaster had associated for years with reluctant concession. 'Filch is still terribly dangerous. We can't pretend nothing's happened, Albus. The Order won't stand for it, and neither will I.'



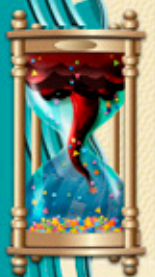
Dumbledore raised one bushy white brow. 'I have a damage-control strategy in mind which will require my speaking to Mr. Filch first thing tomorrow—after which, at breakfast, I'll announce what students have been expecting to hear for weeks: a school-wide state of alert. The alert will limit everyone's movements, including Mr. Filch's, but all going well, it should not unduly perturb either Mr. Filch or Voldemort, who will have been expecting this measure and will no doubt find it highly amusing. Minerva—' Dumbledore leaned forward earnestly, '—there are no guarantees, but I believe this threat can be contained—at least long enough to buy us the time we need. I must again try your patience and ask you to trust me.'

'I have always trusted you,' Minerva said, blinking rapidly. 'But the Order are growing more impatient. How much longer can you contain them?'

Dumbledore's eyes flashed and his voice rang through the room, making Fawkes rustle his feathers in distress. 'I gathered this Order together. I am their Secret-Keeper. Regardless of youth or hot-headedness, all have vowed themselves to this cause. I am confident they will not forget that. Nor—' his tone softened '—have I any intention of acting unilaterally. We all need each other now, more than ever.'

Minerva lifted her chin and looked at Dumbledore, her expression uncompromising.

'I'm afraid there's one more little secret to add to your list,' she said. 'Concerning Doctor Hawking. You said everything depends on her coming to



Hogwarts, but you refused to explain why she must come aside from her supposed knowledge of Voldemort's new weapon. Nor did you explain to me yesterday why I should trust her. Now I understand.'

Dumbledore waited.

'I went to see her myself tonight, and I spoke with her at length.'

Dumbledore said nothing, but she could see the tension in his shoulders.

'You know her real identity, don't you Albus?'

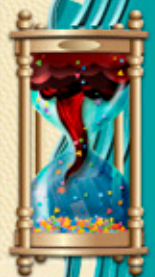
'Who do you think she is?'

'What does the phrase—"most brilliant witch of her age" mean to you?'

The headmaster looked very hard at the deputy headmistress. She glared back. Then he sighed as if, at long last, he were unburdening himself of more weight than he could comfortably bear. He walked over to a large ornate cabinet and waved his wand to open the carved doors. Reaching inside, he rummaged for a moment and at length produced a clear glass ball. Minerva frowned.

'That looks like a prophecy record. Why is it not in the Department of Mysteries?'

'This isn't a prophecy record,' said Dumbledore, placing the ball carefully on his desk. 'It's a message. I found it right here, on my desk, on Monday morning, shortly after Doctor Hawking's owls arrived. When I heard it—well, you shall see for yourself why I felt it necessary to push Monday night's meeting aggressively in Doctor Hawking's favour.' Dumbledore's face was shadowed. 'Minerva, please sit down.'



She obeyed. Dumbledore sat behind his desk and touched his wand gently to the sphere, drawing from it a ghostly curl of white smoke. It enlarged, taking on colour and substance, then gradually formed into the head and shoulders of their visitor. Minerva drew a sharp breath. Stripped of glamour, the hair looked wild, the eyes were bloodshot and deeply shadowed, the skin parchment-pale and stamped with fine lines.

Yet it was possible, looking past the marks of age and weariness, to recognise the face as Hermione Granger's.

'Professor Dumbledore.' The voice still had that unique hint of bossiness, though sounded hoarse and desperately tired. 'You received an owl today from Gwen Hawking. That name is my alias—a necessary device. You will soon discover that I'm actually someone you've known and, I hope, trusted for a long time. This is a warning and a plea: you must do everything you can to convince your colleagues to let Gwen Hawking come to Hogwarts. Do whatever it takes, but make sure she comes here and does her work. Otherwise—the last battle will be a killing field. I know. I lived through it over thirty years ago.' Her voice caught on a sob and steadied again. 'Please believe me. Please let me—Hermione Granger—come to Hogwarts. Let me try and stop something that never should have happened.'

The face, familiar yet alien, clouded and dissolved into smoke that vanished back into the sphere.

'I also found this with the message,' said Dumbledore. He opened a tiny drawer and pulled out a Time-Turner

attached to a fine gold chain. 'But it's unknown to me whether she sent this message from the far future, or whether events prompted her to send me this warning from Hogwarts itself, from a time in the very near future—perhaps even a few days from now.'

'Killing fields,' Minerva whispered. 'If nothing changes, and Voldemort is able to use the Carborundorum Curse, that's what will happen.'

'If our visitor hadn't sent this message, I'm not sure I would have supported her coming to Hogwarts,' said Dumbledore softly. 'From one slender chain hangs a hundredweight of possibilities—some desired, and others appalling beyond belief.'

'But wait...' said Minerva. 'If she sent this message in the near future using her own Time-Turner, and that device is now here, in your hands, then... how could she have sent her message back to you?'

'Minerva, I don't pretend to have a complete understanding of time paradoxes. These are issues even the Department of Mysteries have trouble unravelling. I suspect—I hope—that in the course of events, our visitor will find this device when and where she needs it.'

Minerva took a shaky breath. 'Albus, you need to know something else. Our visitor is very powerful, but for reasons I don't quite understand she will not survive here long, so far removed from her own time. She's dying.' The Deputy Headmistress groped for her handkerchief.

'Ah.' Dumbledore's eyes closed in pain. After a few silent moments, he stood up, came around the desk, and put his strong old hand on her shoulder.



'Then this slender chain could break at any moment. We must be prepared for that,' he said softly.



A day earlier, Argus Filch would not have been discomfited by a visit from Dumbledore. Visits from the headmaster were rare but usually rather pointless. However, the sound of a knock well before dawn and the sight of Dumbledore benignly asking if he might come in made Filch's stomach clench. Everyone knew well that Filch—like his beloved Mrs. Norris—was a nocturnal creature almost never up and about until well after breakfast. Somehow, that meddling old man had known he was up early today.

Indeed, the caretaker hadn't slept at all this night; he had paced for hours around his office, shadowed by his feline companion, his thoughts churning with anger and fear. One simple fact hammered at him: he had slipped up. Mr. Malfoy had instructed him on the Dark Lord's behalf to show only Draco and his pathetic rag-tag bunch of Slytherins the unmapped passage and the crypt of the Eleven. So when the time came (and that time would be soon now, very soon, yes) that pretentious little Malfoy git who wasn't worthy of the pure blood flowing in his veins would have a clue what to do.

But they'd been followed. He hadn't been vigilant enough. Filch was convinced almost beyond doubt that their spy was none other than Miss Mudblood—and he knew little Malfoy agreed with him. He had agonised all night about what to tell Mr. Malfoy, and he had felt

this slender chain



fear like ice crushing his chest at the thought of how the Dark Lord might punish his carelessness.

When Dumbledore appeared it was almost a relief. The headmaster settled himself in a large wooden chair, ignoring as always the polished chains and manacles hanging overhead. Mrs. Norris retreated to a corner and glared, but didn't dare hiss.

'I came to thank you, Mr. Filch, for your vigilant action last night regarding the students in Slytherin House,' Dumbledore said in his mildest tone.

'Er—I don't quite follow you, Headmaster.'

'I've been considering how useful it might be for students whose common rooms are in the dungeons to know, for their own safety, about the fifth passageway, so your expedition last night was prescient. The Hufflepuffs should also be told, of course; you and I can see to that later today.'

'Headmaster.' Filch's voice felt thick in his throat. He swallowed. 'If I may ask—did young Mr. Malfoy by any chance report this to you? I apologise that you didn't hear about this from me in the first instance. I had been intending, of course, to brief you first thing this morning.'

'Of course you were,' said Dumbledore, his eyes glinting. 'I heard of last night's expedition in the course of preparing to put Hogwarts on alert, an event I know you and the students have been expecting for some time. I wanted you to know I shall announce the alert at breakfast today.'

Filch spent a moment digesting the fact that Dumbledore clearly *had* known, after all, about the

this slender chain





fifth passage. He spent another moment realising as well that his question hadn't been answered.

'I understand, Headmaster.' Filch kept his tone neutral. 'But I would highly recommend students stay away from that passage. It is—hazardous in areas.'

'I agree. Fortunately, our alert status will reduce opportunities for students to indulge in any—shall we say—unauthorised explorations of the dungeons. That will undoubtedly make your job easier.'

Filch mustered a smile. 'Undoubtedly.'

Dumbledore nodded and rose, towering over the caretaker. 'Oh... Mr. Filch, it didn't come to my attention until last night that there are still bodies in the old crypt room. Please don't concern yourself about disposing of them; I shall see to that. I would ask, however, that in the meantime you not show that room to any more students. Some would find the sight a bit... distressing.'

Well, thought Filch after the headmaster finally departed. At least the old fart didn't know everything.

But the question of what he would report to Mr. Malfoy still circled like a vulture in his thoughts.



Hermione had expected to toss and turn all night, replaying images of the shrivelled corpses in the crimson-lit room and reliving the shock of meeting the woman whose malignant visions had invaded her mind. But to her surprise, she slept deeply and without dreams (McGonagall's tea, perhaps?), and awoke feeling semi-human. After a hot



bath she felt equal to making the trip down to the Great Hall—this morning its ceiling a pale autumn blue frosted with wispy white clouds. With intense relief, she saw that Gwen Hawking was not at the high table and that, whilst McGonagall was absent, Snape sat in his usual place, wearing his usual dour expression. For a moment, Hermione entertained herself with the thought that the deputy headmistress was overseeing Hawking's confinement to the dungeons in chains. One could always hope.

After a large mug of cream-laced coffee, she considered herself prepared to contemplate the headlines of the DAILY PROPHECY. Just as she was settling in for a good read, an angry Ron Weasley slid onto the bench beside her.

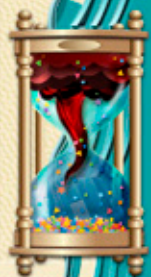
'What the fuck were you and Ginny thinking last night?' he hissed. 'No. Correction: you *weren't* thinking. As if you could take on Malfoy and his Slytherin goons—and Filch!—all by yourselves!'

Hermione sighed. 'Obviously Harry's filled you in.'

'I'm a member of the Order too, in case you've forgotten. An unknown passage leading from the dungeons to—where was it? the Shrieking Shack?—and a room full of ancient mummified wizards sounds like Order business to me, not some schoolgirl adventure.'

'Where's your sense of fun, Ron?'

Scowling, Ron stabbed at a couple of hapless sausages. Hermione started on a second mug of coffee and retreated behind the newspaper. After a couple of minutes, Harry and Ginny joined them. The young woman looked a bit pale but otherwise





seemed to be holding up well. Harry, his face set and his eyes shadowed, hovered close to Ginny and made a point of seating her as if she were fragile, which made Hermione smile into her mug.

'You okay, Hermione?' said Ginny.

'Fine. You?'

'Excellent, thanks.'

'Oh cheer up, Ron; you look like grim death,' said Ginny, poking her brother in the ribs.

By ones and twos other Gryffindors came straggling in, and the heaping platters of eggs, sausages, and porridge on the tables soon emptied. Unwilling to engage in a witless battle of poisonous glances with Draco or his minions, Hermione kept her face behind the paper.

'Have you heard?' said Seamus at length.

'What?' grunted Dean.

'The school's being put on alert status this morning.'

'Finally, finally, finally,' said Dean.

'Brilliant, Seamus. Call *The Quibbler*,' said Parvati.

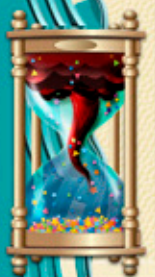
'As if we haven't known for yonks that would happen,' said Ginny, feigning boredom.

'Really? Well I wonder why it's happening *this* morning,' Ron muttered, looking darkly at his sister.

'C'mon Ron... just means we'll have to go around the school in teams and take double Defence on Friday afternoons. Could be worse,' said Harry, sounding to Hermione like a man in full damage control mode.

'Well, it means no fucking Hogsmeade visit this November, you tossers.' Seamus looked at them with contempt. 'You all fine with that?'

At that moment the tapping of a spoon against



china issued from the high table. The students fell silent as Dumbledore rose to his feet. He looked at them solemnly, without his usual benevolence.

'You'll recall that in September, we discussed the need for preparedness against external threats. I warned you that as part of our preparations, I might at any moment place Hogwarts on alert. I hereby do so. From now until further notice, each student must stay within her or his pre-assigned group when travelling anywhere, at any time, within Hogwarts or on the grounds. No student may leave the school grounds except in the case of an emergency and only if accompanied by a faculty member. Flying-zone restrictions for Quidditch matches will be in effect, and the Astronomy Tower and sections of the dungeons are off-limits.' Hermione thought she heard a soft curse from the Slytherin table.

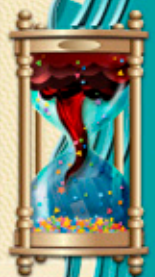
'Prefects, you've all been briefed about this beforehand, but please gather around the Head Girl and Boy. I would like to meet with you all for a few moments.'

Without a doubt, breakfast was now over.

'Told you, didn't I,' said Seamus with grim satisfaction.

After exchanging a quick word with her counterpart, the unimaginative but unflappable Ernie Macmillan, Hermione risked a glance over to the Slytherin table. She hoped to see fury or simple disappointment writ large on Draco Malfoy's self-satisfied face. Instead, he was looking at Dumbledore and smiling as smugly as if he'd received the Order of Merlin.

Now what? That crapulous little bugger. As if she didn't have enough to worry about.





Minerva McGonagall had interrupted Doctor Hawking's solo breakfast. She had refused the visitor's ironic offer of cold toast but accepted a cup of tea.

'As I conceded last night, I think it would be wise, after all, to maintain your alias at all times,' the Deputy Headmistress told the other woman. *Don't think of her as Hermione Granger*, her brain kept lecturing her heart. 'On reflection, that may be the most prudent strategy, though I'm still very concerned about the amount of energy this magic will drain from you.'

'I can cope with that,' Hawking said shortly.

'Really,' said McGonagall, her cool façade not slipping a notch. 'Whilst I don't doubt your abilities, I remind you: if anyone in this school can create a quick and effective remedy for countering your energy loss, it is Severus Snape. Can you afford not to be honest with him?'

Hogwarts' visiting researcher choked on a mouthful of coffee.

McGonagall refused to let up. 'When are you planning to tell him?'

'Professor McGonagall,' said Hawking, recovering her breath, 'I've had years of experience devising field-magic for all kinds of situations, including one in which an operative has to disguise herself for days, even weeks. I know what I'm doing.'

'Doctor Hawking, with all due respect, I sincerely doubt you or any operative have ever had to work under these unique conditions. I don't understand why

you're reluctant to tell Professor Snape who you really are. Unless... you believe he's working for Voldemort.'

Hawking's eyes flashed with anger and her face paled. 'If you knew what I know, you'd understand why I could never, for one moment, believe that.'

'Then tell him. As soon as possible.'

Hawking's gaze slid away from Minerva's. 'I will, at the right time. I promise.'



With the other Heads of House, Snape hovered for a while on the fringes of Dumbledore's impromptu meeting. Then, satisfied that his Slytherin prefects were capable of fumbling through the process of forming and supervising groups of students without a set of written instructions, he slipped away from the Great Hall and headed down to the dungeons. If any of his colleagues had had the impertinence to ask what he intended to do with less than an hour before the blasted Order meeting began, he would have said he hoped to mark one or two more second-year Potions reports.

Normally, the sheer range of potentially lethal variations for a simple Swelling Solution never ceased to amaze and annoy him. He settled himself at his classroom desk and chose a paper. And then found himself staring into space, his thoughts tumbling.

Last night Hawking, leaning forward so the firelight played over her elegant face, had said one sentence battering the tightly fastened doors of his heart: *What happened between us was something I wanted even more than you did.* She'd issued him an

invitation and a challenge, and he failed spectacularly to take her up on either.

'What is it you're not telling me, Doctor Hawking?'

What the fuck had possessed him to think he could interrogate her with such lack of finesse? As soon as those words had left his lips, she'd cast a charm that had made touching her feel like trying to grasp a fistful of hissing snakes and then fled, leaving him with nothing but a nice view of her backside. He'd learned nothing except a new appreciation of his capacity for idiocy.

A brisk knock sounded at the classroom door. Oh bloody fucking hell.

'I'm busy! Go away!'

'How are you feeling this morning, Severus?'

Scowling, he raised his head and met McGonagall's cool gaze.

'I'm very well,' he said, forcing himself to be polite, *'and thank you for asking. But, Minerva, if you'll excuse me—'*

She shut the Potions classroom door with a bang, strode over to him, and to his astonishment leaned over his desk and thrust her face up close to his.

'What did you tell Albus yesterday about Gwen Hawking?'

Snape glared back at her. *'I'm sure you already know,'* he said without inflexion, *'that I have reason to believe her credentials are sound and she has the expertise to re-create and remedy the Carborundorum Curse.'*

'What else do you know about her?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Something obviously upset you so much that you

drank yourself into unconsciousness. If whatever disturbed you has anything to do with our visitor, I need to know it.'

'I don't recall inviting you over last night.'

'I used the Floo network because I needed to talk to you about Doctor Hawking. Unfortunately you weren't in a position to tell me anything whatsoever.'

'Did I hang up a sign saying—"Come In And Make Yourself At Home?" There's nothing you need to know. Except that you flagrantly invaded my privacy.'

Behind the glasses, McGonagall's eyes narrowed. *'Which would you prefer, Severus? To tell me what you know, or tell the Order? Your choice.'*

He uncoiled from his chair like a striking snake. *'Is this an issue of trust?'* he hissed. *'I lay my life on the line constantly in the service of the Light. Not everything I do or think is relevant to this struggle. The Order doesn't own me. You're about to cross a line, Minerva. I warn you; think twice before you do that.'*

Her lips drew back from her teeth. *'And I warn you, Severus, that you had better not be withholding any piece of information—and I do mean anything—that might help us.'*

The two wizards locked eyes. The air between them thrummed with power.

But in the end it was Snape who dropped his gaze. *'I have no clear reason to distrust our visitor, but not even Legilimency could reveal everything. There was a part of her mind I couldn't reach. A part that kept eluding me.'*

'And that disturbed you enough to consider death



by alcohol poisoning?’

Snape was silent.

‘Whatever eluded you, I can tell you this,’ said McGonagall, breaking the stalemate. ‘I’ve spoken to her, and I know she can be trusted. I strongly suggest you demonstrate to her that *you* can be trusted. There’s little time to waste.’ She straightened and pushed herself away from his desk. ‘I’ll see you at the Order meeting.’

When she closed the door with another bang, Snape spent several unpleasant minutes sifting through the entrails of that conversation. What in the name of Merlin and his minions did she mean? Had Hawking told her about their—er—encounter in the Hotel Elysian? But why would she? And surely Minerva would never condone such goings-on.

Right: next question. How was he supposed to “demonstrate” that he trusted Hawking? Was he prepared to trust her? If opening up to her at the most basic physical level, letting her see his wanton need, could be defined as “trust,” then hell, yes—in that sense he trusted her to the core.

Unfortunately, he was quite sure Minerva did not consider shagging an acceptable way for him to “demonstrate trust” in their visitor.

Snape had come to no clear conclusions when another knock came from the classroom door. Before he could react, the door cracked open and Remus Lupin poked his head around the jamb.

‘Bugger off!’ Snape snarled.

‘Good morning to you too, Severus,’ said the Defence professor pleasantly. ‘I thought it might



help forestall the—er—scepticism of certain members of the Order if I accompany you to the meeting. A public display of confidence, etcetera. No, please don’t thank me. I’m just grateful that you haven’t taken it into your head to escort Doctor Hawking.’

‘According to you, I’m damned if I don’t keep my distance from Hawking. According to McGonagall, who just dropped in for a pleasant little chat, by the way, I’m damned if I don’t—how did she put it?—“demonstrate” to Hawking that I can be trusted.’ Snape jabbed the point of his quill viciously into the pile of essays.

Lupin’s golden eyes widened. ‘You didn’t tell Minerva about...?’

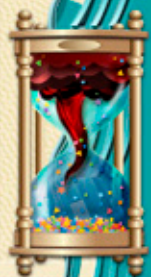
‘Don’t be a fucking idiot, Lupin. I don’t know why, but for whatever reason Minerva herself now seems to trust Hawking completely.’

‘That’s interesting—and reassuring. Perhaps they’ve reached some sort of understanding. Well, if she’s prepared to back you and Dumbledore and vouch for our visitor, then I believe the rest of the Order will fall into step. But Severus—one more friendly warning.’

‘I do so appreciate your friendly warnings.’

‘Moody, Bill Weasley, Kingsley, and Tonks will want an independent observer present at all stages of the Carborundorum project. If you and Hawking see fit to agree, then that will smooth your way.’

‘Ah, Lupin, as usual I’m several steps ahead of you. I plan to *insist* on the presence of an appropriate third party.’ Snape stood up, straightening his robe with a snap. ‘Shall we go to the meeting?’





NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Strategic (and rather wonderful)

The surprising sense of relief I felt after McGonagall discovered my identity lulled me into thinking that seeing Dumbledore would not affect me much. The ridiculous passwords, the corkscrewing staircase, the charming silver instruments displayed on various small tables, the sight of that beautiful phoenix on his perch, and even the portraits of headmasters past (all now apparently asleep) made me feel nothing but faint nostalgia. It was only when Dumbledore himself rose from behind his desk and came forward, enfolding my hands in his without a word and looking at me with compassion, astonishment, joy, and sadness, somehow all commingled, that my heart trembled.

Then Dumbledore said my true name, the name I've left behind forever. He spoke it like a blessing, and my heart cracked open. I wished I could cry in his arms, but instead I clamped teeth down on my lower lip so hard it almost bled. Dropping my gaze to the floor, I took several deep breaths. Control, I told myself. Control. Dumbledore said nothing, just held my hands tight within his warm wrinkled ones.

this slender chain

After a moment I felt strength seeping through me. It was as if he were infusing me with energy.

With all my science and all my expertise in the technologies of defensive spells and counter-spells, I've forgotten what real magic feels like.

When I was able to compose myself I looked back up at Dumbledore and nodded, as if we were finishing a long-awaited conversation. He nodded back without speaking, squeezed my hands slightly, and then let me go.

The three of us sat in small, comfortable chairs, and for old time's sake I accepted a sherbet lemon.

'I realise,' said Dumbledore gently, 'that the next few days are going to be trying for you. But whether by accident or design, you now have three allies. I cannot possibly express my admiration for the courage you've shown by coming to us, nor can we ever—to my sorrow—show you the depth of gratitude you deserve. But you must not hesitate to lean on our expertise and strength. You are not alone.'

'She WILL have three allies IF she tells Severus,' McGonagall said, watching me with cat-like alertness.

Dumbledore raised his bushy brows.

'Do you have good cause not to tell him who you are?' he asked me.

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I remembered the portraits and looked up, alarmed that they might be listening to this bizarre conversation. To my relief, they were all still asleep, even the uber-snarky Phineas Nigellus. As if reading my mind, the Headmaster smiled and said that he had suggested to his predecessors that today's meetings would be far too boring to merit their attention.

I then found myself able to explain that I felt revealing my identity to Snape might expose him to unacceptable levels of risk... though somewhat lamely, I added that I hadn't rejected the option of telling him if it became necessary. Dumbledore and McGonagall looked at each other.

'I respect your argument and see a great deal of merit in it,' said the Headmaster, 'But have you considered the level of risk to the project if you choose NOT to tell him your true identity? A misstep on your part, or an involuntary word or reaction could deepen his suspicions and work against your success.'

Rather frustrated at that point, I told Dumbledore that I could keep second-guessing the situation until I turned blue. Is Professor Snape meant to know who I am? Or meant not to know? Is each new "unexpected" decision or "accident" weakening this hellish time-loop or tightening the noose? I

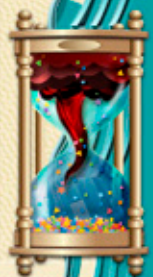


didn't put it in quite those words, but figuring this out is like trying to measure, at the quantum level, a particle's velocity and position at the same time. It can't be done. Not even with the help of magic.

I never found out whether Dumbledore had any wisdom to offer me on that topic, for at that moment his office door announced visitors. McGonagall turned her head sharply and Dumbledore frowned.

'The rest of the Order and senior faculty are here. I'm afraid we're out of time.'

I really do wish he'd chosen different words.



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WHEN, HAVING COME OF AGE, Hermione had been invited to join Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix, she'd taken great pride in being part of something much larger than herself. Her pride hadn't been shaken even after her first meeting, when a surprising number of differences and disagreements amongst older Order members had emerged. Though of course she realised many of the major players were (to say the least) eccentric, her reformist soul had always fancied being part of a monolithic band of brave souls united under the banner of the Light. Soon Hermione accepted the fact that Order politics relied on conflict and negotiation almost as much as on Dumbledore's intently focused vision—a vision not always disguised by the headmaster's unique brand of absent minded benevolence.

But at this Order meeting today, all her last illusions vanished. She first felt impatience and then a growing fury when it became clear that her adventure in the dungeons was much lower down on the agenda than paying inordinate attention to the so-called "visiting researcher." Flanked by Lupin and

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McGonagall, Doctor Hawking sat quietly, wrapped in a dark grey calf-length dress with a teal-blue shawl around her shoulders, her hair pulled up into a knot and her arms folded across her chest. She looked every inch the sober middle-aged academic, yet she compelled eyes toward her. Stealing glances at Harry and Ron, Hermione noticed them staring as well and groaned inwardly. But most disquieting was Professor Snape, seated at a right angle to Hawking. He, too, kept looking at the visitor, his gaze sliding away from her and returning like a furtive animal. Hermione clenched her jaw. The Potions master had indeed been seduced and suborned... and no one else but she was aware of it.

Yet the extensive discussion about Voldemort's newest weapon had its points of interest. Dumbledore wasted little time inviting Hawking to summarise the level of threat. After describing in dispassionate terms the devastating effects of this Curse, she added, still without expression—'When the victims are consumed, nothing remains but white ash—the solid remains of the body—a powder scattered amongst clothing.'

At that moment Hermione felt blackness licking at the edges of her vision, and she remembered the battlefield and the thin cries of the dead carried to her on the wind. She concentrated on exorcising the images, taking deep, slow breaths. At the same time Harry began to interrogate Hawking about whether she was certain Voldemort had this capability and how she'd acquired this knowledge. Finally Snape rounded on Harry, interrupting him.

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'Mr. Potter, I have seen with my own eyes the effects of the Carborundorum Curse. What Doctor Hawking says is true.'

After a few minutes Hermione felt better and, noticing Ron's anxious eyes on her, managed a weak smile. But meanwhile, some other topic must have worked its way through the meeting because—hells bells! Dumbledore and McGonagall were now arguing that Hawking should have clearance to use the internal Floo network! As if she were in class, Hermione stuck up her hand and waved it frantically.

'Yes, Miss Granger?' said Dumbledore, with a faint smile at her antics.

'Sir, I'm sorry, but is this wise when the school's now on alert? This isn't meant to be personal, Doctor Hawking, but I thought I should raise the point.' She flashed a sugary smile at the older woman.

There was silence, during which Hermione felt the weight of Snape's heavy scowl. Harry and Ron just looked at her, their mouths falling open. Moody, though, cracked a brief chuckle. 'I see you've got guts as well as brains, young woman,' he said, nodding at her. 'A valid question. No offence, Doctor Hawking.'

'None taken, to either comment,' the visitor said coolly, and Hermione shivered, disturbed by that voice. 'If you're uncomfortable with my having Floo access, then I agree to an escort. But I warn you—I work long and odd hours. My escort had better be a night-owl.'

'I appreciate your caution, Miss Granger,' said Dumbledore, 'But our Floo network is much more efficient and secure than letting our guest wander around the school

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corridors at odd hours, escorted or otherwise.'

'I appreciate your trust in me,' said Hawking, and Hermione wondered if others also caught the dry edge of irony.

'But we've agreed to assign observers to this project, haven't we?' rumbled Kingsley Shacklebolt, and the discussion degenerated, in Hermione's view, to nit-picking about which Order members or senior faculty were available and when.

'When the hell are they going to talk about that passage and Filch?' Ron murmured in her ear. 'This is rubbish. Hawking's offering help, and they're all acting as if she's Voldemort's advance guard. Just let her get on with it.'

'Do we need to have an observer present twenty-four hours a day?' Lupin was asking. 'Doctor Hawking, surely you're not planning to work overnight.'

'I'm sorry, but I'll need continuous access to the potions lab, day and night, until further notice. I wouldn't ask this if the situation weren't so urgent. I respect your wish to have an observer present,' Hawking nodded to Lupin, 'but with or without one, I'm going to do this work.'

'I not only support but insist on the presence of an observer,' Snape cut in, earning a startled look from Hawking and a raised eyebrow from Moody. 'I trust the Order can rise to the occasion.'

Hermione raised her hand again. 'If there's a problem finding an observer for some of the evenings, then I volunteer. I do most of my NEWT project research at night anyway.'

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McGonagall looked alarmed, and Dumbledore interjected. 'Thank you, Miss Granger, but that won't be necessary.'

'Why not, Albus?' said Moody, one canny eye on the Headmaster and one magical eye whirling lazily. 'She seems perfectly competent and might even understand what's going on better than any of us Aurors would.'

'I find myself agreeing,' said Snape, raising his eyebrows at Moody. 'She is an advanced student, and I believe she would be suitable as an observer.'

This was praise beyond expectations, and Hermione found herself blushing. Hawking sat still, her face expressionless. McGonagall's mouth had thinned into a white line. When Dumbledore hesitated before nodding his assent, it seemed to Hermione almost as if he'd been caught off guard and had no choice but to agree. She smiled with satisfaction. She'd asserted herself in this roomful of elders and eccentrics, won Snape's praise, and found a perfect excuse to keep an eye on their unsettling visitor. *Well done, Granger.*

'Then may we go to the lab and get started?' Hawking half-rose to her feet, but Dumbledore shook his head and held up his hand.

'Please stay for a few more minutes. I'm afraid another matter has come to my attention concerning the security of Hogwarts.'

Reminding everyone in the room of their commitment to secrecy, Dumbledore gave the floor to McGonagall, who reported that their Head Girl, in the course of carrying out her duties, had happened

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to notice suspicious activity in the dungeons after supper the previous evening. With Miss Weasley, a prefect, she had observed Mr. Filch showing Draco and his friends a "fifth passage" leading out of the dungeons, as well as a dramatic display of eleven mummified corpses. 'Whilst some might argue that Miss Granger and Miss Weasley should not have put themselves at risk in this manner, they each showed they are more than capable of protecting themselves and have helped bring invaluable information to light,' the Deputy Headmistress finished. 'Miss Granger's actions lie well within the spirit and practice of Order membership.'

Hermione's glow of pride was short-lived. Far from being praised or subjected to intelligent questions, she found herself listening with increasing impatience as Dumbledore and McGonagall faced a bracing blast of anger and criticism: 'Set more wards!' 'Throw Filch into Azkaban and bury the key!' 'Those corpses deserve decent, respectful torching!' 'What in heaven's name were you thinking, Albus, letting that lunatic have the run of this school all these years?' '...need special patrols for all passageways, *now!*' 'Wouldn't it be wise to secure places like the Shrieking Shack?'

Snape was clearly furious; his face white and black brows knotted, he was almost spitting in McGonagall's face. Listening hard, Hermione caught '...didn't you see fit to tell me? ...Slytherin was *my* house the last time I checked!' Shivering, Hermione realised she might well become the object of that

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fury before the day was out. Meanwhile, Lupin was insisting to Moody, Bill Weasley, and Tonks that the fifth passage couldn't possibly debouch into the Shrieking Shack—a building he knew extremely well of old. Fawkes didn't help matters much by flapping his wings and uttering piercing shrieks.

Even the portraits woke up. Bleary-eyed and cross, they made futile shushing gestures whilst Phineas Nigellus cast an amused, cynical eye on the chaos.

Finally, Dumbledore and McGonagall managed to restore some semblance of order to the Order. In a quiet voice belied somewhat by an angry blue flash in his eyes, the headmaster outlined how and why he believed he had at least temporarily de-fanged Filch and why he felt it was important not to do anything at this stage that their enemy might consider provocative.

'Putting the school on alert should not provoke Voldemort, who has surely been expecting a move like this,' Dumbledore summed up. 'But it will allow us to control Mr. Filch's movements as well as monitor and restrict students' access to all areas of the school. We shall also, of course, strengthen the wards and bring in more Aurors—all things you've suggested, Alastor,' the Headmaster added, nodding in Moody's direction.

'And no more unauthorised student adventures?' said Shackbolt, frowning at Hermione. *Well, buggery, you*, she thought back at him. *I've done everyone a favour, and what thanks do I get?*

'Neither Miss Granger nor any other student under my supervision will have the time or opportunity for

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adventures,' Snape growled. 'I shall see to that.'

'The last time I checked, Miss Granger was in *my* house,' snapped McGonagall.

'Right. That's enough of that,' Moody said harshly. 'Bloody hell, people. Think! Strategise! Voldemort is sure to hold another little Death Eater gathering any time now. What will he learn? He'll know the school's on alert,' Moody continued without giving anyone a chance to answer. 'He *might* believe we've known all along about this fifth passage—what that will do to change his plans is uncertain. He'll know we have a visitor who's trying to counter his new Curse. But... how will he know if we're *succeeding* in countering the Curse? Two things have to happen: first, Fudge's blasted sub-committee needs to believe Hawking's not having much luck; and second—you, Snape, need to convey false information—throw Voldemort off the scent long enough to buy us a bit more time.' He grinned without mirth at the younger wizard, who glared back.

Suddenly Hawking stood up. 'Whatever you people decide, do it now,' she said, her voice filling the room. 'There's much less time to buy than you think. All the information I've been able to gather indicates Voldemort will attack on Hallowe'en.'

Everyone stared at her in shocked silence.

'What?' said Tonks.

'How in the name of Merlin's brass monkeys would you know *that*?' Moody's mad eye swivelled back to Snape. 'Is that what you've heard?'

'No specific date. Just "soon,"' said Snape quietly,

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white-faced with rage or shock; Hermione couldn't tell.

'I'm sure you've all heard some mention of the Warlocks,' said Hawking, unperturbed. Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at each other, eyebrows raised. 'For all I know, one or two of you may even be Warlocks. But if you haven't heard of them, I'll just say that their unacknowledged work and their spilled blood has made it possible for me to bring you knowledge about Carborundorum and to tell you that Voldemort expects he'll be ready to attack on Hallowe'en.'

'A week from now,' whispered Ron. 'Bloody hell.'

'Why didn't you tell us that earlier?' said Harry. Hawking looked at him, and to Hermione's disquiet, gave him a warm smile at odds with the sadness in her eyes.

'If you had all decided against me earlier in the meeting, I would have screamed it out,' she said quietly, looking at Snape's tight face and then glancing quickly away.

'Is there still enough time to counter Voldemort's weapon?' said Flitwick, with a slight quaver.

Hawking looked at Snape again.

'We'll try our damndest.'



When the Order meeting had solemnly adjourned, after a final reminder from Dumbledore that no discussions of the Hallowe'en deadline could take place outside his office, Hawking exchanged a quick word with Snape. But after he left, she lingered, gathering Dumbledore and McGonagall to her with an urgent look.

'The discovery of this "fifth passage" changes things

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— I hope for the better,' Hawking said without preliminaries.

'How?' said McGonagall.

'Remember that the Carborundorum Curse comprises eleven spell-sequences and potion-sequences.'

'Ahh,' said Dumbledore.

'And remember that a key ingredient in the eleventh potion-sequence is—'

'—The so-called "Sweat of the Dead",' finished McGonagall in a low voice.

'I was prepared to synthesise this ingredient; in fact, that was standard procedure for our team. It would have pushed us to the limit of the time remaining, but barring problems we would have been ready for Voldemort by Hallowe'en,' said Hawking, her face tight.

Dumbledore frowned. 'Is it safe to assume Voldemort has already harvested material from those eleven corpses?'

'Almost certainly. And so must we, if we want to widen our safety margin,' said Hawking. 'Not having to synthesise that ingredient will speed things up by at least a day.'

'Some of the Order would consider using those corpses as desecration,' McGonagall pointed out. 'They might like to think we're above that.'

'I know,' said Hawking simply. 'I'm sorry, but it can't be helped.'

'It's tempting to assume that simply securing that room will be enough to hamper Voldemort in his preparations,' Dumbledore offered.

Hawking gave a quick smile. 'I wish it were that easy.'

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But realistically, Voldemort has had plenty of time to find other sources. He may even have been given the knowledge to synthesise “Sweat of the Dead.” It’s still a race, though we’ve been given a boost.’

‘Why didn’t you ask Severus to stay and hear this as well?’ McGonagall pressed.

‘I’m still reluctant to take chances on telling him too much, given his position,’ said Hawking, looking down at the floor.

‘I don’t like this at all,’ McGonagall pressed her lips together. ‘Obviously you must be discreet, but—’ she gave Hawking a stern look ‘—please tell me you’re not thinking of going into that passageway alone.’

‘I told Filch I will take charge of the eleven bodies,’ said Dumbledore. ‘No one will remark on my presence in the crypt. I’ll obtain the material you need.’

Hawking took a deep breath. ‘With respect, Professor, I must do it myself. I must analyse it as I gather it, with spells that don’t exist yet but which I suspect Voldemort has also “discovered” in the same way he “discovered” Carborundorum. I can’t take any chances that the material isn’t exactly what the eleventh sequence calls for.’

‘It will be difficult to explain *your* presence down there if anything should go wrong,’ said McGonagall. ‘And as for how Severus will react when he finds out...’ She shook her head.

‘Doctor Hawking and I must do this as soon and as discreetly as possible,’ said Dumbledore.

‘Discreetly, yes... but not as soon as I wish we could,’ said Hawking. ‘If I harvest the material before every

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single sequence is ready, it will be ineffective. We have four hours at the most between obtaining it and using it to bind the eleventh sequence.’ She smiled grimly. ‘A very tight timeline. That’s one reason why we prefer to synthesise a much stabler version.’

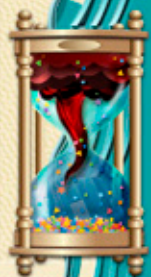
‘And Severus?’ said McGonagall.

Hawking sighed. ‘I hope you can trust me to exercise my best judgement.’



Under any other circumstances, Snape thought sourly, he might not have minded getting a release from all teaching except Advanced Potions, working on a complex and challenging experimental defence sequence, and having as his partner a knowledgeable and attractive woman whose fierce intelligence more than matched his own. But as the first morning wore on into early afternoon, it became clear to Snape that Hawking saw his part in this great defensive enterprise (which Dumbledore, in a fit of ironic humour Snape thought ill-suited for him, had dubbed Project Aleister) as fitting somewhere between bright house-elf and average OWL student. All she seemed to need from him were endless samples of ingredients from his store, constant repetition of spell sequences, and an occasional elementary suggestion about spell-potion interactions. It was as if she were deliberately setting out to insult and irritate him. She exuded an attitude of knowing everything, and Snape wasn’t sure how much more of that he was prepared to stomach—or for how much longer.

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It didn't help that Alastor Moody had volunteered to take the first shift as Order observer. Hunched on a stool in the corner, his magical eye roving without pause around the room and his ordinary eye glaring at Hawking and Snape, the old Auror said volumes through his surly silence about how much he liked and trusted the objects of his gaze. Perhaps, a calmer part of Snape conceded after several hours of this, Gwen Hawking's outrageous condescension was her way of overcompensating for Moody's presence.

'Adding aconite to powered wormwood generally yields no significant interaction,' Snape said to at one point to Hawking, managing (he thought rather well) to sound patient.

'Not in this case,' she said almost absently. 'If you've read closely, you'll have noted the incantation sequence magnifies rather than neutralises the deadly qualities of both.'

'I think you can assume I've read *all* the incantations closely, Doctor Hawking.'

'Of course, Professor Snape. I know this is unfamiliar territory for you. Just trust me; these interactions will work.'

Snape told himself that at least one good thing had emerged from all the disasters of the past thirty-six hours: he no longer desired Gwen Hawking as a lover. Even if he did, it simply wasn't worth the trouble or further damage to his tattered reputation to pursue her. He was already more vulnerable than ever now—*damn you, Lupin; you were right*—and being publicly blind-sided this morning with news

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that Filch had shown students from his own house a fifth passage out of the dungeons without his knowledge or consent most surely had not helped improve his standing in the Order. Had Lucius put Filch up to that? *Lucius, you piece of filth—you're out to get me, aren't you?*

Even worse was hearing that Miss Granger had put herself in grave danger. His first instinct had been to visit wrath and detentions upon his star NEWT student. What held him in check, though, was the realisation that he himself had been even more careless, much less vigilant, and far more self-indulgent: pining for Gwen like a schoolboy, drowning his unrequited lust in Ogdens Old, being impersonally revived by the amused object of his lust, bungling a follow-up interrogation in a way he hoped no one (and especially not his fellow Death Eaters) would ever discover, and then being reamed by McGonagall for failing to trust said object of his lust.

What a fuck-up.

Suddenly Snape noticed Dobby, Hogwarts' chief house-elf, standing off to one side. 'What do you want?' he snarled. Hawking raised her head, puzzled, then saw Dobby and smiled warmly.

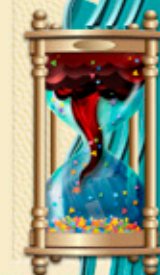
'Hullo, my friend. Is it lunchtime?'

'Yes, please,' said Dobby. 'Dobby has put the lunches in Professor Snape's office.' He threw an aggrieved look at Snape.

Hawking stretched. 'Good. I'm starving. Thanks so much, Dobby.'

'Friends with the house-elves already, are we?' Snape

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muttered as Dobby vanished. 'How liberal of you.' If Hawking heard him, she chose to ignore the comment.

A plate of sandwiches and an urn of coffee were set out neatly on Snape's desk, which was otherwise empty. He scowled.

'Of course it never occurred to them to ask permission before using my desk as a sideboard.'

'I can see why Hogwarts' house-elves adore *you*,' Hawking said, reaching for a plate.

'Lunch break? Good.' Moody, coming up behind them, snagged a ham sandwich in one hand and a sliced tomato and cheddar cheese sandwich in the other. 'Don't mind if I do.'

'Oh, don't hesitate to dig in, Alastor,' said Snape.

'You watch yourself, young Snape,' growled Moody. 'My eye's on you.'

'And on me too, I presume?' said Hawking. Like Moody, she'd settled herself in a chair, a mug of steaming coffee on a corner of the desk beside her and a thick roast beef sandwich on a plate on her lap. When Moody didn't deign to answer her rhetorical question, she lifted the sandwich with two hands and took a huge bite.

There was a knock on Snape's office door. Before he could respond, it opened, and Dumbledore poked his head in. Snape sighed and began looking for another chair.

'Ah,' said the Headmaster, standing in the doorway, 'I'm glad the elves remembered to feed you. Alastor my dear fellow, I'm most grateful for your services today, but I don't think Doctor Hawking and Professor Snape

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need to be observed whilst eating, do you?'

'But Tonks isn't due for at least another hour,' said Moody through a mouthful of tomato sandwich.

'I'll take over until she arrives,' said Dumbledore. Moody favoured Hawking and Snape with one last glare, heaved himself to his feet, tucked the ham sandwich inside his cloak, summoned his thick black staff, and stumped out.

Snape let out a silent breath of relief and, as Dumbledore shut the door on Moody's hostile presence, chose a cheese-and-pickle on rye and took an experimental bite. Suddenly he heard Dumbledore say, 'My dear, are you all right?' Snape raised his head, startled, to see Hawking drop her half-eaten sandwich on her plate and raise both hands to her head as if she were dizzy or in pain. Despite the chill of the dungeons, her forehead was shiny with sweat. Dumbledore bent over her and put a hand on her shoulder.

'Just a bit tired,' Hawking muttered. 'I'll be fine.'

'Severus, would you happen to have a drop or two of Equilibrium Elixir on hand?'

Snape's jaw dropped. 'Yes, but—surely you don't want to give that to her directly?'

'I know it's not recommended,' said Dumbledore, regarding Snape steadily, 'But I believe in this case it will help. If you could dilute four or five drachms with water, I'd be grateful.'

In a few moments a mystified Snape had prepared the tincture. Dumbledore gently put the cup in Hawking's hands. She sipped, gradually downing the liquid, and as both men watched, the lines of strain around

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her eyes smoothed out and her colour improved.

'Better?' said Dumbledore.

Hawking nodded. 'Thank you,' she said a bit hoarsely. 'Shall we start work again?'

'Not until you've eaten,' said Dumbledore. 'It will do none of us any good if you wear yourself out.' He patted her on the shoulder and then, noticing Snape's look, led the younger man into the lab. When out of Hawking's earshot, Snape hissed, 'Headmaster, with all due respect, you know as well as I do that Equilibrium Elixir is designed to stabilise volatile healing potions! It's too powerful for direct use, even in diluted form!'

'Under normal circumstances, you'd be entirely correct. However, there's every chance she will need more of it, and you are the only one with the expertise to design and administer it safely.'

'I don't understand. Why will she need *that* elixir? I can't think of a single known condition requiring it. Whatever it is I need to know, hadn't you better tell me? *Now?*'

'That would be her decision, not mine,' said Dumbledore, his eyes shadowed.

'Is she ill? Is she...?' Snape took a deep breath, seeking calm. 'I considered whether to mention this to you earlier, but when I subjected her to Legilimency, there was a part I couldn't pene—er—' He stumbled, angry with himself, and began again. 'What I mean is that even an accomplished Legimens can't uncover everything.'

'I understand that,' said Dumbledore. with a glint

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of amusement.

'Yes, of course. Well, in Doctor Hawking's case, a large part of her mind refused my examination. Could that have anything to do with her—condition, whatever it is?'

'Do you still believe Gwen Hawking intends us no harm?' said Dumbledore mildly.

'Yes, I still believe that,' said Snape. 'Do you?'

'More than ever.'

'Has she told *you* whatever it was she hid from *me*?'

'Come, dear boy.' Dumbledore took Snape's arm and they re-entered the office, where Hawking had made good progress with her coffee and second sandwich. Her mouth still full, she put her plate down and got to her feet, dusting crumbs off her dress.

'Right,' she said to Snape. 'I think we have the first two sequences in place now. Shall we start on the third?'

'I think we'll work much more productively together, Doctor Hawking,' Snape said, using his silkiest tone, 'after you've told me the entire truth about your condition.'

She froze, her mug of coffee midway to her lips, and shot an anguished look at Dumbledore. The headmaster picked up a sandwich and made a show of examining it. 'I'm supposed to be observing your work,' he said, 'But if you wish to spend some time—er—discussing some ideas over lunch, I'm sure there's no need for me to be present. I shall come back in, let's say, fifteen minutes. Please—' he waved a hand at the remaining sandwiches '—eat

if your wish be to close me

the rest before they dry up.'

And before the other two could utter a word, the elderly wizard had left the room, shutting the door firmly behind him. Snape stared at Hawking, and Hawking stared into her coffee mug as if convinced she could divine the future from its contents.

'Gwen,' said Snape softly, and at the sound of his voice saying that name her eyes, startled, met his. 'I believe you're here to help us, and so does Dumbledore. But he knows something about you I don't. He believes it's your choice whether or not to tell me. I hope you will, because I cannot work effectively with you unless you are honest with me.'

'Are you prepared to be honest with me?' she snapped. 'Will you finally just bloody *trust* me for a change instead of playing games?'

Snape felt anger lashing like a snake's tail. With effort, he calmed it.

'I have shown you all the honesty of which I'm capable,' he said evenly. 'The night before last, I quite literally put all of myself in your hands. Remember? Remember? If you'd wanted to, you could easily have undone me. Yes, I invaded your mind afterwards, deliberately choosing a moment when you were vulnerable. But, though I despised myself afterwards, I knew Legilimency wouldn't break you. You're much too strong for that. Now *listen to me*.' The silk in his voice turned to steel. 'I'm being honest when I say I want to trust you. But you and I know bloody well you concealed a large part of your mind from me. How can I trust you if you won't tell me what I need to know?'

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Hawking put her coffee mug on the desk, sat back down in her chair and, tilting her head up to the ceiling, took a long, slow breath.

'Please sit down, Professor Snape.'

'I'm quite comfortable standing.'

'Sit down, damn it! If you don't, you'll wish you had.'

What in the name of hell is she going to tell me? That she has the plague? Sighing, he sat.

Five minutes later, Severus Snape was very grateful he'd taken her advice.



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Progress, verging into Theoretical, then Personal

Project Nostalgia, Day One. It's teatime. I know Hogwarts has no official teatime blocked off in its daily schedule, but I like teatime. An island of civilisation in a sea of chaos. So I asked poor old Dobby, who's terrified of Snape, to bring us Earl Grey and scones. Snape now refuses to speak to me, and I have nothing more to say to him, so I've secluded myself in a corner of his office to "record my project notes."

Pardon the crumb stains.

Day One. A mixed success, I'd say. Half of the Order thinks I'm untrustworthy. Moody and Tonks

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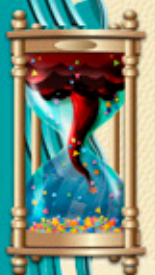


have been breathing down my neck for hours. Hermione Granger thinks I'm the Wicked Witch of the West (...and your little dog too! Heh.). So much for "tapping into" her energy. Instead, if some chaotic, random exchange between us is affecting her with peculiar "memories" too, as I suspect it might, then for both our sakes I wish to hell I could keep her off my tail. But dammit! She's wormed her way in as an Order observer. So what in the name of chaos am I going to do about THAT?

Right. Let's count the pluses: three out of eleven spell-and-potion sequences are now laid out, and it seems I'll have access I never anticipated to the "natural form" of the Carborundorum key ingredient. Except—that makes me uneasy too. Could the enemy have compiled Carborundorum so quickly if Filch, that piece of blast-ended screwt excrement, hadn't made those poor dried up old bodies available for Voldemort to defile?

Even so, if I were an evil Dark Lord working with several months' lead time, I'd have anticipated that this supply might be compromised and would have synthesised lots of lovely "Sweat of the Dead" by now. I would, as well, have gone flat out to "improve" the original product, allowing multiple simultaneous

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killings. I'm sure the only reason Voldemort's not attacking right now, whilst Hogwarts is still twisting in the wind, is that, perhaps, his results aren't yet... optimal. Either way, I have a horrible feeling the Halloween deadline is history.

As if that weren't enough, here's another thought—and this one's really troubling. I am, I was Hermione, and I have NO memory of following Filch down into the dungeons with Ginny OR of seeing "the Eleven." Could this mean my presence is already pushing this deadly time-current in a different direction? I hope so. At least I think I hope so.

Finally, I must record as well that I now have three powerful allies, though to call the most recent an "ally" may be stretching truth past the point of reason. Dumbledore and McGonagall have accepted who I am with an equanimity that comes from—well—age, I suppose: from understanding that sometimes the universe has a most peculiar sense of irony.

But Snape's reaction? The only phrase I can think of is "shell-shocked." Damn it—I had to tell him the truth about me. I had no choice. But I knew, I just KNEW he'd take it badly. How could he not? I made the mistake of stepping down from my perfect, mysterious, powerful pedestal. I ceased to be the

if your wish be to close me



romantic stranger who wanted him without reservation. This afternoon I transformed into something disturbingly familiar and dangerously taboo.

I have now become—and this is the crux of it for Snape—his student.

If he were actually to break that deadly silence and talk to me, I suspect he'd draw the following convoluted line of argument: I have disclosed myself as Hermione Granger. It is utterly unethical for a teacher to seduce a student. The fact that I am now decades older and nothing like the know-it-all who plagued him for more than six years is immaterial. He seduced me, or let himself be seduced (I'm sure he's not sure which is worse). By being my lover, he has violated what is, for him, an inviolable taboo, probably just one level below participating in a Death Eater gang-rape.

What else could possibly explain why, when I'd finished telling him who I really am, where (and when) I've come from, and the fact that I'm experiencing inconvenient fluctuations at the quantum level (clever old Dumbledore to think of Equilibrium Elixir), Snape turned paler than parchment and bolted into the lab? When I came up behind him and begged him to talk to me, reminded him I'd told

if your wish be to close me

him the entire truth about me, he spat at me that it was time to go back to work. Then, a beat later, he said in a low voice that he would experiment with safe levels of Equilibrium Elixir in addition to helping me with the Carborundorum sequences.

I said, 'Thank you.' Then, unable to resist, I added, 'I hope you're glad that I was honest with you, Severus.'

'Please call me Professor Snape,' he replied in a strangled voice.

A few minutes later, Dumbledore came back. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I threw him a bleak look and rolled my eyes in Snape's direction. Dumbledore frowned, but forbore to say anything. Then, unlike Moody, he sat down in a comfortable chair and observed our work (boring, really, just lists of spells and ingredients; me recording and assembling; Snape trundling back and forth between the lab and his store) until Tonks came by about an hour later.

Snape an ally? He acts more like a disapproving parent. Given that I'm a dozen years older than he is, this is truly ridiculous.

I can't work with him like this. I can't live my remaining few days in an emotional hellhole.

I wish I knew what to do

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HERMIONE FROWNED at the neatly arranged and labelled piles of ingredients comprising the four completed Carborundorum sequences. 'It seems a bit strange,' she said, not quite looking at Hawking, who had commandeered another table to sort out parchments, 'that most of the things required for this Curse are so, well, common.'

Not quite looking at Hermione, Hawking gave a quick, grim smile. 'That's the beauty of it. Except possibly for the eleventh sequence, it doesn't take special resources to create Carborundorum. This is a classic terrorist weapon, and terrorist weapons are often built from the simplest ingredients.'

'If that's true,' said Hermione, 'then why has this Curse taken so long to appear? Why didn't Voldemort invent it decades ago?'

Snape wished he could admire his student's nerve and intelligence with the innocent objectivity of the professor nurturing a young mind. Impossible now. When, at lunch, Gwen Hawking had told her appalling story, he'd felt such horror and sadness that he'd been incapable of doing anything except

turning away, not speaking, and above all, not thinking about the implications of his actions over the past two days. He wished with all his being he could continue to think of Miss Granger as a brilliant if often irritating student, a schoolgirl whose exceptional mind was entrusted to his care: not as a young woman in the first flush of becoming the ruthless, elegant, sexually voracious creature he had shagged with such abandon two nights earlier.

At least I no longer want to bed Gwen Hawking. Small mercy.

Oh, REALLY? Then by all the torments of hell, why do you keep looking at her? Remembering, wanting? Then looking at her younger self... and wondering?

At which point, that part of him still fearless about facing the truth had to admit two things: he hadn't stopped desiring Gwen Hawking, and he couldn't prevent an intense, vibrant curiosity about the possible future of Hermione Granger. None of these useless thoughts did very much to help him focus on the task at hand. So for his own sanity, Snape decided his best policy was to detach himself from his co-researcher, at least in the immediate future. At least for this afternoon. Which would have been perfectly fine if it weren't for the fact that when he began distilling Equilibrium Elixir, his stomach began to clench with fear for the visitor: for her well being, for her very existence. Gwen (he couldn't bring himself to think of her as "Hermione") had been close-mouthed about her long-range Time-Turner experiment, but Snape suspected her long journey had weakened her in some mysterious way. Right now she *looked* strong;

she exuded power; her brown eyes blazed. But he suspected that at the most fundamental level, she was splintering apart. The impression of intense fragility was overwhelming, bringing out protective instincts he'd never known he had as well as another, much more frightening emotion.

Tenderness.

Merlin and all his minions help me.

Stationed at her own little table, where the small cauldron of the prototype Cruciatus remedy still simmered, the Order's youngest official Carborundorum Project observer had kept up a steady barrage of aggressive, incisive questions since her arrival an hour after dinner. Hermione had been rather nervous about the possibility of Snape savaging her about her adventure in the fifth passage, but to her surprise he stayed busy and silent at his long table at the far end of the lab. Nor was she sensing any of that disturbing empathy she had felt earlier between Hawking and Snape. And no visions of battlefields either, thank God. Hermione had decided the way was open for interrogating the visiting researcher.

Her latest cheeky question earned a raised eyebrow and a cool reply: 'Even the enemy thinks carefully about the right time to use deadly force.'

'But—all right, pretend I'm a crazed Death Eater,' Hermione persisted. Despite himself, Snape felt his mouth twitch in a smile he dared not show. 'What's stopping me from wielding this Curse myself? Why can't *anyone* with a grudge wield it, for that matter?'

'The spells for Carborundorum,' said Hawking,

the centre cannot hold

again not looking at the young woman, 'require a tremendous amount of power for generating the negative emotions needed. Tell me, Miss Granger, have you ever used an Unforgivable Curse?'

Hermione almost dropped the parchment she was unrolling. Over his shoulder, Snape shot Hawking a look that would have speared her if she'd noticed it.

'Erm—I—just once, to test my, my Cruciatus remedy,' she stammered.

'Really?' said Hawking, flashing an ironic glance in the direction of Snape's back. 'Well, recall the sheer intensity of emotion needed to imbue "Crucio" with power. Hatred, I imagine... or jealousy, or something like it.' Hermione's face had turned crimson, and Snape had turned to face both women, his mouth half-open. 'At any rate, try to imagine generating and focusing *ten times* that intensity. Only one or two wizards in a generation could hope to control that kind of power. And only one in this lifetime is truly, as you put it, crazed enough to try and do so.'

Hermione refused to back down.

'You sound as if you've had a bit of experience yourself with Unforgivable Curses, Doctor,' she said, her eyes alight with challenge.

Hawking gave a brief, grim smile. 'Yes, a bit. Unforgivables, hexes, and a few other interesting surprises. Most recently, Legilimency.'

Snape took half a step forward. 'I think Miss Granger understands the Carborundorum concept well enough at this point,' he said, his voice low and dangerous.

'Of course, Professor Snape.' Hawking's tone also

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had a bite to it. 'But your student *did* ask, much to her credit.' Hawking now looked at Hermione. 'You obviously want to know what we're facing. That takes great strength.' Suddenly she smiled. 'They call that "Gryffindor courage" around here, don't they?'

'Thank you for your explanation, Doctor,' said Hermione politely. She turned back to her parchment.

What was it about this woman that clenched her heart with jealousy, yet invited her mind to open further than it ever had before?



It had been a fine old farce, thought Filch, going through the motions of "showing" Ernie Macmillan and his handpicked little Hufflepuffs the defunct potions room and the dusty entranceway to the fifth passage with the headmaster and a couple of grim-faced Aurors breathing down his neck. Filch could dimly sense brand-new wards binding the old potions room, waiting to trap any magical intruders. As a Squib, Filch reflected with a sour smile, he could have passed through those wards with no more difficulty than walking through cobwebs. As the scion of the Argus bloodline, keeper of dungeon secrets, he had long ago mastered the art of vanishing into the darkness and could have been a hundred yards away before those blundering Aurors even noticed he'd gone. But instead he adhered to Dumbledore's restrictions and even pretended to approve of complete strangers patrolling *his* territory. He sensed his survival depended on appearing to be cooperative almost as much as on the out-



come of the interview now awaiting him.

As darkness fell and cutlery clattered against dinner-plates in the Great Hall, Filch claimed staff privilege to leave school grounds. No one could legitimately stop him, not even the two wizards guarding the gates. One of them, who looked far too young to be play-acting at being an Auror, gave him a mistrustful glare as he stated his name.

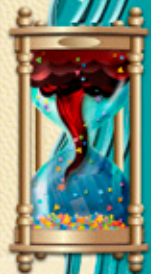
'Reason for leaving Hogwarts?'

Filch smirked. 'Just going in to Hogsmeade for a pint, guv. No harm in that, I hope, not after a long day.'

'Hmph. Well. Stay on the alert, though, if you please.'

'Always do.'

On the outskirts of Hogsmeade, Filch checked to make sure he was unobserved, and then took the little used, overgrown path leading to what most folk in those parts called the Shrieking Shack. He knew better, although he was the first to admit the old Argus grounds had seen better days. The Shack was all that remained of a once grand estate; in the heady days of the early nineteenth century, when Aleister Argus had been headmaster of Hogwarts, the great house had been the social nexus of the region. Skirting the Shack, Filch disappeared into the tangled undergrowth of the Argus graveyard. The waning moon outlined the jagged old headstones—such a shame he couldn't tend to them regularly—and traced silver across the square, frowning bulk of the mausoleum. Filch knew who awaited him there, and his heart began trip-hammering when he saw the tall, black, hooded figure leaning against the mossy stone wall.



'Is that you?' Filch whispered.

'You'd better have a bloody good excuse for being late, Filch.' The voice was low, sibilant, and Filch felt hairs rise on the back of his neck. 'Breaching house arrest entails careful planning and timing. If you take that sort of thing lightly, please tell me.'

'I'm very sorry, guv. It's hard to move freely with Dumbledore and the whole cursed school breathing down my neck,' mumbled Filch.

'Oh, yes,' said Malfoy, 'Albus has finally instigated his little alert.' He grinned, white even teeth gleaming in the night. 'Much good that will do him.'

'Be that as it may, it seems Dumbledore knew about the fifth passage all along. He's been playing me for a fool.'

'Are you sure he knew? I wonder. Still... did you show my son what I wanted him to see?'

'That I did, guv.'

Malfoy fixed Filch with an unblinking stare. 'And did you tell my son what I instructed you to tell him about the passage exit?'

'I did. He thinks it leads to the Shrieking Shack. Of course I didn't take him all the way to the end.'

'Good,' said Malfoy. His lips stretched in a smile. 'He may be my son, but like all those seeking a place in the Dark Lord's inner circle, he must first earn the Dark Lord's trust. And mine, for that matter.'

'Er—Mr. Malfoy,' said Filch, 'Meaning no disrespect, but I don't quite see how your son can help us. There's Aurors everywhere, there's new wards up in Magister Aleister's potions room, and now it won't

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be long before the entire bloody Order go into the passageway with torches and *desecrate* the Eleven!' Spittle flew from Filch's lips.

'Your point?' said Malfoy lazily. Filch took a deep breath.

'I thought—well, I understand Himself considers that room and its contents rather important.'

'Do you honestly believe my Lord has been caught unprepared? He already has what he needs. The Eleven are insignificant now. Which reminds me... about *your* future, Mr. Filch.' Malfoy's fingers curled lightly around Filch's arm. The caretaker shivered.

'My son thinks Miss Granger followed you last night.' Filch felt his heart give a peculiar lurch, and cold sweat broke out on his forehead. 'Now, given what we know about that little busybody, I'm inclined to believe his tale. I've forborne to chastise him—*this* time—for not detecting her and putting her in her place. Can you give me any good reason, Mr Filch, why he whom we both serve should not chastise *you*?' Malfoy's fingers bit into Filch's flesh.

'I—I...'

'Unless, of course, we haven't yet exhausted the limits of your usefulness?'

Filch said desperately, 'No one knows those dungeons like I do, Mr. Malfoy. No one.'

Malfoy let Filch go, revulsion curling his perfect mouth. 'That may or may not be true. I'll let my Lord decide the length of your useful life.' He touched his fingertips together. 'However, in a way, it's rather elegant that Little Miss Mudblood now

the centre cannot hold



knows about the fifth passage and the crypt of the Eleven. I'm sure—quite sure—that she's very curious to know more. Wouldn't you agree?'

'Yes, guv,' said Filch, his mouth dry and his heart thudding. 'But she'll have a hard time getting down there now, even with an invisibility spell.'

Malfoy's eyes glittered in the moonlight. 'If my son is half the wizard I was at his age, he'll find a way to lure her there. I can just *imagine* how Potter and Weasley will react when they realise their dear little Hermione's missing! The disarray will be most helpful for my Lord.'

'And—and my job, guv?'

'When the time comes, and it will soon,' Lucius smiled, 'simply make sure the way is clear for my son.'



'Miss Granger, it's very late. I should escort you back to Gryffindor Tower,' Snape said, in a tone brooking no argument.

Hermione looked up, startled. In the past hour, she'd become so absorbed in her treatise on the most efficacious uses of bodily fluids in a wide variety of potions that she'd somehow forgotten she was supposed to be observing 'Project Aleister.'

'I'd like to stay a while longer,' she said, without much hope. 'I'm close to an idea for improving my Cruciatus remedy.'

'Have you made any further progress on it since the weekend?'

'A bit. I've determined that the Dragon's Tears I syn-



thesised were pure, so the problem must lie in the—er—human elements. I'll have to keep experimenting.'

'Which human elements have you used so far?' said Hawking. She had risen to her feet, arms crossed, teal-blue shawl wrapped tightly around her. Moving out from behind the parchment-strewn table, she ambled toward Snape and Hermione.

The young woman drew herself up, holding the parchment she'd been reading against her chest. 'Saliva and blood—my own, of course,' she said without expression.

'Beautiful colour,' said Hawking, peering into Hermione's cauldron. 'How effective was your last test? You *have* tested it, of course?'

Hermione shot an appealing look at Snape, who raised an eyebrow. No help there, obviously. 'About eighty percent of the Cruciatus effects were neutralised,' she said, doing her best to match Hawking's insouciance.

'Oh, dear. You have some way to go then,' said Hawking.

'I'm doing my best,' said Hermione, flushing crimson and hating herself for it.

'Anyone using Miss Granger's remedy would be able to repel the worst of a Cruciatus attack. I speak from recent experience,' said Snape.

He's defending me against her! Hermione's heart leapt.

'In battle, with multiple Unforgivable Curses and other life-threatening spells coming at you by the dozens, with people panicking all around you, why would you want to entrust your life to any remedy



that's less than one hundred percent effective?' Hawking said remorselessly.

Hermione could say nothing to that. Though she'd defended herself before against Death Eaters and other horrors, her only experience of battle on a large scale was filtered through her recent visions of the dead and dying, of white dust blowing through black robes under a crimson sky. She took a deep, almost gasping breath and concentrated hard on unclenching her right fist. Snape, her vaunted defender, said not a word.

'Look, Miss Granger,' said Hawking, in a friendlier tone, 'For what it's worth, I think you're on the right track by focusing on bodily fluids. But if I were working on this project, I'd want to use a bit more imagination. Blood, spit, and even sweat are a bit obvious. Consider alternatives. Don't be afraid to experiment. Don't be afraid to try, well, something unusual.'

'You said the most effective weapons rely on common, ordinary ingredients,' Hermione said through her teeth.

'Terrorist weapons, yes. But terrorists have no imagination.'

'I think,' said Snape quickly, 'that it's time for me to take Miss Granger to her dorm.'

Hawking had turned away from Hermione and the cauldron and was walking back to the table-full of Carborundorum parchments. Her head drooped as if she were exhausted. 'Of course, Professor Snape. But could you please collect Professor Lupin on the way back?'

'Will he be needed tonight?' asked Snape.

'If the Order insist on having an observer here at all times, then yes, he'll be needed,' Hawking said. She sat back down, her face haggard and her eyes half-closed.

'Wouldn't it be wisest to stop working for a few hours?' Snape said. The question was neutral, but Hermione heard the edge of sharp concern in his voice and looked at him, eyes narrowed.

Hawking shook her head. 'I want to get well into the fifth sequence before dawn.'

Snape opened his mouth as if to argue, then closed his mouth again. 'I'll be back with Professor Lupin before long. Don't do anything until we return. If you wish to take some—er—restorative I've prepared, it's in the tall blue glass.'

As Snape ushered Hermione out of the lab, the young woman felt a strange rush of sadness and longing—feelings not her own. Then without warning came a charge of sexual desire. The force of it made her stagger.

As quickly as they had come, the unwanted emotions vanished.

'Are you all right, Miss Granger?' Snape's voice seemed to come from a great distance.

'I'm fine,' Hermione managed to reply. 'Just fine.'



The drawing room in Malfoy Mansion was designed with no other purpose than to intimate visitors. On a Persian rug ('A flying carpet, of course... but a tame one,' Malfoy liked to joke), several high-backed, elaborately carved chairs sat



stiffly in a rough semi-circle before a stone fireplace that looked large enough to receive a small army. Hanging just above the fireplace, an oversized mask shaped like a stylised skull was engraved with the Malfoy family motto (“EN SANG PUR, NOUS VAINCRONS”). Stuffed with rare parchments, a high bookshelf stood opposite the fireplace, with a sideboard closer to the door. Large tapestries showing festive-looking vignettes decorated the other two walls. On closer inspection, the tapestries revealed scenes of torture and sexual depravity; in some, the crudely embroidered people moved, grimaced, and writhed. The polished oak floor was bare except for the rug, and firelight threw fantastic shadows against the dim, vaulted ceiling.

One might have expected the master of the mansion to be in his element here. Instead, Lucius Malfoy paced before the fireplace, scarlet-lined black cloak unfurling behind him each time he turned. From time to time he stopped, stared at the fireplace, and ran one hand through his silver-blond hair.

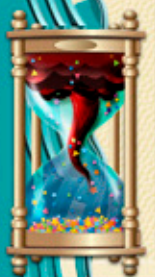
A faint knock came from the heavy oaken door, which then creaked open a couple of inches. Malfoy whirled to face it.

‘Who’s there?’

‘Your wife, Lucius.’ A ringed, manicured hand touched the doorjamb. ‘Are you coming to bed sometime this century?’

Malfoy covered the distance to his spouse in three long paces, tore her hand away from the door, and shoved her hard. ‘Get out!’ he hissed.

the centre cannot hold



Narcissa cried out as she fell against the opposite wall. ‘What—? Lucius!’

‘Just—get—out!’ Lucius slammed the heavy door and bolted it. Turning back toward the fireplace, he felt his breath hitch and his heartbeat stumble as a figure emerged from the now green-tinged flames. Almost immediately he let out a soft curse, half in relief and half in disgust.

‘You.’

Voldemort’s servant, his small watery eyes blinking rapidly, looked around the room, pushed his hood back, and scratched his patchy scalp.

‘All is ready for my Lord, as you can see.’ Malfoy sketched a little bow.

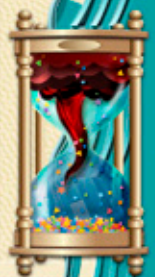
Wormtail narrowed his eyes as if sensing Malfoy might be mocking him, but gave a pompous nod. ‘Then I’ll signal him.’ He raised his right hand, which gleamed silver in the firelight, and cast powder into the fire. A column of crimson flame roared up the chimney. A few moments later, the fire glowed green, burning so brightly that Malfoy had to narrow his eyes against the glare. When his vision cleared, a tall, thin, black-cloaked figure stood motionless before the fire. Malfoy bowed deeply, then approached the figure, knelt, and kissed the hem of its robe.

‘My Lord, welcome,’ he said, still kneeling.

‘No ceremony please, Lucius.’ Behind the hood, a strong young voice rang through the room. ‘This is an informal visit.’

Startled by the voice, Malfoy pushed himself a bit clumsily to his feet. Behind the hood came merry

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laughter. Long-fingered hands pushed the hood back, and Malfoy gasped at the sight of the young, handsomely carved face crowned with jet-black hair. This Dark Lord could have walked the streets of London or even Hogsmeade and not created a ripple of consternation.

Unless, of course, he happened to look at a passerby. All of the transfiguration abilities the former Tom Marvolo Riddle had mastered over the decades could not humanise that flat, crimson gaze or the slit-like vertical pupils. Malfoy found himself able to meet his master's eyes for only a few seconds before he had to look away. The contrast between those eyes and the smooth, handsome young face was more hideous than even he could easily stomach.

As if sensing Malfoy's shock, Voldemort chuckled, then threw his head back and took a deep breath.

'So refreshing to have a proper body, even if only for an hour or two. I intend to enjoy it. Do you have any Glenfiddich?'

'Of course, my Lord.' Malfoy hastened to the sideboard. By the time he had poured two whiskies, his guest had settled himself in one of the high-backed chairs and Wormtail had withdrawn to a corner of the room, crouching rat-like in the shadows. Malfoy handed a glass to Voldemort and seated himself so that he could avoid having to look directly into those crimson eyes.

The pale, black-haired young man took a swallow and sighed with satisfaction. 'Ahh. Two old warriors discussing strategy over a drink or two. How

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delightful.' He reached over and patted his host's knee. Malfoy, pressing his lips together, forced himself not to flinch.

'Two, my Lord? I thought—'

'Yes, yes, I still intend to call for Snape this evening. But not until you've summarised for me the state of affairs at Hogwarts. And certainly not—' Voldemort ran one thin, long finger around the rim of his glass so that it sang eerily— 'until I've finished this excellent whisky.'



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

category: Analytical (devolving, as usual, into Personal)

Back when I was at Cambridge in the dear old DAMPT, contentedly immersed in research into quantum fluids, one of my fellow students kept a favourite poem tacked up in the lab. I've never been much of a poetry fan, but I remember these lines; they haunted me back then and they haunt me now: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' Dave used to joke that the poet (whoever he was) had foreseen chaos theory. But I think that poet speaks for me.

I'm falling apart. My centre cannot hold. I felt this when Snape turned his back earlier today and refused to respect the truth I told him. And he

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thought his Legilimency attack hurt me? But being near my younger self is much worse. I feel my very substance trying to spiral into her, as if she's a quantum singularity and I'm cosmic dust. I don't know if I can avoid her entirely, but something in me understands that if I touch her, physically touch her, I may lose myself, I may dissolve, I may destabilise before my time. When she finally left this evening, I felt shattered. Snape's Equilibrium Elixir helps for now, but I know my destabilisation will soon reach a point where that remedy will no longer make a difference.

Yet my younger self and I share an unbreakable bond. And I have to admit—part of me is relishing this impossible meeting of two minds, different versions. In the end I must fall back and she must go on, but I wonder if some aspect of my present self, or at least some of my experience and knowledge, might survive in her.

I should be recording formal notes about preparing the fifth sequence, but I can't think straight enough to do that. All I can do is keep vigil as I wait for Severus to return. Lupin insisted on staying too, for a while, but finally I persuaded him to leave. Now I'm trying to keep my fear for Severus's safety and sanity under control.

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So I measure out the long hours in lines of ink.

It was earlier this evening when I began to wonder whether Snape was indeed prepared to condemn me without a hearing. Just as he was leaving the lab with—Hermione, and I was slumped at the table feeling like raw death, he looked back at me, and I looked at him, and I felt such a powerful surge of regret and desire that for a moment I couldn't breathe. And I think he felt it too.

When Snape returned to the lab, I'd drunk the elixir and rebounded. He was alone, and when I asked him about Lupin, he said it would be a while yet, perhaps half an hour or so, before Lupin could come, and so, he said, in the meantime he thought he should tidy his store. Perhaps Snape was hinting that he wanted to be left alone, but I found myself trailing after him like a nervous third-year. After a minute or two of tense silence, I took my vestiges of Gryffindor courage into both hands.

'Professor Snape.'

'Yes, Doctor Hawking?' From his tone, I understood the veneer of irony was far from thin.

'I need to say something to you, and I would rather address your face, not your back.'

Slowly he turned, black hair falling limply across his

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left cheekbone, black eyes shadowed. He looked every inch the greasy Potions Master who'd terrorised me in my schooldays and nothing at all like the lover who'd pinned me against a door in the Hotel Elysian. Oh, but the instant I thought of that lover, I felt another treacherous surge of desire. This time I sensed—no, I **KNEW**—that my yearning arched instantly across the room the moment our eyes met. I thought he might move toward me, but instead he looked down, and the arch between us broke.

The terror of the dungeons: unable to meet my gaze. At that moment I found the rest of my courage.

'There's something—one more thing—you don't yet know. Something about you,' I said.

Snape looked at me again, his expression unfathomable.

'Did I die in your version of the future?' he said. Speechless, I nodded.

'Fighting Voldemort?'

I nodded again and tried to speak. 'You saved Harry Potter's life,' I finally managed.

Snape threw his head back and gave a bark of incredulous laughter. 'Merlin's balls.'

'The truth is this,' I said. 'In my seventh year, I'd just begun to appreciate what you were able to offer me, and you'd just begun to treat me with something

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approaching respect. And then you died. For years I wondered what might have happened if you hadn't. Might we have worked together? Might we have—' I faltered at Snape's incredulous expression, and then ploughed on 'The point is, not a year, not a week—in fact hardly a day—has gone by when I haven't thought of you and... about the might-have-beens.'

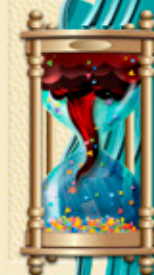
'I have never even imagined encouraging contact with any students after they leave. I'm only too pleased to see the back end of them. You've been harbouring a romantic fantasy.'

I realised all of Snape's defences were up at that point, but his patronising, alpha-male superiority triggered my fury. How dare he treat me like a guilty, apologetic schoolgirl? So I did something that, in retrospect, I think was ill considered. In fact I wonder if it was downright foolish.

I decided Snape was my prey, and I was the huntress. It was time to unleash the hounds.

I gathered all my magic, all my energy, and channelled everything into my glamour, which up to this point I'd been maintaining only at a low level—enough to avoid detection. I moved toward Snape, not letting my gaze falter, not even daring to blink. I let my shawl drop and then released the full force of my spell: a shimmering sexuality far more potent

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than in the Café Faust, when I'd first uncoiled from the corner table and made Snape stumble over his words at our introduction.

And I wasn't finished with him yet.

'I don't know if I can explain,' I said softly, 'exactly why I want you. Perhaps it was because I've been thinking about you for years. Maybe it was the shock of seeing you alive again after so long. Maybe both. I don't know. But I do know this: I want you to look at me and tell me you didn't want me two nights ago, and then tell me—tell me—you don't desire me now.'

Every particle of my being was focused on projecting an aura so compelling that no heterosexual male alive and breathing, wizard or no, would have been able to resist me for long. Even old Dumbledore (perish the thought!) might have felt the force of it. Severus Snape, whom I'd so recently subjected to pleasures I guessed he hadn't experienced in a long time, didn't stand a chance.

I was two feet away from him now and closing. 'Tell me!'

Severus shook his head very slowly, in denial, astonishment, resignation—I'm not sure. His eyes were burning and his hands were reaching for me. His mouth opened.

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'I did,' he whispered. 'And I do.'

I took one more step. His fingers curled around my shoulders and slid down toward my elbows. I closed my eyes.

'No! No!'

My eyes flew open as he wrenched himself away from me and staggered against the wall, his right hand clutching his left forearm. For a few seconds I just stood there, shocked and stunned, my glamour collapsing around me. And then I realised what was happening.

Just as he'd foreseen, Snape was being summoned by the Dark Lord.



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A **S YOU CAN IMAGINE,**' said the pale, handsome young man lounging in one of Lucius Malfoy's high-backed chairs, 'I'm most interested to hear from you about Hogwarts' visiting researcher. I understand Dumbledore assigned you to check her credentials.' He leaned forward, lips drawing back from his white, even teeth. 'Tell me, Severus: *who is she?*'

Now no longer the sole target of Voldemort's regard, Malfoy couldn't help briefly admiring the courage of his brother-in-darkness. Snape withstood that flat crimson gaze far longer than he had, though he must have found the sight of those reptilian eyes framed by uncannily perfect human features just as disturbing. The Death Eater's chief spy sat straight, the glass of whisky that Voldemort had personally poured for him untouched in his right hand. Malfoy couldn't read past Snape's calm expression.

'What little I know about her should not cause you to change your plans, my Lord,' Snape said after a moment.

'I'm sure I don't have to remind you,' said the creature resembling Tom Marvolo Riddle after a brief

silence, 'that anything you don't tell me I shall find out, and I'm sure I don't have to remind you how unpleasant *that* experience can be.' The young lips smiled. 'I'm sorry to have to bring that up, but such are the necessities of our struggle against impurity.'

'I understand, of course, my Lord.' In the minutes following, pieces of a profile emerged: an expatriate researcher, dogged if not brilliant and now past her most productive years, and in the right place at the right time to have received stolen information about Death-by-Fire.

'But why is she at Hogwarts *now*, so far from—wherever it is? It can be no coincidence.'

'When I performed Legilimency, my Lord, I found she'd been recently bereaved; the grief was fresh. I detected a very close relationship between her loss and her possession of the Death-by-Fire spells. I believe her husband or lover may have been the one who stole them. He obviously paid for that with his life. She sees you as the cause of her loved one's death. Her motives for being here are simple: to stop you and avenge herself.'

Voldemort's eyes flared in the firelight and his mouth curved in a cold smile. 'And *can* she stop me? How capable is she?'

'The Ministry have allowed her to stay at Hogwarts and try to reconstruct the spells. They have asked me to assist her. However, I'm not sure how much help I can render, especially when my co-researcher cannot match her strong motive with an equally strong magical ability.'

'And Dumbledore's ridiculous Order? Are they prepared to help this researcher?'

'None of them trust her enough to do anything but keep an eye on her, my Lord.'

'That's encouraging,' said Voldemort. 'But again, I ask: do you believe she is capable of reconstructing the spells for Death-by-Fire within, say, the next five days?'

'No, my Lord. I don't believe she can possibly do that. It's doubtful anyone could.'

'Not even with your help.'

'No, my Lord. By allowing her to try, Dumbledore is grasping at straws. I'm convinced he knows nothing can ultimately prevent you from attacking Hogwarts.'

Voldemort let out a hissing breath. 'But though the field might be clear for burning his little army to cinders, of course Dumbledore will pour all his energies into protecting Potter. He doesn't care about any of the rest. Only Potter.'

Malfoy leaned forward. 'May I, my Lord?' Voldemort nodded, leaning back in his chair as if suddenly weary. 'Old friend, I'm curious. How is it you were able to get close enough to perform Legilimency on—what's her name again?'

'Gwen Hawking.'

Malfoy's lip curled. 'No pureblood connection there. How unsurprising. At any rate, did you attack her? What was your method? My Lord—' with an apologetic glance at the young man—'I ask this only to verify the reliability of Severus's information.' The thing resembling Tom Marvolo Riddle waved a languid hand.

For the first time since he had Apparated into

the middle of a sudden Wiltshire squall and been escorted by one of Malfoy's house-elves to this sordidly depressing travesty of a gentleman's drawing room, Snape allowed himself to smile. He leaned back in his chair and raised his still-untouched glass of whisky, letting firelight glow through the amber liquid. 'Why, Lucius,' he drawled. 'I'm surprised you have to ask. It's true that I haven't practiced for some years now, but I've forgotten none of my skills.'

Malfoy raised his aristocratic brows. 'Really? From what you've said, Dumbledore effectively gave you *carte blanche* to—er—penetrate her secrets. How much real skill would that involve? The assignment must have been rather boring for you.'

Snape gave Malfoy a level look. 'She was distrustful at first. Her defences presented a small challenge. But she's plain and quite obviously needy. In the end, all I had to do was get her drunk. The rest was—yes, perhaps a little boring. Like taking a toy wand from a toddler.'

'Did she give you her mind just as willingly?'

'She was quite unable to resist me.'

'And there we have it,' said Voldemort. Malfoy looked at him and tried not to recoil. The Dark Lord's young handsome façade was visibly crumbling. Patches of dead-white, reptilian skin were eating through the healthy flesh, and the hands were growing paler, thin fingers extending like spiders' legs. 'Drink your whisky now, Severus, and then feel free to leave.'

Malfoy felt a faint twinge of satisfaction as Snape's smug smile fled and the whisky glass trembled slightly.

Yet his voice was steady. 'Thank you, but not tonight, my Lord. Perhaps I might earn the privilege of a drink with you when we celebrate our victory.'

He moved as if to put the glass down on the low table beside him.

Voldemort raised one decaying hand. 'Severus, I'll assume you did not hear me. I said—drink your whisky. *Now.*' His voice took on a harsh sibilance.

Snape froze. The whisky in the glass glowed like golden fire. For a moment Malfoy entertained the crazed notion that his old ally might actually dash the liquid onto the floor or into the fire. In either case, he would likely earn instant dismemberment or instant death.

Then Snape nodded coolly. 'Of course, my Lord.'

He raised the glass to his lips and tossed the liquid down.

Malfoy took a deep breath and leaned back again. He knew from long experience that for the next little while, it would be best to stay out of the Dark Lord's line of sight.



Pansy Parkinson was in a foul mood. It wasn't because creepy old Filch had spent the late evening patrolling the area outside the Slytherin common room. If he wanted to speak to Draco, and Draco wasn't there, Filch could bloody well wait until doomsday for all she cared. It wasn't even because the new alert status had filled the dungeons with patrolling Aurors (all right, all right—*two* patrol-

ling Aurors). What bothered her more than anything was the fact that the Aurors were male, rather young, and not at all bad-looking... and when she'd gone up to them, smiled, and tried to chat them up a bit, they'd looked through her—looked *right* through her—as if she weren't there. Arseholes.

She was roused from her sulk by movement and voices at the common room entrance. Draco had finally returned, which was about bloody time, but he'd brought fucking Filch in with him. The caretaker did make occasional sycophantic visits to the common room because he was in charge of the dungeons and sometimes he had to inspect things. Though none of the other students scattered around the green-lit common room looked all that surprised to see him, Pansy had a feeling there was more to this particular visit than checking pipes for leaks. She pushed herself up from her favourite deep chair near the fireplace (any other students stupid or daring enough to sit there found their backsides hexed with boils) and joined Draco and Filch, who of course had brought his disgusting cat with him. Pansy sneezed and glared at Filch, who smirked back.

A moment later, Crabbe and Goyle showed up. "Silent and deadly," those two liked to call themselves. More like dumbstruck and deadly stupid, in Pansy's opinion. She couldn't understand why Draco put up with them, except that they were large and could be counted on as convenient windbreaks.

'Prefects' meeting!' Draco announced. The six or seven students scattered around the common room

looked up. 'That means get the hell out of here. Now!' His tone encouraged no one to question the oddity of a prefects' meeting that included two non-prefects and the school caretaker and took over an entire student space. The students just got out. Fast. That was how things worked in the kingdom of the Slytherin common room.

'Right.' Draco plopped himself down in one of the puffy chairs. Pansy casually sat herself in another chair close beside him. After an uneasy moment, Crabbe and Goyle lowered their bulks to the carpeted floor. Filch remained standing several feet away, cradling the cat.

'My father needs my help,' said Draco, stretching his legs out, 'and I've told him I'd like to let you lot in on it too. Might be fun.'

'Oh yeah? Fun?' said Pansy.

'You *could* sound a bit more enthusiastic, you cow,' Draco snapped.

'Fuck you,' Pansy muttered.

'Later.' Draco shot her a feral grin. Pansy smothered a giggle. Filch cleared his throat, and Draco looked up at him absently, as if he'd forgotten the caretaker were there.

'Anyway, what I need to do involves that chamber we found last night.'

'Oh shit. Don't tell me we have to go back *there*,' said Pansy.

'Are you with me or not?' Draco drew his wand out and casually swung it from his fingertips.

'All right, all right. I'm listening,' said Pansy.

'Mr. Filch and I think the Mudblood followed us down the passage last night. We think she's gagging for a chance to go back down there and play the heroic Head Girl. But she won't break school rules again, we're guessing, and she won't go down there again with just anybody. My father—and someone even higher up than he is—want us to make sure she can't resist paying the Eleven another visit.'

'Hate to break the news,' said Pansy, 'but the dungeons are crawling with Aurors putting up new wards.'

'I believe I can assist with that little problem,' said Filch quietly.

'You'll like this, Pansy,' said Draco, leaning toward her, his tone now soft and intimate. He reached over to her and opened her hand with his. Pansy sighed, her expression smug, as he ran his fingers over her palm. Crabbe and Goyle stared avidly. Filch studied the ceiling with great interest.

'You get to play a lead role,' Draco murmured, 'doing your favourite little trick.'

Pansy met Draco's hard grey gaze. 'And what trick would that be?'

'You know perfectly well.'

'Polyjuice,' said Pansy flatly.

'You've become so deft, so fucking talented, in so many ways,' said Draco softly. 'Remember what I told you when we snuck out in the full moon to pick fluxweed?'

'Oh, yeah.' Pansy gave a short laugh.

'And you promised,' said Draco, 'that you'd stew a good supply of lacewing flies as well.'

'Hmmm.'

'Well? Have you?'

'Of course I have!'

'Could you put together what I need in, say, four or five days?'

'Yes, as it happens. Several doses' worth if you want.'

Draco grinned back. 'Just make sure it's ready by Monday night. Leave the rest up to me and Filch.'

'Er...' Pansy pulled away from Draco's hand. 'Look. I have no time for Miss Mudblood, but if you're planning to hurt her or—whatever, then the Order will be down on our necks in no time. And that kind of trouble I don't need.'

Draco threw his head back and laughed. 'Oh, you're such a tender flower, Pansy. No, she's not going to be hurt. Just scared out of her fucking mind, that's all. Are you all right with that?'

Pansy stared at him for a moment longer, her eyes narrowed, before she gave him a fierce grin. 'Yeah, I'm all right with that.'

'Anything else?' Draco shot at Filch, who smiled and stroked Mrs. Norris.

'No, guv, I don't think so.'

'Then I'm sure you have other things to do right now, Mr. Filch. But,' to Crabbe and Goyle, who lost no time heaving themselves to their feet, 'You two can be good mates and stand guard outside the common room for—hmmm—about twenty minutes.' Pansy looked at Draco and grinned.

Crabbe sighed. He *hated* guarding that damn door.



'Now,' said Voldemort softly, his crumbling face very close to that of his chief spy. Snape heard the voice as if from a great distance. His entire world, his universe, had shrunk down to two great glaring eyes of flame. A small, calm part of his mind still capable of logic told him that whatever had been added to the whisky was stripping away his abilities as an Occlumens. Well, let it. Why not? At least it was better than Crucio.

'Now,' said Voldemort again. 'Please understand. It's not that I don't trust you, Severus. In fact, I trust you more than almost any of the rest. You laboured as my faithful servant when most of your brothers-in-darkness had lost faith in me, though some—' he shot a look at Malfoy —'have redeemed themselves. But I must be sure what you say about Gwen Hawking is true. How might I determine the truth? You're much too clever to be tricked by anything so crude as Veritaserum; I'm sure you've dosed yourself against that and all manner of poisons both standard and exotic. An admirable precaution. I'd do exactly the same thing in your place.

'You, Severus, are a first-class Occlumens. I have no doubt that ordinarily you could, without much effort, block my modest attempts to extract your thoughts. So I'm rather proud that my latest potion seems to have so effectively robbed you of the will to resist. Same principle as Imperio, but much more subtle.'

The small, clear-headed part of Snape that could still think wished the Dark Lord would stop talking and just get on with it. But as he sensed Voldemort

peeling away the top layers of his mind gently, teasingly, almost flirtatiously, he was overwhelmed with images he'd thought long forgotten: dim, guttering lamplight in dark rooms, the sight of bodies undulating, the sounds of drunken laughter and terrified sobs, and the memory of his own profound disgust at the violation of innocents.

'Now. Think about Gwen Hawking. Recall everything she knows about Death-by-Fire.'

Fire. One last bastion of his clear, inviolate mind tried to muster a defence. Snape clung to an image of fire as life giving, not death-dealing. He imagined holding fire in his hands, imagined it burning down to a warm, steady glow: the glow of candlelight in the Café Faust, the play of lamplight on her elegant face, the cool sheen of electric light in her eyes just before he'd bent her back against the stone railing on the Embankment and lost himself in kissing her, the dim intimacy of her hotel room and the feel of her hot wetness against his aching flesh, his yearning, his anger, his regret, her sadness, her need.

'Oh, *ho*,' he dimly heard Voldemort say. 'It seems he was lying after all about this woman.'

'In what way, my Lord?' Malfoy's voice seemed to come from the ends of the earth.

'It seems he's fallen in love with her. Such *very* strong emotions. Quite unsettling.'

'Fallen in—? *Severus*? With respect, my Lord—are you sure?'

'He yearns for her.'

'What does this mean? Can we use this?'

'I have demonstrated,' said Voldemort in an almost musing tone, 'a small ability to impart emotions to certain people with whom I have a connection. And I've known Severus for a long time now.' He rested one spidery hand on Snape's head. His voice, still soft, filled the air with power. 'Severus, you must do everything in your power to gain this woman's trust and make her completely vulnerable to you. She wants you to love her. She needs you. She needs you even more than you need her. She needs you to *control* her. Do you understand?'

'Yes, my Lord.' Snape's voice was thready. After a moment, Voldemort took his hand away. Snape closed his eyes and his head lolled against the chair back.

'In a few minutes he'll awaken. He won't be able to stop thinking about her. He'll need to go to her. Let him.' said Voldemort. He straightened and looked sharply into the corner where his servant lurked. 'Wormtail!' The pudgy little man scrambled to his feet and darted to his master's side. Malfoy stood up. 'If,' Voldemort continued, covering his crumbling face with his hood, 'this woman's as needy as he says, she won't be able to resist him.'

'Yes, my Lord, but—I don't quite understand. That is, of course purebloods have a perfect right to use Mudbloods as we see fit. That's part of our just revenge on the breed. But *love*? Surely a pureblood would be soiled.'

'Ah, but Lucius, this isn't about *love*, whatever that is. It's about *control*. When women fall in love, they consent—for all intents and purposes—to domination.' Deep within the hood, crimson eyes blazed.

'I've cleared the way for Severus to control Gwen Hawking completely. And then I think it's only polite that he introduce her to me. At which point, he'll have persuaded her to share her knowledge with me, and thus prove his loyalty and value. Or he won't, and he'll die, and I'll take her knowledge nonetheless. And then I'll throw what's left of her to the Dementors. She's only a Muddblood, as you point out. Either way—' he pulled his lipless mouth back from pointed teeth '—I'll look forward to picking her brains.'



The last-quarter moon was smeared with thin cloud and gave little light, but Dumbledore could see every bush and blade of grass as clearly as if it were noon. Standing in deep shadow by one of the pillars of Hogwarts' main entrance, the headmaster had long ago dismissed the patrolling Aurors and had waited patiently for more than two hours now, keeping the vigil he always kept when he knew Snape had been summoned by the Dark Lord.

Snape sometimes returned through the main entrance, but usually preferred the more discreet, unremarkable service door some yards away. From his vantage point, Dumbledore could see that entrance clearly as well. At length his patience was rewarded: he sensed the wards obeying an authorised command; the battered old wooden door opened; and Snape stepped through into the school grounds. He looked as fleet and alert as if he'd had eight hours of restful sleep. Too alert, Dumbledore

thought right away. He narrowed his eyes, sensing something not quite right.

'Severus.' Reaching for his wand, Snape whirled to face the elderly wizard, and then relaxed with a faint snort of amusement.

'Headmaster. I should have known you'd be here. As you can see, I'm quite all right.'

'Are you indeed.' Dumbledore looked at Snape carefully, and the younger wizard spread his hands.

'As you see. No Crucio. No pain of any kind. No new Carborundorum tests. In fact, nothing new to report. Now if you'll excuse me, Headmaster, I must go back to my lab immediately.' He set off toward Hogwarts with a long, eager stride. After a surprised pause, Dumbledore caught up with him.

'Nothing new? Severus, I find it hard to believe Voldemort would summon you for a drink and a chat.'

Snape laughed. 'That's exactly what he summoned me for. A drink and a chat about our visiting researcher.'

'Ah,' said Dumbledore.

'No need to worry, Albus. I underplayed her abilities. Of course he used Legilimency to check my story, and I believe I successfully blocked him from seeing the truth—' Snape hesitated for a beat '—about the extent of her knowledge. And I can avow he has *no* idea about her true identity.'

Dumbledore sensed Snape was not lying, yet something about the younger wizard's energy and glibness seemed... off. He felt in his bones that the Dark Lord had wreaked some sort of havoc and mischief tonight.

'Were you and Doctor Hawking planning to work

through the night?’ he asked, changing tactics. Snape gave him a feral grin.

‘You might say that,’ he said and quickened his pace.

‘Do you wish to have an observer present? I’ll gladly volunteer.’

‘Thank you, Albus, but you’ve done enough. You should get some rest. Doctor Hawking and I will probably just debrief. If we decide to start work on the fifth sequence, we’ll call Lupin.’

‘Please encourage Doctor Hawking to sleep for a few hours, not work. And that goes for you, Severus. You will do none of us any good if you collapse from exhaustion. Your ordeal tonight—’

‘—was no ordeal, Albus. How many times do I have to repeat that I’m fine?’ They had reached the kitchen door, Dumbledore hard pressed to keep up with the younger man’s loping pace, and now Snape turned to face his escort, his black eyes hard and dangerous.

‘Good night, Headmaster,’ he said softly, and without giving Dumbledore a chance to answer, unsealed the door-wards, unbolted the door, and vanished into the dim, cavernous room. A startled house-elf peeked out the half-opened door and yelped when she saw Dumbledore standing on the threshold.

The headmaster smiled sadly. ‘It’s all right, Dinky. Go back to bed.’ He closed the door, re-sealed the wards, and stood on the threshold for some minutes looking up at the last-quarter moon, its light now almost smothered by a rack of thickening clouds.



After her bizarre conversation with Hawking, Hermione had not enjoyed being escorted up to Gryffindor Tower by a tense, silent Snape. She’d felt profound embarrassment about her flash of sexual longing when leaving the lab, and more than half suspected she’d felt the back draft of Hawking’s emotions. *And Snape’s too? No. I don’t want to go there.* Under those circumstances, she could think of nothing to say to Snape; she couldn’t even look at him. As if sensing something amiss, or perhaps just anxious because of the alert, even the garrulous Fat Lady let Hermione into the common room without a word.

Not even the presence of Ginny in the common room and the absence of young males did much to soothe Hermione. Ginny raised a half-cocky brow as if to say, ‘Well, we’re getting through this all right, you and me, aren’t we?’ which made her grin. But to Hermione’s surprise it was Parvati who sat her down, produced a mug of camomile tea that rivalled even McGonagall’s for sheer size and comfort, and spent five minutes telling her what a wonderful Head Girl she was: calm, brave, and confidence-inspiring.

‘The lads are brill, really. I know Harry and Ron and Dean—’ Parvati blushed a bit there, and Hermione and Ginny exchanged a mischievous glance ‘—and the rest are more than ready to cut the Dark Lord to pieces, but let’s face it Hermione—you can think rings around them.’

‘You mean—I’m not coming across as a bossy know-it-all?’ said Hermione, half-smiling.

‘Of course you are,’ said Ginny with a straight face.

'But in the best possible way.' Hermione laughed, and the tightness around her heart eased.

'So,' said Parvati, smiling sweetly at Hermione. 'Since we have this place to ourselves for a few precious seconds, tell us all about Professor Snape's—erm—new partner.'

Hermione sighed. She should have known Parvati was being extra-nice just to try and extract some gossip.

'You mean the visiting researcher?' she said, unable to think of anything more brilliant, but Parvati was determined to waste no time.

'Half the school saying Snape's got some old hag stashed away in his lab. You must've met her by now. Come on! Tell us! What's she like? Is she a hag?'

Hermione, half amused and half dismayed, looked at Ginny, who shrugged but also raised her eyebrows, eager for information. No help there.

'Not much to tell,' she said casually. 'She has a background in defence against the dark arts, and she's helping Professor Snape and the—erm—Ministry with some spells and remedies.'

'What does she *look* like?'

'Well—you know, I didn't really spend a lot of time looking at her. A bit taller than me. On the thin side, but not a bag of bones. Snooty. But,' Hermione added reluctantly, 'very smart.'

'How old is she?' said Ginny.

'I dunno. Hard to tell. Some grey in her hair. But not ancient. Probably not much over forty.'

'Hmm,' said Parvati, disappointed. 'She sounds like a swot.'

'Just Snape's type, though, wouldn't you think?' said Ginny.

'Nah. The greasy git's *your* territory, isn't he, Hermione?'

At that point, Hermione had decided there was little to be gained by staying in the common room. There were times—and this was one of them—when she gave profound thanks she was Head Girl and could commandeer the prefects' bathroom more or less whenever she wanted. After soaking in foamy hot water for a second time that day, she'd slid into bed with a parchment detailing the history of and various efforts to control the Unforgivable Curses. She was asleep in minutes.

After some time she awoke, or thought she did, and found herself slumped at a large parchment-covered desk. After a moment, she recognised it as Snape's desk, and looking around, saw she was in Snape's office. She could see the lab through the open door. What in the name of Merlin's demons was she doing *here*? Had she walked in her sleep? Heart hammering, Hermione stood up and immediately realised that something felt wrong. She looked down at herself and drew in a horrified, wondering breath. The two hands planted on the desk looked like those of a much older person. The body beneath the grey dress was thinner than it should have been.

'Oh, God,' she breathed. She clutched her bound hair, pulling frantically until she collected herself enough to mutter a spell that loosened the knot. The hair that cascaded around her shoulders was shot with silver. 'Shit, oh shit, oh shit.'

Calm down, Granger. You're dreaming. Get a grip. You'll wake up any minute now.

But how could it be a dream? She ran alien hands up and down an alien torso, and everything felt all too real and solid. She stood still for a minute, concentrating on just breathing, until slowly, slowly her natural common sense asserted itself and her roiling brain calmed enough to grope toward some form of reasoned thought. Could this be some new, powerful form of Legilimency? Maybe the visitor was experimenting with much more than the Carborundorum Curse sequences. That must be it. But if so, why had this Legilimency, or whatever it was, force-fed the consciousness of Hermione Granger into the body of Gwen Hawking? Why not the other way around?

Now *that* was an unfortunate thought. For Hermione realised right away that if she now seemed to have custody of Hawking's body, Hawking must have custody of hers. Ugh. She swallowed back a wave of nausea.

And worse—to have done this *without her permission*. Without so much as a warning, even a single word. What kind of monster would experiment on the unwilling?

The door leading into the potions classroom banged open. Hermione whirled, half-stifling a shriek, as Severus Snape charged into the office, hair flying and cloak askew. His eyes fastened on her, burned into her, and in three strides he reached her and caught her arm.

'We need to talk. *Now!*' Without giving her time to reply or even react, Snape propelled her into the lab. When she stumbled, he supported her. Then,

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with a kind of detached astonishment, she saw he was unlocking the wards to the door of his private rooms—the rooms she'd envisioned a dozen times, in a dozen different ways, since her erotic dream back in September.

The last thing she expected was that she'd recognise the spacious but unexceptional living room with its large fireplace, low table, and comfortable looking chairs. This was much more than the *déjà-vu* that occasionally affected all humans, magical or Muggle. She'd been here before.

Correction. Hawking had clearly been here before. Under what circumstances, Hermione didn't want to know. But she suspected she was about to find out. One moment she experienced something that a calmer part of her mind found ironically amusing: intense, bitter jealousy of a woman whose body she now mysteriously inhabited. The next moment, she realised she was terrified. For Snape was looking at her with an intensity and heat she had never imagined even in her most fevered dreams, and certainly never experienced. Whether she liked it or not, whether she was about to take part in a conversation or something even more intimate, the consciousness and memories calling itself 'Hermione' now had a ring-side seat.

Snape gestured her to a chair, and she managed to gather herself together enough to sit down. He waved his wand at the fire, which sprang into life, and then instead of sitting down, he stood, arms folded, cloak slipping from his shoulders, his face half-hidden by

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straggling hair. His hands gripped his own elbows so tightly that the knuckles turned white.

'Earlier, you bludgeoned me into admitting that I still want you.' His voice was ragged. 'You can put the bludgeons away now, but be warned. If *you* don't want *me*, or if you were simply testing me for some obscure purpose, then leave. Now. If you stay, you'll reap what you've sown, I promise you.'

With no idea whatsoever how to respond to this astonishing speech, Hermione opened her mouth. At that moment, something else took command.

'I wasn't testing you. I needed to know the truth.'

The voice coming from her mouth was low, controlled, and powerful, though the words made no sense to her at all.

'And?'

Hermione felt the room fade, and her world dissolved for a moment into chaos. For a moment, it seemed she was curled up in her Head Girl's bed, a parchment crumpled under her cheek. Instead of welcoming the return to her own body and sinking into sleep, she fought to return to Gwen Hawking and Snape: to witness and experience the unthinkably desirable.

But Hawking now had gained the ascendancy. All Hermione could do was watch through the older woman's eyes, unable to do or change anything: a silent, trapped passenger in a train speeding out of control.



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HAWKING CROSSED her elegant legs and stared back at Snape. 'How much does Voldemort know about me?' she shot back.

Snape took two slow steps toward her, his eyes never leaving her face. 'Not enough about you or the knowledge you've shared to change his plans or to jeopardise ours,' he said quietly. 'But to protect that truth, I had to appease him with another.'

'What do you mean?'

'He knows about—what happened between us. About the Hotel Elysian two nights ago.' From the dreamlike vantage point of Hawking's eyes and body, Hermione felt jealousy drenching her. If she'd been able, she would have hurled something across the room.

'Bloody hell.' Hawking let out a hissing breath. 'Then he must know what we're planning to do with Carborundum. I showed you everything that night.'

'I swear he did *not* see that information.' Snape took another slow step toward her. 'I showed him only... other things.'

'Only?' Hawking took a deep breath, visibly calming herself. 'Right. Well, if he knows we've been lovers, where does that leave all your talk last night

about the dangers of a relationship between us?’

‘I was under attack,’ said Snape between clenched teeth, ‘and I had to give him something. Tell me—what would you have done?’ In an eerie reversal of the scene between them a few hours ago, Snape continued to close in on Hawking, who gripped the edges of her chair and stared up at him for a long time.

‘I would have done,’ she finally managed, ‘exactly what you did.’

‘Are you choosing to stay?’ His voice was low and strained.

‘I choose to finish what I’ve started,’ Hawking said softly, not moving from her chair.

Speechless, Snape touched Hawking’s face and ran a slow, careful finger along her jaw line. Deep within her cage of alien flesh, dreaming and not dreaming, the consciousness that was Hermione Granger shivered in trepidation and delight as that finger traced a warm line along her neck and moved down to the loose, cowl-like collar of her dress. At that moment, she realised that the woman calling herself Gwen Hawking had become aware—at least on some level—of Hermione’s chaotic presence. But Hermione couldn’t penetrate that experienced and powerful mind. It was like viewing the world from beneath the surface of water; she could “see” nothing but senseless, shifting forms of darkness and light.

But she could *feel* everything the older woman felt. Hermione gave up trying to understand why or how this was possible as Snape moved behind Hawking’s chair and slid both hands under her collar. The slip

beneath her dress was thin, and as he teased her nipples through the silky fabric they hardened almost immediately. She groaned, arching her back and pushing herself into his hands. As her head fell back, the sight of her half-open mouth was more tempting than he could bear; leaning down over her, he covered her lips with his. When she reached her arms back and wound them around his neck, drawing him down to her, and opened her mouth completely as if to devour him, he withdrew only enough to flick the tip of his tongue lightly against her lips. She gave a small, delighted laugh and reciprocated with tiny touches of her own tongue.

‘I could do this all night,’ she said, when she had a moment to speak.

‘Be quiet.’ He continued to rub one nipple whilst letting the other hand slide farther down. Slowly, he pulled her slip up and curled his fingers underneath the thin cotton knickers. ‘Oh, no,’ she gasped, helplessly spreading her thighs apart as much as she could in that chair. And then Severus’s lips and tongue silenced her.

Hermione couldn’t do a thing to stop what was happening. And why should she? This was far more pleasurable than any fever-dream. She absorbed every one of Hawking’s feelings, relished every exquisite sensation: the lover’s hand cupping her in exactly the right place, her inner thighs slick with arousal, and then fingers beginning to stroke her with a slow, maddening rhythm. Hawking pushed her pelvis up into his hand and let out a loud groan against his lips.

At length, trembling, she mustered the will to free her mouth from his.

'I don't want—to do this here,' Hawking whispered. 'Damn it Severus—take me to your bed.'

'Do you really want me to stop *now*?' he hissed against her neck. Suddenly he pushed two fingers deep into the hot, wet tightness of her and then withdrew. She groaned again as his fingers slid, hard and slow, against her clit. And then he entered her again and withdrew from her again. And again.

'No! You bastard. Oh God. Oh... Oh... !' As she writhed against his hand, he covered her mouth with his, muffling her cries.

Hermione's mind clung desperately to Hawking's body as it arched, convulsed, and then subsided, quietening, slumping back into the chair, gathering in breath as Snape's fingers slowly withdrew. She dimly sensed rather than saw Snape move to face her and stretch his hands out... and at that moment, Hermione felt the reality of Hawking's flesh melting, dissolving. She found herself lying alone on her dishevelled bed, very much back within her own flesh—with that damned parchment cutting into her cheek. Her skin burned with the memory of Snape's touch, and her thighs felt sticky with the aftermath of that shattering, stolen orgasm.

'Oh, no. No. No.' Pushing the parchment away, she buried her hot face in her pillow and let the tears come.



Harry woke with a start. He'd dreamt he'd heard Hermione screaming at him from somewhere in the dark, screaming she was lost and he had to find

her. Almost before he opened his eyes, the Occlumency training Dumbledore had supervised during the past year took over, and his mental defences snapped into place. Harry lay rigid, his eyes wide and his heart pounding. Though Voldemort hadn't attempted to co-opt his thoughts since the hideous year when Sirius had been lost, Harry lived with the constant low-level awareness that one fine day his nemesis might take pleasure in re-establishing that connection. One fine day... when the Dark Lord decided it was time for Harry to die.

But as the long minutes passed, Harry realised he could sense nothing. He raised himself on one elbow and pulled back the bed-curtain. The dorm glowed faintly in the moonlight coming in the window. Behind his own bed-curtains, Ron snored softly. Everything seemed completely normal.

Yet Hermione's voice still echoed in Harry's mind. 'I'm lost... find me! *Find* me!'

'Bloody hell,' Harry muttered, now wide awake. Maybe—could Hermione be in some kind of trouble? *Nah. Just a dream, you git.*

But what if it wasn't just a dream?

Would it hurt to see where she was?

Harry swallowed, got quietly out of bed, and reached down underneath it. He found the Marauder's Map, slid back into bed with the parchment, and unrolled it out on top of the eiderdown. Groping for his wand, he called forth a dim yellow light that barely revealed the Map's whimsically baroque designs as they gradually appeared on the blank

parchment. At first glance, everything appeared as it should—he could see no one moving around at this time of night except the new Auror patrols: two wizards on the grounds just outside the wall, one inside the Great Hall, one up in the Owlery, and two down in the dungeons. Harry smiled grimly, feeling sorry for those two; dungeon-duty couldn't have been their first choice. Or maybe it had been, given the heightened excitement within the Order about the interesting things Hermione and Ginny had seen down there.

There was no sign of Hermione in the dungeons, to Harry's relief. But—did the Map now want to show him the old, disused potions room or the fifth passage? Perhaps reveal where that passage exited? Harry felt a quick jolt of disappointment to see those areas still blank. Where he thought they should have been, the Map displayed only a caricature of an unpleasant-looking wizard with black hair and a thin moustache. No name appeared below the picture, and Harry didn't recognise the face. A quick look through the rest of the mapped dungeon showed nothing much of interest. The Slytherin common room was empty, as were the guest rooms where Doctor Hawking was quartered. Well, she was probably working in the lab with Snape. Except that both the potions classroom and the adjoining rooms were empty. That was strange.

Could they be in Snape's rooms? No way to tell, since the Map showed only a blank space and a hand held out forbiddingly. The words scrolled beneath

the hand said 'Private. Don't even try.' Harry choked back a soft laugh. *That* was new and went some way toward confirming the suspicions he hadn't yet dared to share with Hermione about the possibility that the relationship between Hawking and Snape stretched beyond "professional." Though the notion of Snape with a woman boggled his imagination.

Something else caught his eye, a movement up in the Gryffindor girls' dorms. Harry frowned, risked increasing the light a little, and peered at the area. *There* was Hermione, right where she was supposed to be at this time of night: in her bed. Harry let out a soft snort of annoyed relief. Then he saw something that chilled him. The letters of Hermione's name flickered, fading in and out—the *same way they had for Gwen Hawking last night*. For a moment he even thought he saw faint, ghostlike letters spelling out "Gwen Hawking"—superimposed over Hermione's name. Then 'Hermione Granger' reappeared and solidified.

'Fucking hell!' he whispered. Without thinking, he grabbed the Map and his wand and shot out of bed. He'd made it almost to the door before he stopped himself. *Wait. I can't just go charging into the girls' dorm.* Taking a deep breath, Harry unrolled the Map again and angled himself so the waning moonlight from the window cast a faint, frosty glow on the parchment. The name "Hermione Granger" was now written in firm, solid script. Harry glared at it for several minutes. It stayed firm.

Whatever had happened—if anything had happened—there was nothing he could do about it in

the middle of the night. Harry rolled up the Map, shoved it back into its hiding place and, shivering by now, crawled back under his eiderdown. It took him at least an hour to fall asleep again.



As Hawking lay limply back in the chair, Snape withdrew from her without haste and straightened. Unbearably aroused, he moved around to face her and reached down, ready to yank her onto the floor and fuck her right then and there. And to think, earlier on, she'd assumed she could make *him* bow to her will. *She's weak. She let me control her. She WANTS me to control her.*

Yours to use as you see fit, a fell voice whispered in his mind.

NO! I won't!

Snape's hands clamped against his forehead and he breathed deeply, searching for control. At almost the same time Hawking gasped and sat bolt upright in the chair, her eyes wide. 'I—where—' she said dazedly, and then she went white and closed her eyes. 'Oh,' she said in a trembling voice, and then she dropped her head into her hands. Snape forced himself to turn away from her and let his hands drop slowly, putting all his energy into controlling the darkness growing within him: the old desire to damage and degrade. He was trembling, for he hadn't had those feelings in years, not since his earliest days as a Death Eater. That he had spent so long controlling and renouncing that darkest aspect of

power over others, only to have it rise up again so easily, terrified and enraged him.

It wasn't like this two nights ago. Why now?

He made himself look at Hawking and saw that she had raised her head. Her face was still pale, but her eyes were clear and she looked calmer.

'Are you all right?' he forced himself to say. His voice sounded surprisingly level.

'Yes. Just... dizzy for a moment. I'm fine.' She smiled then, and held out a hand to him. 'More than fine.'

He stared at her.

'Severus, for Merlin's sake, aren't you going to help me up?' He put out a hand. Her warm fingers curled around his palm, and he felt the fey lightness of her as he pulled her to her feet. He intended to let go of her as soon as she was steady. He needed to retreat and find the strength to bludgeon the beast back into its cage. But without giving him time to think or find excuses to distance himself, Hawking, her eyes never leaving his face, reached up to unfasten the cloak still hanging askew from his shoulders. As the cloak slid away from him onto the floor, she began unfastening the buttons of his waistcoat. Snape made a slight move—whether to help her or push her away not even he knew—and she placed one hand flat against his chest as if to quieten him before continuing to undo the buttons.

'Let me,' he heard her say as if from a great distance, although she was so close he could feel her warm breath tickling his neck. The feel of her hand moving, button by button, down his front was

extraordinarily erotic. 'All shall be well,' she whispered, and that strange phrase resonated with him, as if he'd heard it before in another life, another time. As his waistcoat opened, she placed one palm flat against his white shirt, almost as if asking permission, and then slid both her hands around his lean waist, twining her arms around him. He let his chin rest on her wild, silvering hair for a moment before allowing his arms to wrap around her. They stood, melded together, neither of them moving, whilst within him a silent battle raged between the lover of the Hotel Elysian and the demon urging him to dominate her. To control her completely.

At length she gently disengaged one arm and moved her hand slowly down his front; with a small, pleased sound she spread her hand against the bulge of his erection. He drew in a sharp breath. As she raised her face to his, wrapping both arms around him again, he cupped the back of her head with one hand and pulled her hips against his crotch with the other. He opened his mouth against hers. He could feel himself starving, thirsting for her. The beast within him snarled in triumph.

He pressed harder into her, and now he could feel her wanting to pull back a bit, to savour the sensations, to go slowly, but this was no time for artistic invention or niceties. It was time to take her. To control her. He stopped trying to overcome the force that savaged him.

He knelt and pulled her roughly down with him. Now she tried to withdraw in earnest. 'Wait,' she

said, her voice fracturing, 'Wait. We don't have to do this here. Severus!' But he forced her slowly onto her back, his hair hanging down around his face and his eyes gleaming, taunting her, daring her to stop him.

'What are you doing?' she gasped. Suddenly Snape felt her skin writhe beneath him as if he were grasping a handful of snakes. He cursed and pulled back.

'That trick again? Is this your best defence?'

'You don't want to see my best defence.' She tried to pull her legs away.

Snape smiled, said softly, 'Why not? Show me.' He reached for her shoulders and was again repelled.

'What the hell are you playing at, Severus?'

'*Expelliarmus Potens*,' he hissed, and her shield collapsed.

'I taught you that, you fucking bastard!' she yelled. Without stopping to wonder why she didn't immediately muster another defence, he spread himself on top of her, pushed her dress up, and yanked her knickers down past her knees. She turned her face away from his. His breath whistled harshly in her ear as he pulled the front of his trousers open, took one of her hands, and forced it around his rigid cock. He held her hand there for a long moment. When he slowly removed his, hers stayed curled around his hot, aching flesh. Slowly but very firmly her fingers began to tighten, loosen, tighten. He groaned, unable to help himself.

'*Laqueus*,' she murmured.

To his shock, he realised she had rendered him immobile. Her hand trapped him. He could not withdraw from her, even if he wanted to. And if she let go now, he would howl himself into insanity.

'Voldemort attacked your mind tonight, didn't he?' Hawking whispered, her fingers moving remorselessly.

'No. Not true.' Suddenly her fingers stopped moving, and he groaned in protest.

'Did he instruct you to rape me? As if *that* would accomplish anything?'

'No. No,' said Snape, breathing raggedly.

'If it's a question of control, Severus, tell me—who do you think is in control right now?'

He felt her head turn back toward his whilst her fingers resumed their mercilessly precise movements. He gasped, knowing if she didn't stop soon he would spend into her hand. The thought horrified him even more than the realisation that his attempt to control Gwen Hawking had backfired.

'Look at me, Severus.' Unwillingly, he did. Her eyes blazed into his.

'The only way you or Voldemort can control me is to kill me,' she said. 'You can tell your master that next time you see him.'

'Nothing—happened,' he panted.

For a long moment they stared at each other: her face icily calm; his flushed, dishevelled, wild-eyed. Then, with a muttered word that sounded like a curse, Hawking spread her thighs. 'I choose to do this. You have no control over this,' she said clearly, her voice ringing out like an incantation, and with no ceremony guided him inside her with her hand. Snape felt her inner muscles closing down on his cock with the same merciless intent as her fingers, and her hands dug deep into his buttocks as she

thrust against him. There was nothing he could do. He might as well have tried to control a hurricane. As she cried out, her head arching back and her body going rigid beneath him, his control finally collapsed. A black tide of pleasure roared through him, flowing, slowing, then finally ebbing.

The beast within him relaxed the grip of its claws and slunk away into the night.

Oh God. What have I done?

Hawking pulled away from him. Her absence bit into his damp, softening flesh like fangs. Before he could think or speak or even look into her face, he felt something like a cold wind pull him out, up, away from her. He landed on his back hard enough to knock the breath out of him.

Stunned, Snape watched Hawking find her feet and straighten her clothing. Then she looked at him.

'Tell your master it won't work,' she said, without expression.

As Snape pushed himself to one elbow, she walked to his fireplace, cast the Floo powder, and vanished from his presence.



'God, Hermione, you look terrible,' Ginny muttered to Hermione as they sat down to breakfast in the Great Hall. 'Didn't you get any sleep?'

'Erm—yeah, but—I kept waking up.' Hermione buried her face in her customary large mug of coffee in an effort to discourage further conversation. Unfortunately, Parvati chose that moment to peel

away from her escort-group, slide onto the bench beside her, and peer into her face.

'Oh, heavens, you look awful.'

'Cheers.'

'You coming to the Master class this afternoon?' said Parvati, oblivious to Hermione's sarcasm.

'What do you mean, am I coming?' Hermione fixed Parvati with a slightly bloodshot glare. 'It's required.'

'Just thought you might have some kind of special permission to work in Snape's lab instead.'

Hermione had no time to digest that peculiar comment, for Ron, Seamus, and Dean—who'd spent some minutes chatting over at the Ravenclaw table—finally made their way over to Gryffindor territory. Fortunately, Dean's arrival distracted Parvati from torturing Hermione, who wanted nothing more than to dive headfirst into her coffee mug.

'Anyone seen Harry this morning?' said Ron through a mouthful of French toast.

'Saw him outside with Hagrid about half an hour ago,' said Seamus. 'Oh, hang on—there he is.'

Harry, looking drawn and tired, deposited himself opposite Hermione. 'Hey Ginny,' he muttered to the red-head beside him, not even looking at her. Ginny pushed the corners of her mouth down and moved a few inches away. Harry made no move to help himself to breakfast but sat, elbows on the table, fixing Hermione with a green gaze so intense and anxious that she blinked, put her coffee mug down, and looked at him worriedly.

'Harry, is something wrong?'

'Erm—just wondering if you're feeling okay this morning.'

'God, what is it with everybody? I must look like the back end of the Knight Bus or something. Thanks so bloody much.'

'She sounds fine to me,' said Ron, trying not to smile. Harry looked at her keenly for another few seconds, then shrugged and reached for the French toast. Yet Hermione sensed Harry's continuing tension.

'So Hermione,' said Ron, probably sensing as well that something was off and trying to smooth things over. 'Find out anything interesting about Doctor Hawking yesterday?'

'Nah. Hermione says she's a boring old swot,' said Parvati in disgust.

'I—er—saw her in the hallway yesterday,' said Ron, and Hermione realised that though he was respecting Order secrecy, he obviously couldn't stop himself from venturing an opinion. 'She seemed—I dunno—pretty powerful to me. Like she might do you some real damage if she was brassed off.'

'I'm not so sure she's a boring old swot, either,' said Harry, his eyes narrowed. Hermione shot him a startled look.

'Really? Why?' said Parvati, her eyes gleaming. Then she looked up and suddenly frowned.

'Hello Ginny,' came a velvety voice from behind Hermione. She, Harry, and Ron swivelled around. Draco stood there, smiling. Hermione looked at Ginny, who was staring at the table, and saw the younger woman flush a deep, dull crimson. Ron and

Harry went instantly on the alert. If they'd been animals, their fur would have been standing on end.

'What the fuck do you want, Malfoy?' Ron growled. Draco arched one brow.

'Just passing by, Weasel. Thought it'd be polite to say hello to your sister.'

'Go and die, Ferret-boy.' Ron's voice held a deadly edge. 'She doesn't want to talk to you.'

'Why don't I just tell him that myself, Ron, thanks all the same,' said Ginny. As Ron and Harry gaped at her, she rose from the table, faced Draco, and looked him coolly in the eyes. A bit surprised, he drew back. Ginny smiled and said, 'I don't want to talk to you, Malfoy. Fuck off.' Hips swinging, she strolled over to the Ravenclaw table as Draco and the other young men, mouths gaping, stared after her.

'She—she's never said *that* before,' Ron whispered.

Draco recovered his poise first and fixed the Gryffindors with a mocking look.

'Guess your sister's the one with the balls in the family, Weasel,' he drawled.

Ron shot to his feet, and Harry joined him. They locked eyes with Draco, who bared his teeth in a feral grin. Then Ron said in a low voice, 'Malfoy, if you're not at least halfway across the hall when I count to five, your head'll be changing places with your arse.'

'Don't think for one minute he won't do it,' said Harry without expression.

'One,' said Ron.

'I just had a question about the wonderful Doctor Hawking that I thought maybe our Head Girl might

be able to answer,' Draco said, doing his best to sound casual. He looked at Hermione with an expression that she imagined he thought was appealing. 'After all, you have lab privileges. You must have seen a lot of her and Professor Snape yesterday.'

'I barely exchanged two sentences with her.' But Hermione had to exert some control to stop the hand holding the coffee mug from trembling.

'Rumour has it Hawking's a specialist in defensive magic. Is that true?'

'If you don't know, we're sure as hell not telling,' said Harry. 'Three seconds, Malfoy.'

'Look.' Draco looked Hermione firmly in the eye, sounding more sincere than she'd ever known him. 'You all know as well as I do that Dumbledore's at the end of his rope. Everyone knows we're in deep shit, and Hawking's been called in for a reason. She *must* know a thing or two that even Dumbledore doesn't. All I'm suggesting is that we ask her if she'll come to Master Class this afternoon and show us a few defensive moves.'

Hermione drew her lips back from her teeth to spit out a retort, and then she stopped herself.

'She's a visiting professor, isn't she?' Draco closed in, sensing Hermione might be listening to him. 'Isn't teaching one of the things she's supposed to do? Why wouldn't she want to teach an advanced class? She's not trying to avoid being seen, is she?'

'She's a *researcher*,' said Hermione, but her tone lacked conviction. 'She won't have time to waste visiting a Defence class.'

'Really?' said Draco. 'Well, if you can't even be

bothered to find out, I will. I'm meeting with my Head of House this morning, and I'll ask him to put it to her. I understand he and Doctor Hawking are working very closely together.' He managed to make the entire speech sound obscene.

Harry took one step toward Draco, who involuntarily started back before glaring at the other young wizard. Hermione could only imagine the expression on Harry's face.

'You'll do no such thing, Malfoy,' said Harry, his voice low and deadly. 'I'll ask her.'



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Analysis

I expected to be up all night, pacing around my chilly quarters—enraged, ashamed, terrified about what had just happened between me and the man for whom I would have laid down my life less than a day ago. I expected to agonise for hours. But before pacing, I decided to lie down for a bit, reasoning that I could just as easily agonise in a comfortable position. The next thing I knew, I was awakening, stiff-necked, from the kind of deep, mindless sleep around which the body wraps itself gratefully after sex—especially sex on a damned hard floor. My body, it seems, doesn't care about Voldemort or control or power-games or issues of trust.

chaos theory

My body, it seems, is also up for grabs. For some minutes last night—rather lively and interesting minutes, as I remember—I felt someone else taking up space inside me, sharing my experiences. Greedily lapping up every sensation. Someone I know all too well.

Now you finally understand what all the song and dance is about, don't you, you bushy-haired stack of books with legs!

No. I don't mean that. Poor Hermione. You couldn't help what happened any more than I. We're one and the same at the quantum level, and that's one too many of us. It's impossible to predict where the particles are going to end up. I don't believe these chaotic exchanges will stop until, well, one of us ceases to exist.

I suppose I should try harder to avoid Hermione so I can minimise the damage to me. But that doesn't seem very likely now. Barring her from the lab would arouse the Order's suspicions all over again, and I don't have time for dreary politicking. As well—I can't simply avoid her. I feel responsible for her. It's the strangest possible feeling, as if we were mother and daughter: something beyond any experience for me. I feel drawn to her, as if something remains to be finished that only she and I can do together.

Does that something—whatever it is—involve Snape?

Snape. I've been circling around that issue long enough. Time to crash into it headlong: I think

chaos theory

voldemort tampered with his mind, and I didn't try to help him. Instead, I clamped my power down on him and used him for my own pleasure, simply because I could, even though I knew his personality had gone away. I should have stopped him, stopped myself, and tried to help him.

Face the truth, Gwen Hawking, you slag. You could have put a stop to what was happening. But you chose to fuck him. And then you couldn't resist bludgeoning him one more time with your almighty defences because you just had to show the terror of the dungeons how powerful you are, didn't you?

Control. The heart of Dark Magic. It's so tempting at times. That's one reason why the field-Aurors of my time drink so bloody much. One reason why so few of them have stable relationships. Like poor Harry.

I can't go back to Snape's lab. I can't work with him until I know how to help him or until I can somehow undo the damage. And the bloody fifth sequence isn't near finished. I'm falling behind. Oh God, I can't believe how thoroughly I've bollixed things up.

There's nothing for it. I need help. I have to tell Dumbledore, and by extension McGonagall, everything about me and Snape.

And I have to do it NOW.

chaos theory

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

the invisible worm

DUMBLEDORE HAD JUST returned to his office after breakfast when the woman who had once called herself Hermione Granger poked her head out of his fireplace and asked to speak with him. Sitting stiffly in an overstuffed chair and twisting between her fingers the wrapping of a sweet Dumbledore had insisted she take, she outlined the evolution of the relationship between her and Snape, from their dinner at the Café Faust to their disastrous encounter only hours before. Though she kept her voice expressionless and her account dispassionate, Dumbledore could sense her deep distress, and he wasted no time on judgments or recriminations. His own expression calm, he ruthlessly contained his fierce alarm and the guilt that pricked him for not acting on his instincts the night before about Snape's state of mind.

'Have you seen Severus this morning?' he asked, his voice as mild as if he were inquiring about a lost quill.

'No. Wasn't he at breakfast?'

'No. I put that down to the fact he, like you, is keeping an irregular schedule now. Let me see if I can find him.' Dumbledore cast a handful of Floo powder into

his fireplace, knelt, placed one hand on each side of the hearth, and put his head and shoulders into the vivid green flames. Hawking perched tensely on the edge of her chair, waiting. After a minute or so, Dumbledore drew back from the fireplace and pulled himself upright, sighing. He shook his head.

'Nothing. He may be in his bedchamber, which isn't part of the Hogwarts Floo Network.'

Hawking clenched her fists. 'We need to find him. He needs help, Headmaster. I don't think I can deal with him alone. Damn it, I probably shouldn't be within ten miles of him now.'

'Piling blame on yourself is unproductive,' said Dumbledore briskly. 'I encountered him last night after he had been with Voldemort. Usually those meetings shatter him. But he seemed full of energy—almost arrogant with it—and unusually eager to see you. I sensed something was wrong then, and I didn't act on that internal warning. But come, Doctor Hawking. We must find Severus, and we have no time to lose.'

'We?' Hawking seemed riveted to her chair. 'But—but I shouldn't...'

'Whatever is happening to him involves you. And possibly someone else—but we shall see,' Dumbledore added in a low voice, and Hawking threw him a puzzled look as she got to her feet.

They emerged, shaking off bits of soot, into Snape's living room. Nothing seemed out of place except for a squashed looking chair cushion on the floor. Pulling out his wand, the headmaster crossed to the door leading into the lab. '*Alohomora.*' The door swung open.

'No wards,' said Hawking.

'Why would he need them going *out* of his chambers?' said Dumbledore. 'This is not the Hogwarts of your future.'

'Right.' She found herself flushing at her stupidity, but wasted no time checking the lab. Everything seemed to be exactly where it had been the night before, including Snape's desk, where she'd been half-drowsing over a stack of parchments the moment she'd felt Hermione's consciousness flooding into her. A quick check of the office, the store, and finally the Potions classroom beyond found nothing out of order, and no sign of Snape.

Hawking joined Dumbledore, who was now looking thoughtfully at the door leading into Snape's bedchamber. 'I could tear his wards apart, but that would leave the door rather damaged. Am I right in guessing—' he looked at her askance —'that your methods might be more... advanced?'

'Oh. Well—' She took out her wand, concentrated for a moment, and then pointed it at the upper left-hand corner of the door. '*Primarius.*' The wand tip travelled to the upper right-hand corner, trailing a ribbon of blue light. '*Secundani.*' The blue light crossed the door diagonally down to the lower left-hand corner—'*Tertianus*'—and swept over to the last corner. '*Quartanus.*' Now blue light swarmed restlessly over the entire door. Hawking pointed the wand at the centre. '*Phalanx exarmo!*' The light shattered soundlessly into fragments and vanished.

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow. 'Splendid. You

must record that sequence for me sometime.'

'Er—thank you.' Hawking kept her wand in her hand as Dumbledore unlatched the door and gently pushed it open, keeping it between him and the room. Hawking was right behind him.

'Severus,' she called softly. 'Are you there?'

'*Stupefy*, you fucking bitch!' The hoarse shout rang through the bedchamber, and a bolt of red light exploded against the outer edge of the door, barely missing Dumbledore.

'I think that was meant for me,' said Hawking.

'I'm sorry to say I think you're right.'

'I'll go in first.'

'Certainly not. I'll go first. I don't think he'll be as inclined to lash out at me.'

'I wouldn't count on that, Professor. At least let me enhance your shield.'

'A prudent idea, Doctor Hawking.'

Another bolt of red light exploded against the door. They shrank back. Rapidly Hawking drew a rough circle around the headmaster with her wand, muttering '*Protego Maximus*.' Then Dumbledore shoved the door hard so it banged against the wall. He and Hawking stepped quickly into the room, wands at the ready.

'*Bleyke!*' Both the voice and the cold, grey, foul-smelling wind of the Blasting spell came from the enormous four-poster bed on the other side of the room. As the wind broke apart harmlessly against their shields, Hawking and the old wizard shot a quick glance at each other and then, by unspoken agreement, moved apart so they could approach

the bed from different sides. What Hawking saw there made her draw in a shocked breath. Snape, his white shirt hanging out from beneath his waistcoat, sat curled in a ball, pale sinewy forearms wrapped around black-trousered legs, his face buried in his knees. Suddenly he moaned as if in pain, and his hands came up to clutch his head.

'Have to—have to—no—no.' Fingers buried themselves in lank hair. Hawking swallowed hard.

'Take this... fucking thing... *Out! Of! Me!*'

Hawking's face reflected the agony in Snape's voice. She met Dumbledore's eyes in despair. His face was grimmer than she had ever seen it.

'Look to him!' The old wizard's warning came a split-second before Snape's head came up, his teeth bared and his black eyes glittering. '*Incendio!*' His hands, both wandless, flung green fire: one bolt sped for Hawking, the other for Dumbledore. Her wand a blur, Hawking countered the flames with a water-spell that showered the area around Snape's bed with a fine mist. The Potions master snarled. But in that second or two as Snape concentrated on Hawking, Dumbledore hurled a Stupefying spell. Snape collapsed.

An appalled silence fell. Then Hawking took a deep shaky breath, her wand still in a defensive position, and slowly drew closer to Snape. Dumbledore let his wand-hand drop as he approached from the other side of the bed. As Hawking watched, the headmaster extended gentle fingers to touch Snape's sweaty forehead. A moment later, he snatched his hand back as if he'd been burnt.

'What is it?' Hawking whispered.

'Voldemort,' Dumbledore said in a low voice.

'Controlling Snape's mind,' Hawking whispered. 'I—*felt*—it. But he denied it.'

'I doubt Severus even really knows what's happening to him, or why. All he knows is that he's fighting a terrible battle. And I suspect he's losing.'

Hawking closed her eyes, her face etched with weariness and pain. When she opened her eyes again, they were calm, clear, and fearless.

'What must we do?'



'Professor Snape?'

Hermione, puzzled and a little alarmed, stepped into the Potions lab. Like the classroom, inner office, and store, it was deserted. The ingredients for the first four Carborundorum sequences were still neatly arranged on one long table; on another counter, a much smaller group of containers and dried substances could be only another sequence under preparation. Hermione's NEWT project looked exactly as it had when she'd left it the previous evening. Everything seemed quite in order. Except for the fact that the two people who should have been there were not.

They're in Snape's rooms. Alone. In bed together. Hermione clenched her fists so hard her fingernails sank into her flesh.

'Hmm. Tha's strange.' The deep rumbling voice over her shoulder made her jump. She'd quite forgotten the presence of her escort. 'I thought Pro-

fessor Snape and Doctor Hawkin' were supposed ter be here righ' abou' now.'

'Erm—perhaps they're at a meeting.' She hated herself for trying to make excuses for them.

'What meetin'? 'S no meetin' I know of.' Hagrid frowned massively at the door to Snape's rooms, and for one horrified moment Hermione thought the half-giant might go over and knock.

'A research meeting?' Hermione said lamely.

'Hmph. Well, I can' leave yeh here on yeh own, and I can' stay wi' yeh, Hermione; I've got my patrols.'

'Look, I'll be fine here. It's perfectly safe. I have to work on my project, Hagrid.'

'Dumbledore's orders'r firm—yeh know *tha*'. Students have ter be in groups or wi' staff—never on their own. Look—' and to her horror, Hagrid started across the room to the private door —'why don' I see if Professor Snape's in?'

'Wait!' She tried not to sound panicky. 'He—he may not want to be disturbed.'

Hagrid turned to look at her, and she shrank from the wise, amused gleam in his eyes. 'Really? An' why migh' tha' be?'

Hermione was spared the embarrassment of having to concoct an answer as, out in the Potions classroom, a door banged open and feet clattered down the stone steps.

'Professor Snape? Doctor Hawking?' Harry's voice, rough and abrupt, called out from behind the door between the classroom and Snape's office. Hermione darted into the office and opened the door.

'Figured you'd be here,' said Harry. Peering over his shoulder were Ron and of all people, Tonks. 'Er—I suppose Professor Snape's here too?'

'No, he's not.'

'Really? Well, what about Doctor Hawking?'

'She's not here either.'

Harry and Ron glanced at each other, looking as concerned as Hermione felt. Even Tonks frowned. 'Aren't they *supposed* to be here?' said Ron. 'It's—what—less than a week before the big Hallowe'en invasion, right? Time's running out, isn't it?'

'It bloody well might be. But that's according to Hawking, isn't it?' said Tonks, her eyes narrowed.

'I think something's wrong,' Hermione said, much more sharply than she'd intended. 'Wait here a sec.' She ducked back into Snape's office, leaving the door open. As the two young men hovered in the doorway, not quite brazen enough to enter, she threw Floo powder into the fireplace, knelt down, and pushed her head and shoulders into the bright green flames. There was a long moment of quiet. Then Hermione pulled back and stood up. Her face looked ghastly pale in the fading greenish light.

'I've just talked to Dobby in the kitchens. If anyone knows what's going on in this castle, he does,' she said, her voice dry and strained. 'He told me—he said Professor Snape's been taken ill. He's in the hospital wing. And Hawking's with him. And Dumbledore.'

'Bloody hell,' Tonks breathed. 'Must be serious.'

'Jus' a question o' time before Snape got himself hurt,' Hagrid said sadly, standing in the doorway

leading into the lab. 'Playin' wi' fire, tha' one.'

'Without Snape's help, what're the chances of Hawking finishing—whatever it is?' said Ron, looking askance at Hermione.

'I'm not sure,' said Hermione. Her voice sounded choked.

'In that case,' said Harry grimly, 'Don't you think she might spend a bit of time teaching us some new defence spells?'

'Harry,' said Hermione, turning on him, her mouth in a rigid line, 'She'll say no. She'll say she needs to spend *every second* doing the work she came here to do.'

'Really? I don't see her here now. Do you?'

'Think you've made your point, mate,' said Tonks gently.

'In fact,' said Harry, as if Tonks hadn't spoken, 'for all we know, this counter-curse of hers may not even work. So, just in case, I'd feel a hell of a lot better finding out if she can offer us something *practical*.'

'But there's nothin' more fer us ter do down here righ' now, is there?' said Hagrid, putting a huge hand on Harry's shoulder as if to calm him. 'Now I've got patrols, and you three've got classes nex' period, am I righ'?''

'Not me,' said Hermione bitterly. 'I've been excused from Arithmancy to work on my NEWT project.' She looked at Tonks. 'Can't you stay for an hour or so?'

'Sorry.' Tonks shook her head. 'I only came along because the boys here needed an Order member. I'm not supposed to come back and observe 'til this afternoon.'

Having no other choice, Hermione shut Snape's office door, carefully re-activated the wards as he'd taught her in September, and allowed herself to be escorted back up to the Entrance Hall. There Hagrid and Tonks left them, and a large troop of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws filled the void, all chatting and laughing a little too loudly.

'Hermione!' said Ginny, surprised. 'Aren't you working on your project?'

'Harry! Hermione!' Parvati and Padma wrestled themselves into the circle of friends, looking enormously pleased.

'You'll never guess—'

'What we've heard from a house-elf—'

'—and of course they hear everything—'

'Shut up, Padma; we know that. Anyway, it's about the visiting researcher!'

Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged glances: half-puzzled, half-alarmed.

'What about her?' said Ron.

'Well, Snape's ill or something—'

'Really?' said Neville, looking pathetically hopeful.

'—so he won't be able to take Potions or lurk around in Defence—'

Dean and Seamus cheered and clapped each other on the back.

'So guess who's helping Lupin teach this afternoon?'

'If you think it's Doctor Hawking,' said Harry, 'you're dead wrong. I haven't even asked her yet.'

The twins stared at Harry, then at each other. Padma looked crestfallen. Parvati frowned.

'We've heard that Dumbledore told her to come,' said Parvati crossly.

'Really,' said Harry. 'Well, sorry, but I think that's bollocks.'

Hermione stayed silent, not wanting to be drawn into the Patils' world of rumours. Instead, she kept an eye on the groups of students heading up the wide marble staircase. After a few moments, she slipped away from her friends and joined four young women from Hufflepuff as they climbed the stairs. They welcomed her without surprise, for another beneficial responsibility of being Head Girl was having the freedom and, indeed, the responsibility to float amongst different student groups as long as she was never on her own.

It just so happened this group were on their way to Charms on the third floor and, of course, would be passing by the hospital wing.



All he could sense was the dark. Snape could see it, taste its bitterness, feel it enfolding him like cold fingers. He knew how close he was to the source of it by the throbbing of the Dark Mark on his arm. He knew it by the fell, sibilant whisper that echoed around the chambers of his mind.

'She's yours—if you have the strength. Take her. Use her. *Control her.*' The whisper swelled to a shout. Snape turned, looking blindly for an escape. He saw a dim light up ahead and blundered toward it. It was an open doorway, and through it he saw the bed-

room in the Hotel Elysian where he had made love with Gwen Hawking. The eiderdown was turned back, and a red rose and two chocolate truffles lay on the thickly piled pillows. Something about the rose made his throat close up in horror. Something that *voice* mustn't know, mustn't discover. He seized the rose and threw it across the room. But laughing, a young woman caught it. It was Hermione Granger, his student, wearing a simple grey dress that hugged her swelling breasts and slim hips like snakeskin. Her intense, intelligent brown eyes locked with his as she gently held the rose and spread open the crimson petals. Suddenly, to his alarm and shame, he felt the blood rushing to his groin. In seconds he was erect, every inch of him tingling with desire.

Hermione stepped up close to him, and her eyes gleamed with the confident, challenging amusement of her much older self—the self he yearned for. Her soft lips parted. 'Though you have closed yourself as fingers/i open always petal by petal yourself as Spring opens... her first rose,' she whispered, her voice warm, wrapping around him, protecting him from the cold, harsh force that wanted to stab him like knives in the dark. Of course. That was it. If he could just be with her, he'd be safe. The fell voice would spiral away into the night forever, and he would have light, warmth, the softness of her lips and breasts, and the silky wetness between her thighs.

All his shame vanished. All taboos melted away.

As if in affirmation, he felt her arms slide around his neck. A frizz of brown hair tickled his cheek as

he wrapped his own arms around her and bent his head to kiss her, welcoming her tongue as it probed his mouth gently. Her hips shifted against his erection. Suddenly he couldn't wait. With one hand he unbuttoned his trousers and freed his rigid cock; with the other he pulled her dress up around her waist. He spared one quick moment to wonder why she was wearing nothing at all beneath: no knickers, not even a slip. Wouldn't she feel the chill of the dungeons? But no, of course not. This was the Hotel Elysian, where light and warmth and pleasure ruled. With a sound that was half-laugh, half-growl, he crouched slightly. Her legs wrapped around him; her thighs opened to him; his hand slid down to caress flesh as silky as the petals of that dangerous rose; and she moaned deep in her throat. When he thrust himself inside her and felt her enveloping him, he gave himself over to pure sensation.

On the cliff's edge of orgasm, his breath coming in gasps and his legs starting to tremble from the strain of holding both of them upright, he opened his eyes and stared into hers: glazed, half-lidded, almost drunk with passion. 'You're—mine,' he whispered harshly. As he pulled her with him over the edge, her eyes squeezed shut in rapture. As their movements slowed, they opened fully, growing wide, wider, becoming large and slit-like and reptilian. As he pulled back in horror, they began glowing with a dull crimson. Her mouth opened wide, and the soft flesh of her lips shredded away from the skull-like face.

'Control her.' Voldemort's cold whisper reverberated through his skull.

As this act of mating devoured him, Snape sensed a thread of light, a skein of warmth trying to wrap itself around him, trying to deliver him from evil, trying to rescue and reclaim him.

But the light wasn't strong enough. It wasn't *nearly* strong enough.

At last, having drained him, the thing with Voldemort's face unwrapped its arms from him and pushed him away. Snape reeled back, trembling, almost falling. Then he stumbled back into the dark.



Hermione, gradually falling back behind the Hufflepuffs, waited outside the hospital wing until the hallway was empty. Then she drew her wand out of her sleeve. When the Disillusionment charm was complete, she slowly pushed open one of the double doors and slipped inside. She took off her trainers, which instantly become visible, and pushed them under a shelf. On each side of her stretched a row of crisp-sheeted white beds, two of them occupied. Hermione recognised Amy Griffin, a runty looking first-year, but raised her eyebrows to see the miserable-looking bulk of Goyle in the other. As she ghosted past, Goyle retched and deposited a tiny, perfectly formed frog in the deep basin conveniently beside him. By the sound of it, the basin already contained a large number of tiny frogs, all very lively. Hermione bit her lower lip hard to stifle

a laugh. The unfortunate Goyle had no doubt earned yet another reprimand from Draco Malfoy.

Several privacy screens guarded the far end of the wing. She could hear nothing, but assumed a silencing charm had been cast. Holding her breath, she tiptoed around to the left and found a narrow gap between the last screen and the wall. Double-checking to make sure her Disillusionment charm was holding, she carefully pushed her face around the end of the screen. Craning her neck, she could see the bottom half of a bed and the outline of two legs covered by a white hospital blanket, as well as half of McGonagall, her back toward Hermione. Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey stood in her view, blocking the top half of the bed. Dumbledore spoke silently to someone who must have been standing across from him, someone she couldn't see. Hawking?

Hermione pushed her head forward a little more, and suddenly she broke through the silencing charm as easily as through water. After a moment of sheer terror when she was convinced she'd become visible, and then another moment when she realised she hadn't, she relaxed a bit and began to make sense of the conversation.

'—my power,' Madam Pomfrey was saying. 'All I can do is try and reduce the convulsions and keep him as comfortable as I can.'

'He's dying, isn't he?' Hermione still couldn't see Hawking, but the voice was as unmistakeable as her own.

'I sense he'll survive perhaps another two or three days,' said Dumbledore very quietly.

'Are you sure you can't reach him? Can you... please try again?' said Hawking.

'Child, it would do no good. Severus's consciousness—his essence—had already retreated beyond my range earlier. Now, he's out of reach of even the most powerful Legilimens.'

'Even you?' McGonagall sounded incredulous.

'Even me. Voldemort—' and Dumbledore's face twisted in a bitter expression that shocked Hermione to see —'seems to have infected Severus with a compulsion so powerful, so insidious that it's wormed its way into the very roots of his personality. I think part of Severus knows this, and he's fighting for his life. But the terrible irony is that his determination to fight is exactly what will kill him.'

'So—if he succumbs and lives—he'll be entirely Voldemort's creature?' McGonagall breathed.

'He won't succumb. Which means he'll die,' said Hawking thickly. 'This can't happen. I won't let it happen. Not again.'

Dumbledore gave Hawking a keen, almost warning glance, and then reached out and must have touched her arm, but Hermione couldn't see.

'Severus is beyond my reach, but I don't think he is altogether beyond help,' he said. 'There is a Healer I know. She works with patients in the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's. She's unorthodox and rather—er—eccentric, but extraordinarily talented.'

'Is she a Legilimens?' said Madam Pomfrey.

'She's that... and much more.'

'What's her name?' asked McGonagall.

'Ethelwyn Trickett,' said Dumbledore, with an expression Hermione couldn't begin to read.

'No,' said McGonagall. 'Oh no. Not *her*.'

'Professor Dumbledore,' said Madam Pomfrey in the sharpest tone Hermione had ever heard her use. 'If this Healer of yours is Severus's only hope, then for heaven's sake Owl her now! With all due respect, Minerva,' she added, a bit more calmly.

'Er—of course,' said McGonagall, clearing her throat. 'If you think she can help, Albus.'

'As Poppy says, I think she's our only hope,' said Dumbledore. 'But—Doctor Hawking.' He said that name with a peculiar emphasis. 'Regarding your work. I'm no Potions master, but I will offer my services for the next few hours, after I've taken care of this business.'

After one or two inconsequential exchanges, Madam Pomfrey conjured an opening in the privacy screens, and Dumbledore and McGonagall left. Hermione caught a brief glimpse of Hawking, wrapped in a deep blue shawl shot through with silver thread, moving around the bed and reaching a hand out to the still figure lying there. Her eyes were sunken, her face pale. Then she followed Dumbledore and McGonagall out into the main hospital wing. For a while Madam Pomfrey fussed around the bed, then the matron exited as well. The opening in the screens closed behind her.

Finally, Hermione could see Snape. Or the still, almost waxen-looking figure that looked like Snape. His flesh had tightened, emphasising his large, beaky nose and making his cheekbones stand out

sharply. The sallow skin seemed almost as white as the bed sheets; his dull hair lay limply on the pillow. Tears filled her eyes, and for the first time in her life, Hermione found herself looking at the terror of the dungeons with pity and an overwhelming desire to help, to put her strength and power on the line for him. Unable to stop herself, she manoeuvred carefully past the gap between the screen and the wall, and moved toward the bed. Though the white blanket was pulled up to Snape's shoulders, the contours of his body were clearly outlined beneath. Hermione could see that his shoulders were broad, but otherwise—without the professorial robes or the heavy coat she had sometimes seen him wearing outdoors—he looked, well, thinner than she'd expected. At the same time, though she couldn't have expressed how, she sensed in him an intense, febrile strength: the strength of a soldier fighting for survival, but exhausted beyond all measure.

'Professor Snape,' she whispered. She reached out and touched the outline of his right hand. At her touch, he shifted restlessly. Startled and stifling a gasp, she snatched her hand away. Snape's head pushed against his pillow, and his shoulders and pelvis arched up against the blanket. 'No,' he moaned. 'Gwen! Where—? I can't—can't ...'

Gwen. Of course. Hermione felt her face go rigid. Then she heard Madam Pomfrey mutter, 'Oh dear,' and start to walk briskly back toward the privacy screens. Hermione retreated from the bed. As she slipped out of the screened area and back through

the barrier of the silencing charm, the sound of Snape's moans stopped abruptly.

Gliding silently past the two rows of beds, not even sparing a glance at Goyle as he groaned and vomited up another perfect froglet, Hermione had to blink away tears again, and this time not from pity. Snape would never know, *should* never know, that a seventh-year student barely out of childhood had taken a wild ride in the body of his much older lover. Nor would he ever accept, or even acknowledge, that this seventh-year student loved him. And he would never understand as she did—with a knowledge reaching deeper than instinct—that despite his relationship with Hawking, Snape was her soul mate. His death would diminish her in ways she knew she couldn't begin to imagine.

But these thoughts were useless. How could she dream of having anything to offer a man who yearned for someone so unlike her?



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Progress

I've been forcing myself through the next cycle of Project Nostalgia. What other choice is there? Dumbledore met me back down in the potions lab after he'd sent an owl off to summon that healer, and we worked well past lunchtime, pausing only to gulp down more of those excellent house-elf sand-



wiches (I still feel guilty every time I'm served by a house-elf, and what makes it even worse is that each time over the next thirty years the elves try to organise, they'll be trampled on by the bloody Global Goblin Consortium!).

Dumbledore is more than competent; he could have easily taught potions himself, and in some ways is more creative than Snape (who didn't think of treating me with Equilibrium Elixir). But he lacks Snape's years of practice, his fine eye for detail, and most of all, what an old Muggle chemistry professor I once knew used to call "a feel for the molecules."

Severus Snape definitely has a feel for the molecules.

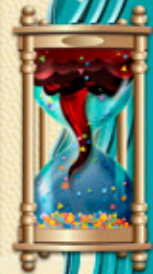
But I can't think about Severus now, not without being paralysed by despair and a horrid, creeping feeling that no matter what I do, he's going to die, I can't stop it, the blasted time-loop I created isn't capable of being un-closed. Is this why I didn't try to help Severus when I should have? Because somehow—he's "supposed" to die?

Ah—I can just hear the bossy-Granger-cow part of me: 'That's utter bollocks. Hardly thinking like a top Ministry researcher, are you? Focus on re-creating the Carborundorum Curse and its counter-measure before Hallowe'en. Then maybe, if you're



very lucky, you can prevent at least some of the mass slaughter. Remember your bloody mission!' Right. Back to recording events.

In the early afternoon Tonks came by to observe my deeply uninteresting doings and Dumbledore had to leave, but by then he'd helped me find and prepare all the ingredients for the fifth sequence. As Tonks sat in a corner (not speaking, thank God—how mind-boggling to remember her as the grim Chief Auror of my day!), I began working on integrating the ingredients with the spells for completing, but not yet binding, the sequence. This process of integration reminds me a bit of sewing—that quaint Muggle hobby my mother used to indulge in during her spare time. Mum used to gather all the fabric, cut it all out in the correct patterns, and then make a sort of pile with the bits she needed to sew first at the top. Then she'd systematically work her way down to the bottom, integrating and adding in a way that looked chaotic at first, but ultimately made perfect sense. The sewing machine and its stitches—and Mum's feel for the molecules—were the forces binding those pieces together into a coherent whole. For me, the binding force of all these sequences is the





final magic I'll summon: that wizards' ability to use thought and feeling as a means for re-shaping the fabric of the universe at the quantum level. Only then will these piles of interlocking sequences stitch themselves together.

It's really rather elegant, and I found I could almost forget that the pieces I'm binding are part of a curse that causes mass death: a brutish power that could—and did—splinter the future into chaos.

I was focusing on my task so intently that when the door leading from Severus's office to the Potions classroom announced that someone wished to enter, I ignored the summons. Eventually Tonks muttered, 'Right. I suppose I'll get that.' Still not really paying attention, I heard faint voices. It was only when I heard what sounded like an army of feet coming through the office and into the lab toward me that I put down my parchment and quill and turned around, annoyed.

Tonks met my eyes with a smirk as Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger came to a halt in the middle of the lab. My younger self was hanging back a bit with Ron, and the fact she wanted to keep her distance suited me just fine after what happened last night. But Harry stepped forward, scowling, his arms folded and his eyes narrowed—the



very picture of teenage angst. I had to stop myself from smiling. In so many ways, this seventeen-year-old was father to the lonely, impulsive man who, in the last years of his life, had sometimes been my lover.

And Ron. Oh God, surely if nothing else, I could at least prevent HIM from dying before his time.

'Doctor Hawking, may we speak to you for a minute?'

Harry.

'Sorry for intruding,' Ron hastily added.

'That's all right,' I said, and then I did smile at Ron; I couldn't help it. Though I'd seen him across the room at yesterday's Order meeting, it was strange and wonderful speaking to him now after thirty years of remembering and missing him: like being in a waking dream.

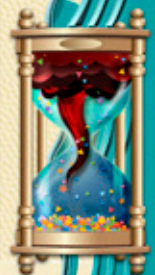
'I don't know if the Headmaster's told you,' said Harry, 'but some of the sixth and seventh-years've been taking a Defence Against the Dark Arts Master class, and there's one this afternoon. In less than half an hour.'

'Yes?'

I said politely. I had a sinking feeling where this conversation might be going.

Ron chimed in. 'Professor Lupin's been team-teaching it with Professor Snape, but—erm—we've heard Professor Snape's ill.'

'Yes, he is,' I said quietly. At that, Hermione's



stare become intense. I wondered whether she thought I was to blame for that.

'So we wondered,' said Harry, 'if you would visit our class and teach us some new defensive measures. We've asked Professor Lupin already,' he added, as if that were a fait accompli, 'and he said that'll be fine.'

'Actually, he said he'd love to have you come,' Ron said firmly.

I let a moment go by. 'That's very kind, but I have a job to do here in the Potions lab.'

'If we're going to be attacked in six days and you know any new spells that can help us, then wouldn't visiting our class be part of your job as well?' Harry's tone brooked no compromise. I groaned inwardly.

'I'm sorry, but I really can't spare the time. I'm at a critical stage in the work I was brought here to do. Every hour counts now.'

'Then why weren't you here this morning?' Hermione spoke for the first time. I hoped, for her own sake, that I was the only one who heard the ferocity in her quiet voice.

'In case you haven't quite understood,' I said, keeping my voice absolutely even, 'my research partner was taken ill.' Hermione flushed a dull crimson.

'Guys,' said Ron, looking a bit nervous. 'We'd better go.' 'I told you she'd say no. After all, Doctor Hawking's a researcher,' Hermione said, in that ferociously quiet voice. 'There's a big difference between theory and actual practice. I'm sure there's nothing she can actually teach us.' She turned her back on me and started to walk out. Tonks, Harry, and Ron boggled at her.

Ye gods. Little Miss Books-on-Legs was trying to bait me. I stood up and opened my mouth, ready to dismiss my unwanted visitors with firm courtesy. Instead, in horror, I heard myself say:

'Give me about an hour to finish up here first, and then I'll come and observe your class.'



TUPIFY! yelled Seamus Finnigan.

'*Referio*,' said Draco Malfoy, turning the bolt of red light back on itself and hurling it back toward Seamus. Startled, the young Irish wizard shied back and then managed to dissipate the spell barely in time. Draco smirked. Pansy made no effort to stifle her snort of contemptuous laughter.

Lupin stroked his chin. 'I would be happy to review defences against the mirroring counter-attack, Mr. Finnigan,' he said mildly. Out of the professor's line of sight, Ron grimaced.

'No, sir; not necessary. Let me try again,' said Seamus. He looked down at his feet, running a hand through his sandy hair as if trying to gather his thoughts. Several seconds passed. Ron and Harry exchanged a puzzled look, Lupin raised an eyebrow, and Draco allowed himself a small sigh of impatience.

Then, so quickly that Hermione jumped, Seamus pointed his wand at Draco and shouted '*Petrificus Totalis!*'

'*Referio!*' snapped Draco, bouncing the spell back to Seamus.

'*Protego Adamant!*' said Seamus, grinning, and suddenly the air around him shivered as Draco's coun-

a terrible example

ter spell hit Seamus' shield and rebounded, sending silver sparks showering out in a fine spray. Students backed away hastily, but a few sparks landed on Draco's right arm, which fell stiffly to his side. His wand clattered to the floor.

'Bloody brill, mate!' said Ron, quite forgetting it was against the rules to swear in class. 'Had me going there!' Dean punched his fist in the air with glee, and Harry grinned. Hermione and Ginny exchanged the kind of glance women reserve for times when they know men have managed to do something impressive but should not be overly encouraged.

'Been practising that one,' Seamus admitted, unable to stop smirking.

'Hmm,' said Lupin. 'I confess Mr. Malfoy wasn't the only one taken by surprise. But as long as you have the full range of standard defences down cold, I suppose a dash of creativity might help keep our enemy off balance.' He looked at Draco, his expression carefully bland. 'How's that arm of yours? Do you want to go see Madam Pomfrey?'

'No, thank you; I'm fine,' said Draco through gritted teeth. He was now holding his wand in his left hand.

'Are you sure? Take a few minutes' break at least. Everyone else pair off. I want Level Two attacks and defences. *Now*, please—not next week!' The sixth and seventh years hastened to comply, and in a few seconds the air of the classroom was thick with curses and hexes... and occasional yelps of pain or a shouted '*Finite Incantatem!*' from students a little too slow with their counter-measures.

a terrible example

Hermione was paired with Luna Lovegood, who'd proven over the past year or so to be an adept if eccentric fighter. Luna had just neutralised her partner's double-Incarcerous attack, and Hermione was bracing herself for an off-the-wall but no doubt effective response. Suddenly, she sensed a strange stirring near the classroom door. Unable to stop herself, she shot a quick glance in that direction. Gwen Hawking stood just inside the room, her deep blue shawl clutched around her. Framed by silvery hair pulled back into a loose knot, the visitor's face looked pale and tired and sad—yet Hermione caught the strangest impression of amusement as well.

Distracted, Hermione didn't notice the huge ball of sticky blue slime hurtling toward her. She gave a strangled shriek as it plastered itself all over her face, front, and arms. Draco hooted with laughter.

'Oh!' Luna's large grey eyes widened with astonishment. 'Hermione! I—I thought you were ready!' She waved her wand. '*Finite Incantatem.*' The slime vanished.

'Oh, too bad. Blue suits you, Granger; you should wear it more often,' said Pansy sweetly.

'I'm so sorry, Hermione,' Luna murmured.

'S'okay; don't worry about it.' Hermione looked over toward the doorway again. Hawking hadn't moved. She looked as if she were being most careful not to smile.

'But hey—nice hex-work,' said Ron to Hermione and Luna, and then noticing Hermione's glance, he too looked over toward the doorway. Giving a slight start, he nudged his own partner, who raised his

a terrible example

black eyebrows when he saw the visitor and gave her a cool nod. Hawking nodded back at Harry.

'Doctor Hawking,' said Lupin, his tone failing to hide his surprise. He'd had his wand out during the practice, ready for damage control. Now he pushed it back into the voluminous sleeve of his robe and made his way through pairs and clusters of students, who had all by this time stopped practicing and were staring at the stranger in the doorway.

'Hello, Professor Lupin,' she said, with a slight smile.

'Er—how can I help you, Doctor?'

Her smile vanished. 'I thought,' she said with a puzzled frown, 'that I'd been asked to come and help *you.*'

'I don't understand.'

'Oh hell,' said Ron in an undertone to Harry. 'Now the boggart's out of the bag.'

'S'okay,' said Harry softly and stepped forward. 'Professor,' he said, 'I asked Doctor Hawking to visit our master class. I thought—well, she might be able to show us some new strategies. I was going to ask you if it would be all right.'

'And exactly *when* were you going to do that, Potter?' said Draco, grinning.

'I need no commentary from you just now, Mr. Malfoy,' said Lupin. He kept his golden eyes on Harry, who looked back steadily.

'I asked her too; it wasn't just Harry,' said Ron, stepping forward.

'And so did I,' said Hermione.

'I was told, Professor,' said Hawking, 'that you'd approved my visit.'

a terrible example

'Yes, I've gathered that,' said Lupin. He shifted his gaze to her and spread his hands in apology. 'I wouldn't have dreamt of interrupting your research, Doctor, but obviously my students had other ideas. I'm sorry for the trouble.'

'Not at all,' said Hawking. 'It seems quite clear there was a miscommunication. My apologies for interrupting your class.' She turned as if to leave.

'Professor,' said Harry rapidly, 'I know I should've asked your permission. But if Doctor Hawking is able to stay a while, and if you don't mind...?' He looked back and forth between Lupin and Hawking.

It seemed to Hermione that Hawking was looking at Harry with the most peculiar expression: as if she were trying very hard either not to laugh, or not to cry.

'With your approval, Professor, I could stay for a few minutes,' Hawking said softly.

An hour later, the atmosphere in the classroom had become taut and intense: a bit, Hermione thought, like the first day Lupin and Snape had squared off in early September. The intensity had built up slowly as Hawking circled the room, watching student pairs duelling. She had said nothing at first—just watched, her brown eyes hooded. Hermione caught Harry flashing impatient little glances at the visitor. And then Hawking had said a few soft words to Lupin, who'd listened, then nodded, then touched his wand to his throat. 'Attention, class.' His amplified voice echoed through the room, and gradually the duelling stopped. In the face of silence, Lupin reversed the *Sonus* spell and spoke normally.

a terrible example

'Doctor Hawking and I think you're ready to learn some new defence-spells. Could I please have two or three volunteers?'

Harry and Draco stepped forward simultaneously.



'Albus,' said Minerva McGonagall, trying very hard to keep her voice low and steady. 'Is there really no other recourse?'

Dumbledore, sitting at his desk, had just unleashed a filing-charm, and the wooden surface was covered with parchments and various small gadgets sorting themselves out. He peered mildly up at McGonagall over his half-moon reading glasses.

'No, there isn't.'

'Are you sure? There *are* other healers.'

Dumbledore sighed. 'Minerva, there are no other healers like Ethelwyn.'

'It's Severus's *life* we're talking about! How can we entrust that to someone with her history?'

Dumbledore rose and walked around his desk to look squarely at his old friend. 'Minerva, this school is full of witches and wizards with a "history." Was I foolish to think that after all this time, you would no longer hold Ethelwyn's past against her?'

She bristled at him. 'I know she has her supporters and admirers: including you, Albus, it seems, which I admit surprises and disappoints me.'

'She made one mistake, Minerva, and she paid for that mistake. She has done her penance and has been exonerated.'

a terrible example

'It's astonishing Trickett has managed to avoid killing anyone else,' said Minerva furiously. 'Her methods smack more of hucksterism than healing. She loves taking risks, and she can't stop herself from walking on the cliff's edge.'

'We need someone who isn't afraid of that edge, because that's where Severus is clinging.' The old wizard's voice took on a sharp edge, and his faded blue eyes flashed a warning. 'What's your solution, Minerva? Severus is beyond my reach—he's somewhere I have never travelled and cannot go.'

'I have no solution,' said Minerva. Behind her square glasses, her eyes filled with angry tears, and she turned her back to Dumbledore. 'I suppose we have no choice.' She fumbled a handkerchief out of the sleeve of her robe. 'For Severus's sake I won't object publicly to her intervention, Albus. But under no circumstances am I prepared to let students be exposed to her or find out anything about her methods—especially her use of Pensieves. We would be setting a terrible example.'

There was a long, miserable silence, broken only by the soft sounds of parchments sorting themselves into neat piles on the headmaster's desk.

'I would not have called her if our need weren't desperate,' Dumbledore finally said.

'I know,' Minerva whispered. Dumbledore moved toward her, resting gentle fingers on her shoulder; at his touch, Minerva lifted her head and raised one hand to cover his.

Suddenly a soft pop came from the fireplace.

a terrible example

Both wizards started at the sound.

'Headmaster?' Remus Lupin's distressed face appeared in the green flames.

Dumbledore approached the fireplace, frowning, McGonagall peering over his shoulder. 'Aren't you supposed to be taking the Master class this afternoon, my boy?'

'I was, but I'm afraid there's just been an accident.'

'What happened? Which student?' snapped McGonagall, almost pushing Dumbledore aside.

'It wasn't a student,' said Lupin rapidly. 'No student's been hurt.'

'Then... who?' said McGonagall.

Lupin visibly swallowed. 'Doctor Hawking.'

'Did she—collapse?' McGonagall straightened, exchanging a distressed look with Dumbledore. 'Did she show signs of weakness?'

'No, not at all,' said Lupin, looking a bit puzzled. 'She was demonstrating some defensive tactics, with my permission of course. And then the strangest thing happened. Miss Granger managed to defend herself successfully against an Incendio spell—but somehow the spell rebounded right back into Doctor Hawking's face.'

'Didn't Doctor Hawking defend herself?' Minerva demanded.

'I—' In the green flames, Lupin rubbed a hand over his face. 'That's what puzzles me. I'm not sure Doctor Hawking *was* able to defend herself. From where I was standing, it looked as if Miss Granger's power suddenly increased. How much I don't know.

a terrible example

Perhaps double. Maybe even more.'

'How in the name of Merlin's minions did Miss Granger manage *that*?' said Dumbledore, quite forgetting his language in his surprise.

'Erm—I'm afraid I have no idea, Headmaster. But the upshot is that the left side of Doctor Hawking's face and both her hands are quite badly burnt. She's in the hospital wing right now. Poppy has already started skin regeneration and says she'll be fine by tomorrow. I'm still in the hospital wing, but I'll have to leave shortly to make sure Miss Granger is all right.'

'Then we'll be right there,' said Dumbledore.

'And when we arrive, Professor Lupin,' said McGonagall through her teeth, 'perhaps you might tell us why Doctor Hawking was visiting your Master class in the first place?'



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Disastrously Embarrassing

Two small pieces of good news: before his meeting with Voldemort, Severus had concocted enough Equilibrium Elixir to last several days, and Professor Dumbledore instructed Madam Pomfrey to administer a tincture whenever I ask for it. Later, when I expressed distress at not being able to write until my hands heal, that kind woman had a quick word with Dobby, who managed to dig up a Quick Quotes Quill.

a terrible example

Otherwise, this has been one of the worst days of my life, and I brought it upon myself. I've been worse than an idiot. I've let pride and arrogance rule everything I've done since arriving at Hogwarts. On Tuesday night, a man I dreamt about for years became my lover. Last night, when that man came under attack and needed my help, I refused to see the signs. I exploited him just to show him my power, and now he's dying just yards from me. This afternoon, I let myself be browbeaten by Harry, so full of arrogance himself but whom I once loved and for whom I still mourn. Was I trying—God help me—to IMPRESS him? And Ron, whom I desperately want to save. Was I trying to re-live happier times? And Hermione, who hates me, I think. Who terrifies and fascinates me. No matter how much I tell myself to stay away from her, Hermione still manages to put herself in my path. Or I put myself in hers. It's as if we're two struggling limbs attached to the same body, or two planets helplessly speeding toward collision.

But that's still no excuse for my behaving like such an overgrown prat. If I haven't already compromised past all remedy my self-imposed mission to prevent the Carborundorum slaughter, then I'm luckier than I deserve.

And just what the hell HAPPENED down there

a terrible example



in the Defence classroom? There were two defensive spells I wanted to demonstrate: very basic, the kind of thing first-years are routinely taught at what might one day, if my mission fails, become the Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Defensive Magic. One spell combines elements of *Protego* and *Referio*, not only repelling an attack but acting like a boomerang. You learn a mental flick of the wrist, so to speak, twisting the power of an attack-spell and whipping it back toward the attacker. Then, as the attacker, you have to learn to duck.

I had the pleasure of stinging Draco a few times; he's too proud to duck, and that will eventually be the little bastard's downfall, I'm pleased to say. Harry picked the concept up quickly, keeping me on my toes. I'd like to think that as we sparred he was starting to look at me a little differently, with a bit more respect and not quite so much pride and distrust. And Ron. That was sheer joy. I was almost laughing with delight when I duelled with him. I'd forgotten his mischievous sense of humour, the touch of something unexpected. A Weasley trademark, of course. At least I taught him something new; something useful. It might help save his life. I'll try and console myself with that thought.

And then Hermione stepped forward. If I'd had any

a terrible example



sense at all, I would have halted things right there and found an excuse to leave. But no. That pride and arrogance again. You'd think I'd have known that the chances of another chaotic quantum-level exchange were fair-to-decent; we share the same substance, and that substance constantly tries to find its rightful place. But that isn't quite what happened this time. It didn't feel like an exchange of thoughts or sensations... more like an exchange of power. After I made sure Hermione had her defences up, I launched *Incendio*—a spell any advanced student ought to be able to deflect in her sleep, so I was going easy on her.

But then I felt my power being pulled out of me, like thread from a spool. In the next, I saw green fire hurtling toward me. And in the next, I was down on the floor, and everything hurt like bloody hell.

In the chaos that followed, Hermione stayed well back from me. Probably wise. It was Lupin and Harry who half-supported, half-levitated me to the hospital wing. That was the first time I'd touched Harry since, well, my fiftieth birthday—only it was a very different Harry then, so I decided not to think about that anymore.

I'm not terribly concerned about the burns; Madam Pomfrey's more than capable of healing those in

a terrible example



short order. McGonagall, however, was merciless; if I'd been in a position to care, her disappointment in me might have seared me more than any Incendio spell. She and Dumbledore appeared just as Pomfrey was finishing her treatment and just as I was starting to snuggle into the comfortable warmth of a sedation charm. Lupin had hovered anxiously in the background most of the time, but after a hurried conversation with Dumbledore and McGonagall and a reassuring nod for me, he left. At that point, not even Dumbledore seemed to be able to prevent McGonagall from moving in for the kill. Fortunately, all I remember are her square glasses flashing and her low voice hissing things like 'Put yourself in danger! Too much risk! Jeopardise your work!' And references, I think, to Miss Granger. I'm sure McGonagall was saying she'd prefer me to keep my distance from her. I dimly heard Dumbledore saying something about moving Hermione's NEWT project away from Snape's lab, and I remember wondering what Hermione would think about that and whether that would make her hate me even more, and then I wondered what Snape would think about that and if he'd given his approval.

And then I remembered Snape is dying, and I felt

a terrible example

a pain sharper than the flames of Incendio bite into me and gnaw at my bones.

Perhaps Snape was meant to die by one means or another. It could be that even if I manage to restore what should have happened, Snape will still die because he must, because that's the way this universe unfolds.

I decided not to think about that anymore.

I fell asleep. I think I dreamt of the Hotel Elysian; I remember a rose on a pillow, and Severus's black eyes looking at me with longing and passion. I awoke with tears on my cheeks. It was dark outside. At length Pomfrey gave me some broth and then, some Elixir—which I seem to need more often now. Later, feeling more energetic, I said I wished I could write, and in a few minutes the Quick Quotes Quill appeared.

At least I've been able to complete the fifth sequence earlier today, thanks to Dumbledore's help, and I'll be back in the lab tomorrow starting on the sixth—though without Severus, the dark weight of Carborundorum will be much harder to bear.



LATER—

A few minutes ago, Madam Pomfrey helped me into the screened area where Severus lies. He looks

a terrible example



even worse than he did this morning: much paler and more shrunken, as if Voldemort's compulsion is draining him not only of flesh but life. Occasionally he moans and his arms or legs spasm, as if he's trying to run or struggle. I crept back to my hospital bed, trembling.

If this healer can help Severus, then I swear by all the strange, charmed forces binding this universe together that I will give him everything of myself that I can, for all the time that remains to me. And if his wish is to close himself and turn away from me, I will respect that. How could I blame him? It would be no more than I deserve.



'So you still don't know what happened?' Ron, his face drawn with concern, peered at Hermione. She shook her head, her expression hard to read in the dancing firelight. Ginny and Harry glanced at each other. Harry had pulled two more squashy chairs up close to the common room fireplace so the four of them could talk undisturbed.

'She couldn't have let her defences down, could she?' said Ron.

Hermione shook her head again. 'I can't explain it,' she said. 'I just twisted her attack the way she showed us, then all of a sudden it's as if a huge amount of power just came to me—far more than

a terrible example



I've ever had before.' Suddenly, with an uncomfortable jolt, she remembered Hawking's acidic remark the night before about the Carborundorum Curse: *Recall the sheer intensity of emotion needed to imbue Crucio with power. Try to imagine generating and focusing TEN TIMES that intensity. Only one or two wizards in a generation could hope to control that kind of power.*

'But where did it come from? It can't have come from her,' Ron persisted.

'That's right,' said Harry. 'That wouldn't make any sense. Why chance putting herself in danger?'

'Unless—' Ginny began, and then said more firmly, 'No. She couldn't have thought Hermione didn't know how to defend herself.'

'Why would she think that?' said Ron. Harry looked down at his hands.

'I could have killed her.' Hermione's voice was very low, and she held her hands together as if trying to keep them from trembling.

'But you didn't,' said Ginny rapidly. 'You didn't. You pushed the main force away from her.'

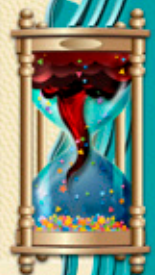
'What did it feel like to have all that power?' asked Ron, his tone curious.

Hermione shot him a peculiar glance. 'Horrid. It's like being too full, like wanting to burst. I can't imagine someone actually *wanting* that much power all the time.'

'Are you—erm—back to normal now?' Harry asked. Hermione gave him a crooked grin.

'I think so. But if I hadn't somehow deflected most of the spell away from her—' she swallowed '—I hate to think what might have happened.'

a terrible example



Ron put a strong hand on her arm. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'You'll be fine. But I don't think you should be by yourself tonight.'

'I'll stay with you, Hermione,' said Ginny.

'Naw,' said Harry. 'We stick together. I say let's conjure up some sleeping bags and butterbeer and camp out in front of the fireplace.'

'We may not be the only ones with that bright idea, mate,' said Ron, his eyes mischievous, as in twos and threes Gryffindors of all ages began to fill the common room, talking and laughing loudly. Quite a number of them were conjuring sleeping bags and assorted treats. 'I have a feeling it's going to be crowded in here tonight.'

'Oooh, lovely. A sleepover. Sweets and sticky fingers. How second-year,' said Ginny, rolling her eyes, and Harry threw her an exasperated look.

'Come on, Ginny. Think like a prefect. This is just what we need to keep morale up.'

'Thanks for the pep-talk, Professor Dumbledore.'

Harry looked astonished. 'Bloody hell, Ginny—what's with the aggro?'

'Harry, the sooner you grow up and get the fuck over yourself, the better.' Ginny pushed herself to her feet and shouldered her way through the crowded room, heading for the stairway to the girls' dorm. Harry and Ron stared after her.

'What's biting *her* arse all of a sudden?' said Harry in wonder. 'First whatever the hell happened this morning with bloody Malfoy, and now... what?'

'Well, I'm just guessing,' said Hermione. 'But

a terrible example

could it be she's getting a little sick and tired of being treated like someone's little sister?'

'But she is someone's little sister!' said Ron, genuinely puzzled. Hermione fixed Harry with an innocent stare.

'Is she, Harry?' she said gently, and had the pleasure of watching a blush spread across the face of The Boy Who Didn't Quite Get It.

'She can't—she doesn't actually *fancy* Malfoy, does she?' Harry said, sounding a bit strangled.

'Over my dead and worm-infested body,' said Ron grimly.

As an edgy kind of sociable chaos roiled through the common room, Harry caught Hermione looking at him several times as if she wanted to tell him something. Harry waited until Ron was off in a group with Dean, Seamus, and Neville; from the roars of laughter, they were obviously working on a few other creative variations of standard spells. Then he joined Hermione, who'd staked out a quiet corner.

'Are you sure you're okay?' he asked her. Hermione smiled and squeezed his hand.

'Fine. But—well, I've been thinking. About this afternoon. And about when we met Doctor Hawking, two nights ago. Remember what I said about her?'

Harry frowned. 'You said you had a bad feeling about her. You thought she was trying to invade your mind.' Memories from the night before rose up: his vivid dream of Hermione screaming 'I'm lost!' and the Map showing him Hawking's name faintly superimposed over the flickering letters of Hermione's. He shivered.

a terrible example

'Well, I'm not sure if that's true,' said Hermione thoughtfully, jolting him out of his reverie. 'Listen, Harry, for whatever reason, I can sometimes tell what Doctor Hawking is thinking or feeling.' Harry was intrigued to see a dull flush creeping up her neck as she spoke, but her voice was steady. 'But I don't think she's doing it on purpose, or doing something to me. I think it's happening at me. I don't think it's something she can control. Whatever happened this afternoon—I don't think she intended it. It was as if she, well, lost hold of something. Something slipped away from her, and I simply caught it. But—oh, Harry, oh God, there was *so much power!* It was like trying to wrestle a dragon. I could so easily have killed her. And if I'd killed her—' she took a sobbing breath and put her face in her hands '—what would have happened? How could I have lived with myself?'

'Shhh.' Harry put his arm around her shoulder. 'You didn't kill her. Stop thinking about that.'

'But we're going to have to fight, aren't we, and we're going to end up killing people in the end, aren't we?'

Harry hesitated, but only for a moment. 'Yeah, I think we are. I know *I* am. Or be killed. Which would not be my first choice.' At that, Hermione looked up at him, her face pale and her eyes dry.

'God, here I am whinging away, and you—you... How do you cope with it, Harry?'

He shook his head. 'I remember my mother and father—and Sirius. And I have you and Ron and the DA and McGonagall and Lupin to pick me up and point me in the right direction.' The absence

a terrible example

of Dumbledore's name spoke volumes to Hermione. 'So,' Harry managed a crooked smile, 'how can I possibly go wrong?'

At that moment, he saw that Ginny had returned to the common room and had stopped to talk with Parvati and Lavender. He squeezed Hermione's shoulder and then let his arm drop.

'So, sure you're okay?'

She made herself smile. 'Absolutely. Oh, and in case you hadn't noticed—' as Harry got to his feet '—Ginny's back.'

'Oh, is she?'

Hermione rolled her eyes, smiling. 'Go say something nice to her.'

'Hmm. Something brotherly?'

'If you don't mind being hexed from here to next week.'

'Ouch. Maybe I should just apologise for being a prat.'

'Good start.'



A pearly October dawn slanted in through the windows of the hospital wing, casting large pale squares of light on the polished floor and narrow, white-sheeted beds. Poppy Pomfrey moved almost silently to check her sleeping patients. Goyle, that great bully, had stopped vomiting frogs at around midnight, so she would unfortunately have to release him back to Slytherin House later today, where he would no doubt continue to terrorise tiny first-years. Little Amy was improving but needed to

a terrible example

stay until tomorrow. Gwen Hawking, who was old enough to know better than end up here, lay on her undamaged side, her silvering hair spread out wildly on the pillow. *Good*, Pomfrey thought. *Almost healed; she can be discharged after breakfast.* But having made that assessment, the Hogwarts matron took a moment to look more closely at this patient. Something had bothered her about the visitor from the moment Hawking, Dumbledore, and McGonagall had consigned an immobilised Snape to Pomfrey's care yesterday morning. Something about the eyes and the way she spoke seemed strangely familiar. But after a long look at the patient's sleeping face, Pomfrey sighed. Nothing she could put her finger on. She must be imagining things.

Maybe Hawking was distantly related to one of the pupils. That must be it.

Next, Snape. Pomfrey let herself in through the privacy screens, steeling herself for more deterioration in his condition. Pomfrey had never had much time for Severus Snape up until now; his personality was too bitterly remote for her conversational skills, and she deplored the fact that Dumbledore didn't seem concerned about letting an ex-Death Eater (if he truly were "ex") loose on innocent children. But no one, except possibly He Who Must Not Be Named, deserved to have his personality eaten alive by whatever dark thing was devouring Snape. *Ah... poor sod.* Snape's face was almost skull-like, his skin dry and burning with fever, and from time to time his arms and legs jerked as if he were trying to move, to run... or to

a terrible example

fight, as Dumbledore had said yesterday.

He's dying. Another day at the most. And there isn't a bloody thing I can do about it.

Lost in gloom, Pomfrey at first didn't notice the stirring at the other end of the hospital wing. Then a door closed and she heard quick footsteps, whispered voices, and the swirl of robes, all moving in her direction. As Pomfrey turned away from Snape, frowning, a gap opened in the privacy screens and McGonagall stepped through.

'Minerva!' said Pomfrey, slightly surprised.

'How is Severus, Poppy?' McGonagall asked in a low voice. As the matron shook her head, McGonagall looked back through the gap in the screens and beckoned, and Dumbledore stepped into the spell-warded sickroom.

'Good morning, Poppy,' he said, and turned his gaze to the dying man. 'Ah,' he breathed, shaking his head. 'He's losing ground quickly, isn't he?'

'Yes, he is,' said Pomfrey, pressing her lips together.

'Then we must begin at once.'

'Begin, Headmaster? Begin what?'

'The Healer from St. Mungo's has arrived.' Dumbledore turned to the opening in the screens and held out his hand. 'Ethelwyn ...? Please come in.' A stout woman with a short, bristling shock of pure white hair bustled into the sickroom. She paused just long enough to glance around as if to note where everything was, and then she came right up to Pomfrey, fixing her with a grey-eyed, black-browed stare so direct that the matron almost took a step

a terrible example

backwards. She braced herself and glared back.

Then, without any warning at all, the strange woman flashed Pomfrey a slightly gap-toothed grin. 'We've never met, my dear,' she said in a rich, warm voice, 'but I've heard so much about you and the good work you do here.' Not giving Pomfrey a moment to get over the shock of such a lavish compliment, let alone being called 'my dear,' the Healer moved to stand beside Snape's bed. 'Hmmm,' she said. She extended one blunt-fingered hand over Snape's hot, dry forehead. 'Ah.' A long silence fell. Pomfrey was torn between fascination with this peculiar woman and anxiety about the stiff, almost angry way Minerva stood with her arms folded. Finally, the Healer let her hand drop to her side and took a deep breath.

'Faagh. The very funk of evil, that is. Bad. Very bad. Albus—' she turned toward Dumbledore. 'He's so sundered from his true self, he's wandered so far from the light, that there's no guarantee even I can bring him back. I want to be sure you understand that.'

'I understand,' Dumbledore said steadily.

'Then you can't help him?' McGonagall's voice trembled.

'I didn't say that, did I now? I will certainly do my damndest. But Severus will need strong advocates. You, Albus. And you, Professor McGonagall. And I believe someone else must to be involved. A woman. Someone with whom he's very close.' McGonagall and Dumbledore exchanged a swift glance.

'He has a research partner,' said McGonagall carefully. 'They've been working on a defence against

a terrible example

Voldemort's next attack.'

'And for that, your Severus Snape was attacked by that scut of a Dark Lord, was he? A cruel thing to happen, but I'm not surprised.' Ethelwyn Trickett stared at Snape again for another moment and then seemed to shake herself. 'A research partner, you say? Well, I'll accept that for now. Is she very young?'

'Young? No,' said McGonagall, a bit taken aback. 'A few years older than Professor Snape, actually.'

'Oh?' Trickett raised her eyebrows. 'Hmph. Funny. Somehow got the impression she's much younger. Well, never mind.' She flashed that gap-toothed grin again. 'I have my talents, but they're a bit wild sometimes, and that's a fact.'

'How is Doctor Hawking?' said Dumbledore, looking at Pomfrey. 'Is she well enough to help?'

'What? Oh lord, don't tell me the partner's out of commission too,' said Trickett, frowning.

'Doctor Hawking is here in the hospital wing,' Pomfrey said. 'She's recovering from—erm—a slight accident, but she should be well enough for me to discharge her. If you like, I'll go see if she's awake. Will there be time for her to eat something?'

'Yes, yes, my dear, of course; she'll need her strength,' said Trickett. 'Then when she's ready, bring her in here, and I'll explain what needs to be done. Meanwhile, speaking of strength, I spent half the night flying here, and I'm right hungered. Albus, any chance we might conjure up a cup of tea, and I don't suppose maybe some toast and bakeapple jam as well...?'

'Of course, Ethelwyn; how thoughtless of me not to

a terrible example

offer you something earlier. Let me ask our house-elves.'

As Pomfrey withdrew from the screened sick-room, the rest of the conversation abruptly ceased. She felt intensely curious about where Ethelwyn Trickett hailed from. Her blustery forthrightness was a trait shared by no English or European healer Pomfrey had ever met. A slight lilt in her voice and the way she said her "r's" suggested she might be Irish—yet that didn't sit quite right either.

Well, that question would have to wait, for Doctor Hawking was beginning to stir, turning in bed and blinking at Pomfrey in the early morning light.

'How is Severus?' she said, her voice low and raspy.

'The Healer has arrived, and she says she needs your help,' said Pomfrey. 'Do you think you feel up to it?'

'Yes of course,' said Hawking, pushing herself up. 'Where is this Healer? Just tell me what I have to do.'



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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

into the dark

DRACO MALFOY hated being outdoors except when playing Quidditch, but the headmaster, making a brief, brisk appearance in the Great Hall at breakfast, had ordered rotating groups of sixth- and seventh-year students to spend at least an hour this Saturday morning on the Hogwarts grounds "for a bit of fresh air and exercise." The sun shone palely through a thin mist of high cloud, and the crisp air bore the sweet tang of smoke from the bonfire of autumn leaves Hagrid was tending down near his hut. Most students seemed to be enjoying themselves: talking and laughing, some playfully hurling charms at each other, a few concentrating on the first stages of flirting. There were even rumours flying that the match between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw might still go ahead on Sunday afternoon as originally planned, if the Aurors approved. The odds were on Hufflepuff, and a few coins were changing hands.

But not one student was ever more than a few feet away from several others, and an unspoken tension underscored the lively chat.

Draco mooched along toward the wall, hands



deep in trouser pockets, Pansy beside him, and Crabbe trailing a couple of feet behind (Goyle, that great lump of stupid, was still in the hospital wing). Draco shot a look at Pansy, who was studying the ground as if looking for herbs. Maybe once they got to the wall and could slip behind a clump of trees or something, he could convince Pansy to perform services. It had, after all, been a couple of days.

Pansy gasped and then swore. 'What's *he* doing here?' she hissed, and Draco's head shot up. Argus Filch, who ordinarily never went outside during the day if he could help it, stood leaning against the wall, smirking at them and holding Mrs. Norris. The cat, which disliked sunlight almost as intensely as her human did, gave a low, wailing growl and Filch began stroking her.

'I was hoping to speak with you, Mr. Malfoy,' said the caretaker softly.

'Yeah? Why?'

'I thought you might like to know that Professor Snape is dying.'

Pansy took a deep breath, shooting Draco an alarmed look.

'What do you mean, dying?' said Draco, his eyes narrowing.

'I heard from a reliable source earlier this morning, who heard Pomfrey say he won't last another two days.'

'Oh, really?' said Pansy belligerently. 'If you didn't hear it from Pomfrey, then how do you know it's true?'

'As I said, I have my sources,' said Filch, sliding a sideways gaze at Pansy and Crabbe, who each took a step backward. 'Just as I know that Professor Snape's

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condition came upon him not long after he met with He Who Must Not Be Named two nights ago.'

'What are you saying?' said Draco, his voice brittle.

Filch looked off into the distance. 'I'm simply saying that although Snape's been considered a bearer of useful information, his usefulness may now have come to an end.'

'Just like that?' Pansy said sharply. 'Don't you think there's any chance someone might be able to cure him?'

'Unless the Dark Lord has other plans, I doubt Snape's condition is curable. I doubt it very much.' He looked down at Mrs. Norris. 'What do *you* think, my love?' The cat slitted its eyes, lifted a hind leg, and scratched behind one ear. Pansy's nose twitched.

'Oi,' from Crabbe, who'd retreated a few feet.

'What?' snapped Draco.

'Shitload of sixth-years headed this way.'

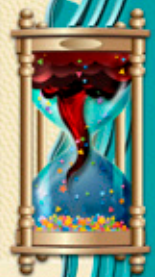
'Fuck. Look, Filch, I want you to ask my fa—' Draco swung back toward Filch and stopped short. The caretaker was yards away, slinking back in the direction of Hogwarts. Draco took a step or two toward him as if about to give chase, then stopped and turned back to Pansy, his expression furious.

'Arsehole. Coward. I need him to slip a message to my father and he bloody well knows it.'

'Snape and your father're old mates, aren't they?' Pansy asked in a low voice.

'Mates?' Draco gave a bark of incredulous laughter. 'The Snapes have served the Malfoys for generations. I pay lip service to Snape only because he's Head of our House.' He shot Pansy a narrow-eyed look. 'If Snape

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really has betrayed our family, then he deserves to die.'

'Do you know that for sure? All we've heard is what that filthy old caretaker wants to tell us.'

Draco kicked viciously at a late-blooming rosebush, watching with grim pleasure as petals showered to the ground. The bush immediately retracted the rest of its blooms and grew extra-large thorns. 'What I know,' he said through gritted teeth, 'is this: if Filch ever lies to my father or to me, he's worse than dead.'

'Well, then—so what do we do if Snape's not in the picture by Monday night?' Pansy stuffed her hands nervously inside her robe. 'We can't exactly go through with our little plan for Granger, can we?'

'Why would that be a problem?'

Pansy stared at him. 'Well, I suppose I'm thinking that if I were Granger, and I see Snape suddenly up and about when he's supposed to be dead, I'm going to wonder what the fuck is going on.'

'Really?' said Draco. 'Maybe you're going to be thinking—He's alive! He's alive!—and maybe you're going to be chuffed to bits, and then, maybe, you'll want to do whatever he says.'

Pansy made a face. 'I can't believe she fancies him.'

'Gagging for it.'

'Gods, that's disgusting.'

'Trust me.' Draco bent his mouth close to Pansy's ear. 'So make sure you have that Polyjuice ready by Monday night.'



'Aw, come on Hermione,' said Ron in a gentle

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voice. 'It's been yonks since we've visited Hagrid. He'd love to see us.'

Hermione looked fretful. 'I know, Ron. But I've got to get some work done on my NEWT project.'

The two were wandering among the rose bushes near Hogwarts' Main Entrance. Hermione deliberately dragged her feet to ensure she and Ron stayed a few feet behind Harry and Ginny, who were engrossed in a conversation punctuated with a great deal of laughter. Suddenly Ginny threw the words 'Yes, he really did!' back over her shoulder, with a mischievous glance at her brother.

'What?' Ron yelled. Ginny dissolved in laughter again.

Harry looked at his best friend with an expression of mock horror. 'Ron, Ron. You sad bastard,' he said, shaking his head.

'I'll get it out of you later,' growled Ron, glaring at his sister.

Hermione put a hand on Ron's arm. 'Look, why don't you three go down and see Hagrid. I'm going to Professor Snape's lab.'

'Not alone, you're not!' said Ron, alarmed.

'Ron, believe me, I'm not interested in breaking any more rules. I'll get one of the professors or maybe a senior Order member to come to the lab with me.'

Ron gave her a long, appraising look. 'If you were my student in Staying Out Of Trouble, I'd still be tempted to fail you.'

She rolled her eyes and grinned. 'You'll get no chance to blot my record, Ron. Don't worry; it'll be fine. See you at lunchtime.'

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She ran up the front steps and then turned around. Her friends looked back at her from the rose bushes: Ginny a bit puzzled, Harry frowning, Ron shaking his head. Hermione smiled, waved, and ducked inside, joining crowds of younger students swarming untidily and with a great deal of noise across the hall. She noticed the lean, shaggy-haired form of Remus Lupin talking with a group of sixth-years near the double doors of the Great Hall and made her way over to him, waiting until he seemed to be near the end of his conversation.

'Hello, Miss Granger. How are you feeling this morning?' Hermione noticed the flash of concern in his golden eyes as he looked at her.

'Fine, thanks. Professor, could I ask a favour?'

'Of course.'

Hermione explained.

'I can spare an hour or so,' Lupin nodded. 'That is, if you don't mind my catching up on some reading as you work.'

Hermione's gratitude and relief came to an end the moment she and Lupin stood before the door leading from the Potions classroom into Snape's office. The door was warded, of course, and she tried to open it as usual, the way Snape had instructed her. Nothing. Hermione tried three times, her frustration increasing. Finally, Lupin took out his wand and tapped it gently against the door. Symbols glowed against the dark wood for a moment and then vanished. Lupin shook his head.

'These are wards I don't recognise. I wouldn't be

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able to break them—even if I wanted to,' he added, with a telling glance at Hermione.

'Why would Professor Snape lock me out? It doesn't make sense. He knows I usually work unsupervised.'

'Was it Professor Snape who locked you out?' said Lupin. Hermione looked at him, startled, and then her eyes narrowed like a cat's.

'Doctor Hawking,' she said.

'Perhaps her work has reached a very critical stage.'

'Oh? Well, unless someone forgot to tell me something,' Hermione said, her voice edged with sarcasm, 'the Order has approved me as an observer. She can't keep me out.'

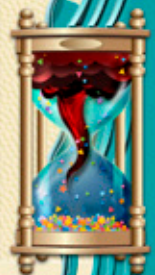
'She isn't keeping you out,' came a sharp voice behind them. 'I am.' Hermione and Lupin whirled, startled. Minerva McGonagall stood a few feet away, her glasses shining in the dim light of the Potions classroom.

'I have made arrangements for you to complete your NEWT project elsewhere, Miss Granger,' said McGonagall. 'Your work is important, but we cannot risk any conflicts with Doctor Hawking's requirements. Not at this time,' she added in a gentler tone.

'Does this mean I'm no longer an observer?' Hermione said challengingly.

'At this stage of Doctor Hawking's work, the Head of the Order—' McGonagall stressed those words slightly '—has decided that only the most experienced members should be involved. Miss Granger' McGonagall raised a hand as if forestalling a flood of objections '—please come with me to my office, and we'll continue this conversation there.'

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'I'll walk you both upstairs,' said Lupin rapidly, putting a light hand on Hermione's shoulder and turning her away from the warded door before she could draw breath to argue. She closed her mouth, sighed, and maintained perfect silence as the two professors flanked her out of the Potions classrooms, along the gloomy dungeon corridor, up into the entrance hall, and up the marble staircase to the first floor. At the top of the stairs, McGonagall paused.

'Remus, neither the headmaster nor I will be at lunch today. Would you sit in for us at high table?'

'Of course, Minerva,' said Lupin, appearing unsurprised by this request. He looked at Hermione, concern again in his eyes, and added, 'Take care, Miss Granger.' Startled by that ambiguous remark, Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it again as Lupin trotted back down the stairs they'd just climbed.

Once inside McGonagall's office, Hermione looked around, puzzled. She and Harry had been there only two nights ago, when she'd confessed to the deputy headmistress that she'd followed Filch and his Slytherins down the undiscovered fifth passage. Something seemed different now. In a moment, she realised what had changed when McGonagall moved toward a privacy screen covered with tiny red-and-gold Gryffindor crests. The screen was new; it blocked in the same corner where, two days ago, McGonagall's old-fashioned tea service had reigned.

'Please come over here, Miss Granger.'

Hesitantly, she did, and when she poked her head

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behind the screen she gasped. There was the small table she'd been using in the lab, her ingredients and parchments exactly the way she'd left them two days ago. In the middle of the table stood her small cauldron, a bit of steam rising from it. Hermione drew closer and looked into it. The gently simmering brew was still the same shade of depthless indigo, and the strong, tart smell struck her in the face.

'You've moved my project,' she said. Her voice sounded choked.

'I can assure you the move was done with utmost care,' said McGonagall. 'The headmaster himself supervised it. Everything should be in order. You may work on your project anytime except when I have student appointments; all you have to do is ask me or Dobby to let you in.'

McGonagall seemed to be speaking a little too quickly. Hermione cleared her throat. 'What if I need ingredients?' she asked.

'Just write them down and send them to Dobby,' said McGonagall, gesturing to the fireplace. 'He will arrange to get them for you.'

'I see,' said Hermione, and looked McGonagall full in the face. The Deputy Headmistress looked back, her expression carefully neutral.

'I'm sorry the Order can't trust me enough to continue working in Professor Snape's lab,' said Hermione, unable to keep bitterness out of her tone.

'Miss Granger.' McGonagall kept her voice low and her eyes on Hermione's face. 'It isn't at all a question of trust. It's a question of keeping you safe.'

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Professor Dumbledore and I are acting in your best interests and in the best interests of the school.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'There wasn't time to discuss it with you first.'

'Has something happened? Is it Professor Snape? Is he—worse?'

McGonagall continued as if Hermione hadn't spoken. 'We moved your project only a few minutes ago, and the moment this was done, I came to tell you about it. Now Miss Granger, I must go, but you're welcome to stay and continue with your project. I know you've done a great deal of work unsupervised, and *I trust you implicitly.*'

'Professor, wait. Please tell me. How is Professor Snape? Is he—?'

McGonagall pressed her lips together. 'We're doing everything we can for him,' she said, her gaze sliding away from Hermione's. 'Don't forget; if you need anything, call for Dobby.' With a rustle of robes she left the office, closing the door softly behind her.

For long minutes afterwards, Hermione hovered over the cauldron, staring blindly into it. *We're doing everything we can.* When Hermione was ten, her grandfather had fallen ill and gone into hospital. At length, when she'd asked her mother when Grandpa would be back home and they could all go over to Grandma and Grandpa's again for Sunday lunch, her mother had acted exactly the same way as McGonagall. Uncomfortable. Masking fear and grief with evasive platitudes, for the sake of the children.

Under any other circumstance, Hermione would

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have found McGonagall's attitude insulting. But somehow, she couldn't bring herself to feel anger. Not in the teeth of a cold, hard instinct that told her Snape was dying.

Hermione gripped the edges of the table, closed her eyes, and wept.

She never noticed how her tears fell, like tiny glittering diamonds, into the swirling indigo depths of her *Cruciatus* remedy.



As Gwen Hawking entered the sickroom, Dumbledore felt a mix of relief and concern. A combination of a good night's sleep, an excellent breakfast on a tray, and a tincture of *Equilibrium Elixir* had restored her to a condition resembling normal strength and health. But she still looked wan, and when she glanced at the shrunken, restless figure of Snape under the white blanket, her face seemed to lose even more colour. Though she'd wrapped herself in the teal-blue shawl she'd worn on Thursday, the severe black calf-length dress underneath made her look funereal, and the oblique sunlight etched every age-line with merciless clarity.

Dumbledore also noticed how much Hawking had increased her intake of elixir within the past two days. She was building up a quick and dangerous tolerance for a substance already, under normal circumstances, too volatile to administer directly to humans. Soon she would reach a point where the present dose would have no effect, and a stronger one would kill her.

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Severus Snape wasn't the only person in this room whose life was ebbing fast.

Dumbledore pushed that thought away and took a deep breath, as if gathering strength. 'Doctor Hawking,' he said pleasantly, 'This is Healer Ethelwyn Trickett from St. Mungo's. Ethelwyn, this is Gwen Hawking, who came to us three days ago from La Société des sorcelleries de Montréal—' he mangled the pronunciation, but continued gamely on '—to share her research on Unforgivable curses. Severus has been working with her.'

'Pleased to meet you, Doctor Hawking,' said Trickett, extending one of her strong, blunt-fingered hands. After a moment's hesitation, Hawking took it. Watching them closely, Pomfrey thought she saw Trickett's eyes widen with a sudden surprise, just as quickly masked.

'Mind if I call you Gwen? And I'm Ethelwyn,' the Healer said in her kind, rich voice, letting go of Hawking's hand. 'You and I have some hard work ahead of us, so we might as well slew around the formalities.'

'If you think that's best,' said Hawking formally.

Trickett smiled. 'You're a long way from rue St.-Denis, aren't you, my dear? I took some training there myself, a long time ago.'

'Did you?' said Hawking, her face expressionless.

'I was away from home—"off da Rock," as we say—for the first time in my life. Even after six years of wizarding school in St. John's, you can imagine how much of a shock to the system a big bad city like Montréal would be,' said Trickett, with a small laugh.

'The Rock?' said Pomfrey, unable to stop herself

from interrupting. 'I've never heard of it.'

'Newfoundland. And they don't call it the Rock for nothing. It can be a cruel place,' said Trickett wistfully. 'But beautiful too, in its own fashion. Well—' she seemed to shake herself '—No time now for all this carawattin'. Albus, do you have the Pensieve?'

'Yes,' said Dumbledore, indicating a small table off to one side. A bowl-shaped object covered with a silvery cloth rested on it. At a nod from Trickett, he waved his wand, murmuring '*Mobilitabis*.' Both table and contents floated to Snape's sickbed, now positioned in the centre of the sickroom, and came to rest behind his head.

'Poppy,' said Trickett to Pomfrey, as cosily as if they were old friends, 'We'll need you to watch over Severus's body. Try and keep him as comfortable as you can. If he goes into a crisis, the four of us will do our level best to deal with it from our end. But you may need to take what measures you can from this end.'

'I'm not sure I understand,' said Poppy, frowning. 'Surely all of you aren't leaving?'

'We're going to use the Pensieve as a sort of portal into Severus's mind. Once we've entered, it may take us a while to restore him. So yes—we'll all still be *here*, so to speak, but our minds will be elsewhere.'

Poppy's mouth fell open.

'I've never heard of a Pensieve being used that way,' she said.

'It's highly unorthodox, and there's a very real risk of mind-damage or death,' McGonagall said in a low, passionate voice.

Trickett looked at McGonagall, her grey eyes compassionate. 'A patient died back when I began using this treatment, and it was my mistake, my fault. He was dear to you, I know, Professor. I was sorry then, and I'm sorry now, more than I can say.'

'If you've really learned from your mistakes, then you wouldn't even *consider* using this treatment on someone so debilitated,' snapped McGonagall, her tone etched with acid. 'You can't resist playing the maverick wonder-healer, can you?'

Trickett moved closer to McGonagall, not taking her storm-grey eyes off the taller woman. Pomfrey took a deep breath and a step backwards. Hawking threw a concerned look at Dumbledore, who seemed surprisingly calm.

'Minerva,' said Trickett, saying the name with deliberate gentleness, 'Maybe you don't know I was the only girl in a family with eight boys, all of 'em wizards. And maybe you don't know that in some of the outports, like mine, witches have little or no status. They tell fortunes and suchlike and when all's well, they're left in peace. But when something goes wrong, if a person sickens or falls under a curse, they blame the witch. There's a saying around my outport—"shooting a witch's heart"—which means removing a spell, so that tells you something.'

'But you're a witch, and you're a Healer,' said Pomfrey, frowning.

'That was out of sheer bloody-mindedness on my part, because women *couldn't* be healers in our outport. Wasn't allowed. It's only wizards who're the

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respected medicine men, doctors, and healers, see. No exceptions.' Trickett sighed.

'Then how were you able to learn healing?' said Pomfrey. Trickett gave her a lopsided grin.

'I picked it up on the sly, with second-hand lessons from my chuckleheaded brothers. I studied far harder than they ever did, and by the time I finally fled Clobber Cove and got myself some proper training, I'd already figured out some pretty handy variations on the healing arts.'

'I've heard of some healers who combine traditional practices with standard spells, but I've never yet had a chance to observe how that might work,' said Pomfrey with enthusiasm.

'It's different, I'll admit. And yes—those methods make me a bit of a maverick, I suppose.'

'Speaking of observation,' said McGonagall, 'perhaps you wouldn't mind explaining why you haven't let other healers examine your "methods" in detail.'

'Well, I don't know which dung sink you got *that* out of,' said Trickett heatedly, 'but I've healed hundreds of patients, and dozens of 'em gave their permission for the process to be recorded.'

'Is there a record of what happened to Gavin Tregarth?' said Minerva through bared teeth.

'Bloody hell,' Hawking said suddenly, stepping forward, her fists clenched. 'Are you here to help Severus or tear each other to shreds over some past mistake? Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone. We can only do our best, damn it!'

McGonagall stared at Hawking in shock, and

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Trickett looked at the floor.

'Doctor Hawking is right,' said Dumbledore softly, 'Minerva. Ethelwyn. We have no more time to dwell on the past. We must look to Severus immediately.'

Trickett kept her eyes on McGonagall. 'If you don't trust me, Minerva, that's your privilege, but in that case it'll be better for Severus if you don't join us,' she said, her tone gentle. 'You can still watch over him with Poppy.'

After a long moment, McGonagall nodded brusquely. 'I'm sorry, Albus. I think it's best I stay here. On this point if no other, the Healer and I agree.' She moved to the foot of the bed to stand beside the matron. Pomfrey relaxed visibly, and Hawking unclenched her fists.

Trickett took a deep breath and stood at the head of the bed, where she could look straight down at Snape and the Pensieve. After pointing Dumbledore to stand at her left and Hawking at her right, she used two hands to remove, almost ceremoniously, the cloth from the Pensieve. The inside of the shallow stone basin seemed filled with silvery clouds, moving and swirling in patterns that looked as familiar and strange as the runes carved into the bowl's rim.

'Don't look into it just yet,' warned Trickett, and Hawking tore her gaze from the hypnotic patterns. The Healer extended both her hands out, palms up, and Hawking was reminded of an Anglican priest blessing a congregation. She half expected Trickett to begin praying, but the Healer merely said, 'Gwen, give me your left hand. Albus? Your right hand.' They

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obeyed, and the three stood for another moment, hands joined, before Trickett said, 'All right now; I want you to look into the Pensieve and think about Severus. Focus on the last time you spoke, or anything else about him.'

'Then what?' Hawking said.

'Then I'll invoke all the awesome powers of every great saint that ever walked the earth,' said Trickett solemnly.

'What?' said Hawking, startled, and heard a suppressed chuckle from Dumbledore.

'Er—Ethelwyn—now is not the time for levity,' he said.

'You're right. My apologies. I have a chuckle-headed sense of humour, but it keeps me sane and helps me survive. Gwen, truly—expect no pyrotechnics,' said Trickett, squeezing Hawking's hand. 'Just think about Severus. The rest will unfold. Don't worry; I'll be guiding you every step of the way.'



PERSONAL NOTES: 25-26? OCTOBER

Part of me wanted to scream—'How the hell is staring into a Pensieve going to help Severus?' Part of me wanted to grab this Ethelwyn Trickett by the shoulders and shake the truth out of her about how McGonagall's mysterious Gavin Tregarth had died. Part of me was wondering whether this so-called healer had spent perhaps a few too many years communing with the sad inhabitants of the Janus Thicky ward.

into the dark



But I respected the fact that Dumbledore appeared unshakeably confident in this strange woman's abilities. And, quite honestly, who was I to hold a mistake against her, when her brand of healing—whatever it was—might be Severus's only hope?

So I swallowed my scepticism and looked down into the Pensieve. Think about Severus, she said. Well, Severus is one person. Snape is another. I started sifting through all my Hogwarts memories labelled 'The Terror of the Dungeons'—black robes, a sneer, a voice dripping with sarcasm, the lash of a bitter tongue, and finally, in seventh year, rare glimpses of a driven man who'd done the only thing he could do and had died for it. Less and less of a real man to me as the years passed after his death, and more of a dream, a possibility, a 'what if?' And then the visceral sight of him at the Café Faust, the force of it like a snake coiled around my womb and squeezing it. The way he had looked at me over dinner. The hot pressure of his lips and tongue, and how the smoke of our breath had mingled in the cold, still air. Strange how vividly I recalled small details about that evening: the railing on the Embankment digging into my back, how tensely we stood beside each other in the lift at the Hotel Elysian, and much later,

into the dark



the deep quiet of the night as I wrote, and he slept in the hotel bed, surrounded with parchments spelling out the deadly sequences of Carborundorum.

And then I made myself relive other memories: Snape's Legilimency attack the moment I allowed myself to open to him. His appalling attempt to drown his guilt with that foul Ogdens Old. The cold, bitter wall of silence he'd thrown up against me when I confessed to him who I really was.

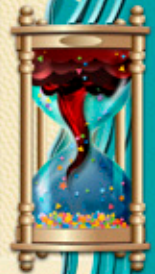
I could have called up dozens more images of a dangerous lover or an old terror. But the memory my mind finally fastened on was Snape two afternoons ago when he'd concocted the Equilibrium Elixir: focused, intent, fingers steady and graceful, the sequence as well choreographed as a ballet, his entire soul engaged and rightfully aligned in a way that I suspect will never happen with a lover.

Trickett gently pulled my hand with hers down toward the surface of the Pensieve. I felt a tumbling dizziness and closed my eyes.

'Gwen? Albus?' said Trickett.

I opened my eyes. Instead of the sickroom and the horrifying, skeletal outline of Snape under a white blanket, I found myself in Snape's office, surrounded by the familiar shelves and more glass jars than I

into the dark





could count, each labelled in excruciatingly neat lettering. I looked down at Snape's desk. It was bare.

'He hasn't been here in quite a while,' said Trickett, who had somehow ended up across the room. I did a double take when I saw her. The drab earth-coloured robes she'd worn into the sickroom were now a deep silvery green, and she seemed both taller and more powerful. Her grey eyes looked almost black, and her shock of white hair glowed. She grinned at me.

'We all have mental images of ourselves, and this is mine—a couple inches taller and at least ten pounds lighter. No sin to it.'

'None at all,' said Dumbledore, appearing from behind me. His robes were now sky blue, and both his beard and hair were shorter and shot through with auburn. He smiled at me. 'I don't mind being a few decades younger myself.'

I looked down at my own body and felt a jolt of shock. My black dress had turned pure white, the backs of my hands were smooth, and my hair—no longer bushy, no longer greying—flowed smoothly over my shoulders in a way I had never, ever managed to accomplish in real life—not even using charms. Dumbledore smiled at me, and the sadness in his vivid blue eyes made me shiver.



'What does my face look like?' I asked him.

It was Trickett who answered me. 'You look about eighteen. A pure young thing. Very interesting age you've chosen, I must say.'

Sweet Merlin. Eighteen? I felt a blush creep up my neck and into my cheeks. 'I didn't choose it,' I said, my throat dry, and Trickett raised her black brows, grinning again.

'Not consciously, no,' she said, walking across the office toward Dumbledore and me. 'Everything you're seeing here is a symbolic representation. You might think of this room—' she gestured at the shelves of glass jars '—as a kind of entranceway to Severus's mind. We've only just knocked on the door, so to speak, and what we're seeing is part of his mental image. I'd say—' giving the jars an appraising look '—that he likes to think of himself as well-controlled.'

I looked down to hide a smile.

'How far in did you come yesterday, Albus?' said Trickett.

Dumbledore hesitated a beat. 'The equivalent of his lab—in through there.' He inclined his head in that direction. 'I might have caught a glimpse of him—or, at least, a sense of someone slamming the door





of Severus's private rooms against me. The way was barred. He was keeping me out.'

'He's gone far beyond that now, into the dark core where most people don't ever go, and most wouldn't want to,' Trickett murmured.

'He's retreated into his subconscious mind, you mean,' I said, using the Muggle terminology deliberately. I must confess I was feeling a little impatient.

'It's more than that,' said this peculiar healer. 'The compulsion he's fighting will most likely take real and terrifying forms, not only to him but to us as well. I'm not—' she used a word that sounded like "frightish,"—but no one should go into those depths unless dire need drives them. Yet that's where Severus is trapped. And that's where we need to go to find him, and bring him back to light and life.'

I decided it was time to move things along. We could deal with dark cores and terrifying forms later.

'Right. Well, let's do it. Where do we go?' I said, and took a step or two toward what, in real life, would have been the door between Snape's office and the Potions classroom.

'Now you just wait a bit, Gwen, girl!' Trickett's hand grasped my arm tightly enough to get my attention. I turned to her, glaring into eyes the colour of

into the dark



a stormy sea, ready to say something sharp.

'I need to tell you a thing or two before you go traipsing around,' Trickett said, her voice as casually pleasant as if we sitting down drinking tea together. My retort dried up in my mouth. 'First, it's best to think of this as a real physical space, so move around normally. Second, be alert. I can almost guarantee you'll need to defend yourself against less-than-friendly manifestations of Severus's personality—and possibly other things even less pleasant. Third, don't stray out of my sight. Ever. For any reason. You'll need my power even just to get out of here, let alone get Severus and bring him back. If we're separated, the link we forged at the Pensieve breaks, and each of us will have to struggle back on our own. And in that case, there's no guarantee we'll all make it.'

It was hard to look away from those eyes once they fastened onto you.

'What does you mean—there's no guarantee?' I said in a low voice.

'If we get separated and you can't get back, you'll be trapped inside the core with Severus. The moment his body dies, your essence, your spirit, will be crushed right along with his. Your body will be left with no mind.'

into the dark



And I'd thought death from quantum dissolution was unpleasant. I stared at her, appalled.

'Has that ever happened?' I managed.

Trickett just looked at me, saying nothing. And suddenly I understood.

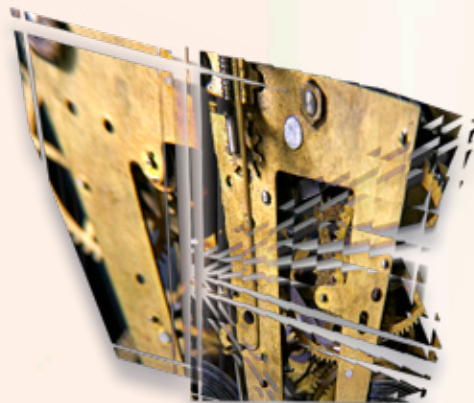
Gravin Tregarth.

'I see,' I said, my mouth dry. 'Anything else I should know?'

'As long as we stay together and trust our guide,' said Dumbledore, 'all shall be well.'

What choice did I have? In for a knut, in for a galleon.

I took a deep, steadying breath and, with Dumbledore and Trickett at my side, stepped forward into the darkness of Snape's damaged mind.



into the dark

CHAPTER NINETEEN

the child

PERSONAL NOTES: 25-26th OCTOBER

The night feels heavy and dead in my dungeon guest quarters. With only the crackling of flames in the fireplace and the ticking of a clock on the far wall to keep me company (the clock had no hands, so I couldn't fathom its purpose), I managed to record my "mental notes" of the first few minutes within the mind of Severus Snape. Then I began trembling too much to hold a quill. I curled up in a chair near the fireplace, wrapped my arms around my knees, and just sat there, my teeth chattering, for what seemed like hours. I don't know how he knew I needed it, but Dobby appeared with a steaming mug of sweetened chamomile tea. I drank it slowly, took some more elixir (I haven't failed to notice the doses are increasing), and after a while the trembling ran its course.

Back to these bizarre records. I'm not even sure whether it's ethical of me to write all this down, but I simply have to.

As a sort of practice run at navigating the "public" mind of Severus Snape, our guide first had us enter his mental Potions classroom—a process involving finding what seemed to be the right door and



sort of "thinking" it open. This classroom looked exactly like its real world counterpart except for one important difference: there were no student benches or tables in the room whatsoever. The desk at the front of the room was bare, shining, and devoid of essays to be marked.

'It was like this yesterday as well,' Dumbledore said, his tone tinged with amusement.

'Remember you're seeing it the way Severus would, through his eyes,' said Trickett. 'You're seeing how he FEELS about it.'

'I gather,' I murmured, 'that Professor Snape would prefer his classroom not to be disrupted by actual students.' I heard something that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle from the headmaster.

Then Trickett steered us back into Snape's symbolic office, and from there, into the lab (an enormous and very well-stocked part of Snape's mental landscape; it would have been paradise to work in). We then found ourselves standing outside the door that in the real world leads to his private chambers. The barrier Dumbledore, powerful though he is, couldn't breach when he first tried to enter Snape's mind.

'Now what, Healer Trickett?' I said. I tried to sound firm but was trying to control an onslaught of recent



and unpleasant memories triggered by the sight of that door: Snape in a Firewhisky stupor, Snape pushing me down onto the floor, Snape immobilised by my Laqueus charm whilst I effectively raped him. I swallowed, feeling slightly sick.

Without a word, Dumbledore took my other hand in his, and I felt calmness and strength flowing into me. Then on my other side, Trickett touched my wrist, and I sensed a sinuous, powerful force emanating from her, supporting me somehow, and then subsiding to curl up inside me: half-napping but ready to spring—tooth and claw—to my defence. I had never felt anything quite like that before.

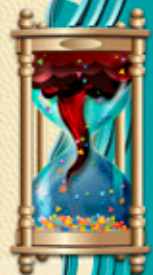
I drew a wondering breath and looked at the Healer with new respect. She raised one amused eyebrow and then, as if knowing I felt steadier, withdrew her touch.

Then she tried to open the door. It wouldn't budge. She nodded at Dumbledore, who also tried, but to no avail.

'Gwen,' the Healer said, standing back. 'Why don't you give it a go?'

'Er—' I started to pull out my wand.

'No, not like that. Just try pushing it open,' she said kindly.





Feeling a bit silly, I put my hand on the latch and pressed, and the door swung open. Dumbledore and I exchanged half-surprised, half-relieved glances, both of us remembering the hellish experience of breaking into Snape's bedroom the previous morning. Trickett looked at me with a peculiar half-smile.

'You're getting the feel of this,' she said, 'but don't be fooled. It'll get tougher the further in we go.'

I've noted before that Snape's real living room is unremarkable, though the full-length settee with its two dark green throw-cushions looks comfortable, and (as I can attest from recent experience), the chairs can be most accommodating. But Snape's "mental image" of his living room gobsmacked me. The room looked twice as big as it really is. Hundreds of parchments and bound books almost spilled out of majestic ceiling-high shelves lining the dark-grained wooden walls (wood, in a dungeon?). The fireplace was huge: gorgeously tiled in Slytherin green and black, and burning with a brightness and warmth that bordered on the festive. The two long black couches angled in a wide V before the fireplace looked sleek, sensuous, and seductive, and there were at least four commodious armchairs, all resting atop a Quidditch pitch-sized carpet pat-



terned with green, black, and silver "S"s.

The final touch: two balloon goblets and a crystal decanter on a low coffee table that looked as if it were made of polished black stone. Red wine glowed inside the decanter. Not a bottle of Ogdens Old Firewhisky in sight.

I looked up at the ceiling. Like that of the Great Hall on clear, cold winter night, it was spangled with thousands of stars.

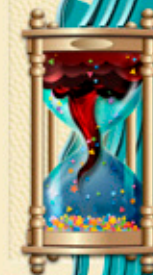
'My word,' said Dumbledore quietly, but I caught the flash of amusement in his eyes. 'I gather at least one member of my staff thinks he's overdue for a rise.'

'Too bad we can't put our feet up and wait for him here,' the healer added with a twinkle.

'Is there any chance he'd come to us if we just—waited?' I asked.

'Well, I wish he would, but no. Not at this point. So—' she gestured to the far end of the vast room, where a plain black door was set into a beautifully panelled wall, '—we must keep going.' Dumbledore and I followed her over to the door.

'Go ahead,' said Trickett to me, 'Try opening it the same way you did earlier.' I pushed my thumb down on the latch, but this time nothing happened. I took



out my wand and murmured 'ALOHOMORA,' and then ran through half a dozen other spells, including the 'PHALANX EXARMO' I'd used to shatter the wards on Snape's real-life bedroom door.

Still nothing. I looked at our guide.

'Now what?'

'You need stronger magic, Gwen, girl.'

'My magic doesn't come any stronger than this.'

'Yes it does,' said Trickett patiently. 'Put your hand on the door and ask Severus to let you in.'

'What?'

Dumbledore touched my shoulder. 'Try it,' he said.

After a long moment, I flattened my palm against the plain black door.

'Professor Snape.' I cleared my throat. 'Severus.' I raised my voice. 'Severus, please let me in.'

Nothing.

'You need to tell him who you are,' said Trickett softly.

That sounded simple enough. I took a deep breath.

'Severus, it's Gwen Hawking. Please let me in.'

'No,' said Trickett, shaking her head. 'No. Only the truth will serve you here. You need to tell him who you REALLY are.'



He whom Lucius Malfoy served seldom bothered to wear his Tom Riddle skin for a mere supervisory visit to the bowels of Malfoy Manor. Malfoy often wished he would; encounters with Voldemort were so much less stomach-churning when he didn't have to stare into those pitiless inhuman red eyes or at a face whose skin resembled wet, crumpled paper. Today at least, Malfoy had the excuse of busying himself at the long table in his laboratory, making sure the mass-killing sequences for Death-By-Fire were in proper order for his lord's inspection. This task had one major side-benefit: he didn't have to look at his visitor very much. For his part, Voldemort seemed quite content peering at parchments and phials as Wormtail hovered a few steps behind.

'How soon will all the enhanced sequences be ready for use?'

'Monday. At least one day ahead of your original schedule. I've been working round the clock, my lord, to ensure this.'

Voldemort gave a high-pitched laugh. 'Have you. This means, I'm sure, that you've been keeping Bulstrode busy.' The tall, beefy wizard at the far end of the table shot a sullen glance at Malfoy and then resumed delicately transferring potions ingredients into a plain glass phial.

Voldemort splayed a bony white hand against the table. It looked to Malfoy like a pale spider, ready to spring.

'That's Erumpent fluid, isn't it?' said the Dark Lord in a musing tone. 'One slip, one slight tremor...

one less would-be Potions master like Bulstrode in this sad world. We wouldn't want that, would we?'

A muscle jumped in Bulstrode's heavy jaw.

Malfoy dutifully acknowledged the Dark Lord's wit with a frosty smile. 'Bulstrode has been providing invaluable service,' he said.

'But Severus Snape—' Voldemort drew out the name with a long hissing sigh '—or even, I'm sure, his sweet visiting researcher would have been so much quicker. We'd have had Death-By-Fire in the field by now, and we'd have already burned Muggles and half bloods by the dozens—an *auto da fe* for the truly deserving.' He stretched his ruined lips across his teeth.

'Only two days more, my lord,' said Malfoy, keeping his hands steady with supreme effort. 'As you know, we must prepare this work as precisely as possible, or the Curse could backfire on us.'

'If it backfires on anyone,' said Voldemort, 'It will be on you, my dear old friend. But I anticipate—' he grinned again '—that within the next day or two Snape and his sweet lover will join us. With their expertise, we can progress with complete assurance.'

'If they join us,' Malfoy murmured, and then his heart almost stopped in shock as the thin spidery hand leapt from the table and grasped his jaw with brutal strength. He found himself staring helplessly into Voldemort's burning eyes.

'If you doubt me, Lucius, you should say so directly.'

'I don't doubt you, my lord,' Malfoy gasped.

'The worm I've planted within Snape,' Voldemort said in the slow, falsely cheerful manner of an exasper-

ated parent explaining something to a rather dim child, 'will compel him to subdue Doctor Hawking and bring her to me. If he tries to fight the compulsion, the effort will grind his mind and spirit to ashes, and he will die. I'd prefer the first outcome; it would allow us to attack sooner than Dumbledore has been led to expect.'

'I understand, my lord.'

'Of course you do.' Voldemort removed his hand from his chief lieutenant's face, but not without first letting one long finger slide along the perfection of Malfoy's jaw line. Malfoy dared not even clench his teeth lest the Dark Lord feel his revulsion. 'In fact, if I can persuade Doctor Hawking to cooperate, I really wonder if I need Snape at all. You have Argus Filch under control, yes? You can guarantee that your son is ready to serve me, correct?'

'Draco—' Malfoy cleared his throat, still held in thrall by the dark lord's red gaze. 'Yes. My son and Filch will arrange a distraction for us—enough to throw Dumbledore, his pet Aurors, and Potter into some disarray.'

'An ambitious goal for such a young and inexperienced wizard,' said Voldemort as conversationally as if they were discussing Draco's NEWTs. He turned his head away from Malfoy, and the blond wizard staggered back a step or two as if something had pushed him. He took a deep breath and placed both hands on the table.

'The distraction will come at a crucial time in their defence preparations, and I assure you my son is fully capable,' he managed.

'What will this distraction involve?'

Now it was Malfoy's turn to grin. 'The abduction

of a certain Miss Hermione Granger.'

'Interesting, if a bit clichéd. When?'

'In two days,' said Malfoy, lifting his chin confidently. 'On the very eve of a battle they will not be prepared for... especially if Harry Potter is, shall we say, unavailable.'

Voldemort bared his teeth. 'Because Harry Potter will, of course, want to rescue Miss Granger—with no forethought and with no help: except possibly from that brainless Weasley.'

Malfoy's smile deepened. 'That's a Potter characteristic we can look forward to exploiting.'

'And either must die at the hand of the other...' mused Voldemort in a far-away voice. 'The Boy Who Lived Too Long will have very little time to regret his overconfidence before I'm finished with him.'



PERSONAL NOTES: LATER...

(A while ago I put my quill down and closed my eyes for a second or two... and bloody well fell asleep. For how long I don't know. Hard to believe I did that. I didn't think I'd ever sleep again. But the body is often wiser than the mind that tries to drive it.)

In some ways, I wasn't a bit surprised to realise that Trickett knew I'm not really "Gwen Hawking." I suppose I'd expected that particular bomb to drop for some time now. Although I made a show of looking at her and

the child

repeating, a bit stupidly, 'Who I really am?'; I damn well knew what she meant, just as I knew she'd sensed, back in the sickroom the moment she'd shaken my hand, that something about me was... wrong.

'Gwen's a lovely name,' said Trickett, her tone very matter-of-fact, 'and you must have your reasons for using it; and I'd like to keep calling you that if I might, and maybe you could finally start calling me Ethelwyn. But I think Severus knows you by another name, and you need to use that one to find him.'

I looked at Dumbledore, who smiled. 'Gwen's true name,' he said, 'is also lovely.'

'I can't believe,' I said through numb lips, 'that I once thought I'd be able to come to Hogwarts under an alias.'

Dumbledore squeezed my hand gently, and once again, I sensed the power he held in check behind a benevolent, twinkling front-stage personality. 'My good friend here is bound by an oath that effectively makes her Secret-Keeper to you and Severus. And as the observer, I'm also bound by that oath. Nothing happening within Severus's mind will ever be made public.'

'I can't even place observers' recollections in the Janus Thickey confidential Pensieve unless all parties give permission. That's one reason; the healer

the child



added a bit ruefully, 'why I've been criticised for lack of documentation. But there's no way around that, nor would I want it.'

'So what goes on in the Pensieve stays in the Pensieve,' I said, half-smiling.

'Damn right,' said Trickett soberly.

'Call Severus,' Dumbledore urged, turning me back toward the door. 'Quickly.'

I put my hand on the door and took a deep breath. 'Severus. Please let me in. It's Hermione Granger.'

The latch clicked, and the door opened a crack. I pushed on it, and as I did so, the two wizards at my side took their wands from their sleeves. I did the same. Perhaps I didn't have an actual flesh-and-blood body in this environment, but my pounding heart and sweaty palms felt all too real. Wands extended, we took a step or two into the room.

It certainly wasn't Snape's bedchamber as I remembered it (and I wish I could say I've seen it under happier circumstances than fighting off Incendio attacks). Having seen his mental living room, I suppose I expected something grand, plush, and excessive. Instead, we found ourselves in a small, chilly room. Dim light struggled through a half-

the child



opened door, outlining what looked like a child's cot, the bedclothes mussed and neglected looking.

'I don't recognise this place at all,' I whispered.

Outside the door, a man's voice shouted 'Fucking bitch!' and shadows suddenly writhed against the patch of light lying on the stone floor. Something else moved on the floor as well, something not outlined by the light. I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck, and I gripped my wand harder. Then came a soft sound, like a hitch of breath or a stifled sob.

'He won't harm us,' Ethelwyn breathed in my ear. I raised my wand and invoked light. A small boy crouching on the floor near the cot looked up at us, squinting, his face streaked with tears. He wore a dingy-looking vest and underpants, and had bunched a grey blanket around his shoulders. His arms and legs were thin, and his feet were bare, dirty, and looked cold. His hair had been cut so short that his small, pointed head looked as if it were covered with black fuzz.

He looked almost as sad as one of those hollow-eyed waifs in Muggle magazines—the ones soliciting donations for starving children. And he couldn't have been more than seven.

'Bloody hell,' I breathed.

The little boy's black eyes widened. 'Wh—who are

the child



you?' he whispered.

'We're friends,' Ethelwyn said softly, and I could sense her power reaching out to him, trying to enfold and comfort him.

'Father and Mother won't let any friends stay,' the little boy said, gulping back a sob. As if in confirmation, the man outside the room raised his voice again.

'Whoring around again? You fucking slag! You cheap piece of cunt!'

'STUPID, you drunken bastard!' a woman yelled. Glass smashed. There was a moment's silence. Then the woman said, her voice a bit slurred, 'If you touch me again, *Sejanus*, even ONCE, you're dead. Got it?' Then—'Severus!' A shadow darkened and grew larger, and we heard someone move down the corridor leading to this bedroom. I doused my light and shrank back as Ethelwyn whispered, 'Not to worry, she won't see us.'

A woman came a foot or two into the room. She staggered a bit, grabbed the doorjamb with one hand for support, and pushed long dark hair away from her face. The little boy looked up at her, his eyes full of love, hope, and terror.

I never want to see such an expression again.

'Severus, get into bed,' said the woman in a low, beautiful

voice. 'Go on.' There was a pause. 'NOW!' Her voice grew ugly, and the little boy scrambled under the eiderdown.

Severus. Severus. I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

When he was still, she murmured, 'You all right, my little man?' No ugly edge now. Her seductive purr could have charmed a legion of Death Eaters.

'Yes, Mother.'

'Good. Go to sleep now.' The woman turned a bit unsteadily and left, pulling the door not-quite-shut behind her so that only the thinnest stream of light made its way into the little bedchamber. Deep silence blanketed the room while we waited for the woman's footsteps to fade away. Then, very quietly, the little boy started to cry.

'LUMOS,' I said, my throat tight, and as a soft golden glow filled the room I moved toward him. He lay on his side, his back to me, his face buried in his arms. I tucked my wand back inside my sleeve and, sitting down on the cot, put out one hand and rested it lightly where the stale-smelling eiderdown covered the child's trembling back. I felt him flinch, but I kept my hand on his back, light and still, not moving a muscle. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ethelwyn and Dumbledore moving to stand near me.

After long minutes, his sobs quietened, and as I felt



his tension ease a bit, I gently began to rub his back. He took a few long, hitching breaths. Once again I became aware of Ethelwyn, standing nearby, extending her power, and without thinking I opened myself to her, letting her warmth move through me and into the shaking little body beneath my hand. As I imagined wrapping this little boy in light and love I heard him gasp, and after a moment he sat up in bed to face me, his black eyes wide in astonishment.

'I know you. You're Hermione.'

I had run out of astonishment. 'Yes,' I said simply.

'And Gwen. You're Gwen too,' he said in wonder.

'Yes, Severus.'

'Why did you come here?'

'To find you. We—we need you to come back with us, Severus.'

'Where?'

I looked at Ethelwyn helplessly, and she smiled at the little boy.

'To somewhere very safe. Where there's more light, and where no one will shout at you,' she told him.

'I can't.' His sallow little face screwed up as if he were about to cry again. 'There's a dark man with red eyes. He's looking for me. If I go away from this room,



he'll find me and kill me.' I leaned forward and, without thinking, gathered the little boy into my arms. He stiffened at first, startled, and then relaxed into me. After a moment, he wrapped his arms around my back.

I turned my head and looked at Ethelwyn and Dumbledore. When I saw the grimness in their faces, the bottom of my stomach dropped out.

'Is this man who I think he is?' I whispered.

'He's not Voldemort himself, if that's what you're thinking,' said Ethelwyn. 'He's not in Severus's mind. Only the worm he left. But—' she looked worried '—I suspect this dark man is just as dangerous.'

'Then—who is he?'

'It might be Sejanus Snape,' Dumbledore gripped his wand tighter. 'I must admit I'd relish encountering him.' The old wizard's eyes turned steely and his sandy-grey brows came down. I was glad not to be on the receiving end of that expression.

Suddenly I heard a murmuring. The little boy was saying something, his voice muffled against my shoulder. I bent to listen and heard 'Gwen and Hermione. Gwen and Hermione,' over and over again, chanted like an invocation.

What happened next I'll never forget. It came like a shockwave: a fierce protectiveness overwhelming me, shattering me to pieces and then hurling





me back together. Against the sheer power of this child's fragility, against the understanding that at the deepest level of his mind, Severus was willing to put his life in my hands when I'd done nothing to deserve that level of trust—I was helpless. I closed my eyes against his fuzzy little scalp.

After what seemed like an eternity, Ethelwyn touched my shoulder.

'We must keep going. We haven't found Severus yet.'

I raised my head and stared at her, astonished.

'Then who's this?'

'It's only a part of Severus. Not the whole.'

'Well, this part of him can't leave this room,' I said fiercely, 'and so neither will I. I have to protect him.'

'No. You have to leave him here.'

'WHAT?!' I pulled myself gently from the little boy and stood up to face the healer, my face inches from hers. I was bloody well as tall as she, and this time her storm-grey eyes didn't faze me in the least. I kept my wand down with an effort. I can't remember the last time I felt such anger.

'Hermione.' Dumbledore came up to stand beside me, putting a hand on my arm.

'Gwen, girl,' said Ethelwyn in a low voice, 'you can't



protect him by staying here. That won't save Severus's life; it'll only put off his death. You must come with us. We must deal with this dark man of his.'

'And just how the hell do you know that?' I hissed.

'I bloody well DON'T know it a hundred percent. I'm not God; I'm just a healer, but I have some experience in these matters,' said Ethelwyn, an edge creeping into her rich voice. 'Gwen, if you won't trust me, then we must withdraw and Albus and I'll have to come back alone and do our best.'

'Professor?' I appealed to Dumbledore, even though I knew it would be futile. 'Please—I can't leave this little boy. He needs me.'

'I think,' said Dumbledore steadily, his eyes not leaving mine, 'that if you leave him, he will be safe for now. Either way, Ethelwyn is right. If we don't confront the real danger within Severus—this dark man, this worm—we could leave a hundred of you standing guard over this boy and it would make no difference.'

I stood for a long moment, gripping my wand. Then I looked down at the little boy in the cot. His tear-streaked face was upturned to mine, his huge black eyes full of appeal.

'We have to go for a while, but I promise we'll be back,' I said, trying to keep my voice calm and steady.



'Why do you have to go?'

'We have to find the dark man and make sure he never, ever hurts you again.'

For a long moment, the little boy looked at me, and in his eyes I saw a careful consideration far beyond his visible years.

'If I stay in bed and be very good and go to sleep like mother said, I think I'll be all right,' he finally said.

Ethelwyn moved to the head of the cot. 'Then go to sleep,' she whispered. A stream of golden stars fell softly from the tip of her wand onto the boy's wondering face. His eyes fluttered, then he yawned hugely and snuggled under the eiderdown. After a moment, his breathing deepened, and a small smile curved his mouth. As I looked down on him, my vision blurred with tears.

'We have to go,' said Dumbledore. I took a deep breath, wiped my cheeks with my hand, gripped my wand tightly, and followed my two companions to the partly open bedroom door. I was the last one to exit that tiny, gloomy corner of Severus's boyhood, and I did not look back.



the child

CHAPTER TWENTY

the dark man

POPPY!' Minerva McGonagall poked her head out past the sickroom privacy screens and called, trying to keep her voice as low and calm as possible. Poppy Pomfrey, who had just discharged Goyle and was now monitoring

Amy Griffin's temperature, took one look at Minerva's tight face, patted little Amy on the shoulder, and moved with smooth haste toward Snape's sickroom.

'Is he worse?' she asked.

'I don't know,' said the deputy headmistress, stepping away from the bed to give Pomfrey some room. Snape's hands covered his eyes, and his chest heaved with sobs. Pomfrey brought out her wand and waved it over the patient.

'As far as I can tell, he's simply crying,' she said after a few moments. 'He's no better than he was earlier, but no worse either. At least not physically.'

McGonagall's eyes slid to the three who stood around the head of the bed: still as statues, their hands linked and their heads bowed down toward the Pensieve.

'Is there any way to tell if they've gotten through to him?' she said.

'I wish there were; I really do,' said Pomfrey. There



was silence, broken only by Snape's ragged sobs. After a while the sobs died away, his breathing calmed, and his hands relaxed down to his chest. His ravaged face looked surprisingly serene. After a moment, the hint of a smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

'Well thank heaven for that small mercy,' breathed McGonagall.

'Or thank Healer Trickett,' said Pomfrey, her tone tart enough to earn a raised eyebrow and then a grudging nod from the other woman.

'I suppose that's possible. At least that will be one helpful thing she's done.'

'Minerva,' said Pomfrey.

'Yes.'

'Who was Gavin Tregarth?'



PERSONAL NOTES: 25-26? OCTOBER

Outside the little boy's bedchamber I expected a corridor of some sort, just as gloomy and depressing. I half-expected we'd trip over Sejanus Snape, presumably lying stupified. I hoped and prayed we wouldn't encounter Severus's mother. That toxic aura of love poisoned by rage and fear made my skin crawl.

Instead, we found ourselves in a living room or drawing room, but not Snape's wonderfully grandiose version. This room boasted a huge stone fireplace with a huge, hideous skull-like carving hanging above the mantel

the dark man



piece. Several very uncomfortable looking high-backed chairs faced the fireplace, with a low carved table in the middle. On that table was a tumbler half-filled with a golden, glowing liquid. I looked around and behind me and noticed a series of large tapestries hanging on the other three walls: vivid splashes of colour in the gloomy chambers of Severus's mind. Then I drew in a sharp breath. One tapestry was filled with young beautiful faces: bizarrely, all upside down, their beauty distorted by cruel laughter—except for one, a pretty red-headed young woman, who looked distressed and angry. I recoiled from the next tapestry: a man and a woman, bound in chains, their flesh riven with cuts and their faces hidden, writhing against each other in a cruel parody of sexual ecstasy. But the third tapestry was nauseating: a tall, thin figure reared up, flat reptilian eyes glowing dull red, and pointed its wand at a human figure which twisted in never-ending agony.

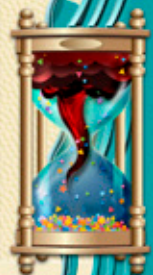
And then I heard the faint screams from that tapestry. 'Bloody hell.' I felt myself shaking.

'I suspect these may be Severus's worst memories,' said Dumbledore, his voice calm but laced with sadness.

'Is this room familiar to either of you?' said Ethelwyn.

'It looks very much like the drawing room of Malfoy Mansion.' Dumbledore's mouth thinned. 'I've had

the dark man





occasion to visit a few times in the past. But why are we seeing it now? Is Severus trying to tell us where and how Voldemort administered the worm?'

'Why, Albus. You never fail to come up with the right answer, do you?' The low, dark, silky voice came from behind us, and all the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

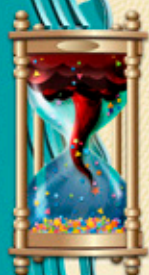
We whirled in unison, wands out and up, and found ourselves facing a man standing a few feet away from us, smirking. He wore a loose black shirt and black trousers, and his hair was tied neatly behind his head, exactly the way it had been when I'd first seen him in the Café Faust. Firelight slid down the planes of his angular face and made his black eyes glow eerily.

'Ah,' purred this dark man, fastening his gaze on me. 'It's my little know-it-all. My star swot. You look lovely, my dear. Deliciously... untouched.' He moved closer, one long-fingered hand outstretched, and I felt Dumbledore and Ethelwyn tense beside me. Even though Snape held no wand, he radiated danger.

He also radiated (God help me) a raw, challenging sexuality that hit me hard enough to make me almost sway on my feet. He obviously noticed even that faint reaction, and his smirk deepened to a feral grin.

'Wouldn't you like me to touch you, Miss Granger?' said this Snape, his glowing eyes not relinquishing

the dark man



mine. He moved nearer. 'Wouldn't you like to feel my hands on you? Isn't that what you dream about, night after night, in your cold bed?'

'Gwen, for God's sake don't let it touch you,' said Ethelwyn to me in a quiet, almost conversational, voice, I saw how her hand tightened on her wand.

'Don't think I haven't noticed how you've grown, Hermione,' whispered this strange attractor, The black eyes filled my vision. 'Don't think I haven't wanted to taste you. Wouldn't you like to hear the languages my tongue could speak against your flesh?'

It seemed like hours before I could make my mouth form words.

'If you were Severus Snape,' I said finally, 'you'd never say such rubbish.'

'What do you mean, if I were? Has this fake healer been telling lies?' He flashed Ethelwyn a look of pure venom. 'I know all about you, healer, and the man you killed.' He spread his elegant hands and looked at me again. 'How can you trust a charlatan like her? Hermione... by all that's dark and light, I have known you now for more than six years. Have I ever harmed you? Have I ever done anything but try to protect you?'

'Would Severus Snape try to seduce someone he's sworn to protect? Would he try to violate a student's trust?'

the dark man



Dumbledore said, his voice deadly quiet.

'You interfering old bastard,' the dark man snarled, and for a moment, his eyes flared crimson. Then his gaze returned to me. 'I care for you. I've just never been able to tell you,' he said, his voice silkier than ever. 'But now I can. Here and now, only the truth will serve.'

Only the truth will serve. The words hit me like a blow. I turned to Ethelwyn.

'That's what you said to us,' I whispered. 'Does he—MEAN that? And how the hell could he know about your past?'

'This isn't Snape... and we've tangled before,' said Ethelwyn, not taking her eyes or her wand off the dark man. 'Well, you worm—' and her voice suddenly sharpened '—we've nothing to hide today, you must know why we're here. Me, Albus, young Hermione here, and Gwen.'

The dark man's eyes flared greedily. You mean *Hawking*? Is she really here? Ahhh. I'm looking forward so much to her utter humiliation.'

When I heard those words, I didn't think. I just slammed all my willpower together and focused on altering my mental image. When I looked down and saw a black dress and a pair of middle-aged hands, I knew I'd been successful.

'Here I am. Try to humiliate me, you pathetic coward,' I hissed at the thing that no longer really resembled Snape.

the dark man

'Gwen!' cried Ethelwyn.

Rage twisting his face, the dark man flung his right hand up. Black ropes erupted from his fingers and writhed toward us like snakes.

'PROTEGO!' 'STUPEFY!' But even as Dumbledore and Ethelwyn shouted their spells in unison, one of the black ropes lashed at me with lightening speed and wrapped itself around my wrist. My wand clattered away and a mass of blackness smothered me. I felt a horrible, swirling dizziness.

I remember thinking—bloody hell. I'm falling out of the Pensieve.



'Who was Gavin Tregarth?'

Under normal circumstances, McGonagall would have subjected anyone daring to ask such a direct question to the patented icy glare she reserved for special occasions, such as deducting triple-digit numbers of Slytherin house-points.

'Why do you ask?' she snapped.

'If what happened to him has any possibility of affecting Professor Snape, I need to know,' said Pomfrey, her tone level.

McGonagall stayed silent for a long moment. 'It was over forty years ago,' she said at last. 'Gavin was a Healer at St. Mungo's. He specialised in locked-ward patients. When Ethelwyn Trickett came on the scene, full of piss and vinegar and touting her wonderful new Pensieve treatment, Gavin was very excited by the possibilities.

the dark man

He began to work with Trickett. They became a team. A few spectacular successes later, they were well on the way to setting the wizarding world on fire.'

'And—?'

McGonagall blinked rapidly a few times. 'Gavin and Trickett began working with a volunteer to try and refine their method. Gavin couldn't say much, of course, but I gathered this volunteer was highly intelligent—even brilliant—if a bit high-strung and egotistical. It turned out he was deeply and by choice entangled in the Dark Arts, and he had volunteered with only one thing in mind: to learn their method and use it for his own ends.'

'But Gavin and Trickett didn't know that,' said Pomfrey softly.

McGonagall's mouth tensed. 'No one did. Not until it was too late. From a few things Gavin let slip about the volunteer, I felt something was—off. I tried to tell Gavin to be careful. But he and Trickett were convinced they were making progress on their technique. I think they were seduced by the sheer challenge of it.'

'What happened?'

'It was supposed to be just another test.' McGonagall took a deep breath. 'But something went terribly wrong. I could never find out exactly what, but Gavin—never came back. Trickett abandoned him, left him to fend for himself inside a deranged mind.'

'Abandoned him? Are you sure, Minerva? Why would she do that?'

'She'd gone beyond her depth!' snapped McGonagall. 'She panicked. What do you do when a drowning swim-

mer tries to pull you down?'

'For heaven's sake, Minerva, that was decades ago. Healer Trickett doesn't strike me as the panicky type.'

'Perhaps the most horrible thing,' McGonagall continued, as if Pomfrey hadn't spoken, 'is that Gavin's body lived for quite a long time afterward.' She flicked a quick glance at the three still figures grouped at the head of Snape's bed.

'Minerva,' said Pomfrey after a moment's silence. 'Who was Gavin?'

McGonagall removed her glasses and pressed her fingers against her eyes. 'My husband. We had been married for almost three years.'

Words seemed inadequate. Pomfrey put a gentle hand on her colleague's arm.

'It was, of course, standard practice at St. Mungo's to keep volunteers' identities private,' McGonagall continued, her voice expressionless. 'Gavin respected that policy, but once or twice he forgot himself and let one or two things slip out. At one point, he said that their volunteer was exceptionally intelligent, that he'd had to have been one of Hogwarts' most brilliant and accomplished students. Gavin trusted this man so completely that I once said to him—Shouldn't you take a step back? Be a little more cautious?—but he just smiled and said the work was going well and I shouldn't worry.'

'Right after—what happened to Gavin, this brilliant and trustworthy volunteer vanished. No one was ever able to track him down. It was as if he had never really existed.'

'That makes sense, in a horrible way,' Pomfrey said

slowly. 'He'd have every reason not to be found.'

McGonagall gave a bleak laugh. 'Oh, it turns out he had all *sorts* of reasons not to be found. That is, until he was damned well good and ready.' Her grey eyes flashed behind her square glasses. 'I'm sure you remember that day as well as I do.'

Pomfrey's eyes widened as shock crept across her face. 'Minerva. Oh my dear—'

'Trickett couldn't stand up against Tom Marvolo Riddle the first time,' said McGonagall passionately. 'How can she *now*? She thinks she can just sail in there and invoke her maverick magic and make everything all right. Damn it!' She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger and took a deep, shaky breath.

'She's with Albus, who's bested him before,' said Pomfrey after a moment. 'And surely after more than forty years, Healer Trickett's learned a thing or two.' But her words sounded hollow.

'Albus came to see me a few months after Gavin was lost,' McGonagall said reflectively, as if Pomfrey hadn't spoken. 'He asked me to bear with him. Then he told me about a set of triple murders in 1942, and how he'd been working to uncover a great deal of past criminal activity in connection with a former Head Boy—who was last seen on the day and on the very site of the murders. Then Albus told me he'd known Trickett for some time before she and Gavin began working on the Pensieve treatment. After a while, the bits and pieces he heard about their brilliant, anonymous young volunteer rang alarm bells

for him—just as, in a way, it did for me. Albus began to wonder if there might be some connection to that former Head Boy.

'But Albus didn't act. He wasn't sure enough. And then it was too late.'

'But—then—' said Poppy, 'Isn't there a chance the volunteer *wasn't* Riddle?' It was a straw wanting to be grasped.

'I'm afraid not.' McGonagall sighed. 'Albus showed me the proof during that conversation. He said without it, he wouldn't have had the right to look me in the face.' She let her fingertips touch the surface of the white blanket covering Snape. 'It was a release form the volunteer had signed. The name was an anagram, an exercise I understand Riddle quite liked in his school days. Unscrambled, the letters spelt out a name. Albus was able to convince me that, except for one other person who couldn't possibly be involved in this, only he and Riddle knew that name. It was Riddle's idea of a sly little joke... as if he knew, even then, about Albus' suspicions and found them vastly amusing.'

'What was the name?' whispered Pomfrey.

'Aragog.'

Unable to speak, Pomfrey looked down at Snape. The peaceful half-smile was gone, and his face was now twisting through a range of expressions: all of them unpleasant. Without thinking, Pomfrey smoothed the wrinkled white blanket bunched around his shoulders.



PERSONAL NOTES: LATER—

The dizziness passed. I opened my eyes, expecting to find myself back in the sickroom. Instead, I was sitting on a soft bed, my back against large pillows plumped up behind me. Lamplight cast a dim, intimate glow, making the rest of the room hard to see. But the outlines looked suspiciously familiar. Then I became aware of someone lying beside me, covered by the duvet. The figure stirred, and before I could draw back, a pale sinewy arm emerged and lazily draped itself over my thighs.

'Bloody hell.' I leapt off the bed, my skin crawling.

'Gwen?' The duvet shifted. The man beneath it pushed long black hair away from his face and then propped himself on his elbows, peering at me.

Severus. Exactly as he'd looked after we'd made love at the Hotel Elysian. I shivered.

'Why on earth are you standing over there?' he said, and except for the unusual mildness of his tone, he even sounded like Severus.

I looked around and found myself unsurprised that the room resembled the one we'd shared in the Hotel Elysian. Though relieved that the dark man hadn't conjured up a Death Eater rape gang, I distrusted this memory-echo of a night when Severus and I had each opened ourselves to the possibility

the dark man

of joy and then, sadly, closed ourselves again. Clearly the dark man was still trying to manipulate me.

Then I noticed it: not a presence, but an absence that made my heart almost stop.

No Dumbledore. No Ethelwyn.

I couldn't see anything beyond this room except darkness. But I could see clearly in my mind's eye the Healer's sober grey eyes and hear the echo of her warning: "Don't stray out of my sight. Ever. For any reason. You'll need my power even just to get out of here, let alone get Severus and bring him back."

'Severus,' I managed, my heart feeling as if it were jumping up my throat. 'I—erm—just need to leave for a few minutes.' I hoped I sounded plausible. 'I'll be right back.' With reinforcements. Even as I spoke, I gathered my will and imagined sending an arrow of thought out, away into the darkness around me: PROFESSOR DUMBLEDORE! ETHELWYN TRICKETT! I'M HERE! QUICKLY! QUICKLY!

'Leave? No, Gwen. You can't leave. I want to talk to you.' The Severus-image sat up fully, pushed the duvet down to his naked waist, and started to get out of bed. I backed away. Fast.

'Yes, of course we'll talk,' I said, keeping my voice calm. 'In a few minutes. I promise I'll be right back.'

the dark man



You don't need to get out of bed, really.'

'Why not?' The Severus-image smiled as he got out of bed and stood before me, his hair falling around his face, his eyes gleaming and—yes, I must say as well, his cock splendidly erect. I tried not to look at him.

'I want you, Gwen. Not the girl you once were, but you.' He held out his hands. 'Come. We were happy here. Why don't you stay with me?' His voice was deeper than night.

I'd like to think that if he hadn't said another word, I'd still have summoned the strength to resist him. But I'm honestly not sure. Part of me knew that his tempting offer—to stay with him, to lie back into that bed with him—would have meant death for him and me. But bloody hell—I was going to die anyway. So why not take those few steps forward, let him wrap me in sweet darkness, and damn to everlasting entropy my self-appointed "mission"? I can't begin to say how much I wanted that. I felt my whole body vibrating with lust... but maybe I was lusting for death as much as, if not more than, my lover's touch.

What saved me was a tactical error. For in the next moment, this image of Severus felt he had to add, in the same silkily confident tone with which the dark man had tried to seduce my Hermione-self, 'I love you, Gwen. Here and only here, I can tell you



that. Only the truth will serve in this place.'

'He's a powerful Legilimens, remember,' I could almost hear Ethelwyn saying to me. 'He knows exactly what you want to hear.'

Deep within me a force stirred: not sexual desire but a kind of anger, borne on the back of that sleek, sinuous power Ethelwyn had shared with me earlier—that strong force I'd invoked to comfort and defend the child trapped by terror in the bedroom. Though disarmed, I was not without resources.

DUMBLEDORE! ETHELWYN! I stopped trying to send precise arrows of thought and imagined I was a singularity radiating I'MHERE! I'MHERE! I'MHERE!, a relentless force of gravity I hoped would pull my lost companions to me.

'Don't go,' Severus said, noticing my slow step backward. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. I want you. I'm like a parched man who's had one sip of sweet water. I want more, much more,' and he began to move toward me.

I know it sounds absurd to imply that facing a naked man I'd dreamed about for years—a naked man in a fever of grandiloquence and physical arousal—could suddenly seem the stuff of nightmares. But I knew, I just knew, that if he touched me or even came much closer to me I'd be lost, lost





within his mind, unable to help him or help myself.

And that wasn't why I travelled so far into the past and signed my own death warrant in the process.

'I'd like to believe you,' I said, raising my chin. 'But I doubt the Snape I once knew would ever say such things.' Calling it 'rubbish' seemed unkind as well as dangerous.

He hesitated, and I took another very slow step backwards.

'THAT Snape is pathetic,' he finally said. 'He has closed himself completely. He might as well be in chains in Azkaban.' His tone dripped contempt.

'Oh for Merlin's sake, what are you ranting about now?' came a peevish and all-too-familiar voice from the darkness. I had neither the time nor the energy to be astonished when another Snape stepped into the light. This mental image wore the usual black teaching robe, and his hair, as I remembered it years ago, straggled limp and uncared-for around his sallow face. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw his naked doppelganger.

'For fuck's sake,' he said in disgust, 'can't you at least COVER yourself? Here—' He unfastened his robe, shrugged it off—revealing black trousers and a dark green waistcoat over a white and slightly



wrinkled shirt—and tossed it over to his other self, who caught it one-handed.

'Why? It's your own body, you repressed bastard,' Severus retorted, but he draped the robe around his shoulders nonetheless.

I cannot even begin to describe how bizarre it felt to be facing two Snapes. But I could also understand why this might be happening, since I'd been thinking of Snape and of Severus as two distinct personalities before Ethelwyn plunged us into the Pensieve.

'Have you considered,' Snape said, his voice cold and deadly, 'that while you've been shagging your brains out in this lovely little room, I've been trying to FIGHT the enemy?'

'And have you considered,' Severus spat back, pulling the robe tighter around him, 'that the harder you try to fight this thing, the deeper you dig your own grave? In case you've forgotten—' he flung a hand out toward me '—SHE'S here. If you endanger us, you endanger her too.'

Snape shot me a cool look. 'She's irrelevant. What's she even DOING here?'

I decided I'd had enough of being ignored by two Snapes. 'As long as you believe you have to fight the





enemy alone, without help, you'll lose, Professor,' I said quietly. 'This is my fight as well.' Even as I spoke, it seemed another voice echoed within me. The power was there; I could feel it, and it gave me hope. But without the Healer's guidance, I had no idea how to use it.

'Listen to her!' said Severus to his doppelganger. 'We need her, you idiot. Have you any idea what she could mean to us?'

'We're in this mess to begin with because he found out you were shagging her. Bloody hell, even Lupin knew it!' Snape hissed. 'Why didn't you just take out an advert in the DAILY PROPHECY?' He took a menacing step toward his double. 'I warned you. You knew it would make you vulnerable in HIS eyes. But did you listen? Did you even THINK?'

'Perhaps I'm not quite as terrified of him as you are,' Severus said furiously.

'You pathetic, fucking, cowardly bastard,' Snape whispered. 'You have no right to speak. You have no right to even exist. I've lost count of the times I've risked my life, while you—you loll around thinking you're entitled to more than mere survival!' He bared yellow teeth. 'Well you AREN'T!'

I had to do something to break this appalling ten-



sion between them. I took a careful step toward the Snapes, who by now were standing almost nose-to-beak-nose, glaring horribly at each other. 'Professor,' I said, keeping my tone low and reasonable. 'Why do you say that?'

He twisted his head to eye me. 'Because he has much to atone for.'

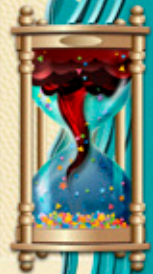
'And you don't?' Severus said in a low voice, his eyes glittering. 'And are you really so eager to die for him? Do you honestly believe he'd give a rat's arse if you DID die? You're disposable.'

'He thinks that about every one of his Death Eaters, you spineless piece of shit.'

'I don't mean HIM, you idiot. I mean Dumbledore.'

In the thick silence that followed, I took another step forward. 'You're both idiots,' I said. As two identical faces turned toward me in shock, I added, 'And if either one of you so much as raises a hand or your voice again, to each other or to me, I promise you'll regret it.' Severus opened his mouth, and I slashed my right hand savagely through the air. 'NO. YOU LISTEN!'

Now this part is unexplainable. I don't quite understand how I knew what to say, but the words rose out of me like air, like light, and they echoed with power. 'Dumbledore is not the enemy. Think!





Has he pitted the two of you against each other? Why would he do that? He's here too; he's trying to find us, trying to help you. But as long as you keep fighting each other, the enemy will win. You're playing right into his hands.'

'And what gives you such special insight, you insolent Gryffindor?' Snape said cuttingly.

I raised my chin and gazed first into Snape's hostile eyes, and then into Severus's opaque ones. You. You've opened me in ways I never expected. Not just you, as a lover—to Severus, who couldn't quite hide a smirk—but you as well—to Snape, who pulled his head back in surprise and disquiet.

'I would never, I will never use a student like that,' he said.

'How flattering, but I'm just a tad too old now to be your student. I mean you opened me intellectually. You pushed me without mercy at Hogwarts because you knew what I was capable of. There were many times I hated you for it. But there were times—' I swallowed and kept my gaze steadily on Snape—'when I may have loved you for it. Especially near the end, before—before...'

'Before I died,' said Snape baldly. 'For a tactless Gryffindor, you have an astonishing amount of trouble



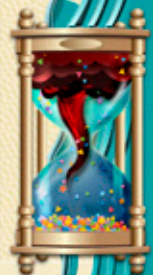
speaking plainly about some things. I remember our entire bizarre little conversation. "There's something you don't yet know. Something about you," I believe you said, and I responded on cue: "Did I die in your version of the future?" It wasn't exceptionally difficult to guess. We're at war, or about to be, and I'm playing the Great Game full-time. Even a first-year could have predicted I'd be killed sooner or later.'

'Don't forget the bit about saving Harry Potter's life,' Severus said, his tone almost amused.

Snape grimaced. 'Another good reason to stay right where we are. Let the Potter brat fight his own battles.' He took a deep breath, folded his arms, and glared at me. 'What's the point in stumbling through the dark with you in a fruitless attempt to go—where? And why? I—or we—are going to die either way. I choose to stand my ground here.'

I lost my patience. 'You don't have to die at ALL, you stubborn bastard!' I yelled. Each Snape took a startled step backward, but I was too furious to relish that brief moment of power. 'Have you forgotten why I came back to Hogwarts? To save your life and as many others as I can! How dare you throw away that chance! How dare you!'

The Snapes stood absolutely still. The silence felt



so thick I could hardly breathe.

When I spoke again, my words didn't rise up like air or light; they dropped into the darkness around us like stones. 'You can't win any fights here. You have to come with me (AND DUMBLEDORE AND THE HEALER, WHERE ARE YOU? I'MHERE!MHERE!MHERE) back outside, because you know perfectly well—' to Snape—'that that's where the real fight is, and—' to Severus—'that's where you have a chance for a life which is more than mere survival.'

'And if I don't...?' said Severus, his voice as soft as silk on skin.

'Why wouldn't you if you love me? unless you're lying about that,' I threw back at him.

'Of course he is, you foolish girl,' Snape muttered. 'He lies constantly.'

'But to answer your question,' I said, facing Severus squarely, 'if you choose not to come back with me, I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU.'

'What?' said Severus.

'I'll stay here with you. I lost you once. I'm not going to lose you again.'

'Even if it means your death as well?' said Severus, sounding shaken.

'What about all those lives you want to save? Giving up, are you?' Snape sneered.

'You should know me better than that, Professor. Whatever choice you make, I refuse to abandon you.'

'It's HIM you don't want to abandon,' said Snape bitterly, pointing at Severus, who shook his head, looking stunned.

'I will abandon neither of you. But please listen: we have no chance—NONE—to defeat our enemy if we stay here. If you come with me, if you follow me back outside, then we have a chance, we could still win. You must realise that!'

'I—I wish I could,' said Severus, his expression agonised. 'As soon as we try to leave—'

'Wait!' Snape hissed. 'Do you hear something?' I followed his pointing finger into the dark. Something stirred out there, and I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck. As my fingers groped for a wand I didn't have, a little boy with cropped black hair walked into the dim light, wearing nothing but underclothes and trailing a grey blanket. When he saw me, he stopped dead for a moment and then rushed over to me, letting the blanket drop as he threw his thin arms around my waist. I cupped one hand around his crop-haired, fuzzy head and with my



other, tilted his chin up.

'What are you doing here?' I said softly, trying not to show my shock. 'You're supposed to be asleep in your room.'

'I woke up, and I was scared. I came to find you.' 'Still trying to get away from the dark man, you poor little toad?' said Snape, with acidic pity. 'It won't work.' 'Shut—the fuck—up,' Severus hissed. 'With that attitude you might as well curl up and die right now!'

'Feel perfectly free to curl up and die yourself, you pathetic bastard,' Snape said, furious. 'Don't you understand what's happening? We're being **INVADED**. Don't you see that?'

Then the little boy still clinging to me began to shake. 'I don't want to, I don't want to,' I heard him mutter. 'Nonononono...' I held him, and I knew something terrible was about to happen, and I wasn't at all sure I could handle it. So not for one second did I stop radiating my mental scream to Dumbledore and Ethelwyn, though it felt as meaningless as a dying star in a burnt-out galaxy, shedding a dull light no one would ever see.

Someone or something heard me.

But it wasn't either one of my companions.

the dark man

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

fragmentation



ALL I CAN DETERMINE,' said Dumbledore, frowning in concentration, 'is that she isn't far away.' He almost absently patted his right sleeve, where he'd tucked Hawking's wand.

The wizard and the Healer were still in the tapestry room. The glowing logs in the grotesque fireplace had burned down almost to coals. Darkness pressed in around them.

'Well that's a mercy,' Ethelwyn muttered. 'If we can find Gwen within the next few minutes, there's a chance we won't lose our connection to the Pensieve.' The Healer was tracing a complex pattern of symbols against the only wall that didn't sport one of the hideous memory-tapestries. The symbols glowed a faint electric blue. Dumbledore looked at them closely, struck by their resemblance to the outlines of human figures.

'A Finding spell?' he asked softly.

'Better'n that. A Rummaging spell.' She grinned at Dumbledore's bemused expression. 'A thorough search. It was one of the first charms I ever learned, since the brothers were always bucking me stuff.' Her smile fading, she connected the figures with curved



lines. 'Gwen's not the only one out there we need to find, and fast. She has others around her now, and it's getting worse for her by the minute, I fear.'

'Others?'

'Aspects of Severus. I'm convinced that trying to fight Voldemort's compulsion has fragmented his personality. I feel them out there, Albus—milling around, hopeless, but mighty venomy.'

Dumbledore's brows drew down. 'And Hermione's contending against all these—fragments.'

'I think so. I've lent her some power, but unless we get to her, she won't be able to stand against 'em. Not for long, anyway.'

'And if we don't find her, she'll be trapped here,' said Dumbledore softly. 'She won't be able to get out.'

'One thing at a time,' Ethelwyn muttered, concentrating on her spell.



PERSONAL NOTES: 26? OCTOBER

(IT MUST BE BY NOW)

No, it wasn't Dumbledore or Ethelwyn who emerged from the darkness.

Only Voldemort would have been a worse sight.

'Well, well. Isn't this lovely. *Toute la famille, encore ensemble.*' The tall woman pushed dark hair away from her face, revealing large black eyes, angular cheekbones, and a smile like the curved blade of a scimitar.

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Her resemblance to Snape made me catch my breath.

'Mother.' Snape's voice was flat with disbelief. Severus pulled his borrowed robe even more tightly around himself and said, sounding strangled—'What are YOU doing here?' The child turned his head to look at her but kept his arms locked around me.

She laughed low in her throat. 'I live here, obviously, just as you do. But I can see I should have asserted my presence well before now.' Her gaze turned on me. 'I mean—dear lord—what am I supposed to think about your association with this—creature?'

'She is not—' began Severus indignantly. Snape cut him off. 'I'M not with her! HE is!'

The dark woman's face grew ugly as she looked me over. 'She's the worst kind of Mudblood. An uppity one. A know-it-all.' Suddenly she took two swift steps toward me: the child, stifling a shriek, buried his face in my waist. I shielded the child's head with one hand and braced myself.

'How dare you touch my son? How dare you contaminate him?' she hissed, and her eyes were as flat and pitiless as those of a snake. She raised her right hand. 'IMPERIO! Release him!'

'No!' the child cried out as, against my will, I felt my hands relax. 'No!' At the same moment Severus,

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shouting 'REFERIO!', leapt between me and the thing resembling his mother, his right hand pointing at her, and my terrible compulsion to obey her drained away.

For a moment, Severus and the dark woman glared at each other. Then she twisted her mouth in an ironic smile.

'Very quick to defend her, aren't you? How disappointing,' she said in that low, beautiful voice I'd heard back in the child's bedchamber. 'But why should I be surprised? Look at you.' Her black gaze swung to Snape. 'You'll soon be forty, but what have you done with your life? Your betters know which side to choose. How much longer do you think you can keep playing your foolish game? You're doomed to fail, my little man.'

'Don't listen to her,' Severus said, his voice low and tense.

'Fine.' The voice took on a biting edge. 'Don't listen. You're used to being a failure, aren't you, son? You're used to being left out. Rejected. Could that be why the only woman who'll look at you isn't worthy of cleaning your cauldrons?'

I know: I should have been bristling with anger. But sometimes a prudent silence is the better part of valour.

'You truly are a monster, aren't you?' Snape matched her contemptuous gaze, but I heard the strain in his voice.

'ME? You obviously don't remember your father very well, do you?' Her voice fell to a whisper. 'You don't, I suppose, remember the shouting. The times he hurt you. The times he hurt me.'

'I remember him.' Severus's voice cracked. 'I remember being in my room...'

'I was in my room,' the child wrapped around me said softly, and his arms loosened slightly from my waist. 'There was a dark man. He was always looking for me.' He met the woman's gaze for the first time. 'You told me that if I stayed in my room, I'd be safe.'

'I tried, my little man. I tried to keep you safe.' Her beautiful voice grew ragged, and she put a hand out toward the child.

'Don't let her touch you!' Severus's voice cracked like a whip, and Snape stepped back from the woman to shield the child. Her lips drew back from her lovely white teeth.

'You idiot,' she hissed at Snape. 'Don't you see it's not me you need to be afraid of?' She flung an arm out toward the darkness. 'He's coming for you. He's coming, and there's not a damned thing you can do about it.'

'What do you mean?' Severus stepped forward, white-faced, eyes blazing.

'The enemy,' said Snape, sounding strangled. And



at that exact moment, an unearthly howl surged out of the darkness toward us. It was a sound so alien, so terrifyingly lonely that I stopped breathing, and the little boy jammed his face into my stomach.

'It's the dark man!' he whimpered, and I wrapped my arms around him.

'We won't let him get you, I promise,' I told the boy. Snape gave me a bleak, white-eyed look.

The shivering howl sounded again, closer this time. The dim light marking the boundary between this room and the darkness beyond shaded to the colour of clotted blood. Snape groped for his wand.

I'm competent with basic wandless spells, but all my state-of-the-art defence techniques require a wand.

And I had none.



'This—fragmentation of personality. You've encountered it before,' said Dumbledore as the Healer stepped back a bit from the wall on which she'd preparing her Rummaging spell. She threw him a sharp look, but said nothing.

'The first time you encountered it,' Dumbledore added softly, 'was the day Gavin Tregarth's mind was lost.'

Ethelwyn leaned one hand against the wall. 'You don't hold that against me as well, do you Albus?'

'You know I don't. But Ethelwyn—' Dumbledore



stepped close to her and placed his hands on her silver-green-covered shoulders. She raised her head reluctantly, stormy eyes meeting sober blue. 'I'm counting on your having made advances in your research since that day. Consider: when he disappeared from St. Mungo's in 1955, Voldemort stole all the knowledge you and Gavin had accumulated. And he's had more than forty years since to build on it. I'm convinced that's one reason why he's been able to reach out to Harry Potter.'

'What are you saying, Albus?'

'To take on these fragments of Severus's personality and piece them back together could be like challenging Voldemort himself, in all his power.'

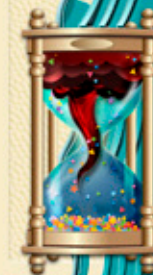
Ethelwyn stared back at Albus, her dark grey eyes level. 'I think I already knew that, Albus,' she said at last. 'But—' she suddenly grinned '—It's not over 'til it's over, is it? So let's stop fretting and get busy. I want us to invoke this Rummaging spell together to boost its power.'

'I'd assumed as much, Ethelwyn,' said Dumbledore, letting his hands fall from her shoulders. 'Any time you're ready.'

Two wand-tips rose.

'Now,' said the Healer, and a circle of silver fire began weaving around the traced human figures. Two voices in unison summoned guidance; two minds listened, poised and waiting, as the sketched figures on the wall pulsed with light.

'I hear her!' Ethelwyn exclaimed, whilst at the same time Dumbledore caught his breath and tilted



his head. 'She's calling our names, over and over,' he muttered. 'But from *where*, exactly?'

Ethelwyn held her wand up high. 'Lumos Exploro.' In the sharp silver light, the memory-tapestries on the other walls looked threadbare and a bit ridiculous.

'Follow me,' she said softly.

'Do you know where to go?'

'I bloody well hope so.'

Behind them the glowing human outlines dimmed, and the memory-tapestries drowned in darkness.



PERSONAL NOTES (my last clear memories about the Pensieve journey)

I remember several things happening before all hell and chaos broke loose.

I remember my stunned relief when Dumbledore and Ethelwyn emerged from the void and barrelled into our faux hotel room, silver light blazing from the healer's wand-tip. I'd given up all hope that they'd find me, and all I could do was stare at them, my mouth hanging open. Ethelwyn, sounding breathless, asked me if I was all right. Dumbledore gave me a quick, warm smile. 'Hermione—yours, I believe,' he said, handing my wand to me with an almost courtly gesture and, still stunned, I took it.

And I remember thinking: our chances of surviving have just improved.

fragmentation

Then Dumbledore noticed the cluster of Snapes standing nearby. His sandy eyebrows rose.

'My, my,' said Ethelwyn, following Dumbledore's gaze. 'I think it's high time we got this kitchen party underway.'

'This—what? Just who the hell are YOU?' Snape demanded.

'She's a healer, obviously,' said the dark-haired image of Snape's mother. 'And, it seems, a pure-blood.' Her mouth twisted. 'Of sorts.'

'Yes, I'm a healer,' said Ethelwyn to the dark woman, 'and if we weren't so pressed for time, I'd be happy to yammer on about my pedigree too. Now please, all of you—' she swept her arm at Severus, Snape, and the image of their mother—'stand behind me. Now!' Something in her voice brooked no argument, and the Snapes, exchanging surprised glances, obeyed her. 'The child too,' Ethelwyn added, her voice gentler, and before I could protest that he wouldn't let go of me, the healer placed one hand on top of his fuzzy black head, lowered her head, and blew into his ear. Unbelievably he laughed, and his grip on me loosened.

'Go to your mother,' Ethelwyn whispered. 'Go on, my dear.' She took his thin little shoulders and steered him toward the dark-haired woman, who reached out

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almost hungrily and wound her white arms around him.

'I never wanted you to be hurt,' she whispered down at the child's cropped scalp. 'I only wanted to keep you safe.'

'That wasn't enough,' said Severus, his tone bleak. He didn't look at her.

'On the contrary, it was too bloody much,' growled Snape.

From within the circle of his mother's arms, the child looked up at Severus once and then at Snape, his gaze level and considered.

'Albus. Gwen. Are you ready?' said Ethelwyn.

'For what?' My lips were dry.

'That's for me to worry about. You just protect THEM.' She jerked her chin at the collection of Snapes. 'But whatever you do, don't let even ONE of 'em out of your sight.'

That terrible scream echoed again from the darkness, and everyone—even Dumbledore—froze, and I remembered that night back in my third year, when Lupin transformed into werewolf form on our way back from the Shrieking Shack. That howl had haunted my dreams for months after. I thought I knew then what horror sounded like. But this was much worse, oh much worse. How can I describe it? Like an army of blunt, bleeding fingernails scrap-

ing across an endless blackboard. Like a screaming nightmare of falling. Like a lungful of fire.

The thin boundary of blood-red light around our faux hotel room grew more intense. Just beyond that ghastly light—only feet away from us—a core of profound darkness rose up like a cobra. At that moment Dumbledore shouted—'YOU SHALL NOT ENTER!' Deep green fire shot from the tip of his wand, and as that fire struck the edge of that solid darkness, it exploded into dozens of small, snarling attack-wards. They covered the entire floor in front of us: a crawling mass of scales, teeth, and claws.

I remember thinking—I really ought to sit down with the headmaster when all this is over and compare hexes—while automatically throwing a Protego Maximus shield around the cluster of Snapes and me.

'No!' I heard Snape yell. 'I can't fight from behind your shield, you stupid cow!'

'Fuck you!' I yelled back. Ungrateful bastard. I expanded my shield, trying to cover Ethelwyn as well. But the spell bounced off her as she whirled to face Dumbledore, her face furious.

'Get rid of those bloody attack-wards, damn it!' she shouted, her eyes blazing. 'Defend! That's all! Just DEFEND!'



'Defences alone won't protect us!' said Dumbledore, his voice rough with effort and anger.

'Albus.' Ethelwyn visibly took control of her temper. 'I'm sorry. But listen to me. It—or he—must enter this circle. He **MUST**.'

'Him?'

'The dark man.' Severus's lips were white.

'He-Who-Thinks-Is-Serve-Him.' Snape's eyes glittered.

Ethelwyn nodded. 'He must be confronted. It's the only way.'

'Ethelwyn, are you sure?' The anger had left Dumbledore's voice. For a moment his wand wavered, and the attack-wards began milling around in confusion. Just beyond them, the dark shape grew larger and more solid. The entire room was bathed in blood-red light.

'What makes you think it won't just kill us?' spat Snape. 'Or you, Healer?'

'And what makes you think you can stand up to his magic? You, with your provincial little spells?' Snape's mother hissed. 'I tried for years. Years! He beat me down. He beat Severus down. And he'll beat you down... **HEALER**.'

'He must enter.' Ethelwyn's voice took on a dangerous edge, like the low growl of a predator. For just a moment, I wondered whom I should fear more:

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the thing closing in on us from the darkness, or this stoutish, silver-haired Healer. Snape's mother took a step back from Ethelwyn's grey, level gaze, pulling the child with her.

'Now—' Ethelwyn turned back to Dumbledore and me. 'Get rid of the attack-wards, but keep up the defences.'

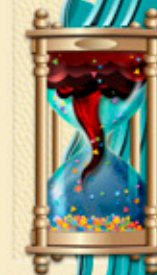
The ward-creatures vanished. As Dumbledore added his strength to my *Protego Maximus*, Ethelwyn faced the dark. Perhaps the power she had lent me earlier helped me sense the uncanny force now uncoiling from her: a force as tense and supple as a giant cat lying in wait, slit-eyed and deadly, for its prey. I glanced at Dumbledore. His bright blue eyes glowed, and I realised he felt that strange, supple power as well.

I remember thinking: can she stand against the Dark?
Or does she only think she can?

Then Ethelwyn raised her wand. '**INLUSTRIO OBSCURUS!**' As her voice filled the room, blue light blazed, arcing into the darkness, blinding me. I felt, I heard, a terrible wind around us, dry as dust, a famine-wind blowing over a battlefield, lifting white sand that blew, hissing, between sprawled bodies, and carrying along with it the cries of the dying and the dead.

Those voices were calling my name.

fragmentation



That's all I can remember. I can't write any more.



'No!' shouts Snape as the great dark column rears up before him. He's suddenly alone. Where are the others? Where's the circle of defences?

Where's Dumbledore? *Where's the fucking Healer?*

And then you died. Hawking's words come back to him, and he realises that time has come.

'But I'll bloody well take you with me,' he spits at the dark column, as it shrinks and coalesces before him into the shape of a tall, thin, black-hooded figure. Its face is invisible, but the eyes glow dull crimson. Snape raises his wand, mustering all his will and every ounce of his hatred.

'Avada Ke—'

'Expelliarmus!' The wand flies out of Snape's hand and clatters to the floor. He only now notices that the Hotel Elysian is gone. This place is cold, stony, and damp, and for a second he can't place it.

Oh, yes. He remembers it now. This is where he first saw Voldemort demonstrate his new weapon on poor old Bletchley.

He makes himself look into the reptilian eyes of the tall black shape before him. If he's going to die, he's bloody well not going to go out like a coward.

'Such a pity you'd rather destroy yourself in a stupid attempt to resist me than simply do as I ask.' The dark man's low, hissing voice holds a hint of amusement. 'But then, you never were a true Death

Eater, were you? Or even a follower? How could you be, when you play both sides? How could you be, when you love a Muddblood? And you *do* love her, don't you? You're not just pretending to use her.'

'Just get this over with,' Snape growls.

The dark figure's laughter makes Snape want to stop his ears.

'Oh, your death won't be quick or painless, my dear Professor Snape. I'm going to turn your mind to ashes, and as you burn, you'll have time to relive and regret every single mistake, every betrayal, every failure. It's about time someone put you out of your misery.' The dark man raises both arms. An arc of light leaps between each outstretched hand and forms into a ball of writhing blood-coloured energy.

'CARBORUN—'

'Contineo!' The clear, carrying voice comes from behind him. A jet of bright aquamarine speeds toward the dark man, pouring itself around the writhing ball like water. Snape turns, stunned, to see Gwen Hawking standing there, her face pale and wan and her upraised wand pulsing with that bright light. She has Snape's wand as well, which she holds out to him.

'Take it. *Take it!* I can't do this alone,' she says. Snape takes the wand with numb fingers.

'It's impossible to defend against this curse,' he manages.

'This is *your* mind, Professor. You control what happens here. You don't have to die unless you want to. Do you want to?'

'I—well—'

'Veritas!' Hawking commands, her brown eyes boring into his, and Snape feels a strange shock pass through him.

'No. Not particularly,' he says in a low voice.

'Then let's deal with this thing.'

'There is no spell to deal with it,' Snape says, his voice bleak.

'And even if you knew one, it wouldn't work,' the dark man laughs, as the ball of writhing crimson struggles against the aquamarine light that barely contains it. 'You don't have the power. You'll fail, as you've failed at everything!'

'You know the spell,' Hawking insists. 'You've known it since the night at the Hotel Elysian.'

He stares at her.

She must mean the Carborundorum remedy. But that's impossible. It's not ready yet. As Snape opens his mouth to tell her that, Ethelwyn Trickett steps into view from behind Hawking.

'Where the hell have *you* been?' He disguises his relief with a snarl.

'Gwen's on the right track.' Trickett acts as if he hasn't spoken. 'You do know the answer. But this darkness is old and strong, Snape, and it'll take more power than the two of you can muster to put it in its place.'

'Damn it!' Hawking's wand-arm, still extended, begins to shake, and her lips draw back from her teeth. The writhing ball of Death-by-Fire seems to swell in the figure's shadowy hands, crimson slowly eating up aquamarine.

'Do something!' Snape yells at Trickett. To his

bafflement, she turns her back on the crimson ball to face cleaner darkness, and with her wand casts a circle of golden light.

'I hope you're ready now,' she says, beckoning to someone Snape cannot see. 'Because we need you.'



Dumbledore, suddenly alone in the dark, hears a soft sound behind him and whirls.

'Sejanus Snape,' he says levelly to the tall, florid-faced man who stands nearby, arms folded. Dull crimson light pulses around him. 'Why am I not surprised?'

'You said you'd relish the thought of encountering me, Albus. So here I am. What can I do for you? Besides let you destroy me, of course.'

'What makes you think I intend to destroy you?' says Dumbledore mildly.

'Then—what? A cosy chat? I should let you know' Sejanus waves a hand at Dumbledore's wand, now aimed squarely at Sejanus's large, hooked nose—'that foolish wand-waving won't work on me.' He bares his teeth. 'This is my place, and I control it.'

'No you don't. *I* control it.' The dark woman, holding her crop-haired child by the hand, emerges from the dark. She tosses a mocking look at Dumbledore. 'How sad your provincial friend couldn't join us, Albus.'

'I wouldn't assume that,' says Dumbledore in a mild tone, not relaxing his grip on his wand for a moment.

'Well, well,' says Sejanus with a slow smile, and the child shrinks back against his mother. 'If it isn't my lovely wife. And my little pride and joy.'

She unlaces her fingers from the child's and steps almost close enough to Sejanus to touch him. He raises his hand—in threat or defence; it's impossible to tell. But she doesn't flinch.

'You treated me like shit, Sejanus,' she whispers.

'And you betrayed and humiliated me, Gabriella,' he flings back.

'You terrorised our son! You had no right to do that!' she shouts.

'You smothered him. You set him up for failure at every turn! *You* had no right to do *that!*'

The child folds to the ground, wrapping his arms around his knees.

'Pax!' Dumbledore's wand slices down, and the two draw back, startled, from the wall of shimmering, silky light now appearing between them.

'Stop this.' Severus steps into the dim reddish light. Instead of Snape's borrowed robe, he is now wearing a black shirt and trousers, and his hair is tied back neatly. He looks down at the huddled child, hesitates, and stoops to place his hand on the boy's dark fuzzy head.

Then he looks up at the images of his parents. 'Why do you keep fighting?' he asks them wearily. 'What's the point? You both died years ago.'

'Because that's how you best remember us,' said Sejanus, his tone bitter.

'Because we have unfinished business,' Gabriella snaps at Severus.

'Because you don't know how to do anything else, damn you!' Severus shouts, straightening, and the

child stifles a sob. Sejanus smirks at his son. Severus, his face contorted with hate, rounds on Dumbledore.

'So much for helping me,' he hisses. 'So much for being on my side.'

'Severus,' says the old wizard softly.

'What are you doing here anyway? Aren't you supposed to be defending us? Or at least defending Gwen? Oh—wait. No, of course not. You're the great leader. You're the chess master. *You're* the one' Severus closes in on Dumbledore—'who sends children out to die.'

'Severus.' Dumbledore's voice is barely above a whisper.

His face white with anger, Severus raises both hands and forks his fingers at his parents and Dumbledore in an irrational and ancient ward against evil. '*Extermino!*'

For a moment, no one moves.

'That spell won't work, I'm afraid.' It's the Healer's voice. Everyone stares as Trickett crouches beside the cowering child and, wrapping him in her arms, looks at Severus, Sejanus, and Gabriella with a faint, sad smile. 'Many's the time I wished I could've used it on the chuckleheaded brothers, but you can't just banish your family, can you?'

'Where were you? And who the hell are you to tell me I can't banish them?' Severus rages. 'They're despicable!'

'And since we're nothing but a part of you now—since, as you so delicately put it, we're dead—then what does that make you, little man?' Gabriella's low, beautiful voice is edged with poison, and her black eyes glitter. Severus stares at her, appalled.

'Well, well.' Sejanus chuckles, a sound like bones rattling. 'Nothing like self-loathing, is there? No wonder you prefer to lurk in the dungeons like a rat.'

'*Silencio!*' Dumbledore thunders, and Sejanus opens and closes his mouth, fury in his bloodshot eyes. 'And you, Gabriella. Beware.' The old wizard's voice is soft again, but far too dangerous for her to ignore. She falls back, baring her teeth like an animal.

Dumbledore faces Trickett, who has coaxed the child to his feet and now rises to hers.

'Where is Gwen?' the wizard asks. 'And—er—Snape?'

Trickett sighs and rakes a hand through her spiky white hair.

'They're with me, and we're still holding the enemy at bay, but not for much longer.'

'What?' Severus looks baffled as well as angry. 'What do you mean—with you? You're here!'

Trickett looks at him, and then at Sejanus and Gabriella. Her expression is not happy. 'This isn't going quite the way I planned,' she says. 'Gwen and Snape are out there—' she flings a hand out at the darkness surrounding them '—trying to fight for their lives, and I'm trying to help them. But they're not powerful enough to save him, not even with me at their side. They need you, too—the parents and the child.' She shakes her head sadly at the figures of Severus's parents. 'You've truly been despicable—to each other and to the child there. The only thing that redeems you, even a bit, is that long ago, you once loved each other. And there were moments when you loved your son as well. Before your lives became poisoned.'

'I did love my son. I still do. I only want him to be safe,' Gabriella finally whispers.

'I never meant to hurt you,' said Sejanus, not quite looking at his wife. 'Or Severus. But I—couldn't help it.'

'And you'd do it again, wouldn't you?' hisses Severus, his lips pulling back from his teeth.

'Severus,' says Trickett. 'Listen to me. Right here, right now, your life depends on whether you can look your parents in the face now and forgive them.'

'What? Fuck that. Fuck them.'

'They're part of you,' Trickett insists. 'If you can't forgive them, then you can't forgive yourself. And if you can't forgive yourself, you'll die. The hate will devour you.'

'...does *thy* life destroy,' says Dumbledore softly.

'What does all this matter? Gwen's out there alone! WHY ARE WE JUST STANDING HERE?'

The Healer's voice lashes at him. 'Because you're not yet ready to help her! If you can't forgive—if you can't finally accept that your atonement is over and done with—you are powerless.'

Severus, shocked into silence, stares at the floor. No one moves or speaks.

'Well, my son,' says Trickett after a long moment. 'You're the chess master now. It's your move.'



Without words, Severus Snape reaches up and takes his mother's hand. She looks down at him, eyes brimming with tears, and squeezes his hand three times quickly—*I love you*—the secret signal

they shared when he was very young. A shadow falls on him. He stares without flinching into his father's face as the big dark man goes down on one knee before him, eyes level with his face, and extends his hand palm up in the ancient gesture of peace. After a moment, Severus Snape lets his fingers touch his father's lightly. His father bows his head.



Snape takes a long, slow breath of wonder. He's not sure how it happened, or when, but everyone is here, gathered in the Healer's golden circle of light: Dumbledore, Severus, and the child. The little boy is standing straight, his face fearless, holding hands with his mother—and his father, chaos blast his heart. At the sight of the demon whose anger haunted his childhood, Snape's hand tightens on his wand, and he closes his eyes, seeing crimson behind his lids.

'No, my boy,' says Dumbledore, and Snape feels a hand on his shoulder. 'That won't work. Hatred only makes *him* stronger.'

'And us weaker.' His father's voice. Snape's eyes fly open. It's Sejanus's hand on his shoulder, not Dumbledore's. Snape forces himself not to recoil.

He looks into the eyes of the hook-nosed wizard. He sees no demon, no dark thing. Only an aging, damaged man, his eyes shadowed with regret.

'Over and done with,' a voice whispers, and Snape looks sharply at the speaker. It's Severus, standing a bit farther away, his arms folded and his expression a strange mix of irony and sadness.

'Hatred has no place here,' says the Healer. Though her voice is low, it echoes with power, like the tolling of a great bell. 'Now—Severus Sejanus Gabriel Snape. Do you want to live?'

Snape has trouble speaking. 'What must I do?' he finally whispers.

'When you're in darkness, what spell enables you to see?'

His lips move. '*Inlumino Veritas...*' he whispers. His wand-tip flares aquamarine and he feels a jolt of power—a clean, wholesome power beyond his experience. It infuses him with energy. Before them, the tall rearing shape of darkness seems to ripple as if a great force is pressing in on it.

But the writhing crimson light it holds pulses as powerfully as ever.

'Not enough,' murmurs the Healer.

Black-clad Severus moves to Snape's side, reaching for Hawking's wand-hand. He wraps his fingers around her thin wrist, almost cradling her arm. Her eyes meet his, widening, and the desperate lines in her face soften. '*Flamma Ardoris,*' says Severus, smiling faintly. Aquamarine lights leaps down Hawking's wand and wraps itself around Severus's hand. His eyes close; so do hers, and Snape sees—half in wonder and half in envy—their faces transfigured with joy. Then a sizzling arc of light leaps from Hawking's wand to Snape's, and for a moment he can't see.

As his vision clears, Snape takes a sharp breath. At his side Hermione now stands, her wand-tip blazing, her brown eyes blazing, her young face wearing

the same look of intense concentration that once irritated him beyond measure. *'Lumen Audentiae!'* she cries, her voice hurling light against the darkness. Now there are four—Severus, Hermione, Gwen, Snape—hands and wands interlinked. As light spreads out against the tall black shape before them, it shrieks in pain and anger, struggling to release its terrible fire.

Hermione gasps. 'It's still too strong!'

'Fulguro!' Dumbledore moves up beside them, brilliant golden light from his wand exploding against the dark. Then to Snape's astonishment, the dark brooding shape of his father thrusts himself into the circle, raises his hand, and shouts hoarsely into the teeth of the dark—*'Nox Noctis Despuo... you fucking bastard!'*

'Damn right!' cries the Healer, and as Snape suppresses an insane urge to laugh, Trickett raises her wand. Light the colour of a summer ocean—golden, aquamarine, silver—twines around her and then stitches its way from wand to hand, weaving a net of glory. Gwen and Hermione, laughing with delight, raise their free hands to touch it. Dumbledore grins like a boy, and the child-Severus beside him stretches up on his toes, trying to reach the light, his eyes and mouth round with wonder. Then Gabriella, whose sardonic smile Snape remembers all too well, lets loose a rippling, delighted laugh that must have done much once, long ago, to make a young, brooding wizard fall in love with her. Before the darkness came.

But now the Healer's light dances around them,

making darkness impossible. *It cannot hold. It shall not hold.* The tall dark shape shrivels and curls up like old paper, withering under the bright heat of resurrection. And just before it fades entirely, Ethelwyn Trickett spreads her arms up and out, and her incantation peals forth like thunder.

'Back into the hole you crawled out from, you evil old scut!'

Snape raises his wand high and laughs in exultation.



In the quiet sickroom, two women sat slumped in chairs near the bed where the still, death-like form of Snape lay without moving. Neither noticed that the corpse took a deep breath. After a moment, he took another, and another. Pomfrey raised her head, puzzled, and started back with a shriek when Snape's mouth opened.

'Evil old scut,' he rasped. McGonagall, on her feet, peered into Snape's face.

Then unbelievably, Snape chuckled.

Pomfrey and McGonagall looked at each other, their faces full of astonishment and hope. The matron snatched up her wand and waved it over him.

'His—his temperature's almost normal,' she said in a hushed voice. 'His pulse is strong and regular.' Her eyes met McGonagall's.

'Over and done with,' said Snape, his voice a ghost of itself but the words clear, and his lips curved in a slight smile. McGonagall pressed her hands against her mouth, too overwhelmed to speak.

'Revivisco,' Snape whispered, his voice fading. He turned his head slightly to one side, and his breathing became deep and regular.

'He's asleep. Just normal sleep,' said Pomfrey, her voice shaking. 'I think—I think he's going to recover.'

'Did you hear what he just said?' said McGonagall, her hands still around her mouth.

'It sounded like an incantation,' said Pomfrey. 'One I've never heard before.'

'I'll be happy to tell you more about it,' came Ethelwyn Trickett's weary voice from the head of Snape's sickbed, 'but I'm going to need a cup of tea first.'



ALONE IN MCGONAGALL'S OFFICE, Hermione had cried silently over the dying Professor Snape for quite some time before she decided this had to stop. 'You're not bloody well helping matters much, are you?' she scolded herself in a rather watery voice, groping for a handkerchief. She looked down at her worktable, noticing with dismay various large wet spots on some of her parchments. 'Damn.' She picked up the damp parchments and spread them out over her bench, and then bent over her little cauldron to check the gently simmering indigo brew.

She frowned. It looked a bit different. The indigo seemed now to flash with tiny golden highlights. She closed her eyes, shook her head, and then looked again.

'Well of course,' she said to herself. 'The lighting's different here than in Professor Snape's lab, isn't it?' Sighing, she reached for a dry parchment and settled into the task of copying lists of possible ingredients, amounts, and combinations thereof.

When Hermione emerged from that satisfyingly mechanical exercise, she had no idea how much time had passed. Two hours? Four hours? She straight-

ened up from her notes with a sigh, yawned hugely, and again checked the contents of her cauldron.

She frowned and pulled out her wand.

'*Lumos Albeo.*' Bright white light spilled over her entire work area. As she gazed into the cauldron, it became apparent that the golden highlights weren't just reflections.

Something about her *Cruciatus* remedy had changed.

McGonagall had assured her the cauldron had been moved with great care. But still, could the potion have destabilised? Or could something have contaminated it?

Or could it have been—tampered with?

And it was as if she heard Doctor Hawking's voice again—her condescending words from Thursday night: "*If I were working on this project, I'd want to use a bit more imagination... Don't be afraid to experiment.*"

No. Impossible. No matter how egotistical or full of herself Hawking might be, she'd surely never violate basic magical ethics and tamper with another witch's spells without permission. Difficult as she might be, Hawking didn't seem intentionally to wish harm on Hermione, unless one considered absolute contempt for an eighteen-year-old schoolgirl to be evil. Hermione somehow knew that even the alien emotions and visions that had been invading her mind weren't subject to Hawking's control.

But a tiny part of Hermione wondered whether—in the case of an unsupervised little cauldron sitting by itself in a corner of Snape's lab—temptation might have overridden ethics.

Maybe Hawking hadn't been able to resist the urge to experiment. On her remedy.

'Right,' she muttered. 'Let's at least test this,' and she drew out her wand to cast an *Analysis* charm.

At that moment, the room seemed to explode and collapse upon her at the same time. The light flared and vanished, and a huge column of darkness rose up before her, leaning toward her as if it were alive. As if it were hungry for her. Hermione screamed, but she couldn't hear herself. The world had gone utterly silent. But no longer entirely dark. Her wand-tip glowed with pale aquamarine light, and she felt power vibrating through her.

And then a pale, sinewy hand curled itself around her wrist, and the light unfurled itself and spread. With relief almost as shattering as her terror, she saw it was Professor Snape whose right hand slid up her wrist, fingers intertwining with hers. His left arm curved around her waist and rested on her hip. He looked into her eyes and smiled as easily and tenderly as if he'd known and loved her for years, a smile she could never have imagined on that pinched, sallow face.

'*Flamma Ardoris,*' he whispered, and fire seemed to spread from the hand resting on her hip, licking below her navel and between her thighs. She lost herself in his eyes, hungering, wanting, needing. She could almost taste his mouth on hers, although he hadn't moved an inch closer to her.

'*Lumen Audentiae!*' Hermione turned her head in shock at the familiar voice and stared as Hawking stepped toward them, her wand-tip blazing, her brown eyes blazing. As Snape's left hand moved away from Hermione and clasped Hawking's wand-

hand, just as his right clasped Hermione's, the older woman's face broke into a look of transcendent joy. Hermione looked at Snape, and saw the same expression mirrored in his face.

But he was no longer looking at her. He had eyes only for Hawking, and she for him.

Suddenly a foul wind swirled around Hermione, and the column of darkness rose again, colder and denser and stronger than before. Snape, Hawking, and even her wand had all vanished. She was alone. Defenceless.

'Severus! Severus!' she screamed. The words choked in her throat. The darkness reared over her and then sank down upon her, covering her with foulness.



About an hour later McGonagall, returning to her office after an eventful few hours in the hospital wing, found Hermione curled up on the floor. Muttering dire imprecations about students working themselves to the point of exhaustion, the deputy headmistress levered Hermione into a chair, hand-brewed a pot of strong tea, dosed it liberally with lemon and honey, and made her drink it. Every drop. After that she escorted Hermione back to the Fat Lady, with strict instructions to go straight to her dorm and sleep until dinner time.

'And if I find you've disobeyed me,' the deputy headmistress warned her, 'you shall be suspended from work on your NEWT project for an entire week. Don't test me on that, Miss Granger.'

'Please, Professor,' said Hermione as McGonagall

began to turn away, 'just tell me—do you know if Professor Snape is going to recover?'

McGonagall hesitated a beat. 'He's receiving the best possible care. Tomorrow you'll hear more news, I promise. Now, Miss Granger, I really must go. And you must rest.' She turned on her heel and departed.

Hermione stared after her.

She knew better. The latest invasion of overwhelming images from Hawking's mind had told her much. Maybe she shouldn't believe it, maybe the vision was wrong, but it was all she had to go on. Seeing Snape joining forces with Hawking to battle the darkness, and then seeing what looked like the darkness winning—crushing everyone with fear and grief—forced her to one conclusion: Snape was dead, or soon would be.

'Can't you please simply give me the password without standing around out here for hours first? I have things to do, you know,' the Fat Lady said peevishly.



At dinner that night, the staff table looked unnaturally empty and subdued. Neither Hagrid's reassuring bulk nor Lupin's calm demeanour could quite compensate for the absences of Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape. Though most students knew (and few cared, except for the gossip-value) that Snape was ill, the fact that both the headmaster and his deputy were now missing a second meal in a row touched nerves throughout the Great Hall. The younger students responded to the tension with a great deal of talk and shrill laughter, whilst the older students said little

and, uncharacteristically, ate less.

Hermione had spent the past two hours lying on her bed, staring at nothing. Now she helped herself to beef curry but barely touched her plate, moving the food around with her fork and responding with a grunt any time the other Gryffindors tried to get her involved in their discussion of defensive charms and hexes.

'Every time I tried Doctor Hawking's boomerang spell, it worked,' said Seamus proudly.

'Not boomerang, mate. Repercussus,' said Ron.

'It's even better than Referio,' said Harry. 'It doesn't just reflect the spell; it kind of amplifies it.'

'Which means it can do a lot more damage if you mess it up,' said Parvati. 'Look what happened to Doctor Hawking. She let her attention slip for one second, and—boom!'

'Rumour has it she's okay now,' said Ginny.

'That was probably her last visit to our Defence class though.' Ron speared a chip and popped it into his mouth.

'Ron. Harry,' said Dean, leaning forward on his elbows, his face sombre. 'We're going to be using these spells for real sooner rather than later, aren't we? Do you two gits know anything us poor ordinary buggers don't?'

'Well of course we're going to be doing this for real, mate, and it could be soon, but don't bloody look at me to say exactly when,' said Ron a bit testily. Even in her gloom, Hermione could tell the lie didn't come easily to him. 'I don't have a free pass into, er, You Know Who's mind, you know.'

'Hmm,' Ginny murmured in Hermione's ear. 'Are the troops getting restless?' Hermione gave a soft snort.

'Hey,' Ginny's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Are you all right?'

Hermione bit her lower lip. 'It's—it's just my project,' she said finally, though Ginny didn't think Hermione's state of mind had anything to do with NEWTS. 'I don't like being in Professor McGonagall's office. I can't do my work properly there.'

'I'm sure they'll move you back to Snape's lab as soon as—erm...'

Hermione raised her eyes to her friend, and the anger and grief smouldering in them silenced Ginny.

'I think Professor Snape is—' she began, but suddenly Ron reached across the table and grabbed her arm. Hermione shot him a dark glare and yanked her arm away, but Ron, his eyes wide, pointed to the staff table.

'Hey. Look who's here.'

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'Lord Voldemort?'

But now Harry was staring as well.

'Does this mean Professor Snape is alive—or dead?' he said softly, and Hermione jerked around to see Professor McGonagall and Headmaster Dumbledore pausing just inside the door behind the staff table. Silence fell as students and faculty began to notice their presence. When McGonagall and Dumbledore reached their empty places, Lupin stood up courteously and made room for McGonagall, who nodded to him and sat down, her face expressionless. Even from where she was sitting, Hermione noticed how terribly tired and drained Dumbledore looked. And

McGonagall looked little better.

This is it, Hermione thought, and felt her throat closing up.

‘Professor McGonagall and I apologise for our absence at lunchtime and our tardiness this evening.’ Though his voice sounded subdued, his words reached every corner of the Great Hall. ‘First, I’m sorry to have to tell you—’ he paused, and Hermione felt her throat closing up ‘—that Professor Severus Snape is gravely ill, but he is receiving the best possible care from Madam Pomfrey and a visiting Healer. We are not giving up hope.’ It seemed to Hermione that Dumbledore shot her another look, and something about that expression allowed her to breathe again. ‘Therefore, as much as we are able to do so under our current alert status, we’ll continue our usual routines. That includes the originally scheduled Quidditch match tomorrow afternoon between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw—’ he smiled as a low hum of voices arose from the tables, and then held up his hand again ‘—bearing in mind the flight limits, which will be strictly enforced.’

Hermione didn’t hear the rest of Dumbledore’s speech, nor could she bring herself to taste another bite of beef curry. *He’s lying*, she thought fiercely. *He’s lying about Snape’s death. Why? Why?*



‘Of course you may see him, Healer Trickett, though I’m sure he’s still asleep...’ Pomfrey, who’d risen to her feet the moment the Healer crossed the threshold into

the hospital wing, came round from behind her desk and courteously gestured for the older woman to lead the way toward Snape’s screened sickroom.

‘Call me Ethelwyn, for heaven’s sake,’ said Trickett, her tone light. But Pomfrey heard, as few others would have, the underlying weariness. ‘And I appreciate your letting me see the patient.’

‘Of course,’ said Pomfrey, sounding a bit shocked. ‘I may be firm about keeping everyone else away for now, but you’re his Healer. Not to mention the fact you saved his life.’

Trickett waved her hand dismissively. ‘I was the conduit; Severus himself and those who care for him provided the life-force. I’ve found—’ she shot Pomfrey an amused glance ‘—that you can’t underestimate the power of forgiveness. Sometimes, as I’m sure you know, the sick have to give themselves permission to get better.’

‘Er—yes, of course,’ said Pomfrey, not quite wanting to comment that such a deep view seemed unfitting to Hogwarts’ usual array of colds, Quidditch injuries, potions explosions, and the grotesque hexes only teenage minds could create. Then she remembered what the entire school might soon be facing at the hands of Dementors, Death Eaters, and the assorted thugs under Voldemort’s sway.

Unlocking the wards guarding the narrow entrance through the privacy screens, Pomfrey allowed Trickett in first, and then followed her.

Snape lay on his right side, his lank hair covering most of his face, his legs slightly drawn up and his left

arm curled under his head. The white blanket had slid off his bare right shoulder. Pomfrey drew out her wand and quickly read his vitals. 'Asleep. Heartbeat and temperature normal.' She spoke just above a whisper. As she had the first moment she'd seen Snape, Trickett extended her hand above his head and stood very still, as if listening. Then she let her hand fall to her side.

'He's still nothin' but skin and grief, but I think he'll be all right,' said the Healer quietly. 'Don't be shocked, Poppy my dear, but I must awaken Severus and speak with him a little. I won't tax him for long, I promise. It's part of my healing process.'

'Of course, if you think it's necessary,' said Pomfrey. 'Would you like me to leave?'

'If you wouldn't mind, yes—just for a minute or two. If you think I'm taking too long, just come and grab me by the scruff and throw me out.'

'Erm—right. I'll check back here in about ten minutes. Meanwhile, I'll be at my desk.' An empty ward provided the perfect opportunity to catch up on paperwork.

As soon as Pomfrey slipped away, Trickett summoned a chair and lowered herself onto it with a deep sigh. She let her head tilt back and her eyes close. The glamorous Healer disappeared, and in her place sat an old, plain, stocky woman with short white hair and dull clothing. An exhausted-looking old woman who wouldn't have looked out of place sitting at any Muggle bus stop as the day's end drained into night.

'*Revivisco.*' Snape's voice from the bed was weak, but the tone was unmistakably amused. Trickett sat up straight, her eyes snapping open. It was as if the

tired old woman had never existed.

'The same to you, Severus,' she said lightly.

'You're real. I wondered if I'd imagined you.' Snape pushed himself up on his right elbow, hair flopping across his forehead, and fixed her with a narrow-eyed stare. 'You're from St. Mungo's. A locked-ward specialist, aren't you?'

'Right on both counts. How do you feel?'

He considered that question for a moment. 'Exhausted. Astonished I'm still alive. Not entirely sure I should be.'

'What does that mean, exactly?'

Snape lowered his eyes. 'Perhaps I should have died,' he said in a low voice.

'Not after all the work Gwen Hawking did to drag you back. Or don't you recall any of that?' Trickett's storm-coloured eyes were as uncompromising as her tone. 'Haven't you twigged yet that the woman loves you enough to lay down her life for you?'

Snape raised his head and stared at Trickett incredulously.

'Nothing seems more unbelievable than that,' he whispered.

'*Flamma Ardoris,*' the Healer said. Her voice was soft, yet the air seemed to vibrate with power.

Snape took a long shuddering breath. His fingers clutched the blanket, knuckles whitening, and for well over a minute Trickett simply sat and waited until he could again speak.

'Is Gwen all right? Can I see her?' His voice sounded strangled.



'Yes she is, and no you can't. Not yet.'

'When, damn it?'

'Tomorrow. Later in the day is all I know. I may be your Healer, but Madam Pomfrey is the boss of this place.'

'She is at that.' Snape's hands unclenched and the ghost of a smile touched his mouth.

Trickett rose to her feet. 'Oh, and by the way, Professor Dumbledore is all right too, just in case you were planning to ask me that.'

'Er—yes. I'm glad to hear it. Please—' Snape hesitated, and then plunged on '—convey my thanks to him. And to Doctor Hawking, of course,' he added quickly.

'You can convey your own thanks to them tomorrow, me son. Now—rest.'



Hogwarts had finally settled down for the long October night. The prefect groups had long since completed their rounds. Two Aurors continued to patrol the dungeons where—after working all afternoon and well into the evening—Doctor Gwen Hawking had finally retired to her guest quarters, where she struggled to record her fragmented recollections of that singular day. Another Auror checked the Astronomy Tower, whilst another paced the Great Hall. Three or four others ghosted through the grounds ('It's all the Ministry can spare at the moment, Albus; I'm sure you understand.' 'All too well, Minister Fudge.'). The dim sparks of light from their wands barely visible in the thick darkness. Filch and Mrs. Norris haunted the corridors, Filch's face



twisting in hatred the rare times an Auror came into view, and twisting again into a hideously sycophantic smile if the Auror looked at him. A light burned in Dumbledore's study, as it almost always did these nights, and the fainter glow of a night-light shone from the windows of the almost empty hospital wing.

Well-hidden (she hoped) by her proven ability to work a Disillusionment charm, Hermione slipped down the corridor towards the entrance to the hospital wing. She hadn't planned to do this at all. But after hours of sitting in the common room, wrapping her arms around the tight knot in her stomach and biting her lower lip almost ragged, unable to focus on anything, unable even to read—well, she had to find out about Snape. *Now*.

Though Madam Pomfrey kept her potions and other remedies under ward, as a matter of principle she kept the infirmary doors unlocked night and day. As she'd once explained to Hermione, 'If someone needs help, they should be able to get to me no matter what time it is.' Hermione thanked Pomfrey silently for that lenient policy now. Outside the doors, she stood watching and waiting, to be absolutely sure no one was patrolling nearby and might see one of the doors opening by itself. When she judged it safe, she entered and closed the door behind her. The wing looked empty, and it was, but Hermione knew Pomfrey had a cot nearby and was probably using it now. Without question the matron would appear almost instantly if she heard a sound.

So just as she had done the day before, Hermione



stepped out of her trainers and pushed them out of sight before moving slowly and silently past the now-empty beds, toward the screened-off end of the wing. There seemed to be no clear opening in the screens, but Hermione knew that privacy-wards hid it. She drew on her supple memory, raised her wand, and in a whisper started running through the rarer ward-banishers she'd read about, praying Pomfrey wasn't wildly imaginative about alternatives.

On her fifth try, a narrow slit appeared in the screens. Hermione slipped inside and instantly resealed the slit. It was quite dark within the sick room; she could barely make out the white-blanketed bed and what looked like (and hoped it was) a sleeping figure, its back to her. She moved toward it, her heart pounding so loudly she was amazed the sound didn't reverberate through the room. She circled around the bed, slowly, slowly, so she faced the sleeper.

She stared at him for a long moment. His hair covered half his face and the part she could see looked pale and drawn, but his breathing sounded deep and regular, like that of a healthy sleeper.

He didn't *seem* to be at death's door.

Suddenly Snape turned on his back, flinging his right arm up over his head, and said in a clear, carrying voice—'And then you died.' Badly startled, Hermione flinched away, and her foot struck the leg of a chair behind her. The sound seemed to explode against the night's stillness, and as quickly as a striking snake, Snape raised his head from the pillow and pushed himself up on his left elbow. Hor-

rified, Hermione froze, holding her breath.

Please, she found herself thinking frantically. *Please don't see me.*

Slowly, Snape's head turned. 'Who's there?' he whispered in a voice that made Hermione shiver. He was looking straight in her direction now, looking straight at her; oh Merlin, she could swear he saw her, and in a moment there would be hell to pay, and she would regret for the rest of her days coming up here and invading his privacy.

'Gwen? Is it you?'

Hermione felt the bottom of her stomach drop away.

After what seemed like an eternity, during which she did not even breathe, Snape let out a soft hiss and lay back down. 'Not bloody likely,' she heard him mutter, and then he was still. After a minute or two, his breathing once again became deep and regular.

Hermione did not move until she'd counted two hundred breaths. Then, trembling with the tension, she moved with agonising slowness, inch by inch, back to where she'd opened the privacy screen. She closed her eyes for a moment in gratitude when, as soon as she was close enough, the screen opened by itself. When she was on the other side she took a big, gulping breath, then made herself move quickly and quietly to the infirmary entrance. Trainers on. Door open, and if anyone on the other side saw and wondered about that, well—sod them. She noticed no one, though, and trembling, stumbled down the corridor toward the shifting staircases that sooner or later would take her to Gryffindor Tower.

Snape was alive and well. Yet she felt as though a door had just closed firmly in her face.



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—
Category: Progress (I suppose)

Well, how would you feel? After an indescribable, endless day of journeying into the unknown, almost losing myself inside the chaotic soul of the dangerous and lonely man I've come to love, and then being pulled back into the light by a bossy healer? Forcing myself—with Dumbledore's help (where does he find the energy?)—to complete the sixth Carborundorum sequence, then recording notes for hours, like an maniac, unable to stop, then topping all of that off with four hours' sleep?

You'd probably feel like death served on toast when you woke up. I certainly expected to feel that way, or worse.

But I feel surprisingly good. Energetic. Even restless. I'm sure I'm surviving solely on Equilibrium Elixir now.

I dreamt of Severus. Or could those be memories of the Pensieve experience floating to the surface? I dreamt I held up a wand of light, and Severus's hand joined mine, and together we blazed against the dark, and I felt a fire within me like the night at the Hotel

Elysian, and I woke up wanting Severus, wanting his touch so badly, but he wasn't there.

And I can't go to him. Not yet.

Well, I could if I stormed the barricades, but Madam Pomfrey warned us yesterday, before we staggered away from Severus's bedside to get some hot food and an hour's rest, that no one will be allowed anywhere near him until the Healer says so. And perhaps that's for the best. If I can finish the seventh sequence today, then tonight I will be able to go up to that hospital wing, look Severus in the eye, and tell him I've made real progress. Then if I push, really push, I can have the eleventh sequence ready by Tuesday night—lacking only the charming 'Sweat of the Dead' that Dumbledore and I will have to gather from the corpses in the crypt-room.

A minor detail I shall NOT be sharing with Severus, by the way. Need-to-know basis only, and he doesn't need to know that.

And then... I'll make the remedy.

About ten years ago, I heard intelligence that some of Voldemort's followers had tried to replicate my counter-measure to devise a counter counter-measure, but they had no success. The remedy's astonishingly simple, yet they couldn't make it work. I'm grateful for small mercies.



Because here and now, at least as far as Voldemort knows, there is no counter-measure. Our only real hope of preventing all those deaths is never to leak the fact that we have the means to neutralise him. If nothing else happens—to me, Severus, Dumbledore—if time is kind, then Project Nostalgia might still succeed.

I know this sounds selfish, but that would mean my death might have some meaning.

My death. Ah.

I haven't told Severus about that yet.

Another minor detail.

LATER—

I'd finished breakfast and was just getting ready to go straight to the lab when Dobby popped in to inform me that Dumbledore has called an emergency meeting and I have to attend. That must mean the Order, of course. But now I'll lose an hour's work at least. Hell and damnation!

You'd think when a person's on a suicide mission, they could at least be exempted from bloody meetings.



memories and night moves



CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

meetings, bloody meetings



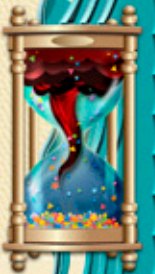
AH, HERMIONE... please have a seat,' said Dumbledore as pleasantly as if she were just dropping in for a cosy chat, rather than being noticeably late for an Order meeting because she'd overslept. Ron, with a faint smile, jerked his chin at the empty chair beside him. Hermione sat and found himself facing Tonks; today the young Auror's hair was brilliant green and standing out in spikes. She noticed Hermione's gaze and winked.

'Are you all right?' Ron whispered in her ear. She nodded vigorously without looking at him.

'Can we get on with it, Albus?' Moody sat leaning forward, both hands clasped on top of his black staff, his normal eye glowering at Dumbledore.

'Before anything else,' Dumbledore said without preamble, 'I want you all to know that Severus will recover from his ordeal. I understand he may be discharged from the hospital wing as early as tomorrow morning, and he should regain full health within two to three days.'

No one stood up and cheered, but some of the tension in the room eased. Hermione flicked a glance at Doctor Hawking. *She knew all along, didn't she?* Look-



ing, if possible, even paler than two days ago, the visitor was nonetheless sitting very straight, the picture of self-possession, one hand holding her deep green-and-blue shawl in place around her shoulders.

'That's a great relief,' said Lupin.

'Exactly what happened to him?' asked Bill, leaning against the wall near the fireplace.

'And more importantly, how is what happened to him going to affect our plans?' said Moody.

It took Dumbledore a good half hour or so to unfold the tale. Yet Hermione had a strong sense that the headmaster had provided only selective information, even though various and sundry of her elders and betters didn't hesitate to interrupt with a good many questions: 'I've never heard of this "worm" before—is it a threat to the rest of us?' 'Ethelwyn Trickett, eh? Bloody hell; I thought she was dead.' 'Are you sure Voldemort isn't still infecting Snape?' 'How do you know Snape didn't leak any information?' 'What about Doctor Hawking? Does she know—er, sorry—do you know for a fact that your information is still secure?' 'But where does this leave Snape? Surely he can't still go around spying for us!'

'His career as a spy is over,' Hawking said flatly.

Everyone stopped talking. All eyes swivelled to Dumbledore.

'I agree with Doctor Hawking,' the headmaster said. 'The moment he faces Voldemort, his true allegiance will be known, not merely suspected, and our enemy will slaughter him where he stands.'

'But if Snape doesn't report back—if he doesn't

answer the next summons—Voldemort will smell a rat in any event.' Bill was no longer leaning against the wall but stood straight, frowning, arms folded.

'Will he?' Lupin leaned forward in his chair, golden eyes flaring. 'As the headmaster just explained, Severus had two choices: either comply with the compulsion or die fighting it. Voldemort doesn't seem to care which.'

'The sheer arrogance of Riddle never fails to piss me off,' Moody muttered.

'Which means,' Lupin ploughed on, 'that if Severus doesn't answer a summons, then as far as Voldemort's concerned, the "worm" killed him.'

'But—erm—' Suddenly aware she was raising her hand as if she were in Potions class, Hermione blushed and put it down.

'Miss Granger,' said Dumbledore, with the ghost of a twinkle.

'When a Death Eater's summoned, the Dark Mark burns,' she said, her blush deepening but her voice steady. 'I've read it can be very painful. The only way to stop the pain is to obey the summons.'

'We know that, Hermione,' said Bill, his voice kind but laced with impatience.

'Then how do you plan to help Professor Snape cope with the pain when he can't obey the summons?'

Several of the Order, including Tonks and Shackbolt, had the grace to look slightly ashamed by that question. Unable to stop herself, Hermione looked at Hawking to see her reaction. The visitor was staring at Dumbledore, her eyes narrowed.



'Healer Trickett and I have talked about that problem,' Dumbledore said gently, his gaze travelling from Hermione to Hawking. 'She has a remedy that should greatly reduce any pain from Severus's Mark.'

'That's good news,' said Lupin. 'Being "dead" will be challenging enough.'

'Yes. As to that,' said Dumbledore, 'I've already told the students that Severus is still gravely ill, and I imagine word is already spreading. Tonight, I'll make the unhappy announcement that Professor Snape's condition continues to deteriorate and that plans are being made to move him to St. Mungo's. I will then formalise Professor Vector's appointment as acting head of Slytherin House.'

'You'll need a bolt-hole for Snape in the meantime,' said Shacklebolt, frowning. 'You weren't thinking of Grimmauld Place, were you?'

'No. That's not safe,' said McGonagall, speaking for the first time. 'Yesterday, Doctor Hawking and I discussed a strategy she calls "hiding in plain sight". Professor Snape will stay at Hogwarts, in his own rooms and lab.' She shot Hawking a glance, and the visitor quirked her mouth in a slight smile.

'What?' Bill looked incredulous. 'That's insane!'

'No. It isn't,' said Lupin thoughtfully. 'The dungeons are already off-limits to students during alert status. Under the circumstances, it might be the last place anyone would look. However, we'll need to make damned sure the area is completely secure.'

'I'll use a triple-warding protocol. That's standard procedure during a terrorist alert,' said Hawking,

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her expression thoughtful.

There were puzzled looks. 'During a *what* alert?' Ron said, confused, and Hermione noticed Dumbledore's sharp look at Hawking.

Hawking frowned and shook her head. 'Sorry,' she said. 'That's—erm—a Warlocks expression.' Her gaze re-focused on them. 'Let's cut to the chase. I can ward Professor Snape's rooms so tightly that not even a spider will get through. If anyone notices the wards, which I doubt, then it's because I want no interruptions. All going well, no one will know that Professor Snape and I are working together again except the Order.'

'All going well,' said Shacklebolt, his expression neutral.

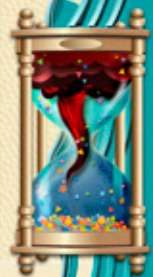
Hawking smiled tightly at him. 'Professor Dumbledore helped me with the fifth and sixth sequences. I can complete the seventh today. With Professor Snape's help, I should have the completed sequences and the counter-measure ready within the next three days.'

'Aren't you assuming rather a lot?' Moody's magical eye rolled, glaring, from Dumbledore to McGonagall to Hawking. 'Think about it! If even one person outside the Order gets wind of the fact that Snape is very much alive, then we're snookered.'

'Like Filch, for instance,' said Tonks, her face screwing up with distaste.

Hawking snorted. 'Unless Filch has powers beyond the ability of any Squib, or most wizards for that matter, he won't even be able to get near my wards, let alone break them.'

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'What about the house-elves? Can they be trusted?' asked Shackbolt, his tone sceptical.

'Of course they can,' Hermione shot back.

'Bloody hell!' Harry leaned forward in his chair, hands gripping his knees, green eyes blazing behind his glasses. 'If you lot can't even trust our own house-elves, that's pathetic.'

There was a startled silence. Then Moody said gruffly, 'Potter, this is about the need for *constant vigilance*—a simple concept, but all too easy to forget.'

'We haven't forgotten about it, Alastor,' McGonagall said, her face flushing with anger, 'and it's presumptuous of you to think so.'

'We're each doing our best, and that's all the Order can ask of anyone,' said Dumbledore, putting his hand on his deputy headmistress's shoulder. 'Now: are we agreed on this "hiding in plain sight" plan?'

A long silence.

'Best of a bad job,' Moody rumbled. 'No offence, Doctor Hawking.'

'None taken,' she said. After a moment, nods and murmurs of assent went round the room, though Harry's expression was still thunderous.

'Then we shall meet here again on Tuesday night,' said Dumbledore. 'Thank you, everyone.'

'May I speak with you, Headmaster?' said Hawking in a low voice. She had remained seated as the others began moving toward the door.

'Of course, my dear.' Dumbledore began to move toward her, but Moody—who had pulled himself to his feet but made no move to depart—leaned on his



black staff and glared at Dumbledore and Hawking.

'Actually, I want a quick word with Doctor Hawking, if you don't mind,' he said with a grim smile. 'I have just one simple question for you, Doctor: *why are you doing this?*'

Hawking looked baffled. 'Why am I doing what?'

'Spending so much time and effort re-creating a curse that will bring about mass slaughter.'

'To protect this school,' said Hawking, a flush creeping up her neck.

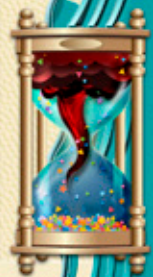
'But what makes you think Riddle's going to attack this school?'

'What makes me think—? I *know* he will. My sources are absolutely reliable. Hogwarts will be attacked.'

'Funny,' said Moody softly. 'I can't quite fathom that.' He shifted his gaze to Dumbledore. 'Albus, why have you, the Order, and the Ministry unquestioningly swallowed the assumption that there'll be a massive attack on a few superannuated faculty, a gaggle of schoolchildren, and a pile of old stones? Have you asked yourself what the hell Riddle would want with Hogwarts anyway? This place has no value to him.' Moody stumped closer to them. 'Oh, I agree he'd off Snape for sport if given the chance, as well as anyone else who happens to piss him off at any given moment. But it's not this school he wants. It's Potter. *Harry Potter.*'

'I haven't forgotten the Prophecy, Alastor,' said Dumbledore softly, but his faded blue eyes flashed.

'Then why the hell aren't you keeping the focus on Potter instead of getting carried away with grandiose battle plans?' Moody's magical eye swivelled





back to Hawking. 'All due respect, Doctor, but putting time and resources into fancy new mass-defence charms seems pretty bloody misguided.'

'I'm acting on the best intelligence I have, Mr. Moody,' said Hawking, her flush deepening. 'We can't take any chances. No—let me put it this way: I *won't* take any chances.'

'Alastor, you're right that Hogwarts itself is no use to our enemy,' said Dumbledore. 'But do you truly believe he's thinking rationally? This is a man who lost himself in the Dark Arts years ago. He's left sanity well behind him. Harry may be his nemesis, but so are all of us. Therefore I must agree with Doctor Hawking.'

'This isn't just about Harry, is it?' Hawking glared at Moody. 'It's about Snape, and it's about me. You still don't trust either of us, do you?'

Moody stood stock still, his magical eye rolling from her to Dumbledore, then back to her.

'Well?' Hawking said after a long, tense moment.

'You talk about trust,' said Moody at last, his voice low, 'Well, trust has to be earned, doesn't it? But as I said to young Mr. Potter, this isn't only about trust.' Suddenly he gave them a crooked, almost raffish smile. 'You shouldn't take this so damned personally, Doctor. I've been in this game a long time, and Sod's Law *never* fails to operate.'

Hawking gave Moody a long, considered look. Then, as if some silent agreement had been reached between them, she smiled back.

'I know. Fair enough. Just let me finish my work. That's all I ask.'



Moody nodded gruffly. 'I'll be keeping my eye on you.' He thumped his staff on the floor. 'Confusion to bloody Tom Riddle.'

'Such a cranky piece of work,' the portrait of Phineas Nigellus said snidely after the door had shut behind the old Auror. Dumbledore threw him a dark look and the portrait subsided.

'I can't help wondering,' said Hawking in a low voice, 'what exactly he's able to see when he looks at me with that Eye of his.'

'It won't serve you to worry about that right now,' said the old wizard gently.

'Right.' She chewed her lower lip, frowning.

'It's never easy, is it?' said Dumbledore to Hawking after a moment.

'And not getting any easier. I'm running low on Equilibrium Elixir, I'm afraid.'

'I'll do my best to prepare more, of course, though it won't be up to Severus's standard.' He looked at her, his eyes sharp. 'How much of it are you taking now?'

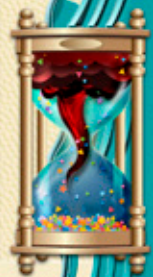
Hawking sighed. 'Too much.'

He reached for her hand, and she looked up at him.

'Forgive me, Gwen; there's no gentle way to ask this. Do you think you'll live long enough to finish this project?'

Her expression was unflinching.

'I had damned well better,' she said. 'But that's another thing I wanted to ask you. If you can spare some time today in the lab, you and I should put together a plan in case I can't stay the course. I—' she made a helpless gesture '—could give you chapter and verse about





why it's impossible to predict exactly how long I have, or even exactly what will happen. But ...'

'Is that your reasoning for not telling Severus that you're dying?'

This time she avoided the old wizard's kind eyes. 'No, it isn't.'

'Are you going to tell him?'

She shook her head. 'I can't answer that. I honestly can't.'



As the Gryffindor Quidditch team systematically shredded Ravenclaw's defences under a sky heavy with impending rain, Hermione tried not to dwell on her Cruciatus remedy—or on other things. There had been no possibility of getting back to McGonagall's office after the Order meeting: she had had to catch up on her duties as Head Girl; she'd had reading and several feet of parchment to write for her other subjects; and then the Quidditch match took up a good chunk of the afternoon. She couldn't come up with any legitimate excuse for not being there and waving the Gryffindor colours. But honestly, much as she'd once loved watching the boys and cheering for Gryffindor—and yes, as happy as she was for Ron, who now might have a brilliant career as a Keeper stretching before him—it all now seemed so... pointless.

She looked again over at the Slytherin benches where Snape usually sat, sneer firmly in place, and felt a tiny, fresh shock at his absence.

'Stop looking over there all the time,' Ginny finally

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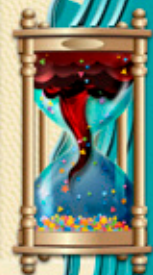


whispered in her ear. Hermione blushed and forced herself to focus on the match, just in time to see Harry go into a spectacular looping dive that should by rights have ripped his ageing Firebolt apart. As the crowd gasped and Ginny gave a strangled shriek, Harry pulled himself out of the dive with inches to spare, waving the Snitch triumphantly. The crowd roared and Ginny leapt to her feet, screaming with such joy that even Hermione couldn't help grinning.

She circled quietly just outside the hubbub of victory—letting others crowd around the Gryffindor team and smiling as Ginny gave an embarrassed Harry a hug and kiss on the cheek. When they finally got back inside the school, Hermione and Ernie, her counterpart, had their hands full making sure all students were in their groups and ready by the time the doors of the Great Hall opened for dinner. Tonight, tiny red and gold Quidditch players circled around the ceiling; every so often—to the delight of the first- and second-years—one of them executed the same frightening, looping dive Harry had pulled off.

When Dumbledore stood up near the end of the pudding course and made his planned announcement about the deteriorating condition of Slytherin's head of house, Hermione, Ron, and Harry tried not to look at each other. But Hermione had a good view of the Slytherin table and Draco Malfoy. His expression remained impassive at the news, but Hermione noticed, with quickening interest, that Pansy looked dismayed. She leaned over to Draco, gripped his arm, and whispered something in his

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ear. He shook his head and said something terse. Pansy whispered again, and this time Draco shook her hand off his arm. Pansy subsided with a scowl, and Draco stared into space as if in deep thought.

As soon as dinner was over, Draco sauntered over to the Gryffindor table and walked right up to Harry and Ron, smiling in what passed for a friendly manner. 'Potter,' he said, holding out his right hand. 'That final dive of yours wasn't bad.' Ron froze in surprise, and Harry stared at Draco distrustfully. 'C'mon,' said Draco. 'You know if I'd been playing this afternoon I'd have had your arse on a plate, but that doesn't mean I don't recognise a decent piece of flying when I see it.'

Harry smiled dangerously. 'My arse on a plate, Malfoy? Fat bloody chance.' But he extended his hand and shook Malfoy's briefly. Then Draco gave Harry a quick, playful cuff on the head. Harry jerked away, surprised, and Draco stepped back. 'Congratulations, Potter,' he said.

'Yeah, thanks Malfoy,' said Harry gruffly, still disconcerted.

'What do you want, Malfoy?' Ginny was suddenly there, her arms crossed over her chest, chin thrust forward, hair blazing in the lamplight.

'Just congratulating Potter. Simple good sportsmanship. You don't have a problem with that, do you Ginny?'

Ron frowned, not liking the way his sister's eyes seemed to rest on Draco's perfect lips as they shaped her name. He shot a glance at Harry, who was frowning blackly.

'Slytherins,' said Draco to Ginny in a low, intimate voice, almost as if they were alone, 'understand fair

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play. And we know how to fight. Sooner or later, you'll need us.' He raised his left hand and with a quick, smooth gesture, ran his fingers through Ginny's hair. As Ron started forward, growling, Draco smiled into Ginny's astonished face. 'Think about it,' he whispered, and then he backed away, shooting an amused glance at the Gryffindors. 'Calm down, Ronny. I didn't do anything,' he said, and then turned and rejoined the Slytherins.

'What the fuck was that git up to?' said Ron in a low voice.

Ginny looked annoyed. 'Nothing, Ron. He was just being—'

'—Slytherin,' finished Harry, still scowling. 'Good sportsmanship my arse. He's bloody well up to something.' Then he looked at Ginny and his expression softened. 'Hey Ginny. All right?'

Ginny had raised a hand to her hair where Draco had touched her, as if to reassure herself everything was fine. *Or—because she liked him touching her?* Hermione found herself wondering, with surprise and distaste at such an unwelcome thought.



Snape considered his Dark Mark. In the aftermath of Trickett's Sundering spell, its lines seemed blurred and faded, as if he were seeing a century-old version of it. He stared, remembering all the times throughout the past twenty years it had burned him—a burning he'd at first welcomed as a sign of belonging and then gradually come to hate and dread.

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Freedom. No more spying for the Order. How strange. But he could probably get used to it.

When Dumbledore and Trickett had come to see him earlier that afternoon, the headmaster had barely started to explain the plan laid down at the Order meeting before Snape held up his hand to stop him.

'I understand.'

'And you realise,' said Dumbledore, 'that you cannot leave your rooms until all this is over. One way or another.'

Snape had smiled grimly. 'There is plenty for me to do in the dungeon.'

'My boy,' said Dumbledore, his tone gentle, 'for all intents and purposes, you'll be dead to everyone at Hogwarts except members of the Order.'

'If that means I'm exempt from marking third-year essays,' said Snape, 'then I believe I can live with being dead.'

He found it almost more difficult to imagine life without the cold burning of a summons. 'Voldemort might sense his Mark's been tampered with,' he'd pointed out to Healer Trickett when she explained what she and Dumbledore proposed to do for him.

'No,' she said firmly. 'No more than he can sense your thoughts when he's not subjecting you to Legilimency. The worm that invaded you hasn't changed that.'

'You'll still feel some pain when he tries to summon you, but it will be manageable with ordinary remedies,' said Dumbledore. Then, his expression grave, he added, 'The fact you'll still feel a summons will also warn us when Voldemort is mustering the Death Eaters.'

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Snape had stretched his left arm out. 'Do it,' he said tersely.

It had taken only minutes. Afterwards, Madam Pomfrey had ordered him to drink more Replenishing broth, and then they'd left him to rest in his screened-off corner of the hospital wing. Alone with the remains of his Dark Mark.

You're not alone, came the unbidden thought. *You're free, and tomorrow you'll be with Gwen. You've been given a second chance, you sad bastard.*

I'm not sure I deserve it, though.

With a sigh, Snape pushed himself into a full sitting position, adjusted the pillows behind his back, and unrolled the first of several parchments Dumbledore had brought at his request: the seventh and eighth Carborundorum sequences. If Pomfrey allowed him to leave the hospital wing the next morning, then Snape wanted to be able to assist Gwen immediately. Refreshing his memory about the sequences seemed prudent.

His thoughts intruded again; if he didn't know better, he'd swear his personality was once again in fragments, each arguing with the other.

Gwen loves you.

She simply needs me to help her. We have a job to do. That's all.

Why don't you let her be the judge of that?

Snape shook his head firmly and forced himself to concentrate on the parchment.

When the tiny golden clock Dumbledore had brought for him chimed eight, Snape raised his head

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from his reading, startled that so much time had gone by. It was now fully dark outside. Leaving the parchment still unrolled on the blanket, he stretched and yawned hugely. He still felt weak, but it was a wholesome feeling—the body in recovery. Taking a deep breath, he swung his legs over the edge of the hospital bed and, keeping one hand on the bed for support, very carefully stood up. Slight dizziness; he closed his eyes and kept breathing until it passed.

‘Professor Snape!’ He turned to see Pomfrey standing just inside the warded entrance to his sick room, her arms folded and her expression stern.

‘Yes, Madam Pomfrey?’ Snape adopted his most forbidding Potions master tone, though he knew the effect was somewhat spoiled by the fact he was wearing nothing but a knee-length white hospital robe.

‘Are you all right? Do you need help?’

Snape drew himself up. ‘No thank you. I simply wanted to stretch my legs.’

Pomfrey looked at him sharply for a moment and then nodded. ‘The toilet’s behind the light blue screen.’

Well? Now what? Is she expecting me to toddle over as she stands there watching? Bloody hell; this horrible robe opens AT THE BACK!

But Pomfrey decided to be merciful. ‘Right, then. If you need me, just call.’ She departed briskly.

A few minutes later, Snape settled himself back into bed and resumed reading the parchment. He was deep in the midst of mentally arranging the correct order and amounts of eighth-sequence ingredients when something intruded on his awareness. His head

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snapped up, and he found himself looking at Gwen Hawking. She stood just inside the privacy screens, wrapped in a huge green-and-blue shawl, her wild hair pulled back in an untidy knot and her eyes looking almost black against the pale skin of her face.

For a long moment, they stared at each other. Neither said a word.

‘Ah. Catching up on a little light reading, I see,’ said Hawking at last. She took a few steps into the room, stopping when she reached the foot of Snape’s bed.

‘I have nothing much else to do at present.’ Snape lowered the parchment he’d been reading.

‘No, I—suppose not,’ said Hawking.

‘You came straight here from the lab, I take it?’ said Snape after a brief, awkward silence.

‘No—I used the fireplace in my room. I went there first to change.’

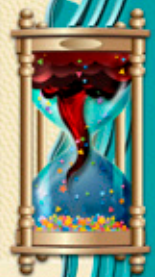
‘Does Madam Pomfrey know you’re here?’

At that, Hawking grinned.

‘Well, not exactly. But I’ve left her with the impression that you’re quite all right and would prefer not to be disturbed.’

‘And what if I truly prefer not to be disturbed?’ He regretted those words as soon as they left his mouth. But she didn’t leave. She looked at him, her eyes almost glowing. After a few moments, he realised her scrutiny was having a physical effect on him as unexpected as it was immediate. *Merlin’s balls, I clearly AM recovering*, he thought, disconcerted. For a second he felt cold fear, but realised a breath or two later that this wanting had nothing in common with the black

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horror of Voldemort's worm. This was how he'd felt when Gwen Hawking had first sat down at his table in the Café Faust: a life-giving force he'd at first tried to control, but to which he'd finally surrendered.

Now what? What should I do? What should I say?

Her mouth opened, and her voice was very low. 'It's too late not to be disturbed. The damage is done. At least to me. Severus—' she took a deep, shaky breath '—I don't clearly remember what happened inside your—when we—'

'When you entered my mind and saved my life,' he said, and as he looked at her again, she closed her eyes for a moment, and it seemed to him she swayed on her feet. Snape leaned forward and grasped her thin wrists. 'Are you all right?' he snapped. She nodded, but he steered her around the side of the bed, swept all the parchments off the blanket, and made her sit. 'Have you been taking Equilibrium Elixir?' he asked. She twisted slightly to face him. Though his fingers were still circling her wrists, she raised her hands and gently touched each side of his face, pushing his hair back, and at that point he grasped the fact that yes, she was here, her eyes drinking him in as if he didn't look like death sporting a two-day stubble, touching him as if she couldn't quite believe he was there.

'Are you—do you—?' He wasn't quite sure what he was trying to say.

'Shhh.' She leaned forward, and he froze as she brushed her lips against the rough skin of his jaw. After a moment her mouth moved to his. Though her fingers tightened against his head, she kissed him as gently as

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if he might break. He did not resist; he did not respond. He was in shock. After all the hell he had put her through in the darkness of his mind, after she'd seen every single vile fragment of his personality?

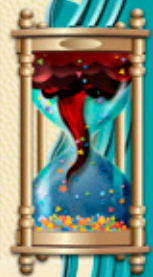
The woman loves you enough to lay down her life for you, Trickett had told him impatiently.

But which woman? The one he thought of as "Gwen," or... ? Snape's memories about how he'd found the strength to banish the worm were perfectly clear. Trickett—calling on all his fragmented selves—Gwen, goading him to remember... and *Hermione*. Both the young student and the middle-aged lover had stood by him and raised their wands, banishing with blazing light the loathsome dark thing that had almost shattered him.

But it bloody well wasn't Hermione the student in his arms now, nor could he ever imagine that happening. It was Gwen. Only Gwen.

'Severus.' The woman he held chose that moment to whisper his name, her lips moving against his. All forms of rational thought fled, and he laid his mouth on hers as if he was dying of thirst and she was water. She gave a stifled moan as their tongues met and then half-fell against him, her arms twining around his neck. Without breaking their kiss, he slid his hand down her leg until he found the hem of her dark grey dress, then slowly pushed the fine fabric up, up. She wore stockings, but thankfully not thick, scratchy ones, and she gasped with delight when he raked his fingernails lightly over her knee and up her thigh. However, the stockings refused to end.

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His frustrated hand could find no way past them.

'Make these things vanish, Gwen. *Now.*'

'No wand,' she said, smothering a laugh against his neck.

'You don't need a bloody wand, do you?' he growled.

With a low chuckle, Gwen drew back from him and slid one hand down his chest, down, down beneath the now crumpled blanket. He closed his eyes and let out a ragged, moaning breath as she gently squeezed his erect cock through the thin hospital gown.

'Not—a good idea,' he gasped.

'Then,' she whispered, 'let's try this,' and facing away from him, she settled herself carefully with her back against his chest. His hardness strained against her bottom, and he wrapped both arms around her with a sigh. Taking his right hand, she spread her thighs apart, and placed his palm against her crotch. At the feel of hot dampness through fabric, he laughed softly, and she felt his cock pulse against her.

'What spell shall I use to remove these damned stockings?' she said, her voice husky, challenging.

'Blast them into eternity for all I care.' He dipped his head to kiss her neck as she tried to make his hand move. She rocked against him, but he resisted her, and she groaned in frustration.

'No, no, none of that,' he said in his silkiest voice. 'I want you naked.'

'But—uhh!—what if Pomfrey—ohh...'

'Let's hope your distraction charm's a good one. But—' he nuzzled her neck again '—unless you can scream in a whisper, you'd better come up with a

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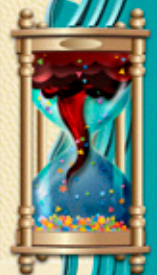


charm for that as well.'

Gwen, grinning broadly, took her hand away from his and became very still for a moment. '*Zotheca,*' she said softly. 'Complete privacy.' Then she swept her hand from her neck to her thighs. '*Evanesco.*' Her shawl, dress, and stockings vanished and then reappeared, draped tidily over a chair in the corner. Wearing only a black slip, she sank back eagerly against Severus's chest, and he again wrapped himself around her. She opened her thighs and pressed his hand between her legs; his fingers cupped her naked wetness, then dipped inside her cunt and withdrew, slowly, over and over. Her moans mingled with his as she spread herself over and around his cock, and it didn't matter that he couldn't enter her—nothing, nothing could feel this glorious. As his other hand teased her nipples through the silky fabric of her slip, her head fell back against his shoulder, lips blindly seeking his. He kissed her, hard, not caring if his rough skin chafed her. After a few moments, she pulled her mouth from his, and indeed—she couldn't scream in a whisper if her life depended on it. He hadn't expected to climax himself—bloody hell, he hadn't expected *anything* like this—he was in the *infirmary*, for fuck's sake, and he was still weak, and they were so clumsily positioned, but when she started to buck wildly against his cock, and when her fingers dug into his thighs, he went over the edge so quickly that he shouted out as much with surprise as pleasure.

It took every ounce of his diminished strength to keep them both from falling off the bed.

meetings, bloody meetings





Gradually their breathing slowed. At length she straightened up and turned to face him, her expression both tender and amused.

'Oh God. Are you all right?'

He gave a soft laugh. 'What do you think?'

'That was incredibly selfish of me. All I wanted to do was see you and—well—apologise.'

'Selfish? Let me queue up right behind you. But apologise? For what?'

'For not trusting you. For thinking you were my enemy, just when you most needed my help and I needed yours.' She looked sad. 'I thought that when I finally saw you tonight, all I'd want to do was talk. But—well—' she spread her hands helplessly '—it seems I needed more than that. I needed to touch you, the *real* you, not some mental image.'

'If you remember what happened in the Pensieve, then you'll know the "real me" is hardly an improvement.'

'I remember only bits. But believe me, I can't begin to tell you how much of an improvement it is to have you here. And free.' Her expression turned mischievous. 'Though I must say you look bloody awful. Why didn't I notice that five minutes ago?'

'First you assault me, in my very hospital bed no less. Then you insult me.'

Her smile deepened. 'Do I owe you another apology?'

He looked at her and understood that in her own way, and whether aware of it or not, she was healing him: piecing together, bit by bit, the fragments of his soul.

He did his best not to smile back. 'Yes, but it will have to wait.' Suddenly exhaustion weighed him



down like a boulder, and it must have shown, for her face fell in dismay. She leaned forward, putting a hand on his shoulder.

'Are you all right?'

'Hmm.' He leaned back against the pillows and closed his eyes.

'Are you sure? Damn it. I've exhausted you.'

'No you didn't. S' healing.'

Snape was conscious of her sliding off the bed, putting him back in order, tucking the blanket into place around his shoulders, picking up fallen parchments. He heard her mutter '*Finite Incantatem*' and dimly wondered what for... oh yes, to end the private-room charm. Clever charm.

With a huge effort, he opened his eyes. Gwen stood by the bed: fully dressed, hair more or less in place, wrapping her shawl again around her. Her face looked tired but serene.

'Seventh sequence tomorrow,' he mumbled. Gwen shook her head, smiling.

'Already done. We're ready to start the eighth. Go to sleep.'

When Hawking slipped out of the screened area, she almost ran straight into Madam Pomfrey.

'You two were very quiet in there,' the matron said, folding her arms.

'Professor Snape was asleep most of the time.'

'Hmph. Best thing for him right now.'

'Yes, Madam Pomfrey.'

'Well then... good night, Doctor Hawking.'

'Good night, Madam Pomfrey.'



EVERUS SNAPE COULDN'T DECIDE whether to feel deeply satisfied he was back in his rightful place, or disturbed by the fact that for the past three days, other people had been in there and changed things around without his permission. At least half a dozen jars, for example, were facing backwards on the shelves. Several parchments and at least one of his rare books had not been put away. His human hand paperweight, which he always kept in the lab, had for no apparent reason been moved to his desk and left upside down, the splayed silver fingers clutching air. And—Merlin's teeth—were those crumbs on his chair?

Yet those violations paled compared to the goings-on in his lab. Two-thirds of his favourite long table was now covered with what looked like almost every phial, small bowl, pestle, and jar he owned. Each container had some sort of lid, labelled with the name of a substance from his stores as well as the amount: from a few grains to several drachms. Almost all those substances were either toxic or volatile, or both. Tightly rolled parchments had been laid down on the table as well, acting as dividers between sets

of substances. Those parchments, he knew, contained the spells for enabling each sequence.

Snape had seldom seen a neater, more carefully organised work-in-process, nor a more disturbing one: so many deadly ingredients assembled for use, with only a few neutral substances and nothing benign. The workmanship was admirable; the cold purpose of it appalling.

'Are you all right, Severus?' This morning's Order observer had come up from behind so softly Snape hadn't heard him. He shot Lupin an irritated glance.

'Of course I'm all right.'

Lupin looked at his old classmate with a small smile.

'How does it feel being dead?' His voice was both amused and sympathetic.

Snape lifted his eyebrows in slight surprise at the question. After a moment he said, 'Strangely liberating.'

'Was Healer Trickett able to neutralise your Mark?'

Silently, Snape stretched out his left arm, pushing up the sleeve of his coat. Lupin nodded.

'Good,' he said.

Suddenly the fireplace in Snape's office spat green flames. As the two men turned towards the disturbance, Gwen Hawking stepped out, shaking a few ashes from her silver-green shawl. Right after her came someone Lupin had never seen before: a stoutish old woman in a plain dark robe, who muttered— 'Could use a good scouring, that'—and brushed a hand through her short white hair.

'Good morning, Severus. I must say you're look-

ing quite revived. I'm delighted your healing's going so well,' the old woman said heartily as she followed Hawking into the lab. Lupin glanced at Snape and was intrigued to see his colleague flush. 'And you must be Professor Lupin,' the Healer added, reaching out to shake Lupin's hand. 'I'm Ethelwyn Trickett.'

'I gathered that,' said Lupin, with a respectful nod. 'It's a pleasure to meet you, Healer.'

For a moment, she looked at him with an odd intensity, as if seeing down to his very bones.

'You've a strange gift, Remus. A rare one, and mighty dangerous if you let it loose.'

Startled at such a personal comment, Lupin stared at her, forgetting he still held her hand.

'But you've a powerful desire to do good,' she said, her voice soft but as intense as her gaze. 'As long as you have that, no beast can master you.'

Lupin realised that Snape and Hawking were staring at him. He cleared his throat and let go of the Healer's hand, feeling as if his soul had just been turned inside out. He wasn't entirely sure he liked the feeling, and his sympathy for Snape went up a notch.

Then Trickett turned to the other two.

'I must be off to St. Mungo's with, as rumour has it, Professor Snape's poor sick body in tow. But Severus, I want a quick word with you before I go. Could we borrow your office?'

Did he have a choice? Snape stood aside politely to let her enter first. After he closed the office door behind them, Snape folded his arms across his chest. 'Yes, Healer?' he said, in the neutral tone he used

to discourage his colleagues from engaging him in useless small talk.

As he expected, such tactics had no effect on the Healer. She looked up at him: a short woman who seemed just as tall as he at that moment.

'I'm glad you've been able to take, and give back, what the woman who calls herself Gwen Hawking can offer,' she said without preamble. 'That augers well for you.'

Snape felt himself flushing again at the memory of last night's particular brand of healing. However, Trickett looked at without expression, her sea-grey gaze calm and measured, and after a moment Snape was able to re-focus his thoughts.

'I'm—not sure I deserve what she offers, but I consider myself fortunate,' he said.

'It's not a question of "deserving." But for both your sakes, it's important for you not to forget that Gwen is also Hermione Granger.'

'She is, and she isn't,' said Snape, clearing his throat. 'And with respect, Healer, I don't see why that's important. I accept Gwen Hawking for who she is. She's very much her own person. And that person has little in common with Miss Granger.'

Trickett sighed and again ran a hand through her short bristly hair. 'Perhaps that's because Gwen is a version of Hermione who really should never have existed at all.'

Snape frowned, disliking the way this conversation was heading. 'How is that relevant? If Doctor Hawking and I can save her younger self and everyone else who would have been slaughtered, then Miss Granger will

go on to live the life she chooses, and all will be well.'

'All manner of things shall be well,' said Trickett softly. At that moment, the cadences of power edged her voice, and Snape felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

'Is that—some kind of prophesy?' He tried to cover his shock and hope with a sneer.

Trickett gave a soft laugh, and the spell broke. 'I don't prophesy. I just try to see patterns. Severus, listen carefully. I think good will prevail, but as to whether everything will turn out as you wish—well, nothing is certain.'

'Indeed. How profound,' said Snape, not bothering to hide the sarcasm.

Trickett refused to be riled. 'Severus, you're not going to like this one bit. What Gwen offers you won't last. It can't last.'

'What?'

'She's slipping away,' said Trickett, her voice gentle.

'What *exactly* are you saying?' Snape's voice sank to a whisper on the last word—a whisper any terrified second-year student would have recognised too well, and too late.

'I'm saying it's unlikely she'll survive. Severus—' she dared to lay a hand on his arm, and he was too frozen in shock and anger to shake her off—'When I look at Gwen, I see someone who's dying. I've been a Healer long enough to recognise the signs.'

Forgetting himself, Snape grasped the Healer's shoulders, almost shaking her. 'First you tell me I need Gwen, and now you're saying I'm going to lose her? In what way is this *healing*? TELL ME!'

One moment he was screaming into her face, and the next she was several feet away from him. He glared at her, shaking with rage. She looked at him, not unkindly, but without compromise.

'You know bloody hell the truth can hurt, Severus, but you can't skew past it, and in the long run it's the best damned medicine of all, however bitter it tastes.'

Snape took a deep breath, trying to calm down. 'You don't know for certain though, do you? Couldn't you be wrong?'

She shrugged. 'God love you, yes, it's possible. But Severus, I wouldn't be telling you such a dire thing if I didn't see the pattern pretty clearly. Gwen should never have existed. Everything about her being here is wrong. And yet, at the same time, there's a rightness to it all. Oh, damn.' She shook her head, looking sad and a little worn at the edges. 'I'm sorry, Severus, truly.'

'But—you said—*all manner of things shall be well.*' Snape felt as if he were grasping at straws. Trickett shook her head.

'It's part of the pattern. That's all I know.'

'Bloody fucking hell.' He rubbed a hand over his face. After a moment, he felt Trickett's hand on his shoulder. He let it stay because he didn't have the energy or will to do otherwise.

'Whatever happens, Severus, if you ever need me—if you ever want to talk—you know where to find me.'

'Yes,' he said mechanically. *Over my mouldering corpse, Healer.*

A few seconds later, the fireplace erupted with green flames, and then he was alone in his office. He

made himself stand very still, without thinking or feeling, for another minute or two, before opening the door to the lab and facing Gwen Hawking.



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Category: Progress (Eight sequences completed)

To put together the first ten sequences takes about two hours. You must stick to a rigid and carefully timed pattern of adding one ingredient after another to a cauldron, stirring them just so, and uttering spells at particular points, finishing with a final key-spell locking that sequence. One missing or ill-measured ingredient, one impurity, one incorrect spell, one error of any kind, and the entire project collapses. For these reasons, it's almost impossible for half-baked terrorist cells to create this weapon, and that—for a while, before the remedy—was the only thing standing between innocent wizarding folk and more mass killings.

Here's the part I hate the most: as soon as the tenth sequence is locked, that cauldron-full of disparate ingredients ripples as if it's alive, and then turns dark red and viscous. It looks exactly like old, clotted blood. I'm not normally squeamish, but the first time I witnessed that transformation, years

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ago, I had to duck out of the lab and be sick.

As far as the Order knows, tomorrow Severus and I—with Dumbledore's help—will synthesise the final substance to complete the eleventh sequence. This morning Severus had Dumbledore owl orders for two or three rare dried funguses to what he described as "unorthodox" sources: the kind that will deliver within twenty-four hours, with no questions asked.

The Order knows that we're pushing ourselves to finish the tenth sequence by late tonight. Tomorrow morning, we'll have all the materials we need to finish synthesising the Sweat of the Dead. I've informed the Order that we'll put together all eleven sequences of Carborundorum, one after the other, on Tuesday night as planned.

Severus is in his office. Dobby will be bringing lunch soon.

A BIT LATER~~Aleph-level!

What Severus still doesn't know is that before dawn tomorrow, Dumbledore and I are making a quick trip down the fifth passage to the room where those poor old dried-up mummies have been propped up for almost two hundred years. There, we'll harvest small amounts of their flesh. No one ever said science was pretty.

all manner of things



Severus will know I've done this only when I tell him at dawn, and by then it will be a fait accompli. Timing: rather tight, but it can work. Less than an hour to get back to the lab with the dried flesh, two hours to lock the first ten sequences—as long as it's used within four hours, the final substance will still be potent when we add it... and thus we will have Carborundorum (and, I hope) Hogwarts ready for battle before mid-day instead of late tomorrow night.

And if I don't last through tomorrow, Dumbledore will muster the Order. Together, they should be able to create the remedy I've recorded. All going well.

And no... I'm NOT telling Severus about the excursion to the Crypt of the Eleven. Not because I don't trust him—he and I have moved well past that, thank god. In a way, there's no reason not to tell him. Part of me longs to; I want him with me, I want to feel him beside me, I do. But some instinct deeper than I can name prevents me. I trust Severus with my life, but I don't trust him not to put his own life at risk again.

So Severus is out of this particular equation.

And I think, I hope, my plan for distracting Severus late tonight will keep him from suspecting what I'm up to.

But he's been shooting black looks at me all day. Ethelwyn Trickett, I suspect. What could she have said to him?



It happened after lunch, when the sixth- and seventh-years attending Advanced Defence Against the Dark Arts were supposed to be hurrying out of the Great Hall to get to class on time. Though Professor Lupin lacked Snape's vicious attitude toward tardiness, he was more than capable of deducting house points for it. Harry, Ron, and Ginny—deep in a lunchtime discussion about hexes involving insects burrowing their way into their victims' flesh—had lost track of time, and Hermione was too distracted to play her dual role of den mother and boss.

'Potter!' Draco's drawling voice brought all of them to attention. 'Not coming to class? Afraid of what I'm going to do to you today?' Bulwarked by Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy, the blond wizard grinned at them malevolently before moving toward the double doors.

'Sweet of Ferret-boy to alert us,' Ron said with a smirk.

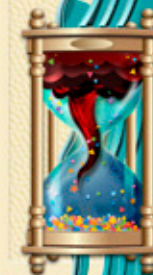
'Oh crumbs, we *are* late! Look—even all the teachers have left!' said Parvati, scooping up her books as the other Gryffindors—except one—scrambled to their feet

'Wonder what Malfoy thinks he's going to pull off,' said Seamus. He and Ron exchanged grins almost as wicked as Draco's.

'So much for Slytherin sportsmanship,' said Harry almost cheerfully.

Ron frowned at Hermione, who all this time had been sitting, hands cupping her chin, her eyes unfocused. 'Come on,' he urged her. 'Time to go to class.'

Hermione jumped at bit. The look she turned on Ron



was hardly appreciative. 'I know, I know! I'm coming.'

'You all right, Hermione?' he said, a bit more gently.

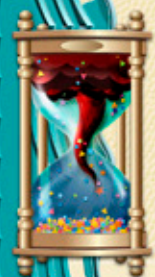
'Fine. Honestly. Go on!' She began picking up the books piled on the bench beside her. Look, I'm right behind you.'

She had been trying all morning, without much success, to exorcise the memory of another invasive and vivid dream the night before: sitting with her back against a man who held her, half-naked, in his arms. She couldn't see him, but she knew that voice: low and rough with passion instead of cutting or cruel. And oh, she could feel him, all of him, and she'd given herself to the dream and ridden it all the sweet way through before awakening, damp with sweat, her thighs sticky, alone in her cold dark bed, on the verge of weeping, feeling as if she'd been flung out of paradise.

She shook her head, finished picking up her books, and headed for the main doorway. The Slytherins and her friends had already started funnelling into the main entrance hall. Then for no apparent reason, the bulky forms of Crabbe and Goyle seemed to stop dead right in the doorway leading out of the Great Hall. Draco and Pansy barrelled into them, and Ginny collided with Pansy. The next second, a wand clattered to the floor.

'Hey!' Pansy, her expression venomous, whirled around and gave Ginny a hard shove. 'You tried to steal my wand!'

Ginny staggered back, mouth open wide in astonishment.



'You slag,' Pansy hissed, reaching down to scoop up her fallen wand.

'It was an accident!' Ron shouted, as he and Harry grabbed Ginny at the same time to steady her.

'Are you okay, Ginny?' Harry asked, shooting a furious look at Pansy and Draco. He now stood beside his cohort, looking remarkably surprised.

'I didn't try to steal your rubbishy wand!' spat Ginny, shaking herself free of the boys' hands.

'What did you say?' said Pansy, raising her wand, her hard little face twisted with hate.

'Don't even *think* of using that thing on me,' Ginny said in a low, furious voice.

'Ha. What a waste of magic *that* would be.'

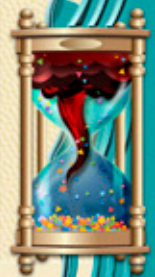
'Girls, please,' said Draco, sounding concerned, but Hermione—trying to push her way through the ring of fascinated students—saw just a flicker of a smirk. *Bloody hell, I think he's planned this. But why?*

'Let me through! Now!' she said in her trademark bossy tone, but just as the students blocking her way moved reluctantly to let her pass, Ginny raised her right hand and slapped Pansy across the face so hard that she fell back a step or two.

'Ginny!' yelled Ron as Harry caught Ginny's arm, pulling it down. Draco caught Pansy, who stared at Ginny in shock and growing fury.

'You *bitch*.' Pansy's voice was almost a whisper, and now her wand pointed straight at Ginny's chest. 'You little piece of Weasley shite.' The red handprint stood out against her white face.

'You'll have to deal with me, Parkinson.' Harry's



voice was low, his wand-tip aimed at Pansy's head. He kept his left clamped around Ginny's arm, pulling her hard against his side.

'And with *this* piece of Weasley shite,' Ron snarled.

'And me.' Seamus, and then Dean.

'Ooh, can't little Ginny defend herself?' Pansy crooned.

'Stop this!' Hermione yelled, pushing her way into the middle of the circle and turning fearlessly to face a forest of bristling Gryffindor wands. 'Put—your wands—away—Now!'

'You heard Miss Granger,' boomed a voice behind them, and the same students who wouldn't let Hermione through practically fell over themselves to get out of Dumbledore's way.

Pansy took one look at the headmaster and shoved her wand hastily back up her sleeve. Ron, Seamus, and the others were almost as quick to follow suit.

Hermione risked a quick glance at Dumbledore. Though he stood very still and stared at all of them calmly, he had never—since the first day she'd met him—terrified her like this. She felt as if she were standing next to an active volcano. Even Harry felt the force of Dumbledore's quiet fury; he stared at the headmaster for a few seconds, then let his eyes drop, and with uncharacteristic clumsiness fumbled his wand back up his sleeve.

'I cannot even begin to describe how deeply disappointed I am in every single one of you.' Dumbledore said flatly. 'One hundred points from Slytherin and a hundred from Gryffindor for this astonishingly

all manner of things

immature display. Now go to your classes.'

For a moment, no one moved.

'Now!' Though the headmaster did not raise his voice, everyone scattered as if he'd shouted.

Once they were well away from the Great Hall and the Gryffindors, Pansy said softly to Draco, 'Well, I hope you're happy.' She rubbed her cheek.

Draco grinned. 'I'll kiss it better later. You were wonderful, Pansy. Perfect.' She smiled back.

'D'you think that's what your father had in mind, then?'

'I'd say,' said Draco, 'we've shaken things up a bit. Old Dumbledore's a little less confident about how well everyone's pulling together to fight our common enemy. It was worth losing a hundred points to see him panic.'

'So it's tonight, then?'

'As long as you're ready.'

Pansy smirked.

'I could use a little fun.'

Draco leaned a bit closer to her, his eyes full of promise. 'So could I.'



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—

Categories: Analysis and some further Progress

Mad-Eye Moody is our Order observer this afternoon. He's glowering at me from his stool in the corner of the lab. I'm doing my best to ignore him, though he and Severus have exchanged a few stiffly polite words.

all manner of things

I wish I could guess what Moody's Eye sees when it glares at me. Just me, without my glamour: an ageing woman who looks as if she might be related to the young Hermione Granger? Or can he see strange fluxes at the quantum level? I wonder what that would look like. Arcs of light? A diffused ripple, like sand shifting under waves? Or does he see my substance dissolving? Does he see me dying?

The funny part of it is, I trust Moody more than any of them, save Dumbledore and McGonagall. I'd give almost anything to confide in him, tell him who I really am, why I'm here, and especially how much I liked and respected his nephew—one of the few D.O.M. bureaucrats with integrity and talent. It's clear where those qualities came from.

Right. Just three more procedures to go to complete the ninth sequence. I'm bloody tired, and I'm beginning to feel a peculiar sense of not being quite connected to reality. As if the solid lab around me, and even Severus, are hallucinations. I have to concentrate hard to keep myself here, but that doesn't always work, because a few times today that quantum weirdness with my younger self came into play. The first time, I was in the Transfiguration classroom. I watched myself turn Crookshanks into a kangaroo—heard a buzz of laughter and a spatter of applause—

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heard McGonagall's dry voice saying—'Thank you, Miss Granger; very good work'—and then, as if a switch had flipped, I was back in the lab. Sometime after lunch it happened again, and this time I saw angry faces—Harry and Ron and Seamus and Dean—their wands pointing at me. Before I could make any sense of that, the scene faded, and Severus was watching me with a most unhappy expression.

Then again, only a few minutes ago. I was in McGonagall's office, alone I think, bending over that small cauldron of anti-Cruciatius. I felt Hermione's mixed emotions: excitement, but mostly suspicion and anger. And I think that's somehow connected with me.

Merlin's dry bones... I can't shake the feeling that Hermione wants a confrontation with me and won't rest until she gets one. I have a bad sense about her right now—not hate or repulsion—more as if something's wrong. And I can't pin point it. Bloody hell, it's driving me bonkers.

To make matters worse, it's clear Severus wants to talk to me. But of course we haven't had a moment's privacy, for which I'm grateful, because I don't know what to say to him. I need to think things through first.

But I don't have time.

Oh, good. Dobby's here with tea.

And it's safe to say I need more Elixir.

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Shortly before dinnertime, Dumbledore emerged from the fireplace in Snape's office and entered the lab. Snape, intent on measuring ingredients, didn't even look up. Hawking, sitting in a chair and making notes on a parchment mounted to a thin sheet of wood, raised her head and gave the headmaster a wan smile. Moody fixed him with an appraising stare.

'You look like hell, Albus,' he offered. Hawking glanced at Dumbledore again, and her brows drew down with concern.

'It's been a—difficult afternoon,' said Dumbledore, his voice even. 'Doctor Hawking? Your progress?'

'In about ten minutes we'll have the ninth sequence completed,' she said.

'I'll wait. Alastor—may I have a word?' The old Auror nodded, and Dumbledore led the way to Snape's office, closing the door behind them.

'A confrontation broke out between Gryffindors and Slytherins earlier today. They might have come to blows if I hadn't stopped them,' said Dumbledore without preamble.

'Let me guess: either Malfoy or The Boy Who's Becoming a Bloody Handful,' said Moody, his mouth twisting in a grim smile.

Dumbledore sighed. He looked every day of his one hundred and fifty years. 'Both, I think. Old fears and hatreds. But the timing couldn't be worse. Once Hogwarts is divided, it's conquered.'

Moody grunted. 'Have you thought of restricting

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students to their common rooms?'

'I'll take that as a bad joke, Alastor.'

'Take it as you like. But you should at least confine Filch. It must have occurred to you he's actively communicating with Malfoy.'

'And it must have occurred to you that, with Severus out of action, Filch is much more useful to me free than restrained.'

Moody's magical eye rotated once. 'How so? D'you expect Filch to report to you!'

'No, but whoever is observing him will, and I trust that observer's abilities implicitly.'

Moody raised the eyebrow over his normal eye, whilst his magical one whirled as if digesting that news.

'What makes you so confident your observer won't be discovered?'

Dumbledore gave a tight smile. 'As I've said—trust. We could use a bit more of that. Which brings to me why I wanted a word with you, Alastor. Could you—and as many Aurors as you can spare—work with me, Remus, and the Master class Defence students tomorrow? Put them through their paces: not to exhaust them, but challenge them. I hope this will help them rebuild solidarity and a measure of trust—and remind them there's more at stake than old House rivalries.'

Moody gave Dumbledore a grim smile. 'You're grasping at straws every which way you turn, old friend. But for what it's worth, we'll do our best.'



Hawking had just placed the parchment of spells

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for the ninth sequence in its proper place on the long table, and Snape was re-sealing jars, when Dumbledore returned to the lab alone.

'How are you feeling?' said the headmaster, looking at each of them in turn.

'Never better,' said Hawking, with a twisted smile.

'Considering I'm dead, I'm doing very well,' said Snape. 'But I think Doctor Hawking needs some rest,' he added, concern edging his voice.

'How long will the tenth sequence take to compile?'

'About four hours,' said Hawking. 'Ironically, it's one of the shorter sequences.'

'Then before we begin, I want both of you to rest for at least an hour. Two would be better.'

Snape nodded. 'I'll make sure she does,' he said.

'You too, Severus,' insisted Dumbledore. 'The house-elves will bring your dinners shortly.'

After the headmaster had left them, Hawking looked at Snape, her eyebrows raised.

'Does he assume we're both having dinner here?'

Snape held out his hand. 'Come.' Puzzled, she took his hand, and he led her over to the door guarding his rooms. No ward-breaking needed this time. He opened the door and courteously stepped aside, allowing her to precede him into the living room. The house-elves had been busy: the room had been swept and tidied, the cushions plumped up, and a hearty fire burned, keeping the dungeon chill well at bay. The battered wooden coffee table, gleaming as if polished, was empty except for two goblets and a decanter full of red wine, glowing in the firelight.

Hawking turned an astonished gaze on her lab partner.

'I thought we were supposed to be resting,' she said lightly.

Without a word, Snape gestured her to the settee and then sat at the other end, about two feet away from her. She watched him as he poured wine. He handed her a goblet, raising his own to her in silent salute.

For a few minutes, the only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire.

'Gwen.' She turned away from the glow to face her companion. He was staring down at his wine, long-fingered hands cupping the goblet as if it held the Elixir of Life.

'This morning, Healer Trickett told me you're dying,' he said, his voice low. 'I would consider it—a courtesy—if you would tell me whether or not she's wrong.'

The red wine in her goblet sloshed as her hand shook. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

'She's not wrong.'

He didn't look at her. The silence stretched into infinity.

'Severus, I'm sorry.'



NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—
and much more

Severus and I, with Dumbledore's help (I consider him our "participant-observer") have just finished compiling the tenth-sequence materials and soon we have to organize them. But Dumbledore's been called away suddenly, and Severus suggested I rest until his return.

Evidently writing counts as "resting," for Severus has chosen to leave me to it as he quietly moves around, putting his lab and store back in order.

I remember every detail of what passed between Severus and me at dinnertime. And finally, I know why I've been keeping such detailed and personal notes: they're for him. I want him to read all of it. I want Severus to know everything. That way, at least a part of me won't die.

(Severus, didn't you find it ironic to be alone with me, firelight dancing in our eyes, goblets of red wine glowing between our cupped hands—all the hallmarks of a romantic cliché, whilst I delivered my own death-sentence? Ah well. They say the gods do enjoy a good laugh.)

When he finally spoke, his voice was so low I could hardly hear him.

'How long?'

For a second, I considered delaying answering by pretending I didn't know what he meant.

'I don't honestly know,' I said at last.

'Days? Weeks? An estimate would be helpful.' (I'm sorry to say your tone had a most unpleasant bite.)

'What exactly did the Healer say to you?' I counter-attacked.

Inch by grudging inch, Severus unraveled the gist of the cryptic remarks Ethelwyn had made to him that morning in his office. I found myself fascinated and soon, in spite of everything, I was sitting on the edge of the sofa and babbling about the shared probabilistic nature of magic and physics at the quantum level. 'It's possible Ethelwyn does have some kind of ability to sense "patterns" beyond what most witches and wizards can grasp. After all, magic and matter are basically transformations of each other.' I was in full lecture-mode at that point; only a Horn-tail could have stopped me. 'When she says "nothing is certain," what she means is that it's impossible to know everything about matter and magic simultaneously.' After a moment, I added lamely, 'I can't pin anything down—not even whether my presence has already changed what would have been.'

And you, Severus, received this disquisition with the stony silence it no doubt deserved.

Nonetheless, I plunged on. 'The results of the matter-magic transformations allowing me to come back in time will endure only so long. Then they predict an unstable state.'

'How long?' Your voice held the deadly edge I remembered all too well from my student days. I sighed.

'Another day. Perhaps two.'

'Sweet fucking Merlin.' You slammed your goblet down on the table, making me jump. 'There must be something we can do. Spells. Potions. You—you've been too smart for your own good since the age of twelve! Let's bloody solve the problem! Not just accept it!' He was almost shouting now.

'We can't.'

'Fuck the Carborundorum project. Nothing is more important than this!'

When you said that, you looked at me in a way I had never imagined or dared hope any man would—with love and pain and fury—and all for me, all on my behalf. God help me, all I could think about was how much I wanted you, and how unfair it was to have stumbled on the pure truth of that at the tail-end of my life.

But Severus, you were wrong, and I had to pull you

back to our task, or else my life and my death would all be rubbish.

When I took your hand, you didn't resist.

'If I knew how to change the nature of the universe, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

There is no remedy. There is no remedy. If you really want to help me, we have to finish what we've started. We have to. Please.'

'I don't believe this. This is impossible.'

I had to be relentless. 'There are laws governing the multiverses, even if we can't control them. Ethelwyn was right. I'm not supposed to exist. At least not here and now. I knew all that before I used the long-range Time-Turner.'

You quickly clasped my hand in both of yours. I'm sure my fingers must have felt like cold bone inside your warmth. 'Damn it, I WANT to live, Severus. I want to live more than I've wanted to in years. Especially now.'

Your hands tightened around mine. You shook your head. 'I don't understand. You and—Hermione Granger—aren't even the same person anymore. Why can't you both exist?'

Ah. A theoretical question. That calmed me, and after a moment I could say without much trouble, 'The laws of quantum mechanics allow some states to exist at any given time, but not others. Hermione and I are



different enough that we've been able to exist at the same time and place, but that can't last.'

'But how do you know?'

I sighed. I knew you weren't going to like this next bit. 'It's as if she and I sometimes enter a kind of intermediate state in which we exchange magical energy. Or more accurately, my energy is being pulled from me, and it's going to her. And I'm afraid the effect's getting stronger. I have no idea if physical distance makes any difference—maybe not—but I'm certainly trying to avoid close contact. I may last longer if I do.'

I'm glad you couldn't see your own face. It was a study in fascinated horror. 'Couldn't those transformations of yours predict that?'

'No. And Hermione can't help it. There's nothing she can do to stop it.'

Then I suspect the dark part of you that would never stop being a spy asserted itself. 'Can Miss Granger sense your thoughts? Does she have any idea who you are?' Your eyes became narrow and shrewd.

'I don't think so. The exchanges are random, and they're just sensations, feelings—not like Legilimency. She must know something's wrong, though. And—' oh, I couldn't stop adding this '—I'm afraid



one or two of these quantum exchanges took place when you and I were—erm—making love.'

'Oh. Oh! FUCK.'

I began to laugh and was soon helpless with it, tears rolling down my face. I couldn't stop, I honestly couldn't, and I thought you might get up and leave in disgust. But you didn't. You moved right up beside me and put your arms around me, pulling me against your chest. And you held me. Simply held me.

Yet when I was finally able to look up at you, I couldn't read your face.

'It's better than crying,' was all I could think of to say. Your smile was quick and bitter.

We sat for a while, not moving or speaking. Finally, because I couldn't bear the tension raging around us any longer, I said, 'I was hoping we might spend the rest of this free time doing something much more pleasant than discussing quantum geometry.'

You grasped my meaning right away, but the appalled expression on your face made my heart sink. I went right into defence-mode and pulled away from you.

'Oh bloody hell! I suppose the idea repulses you now, doesn't it?'

You shook your head. 'No—no. It's just...'

'What, then?' I knew how childish that sounded. 'If



you want me to go... if that would be easier for you, then tell me.'

'You wouldn't let me face my nightmare alone.' Your warm hand cupped my head, subtly making me lean into you. 'If you think I'm going to let you go through yours alone, then you clearly don't know me at all.' I turned my head to look at you, and saw your face—I have no other word for it—unclosing.

As I stared at you, hardly able to believe what I'd just heard you say, your arms came round me and you gathered me close, so close I could scarcely breathe, but I couldn't have cared less about that, and I wrapped myself around you. And all I could think about, over and over like the tolling of a gong, were the words Æthelwyn had said to you—'And all manner of things shall be well.'

After a while, I summoned up the nerve to kiss you, and—oh thank all the powers that be—you not only responded but soon had me begging, between gulps of air and laughter, to please, please take me to your bed.

I want you to know this, Severus: for me, the slow, sweet sharing of passion between us over that next hour was different from anything we've yet experienced. It was almost as if, after years of hard travelling, we'd arrived at our rightful place. I very much hope you—

—Ah. Time to finish the tenth sequence.



As he'd been instructed, Dobby appeared in Snape's living room with dinner for two but found no one there to eat it.

'Professor Snape, sir? Doctor Hawking?'

Frowning, he put the tray beside the decanter and two half-filled wine goblets.

'What must Dobby tell the headmaster? Have they eaten, he'll ask? How is Dobby supposed to know?' He threw a dark look at the door to Snape's bedroom.

'Dobby is not going in there.'

Looking most unhappy, the house-elf vanished.



The plateful of bangers-and-mashed (kept piping hot by magic) smelled enticing, but Hermione paid it no attention. Hunched over her little table in the corner of Professor McGonagall's office, she scribbled notes as quickly as she could. From time to time she peered into the cauldron beside her, looking deep into what seemed, beyond all possibility, an almost perfect, almost entirely effective Cruciatu*s* remedy.

One small problem, though. She had done nothing to alter the potion since last Thursday, when the remedy had tested at eighty percent effective. She'd wracked her brains trying to remember what she'd done to it since Dumbledore and McGonagall had moved it away from Professor Snape's lab on Saturday morning. But nothing. Nothing. She'd tested and

re-tested it, and read and re-read her parchments, and taken reams of puzzled notes. That was it.

She'd wondered earlier if Gwen Hawking had interfered with her project. Now she was almost certain of it. On the one hand, she couldn't imagine any scrupulous witch doing that. But on the other hand, what other possible explanation was there?

"Dead" or not though, Professor Snape had to know. As an Order member, Hermione knew she could get access to him in an emergency. And in her humble opinion, if a powerful witch with deep knowledge of deadly weapons had tampered with a substance potent enough to tip the balance of a wizarding war, surely that counted as an emergency.

The magical dinner plate smelled so good, and Hermione's stomach rumbled, but she shot the food an irritated glance and brushed hair out of her eyes. 'One more test,' she muttered. 'Just to make sure.' She got to her feet, stretched her back muscles, and levelled her wand over the cauldron. 'Analyse.' Sure enough, as the patterns symbolising ingredients and interactions formed in the air above the cauldron, they sketched the same result as the last half-dozen tests: no more variations in the red end of the spectrum, no discernable impurities.

And, in theory at least, a ninety-eight percent effectiveness rate against the Cruciatius Curse.

'Well,' she said. Too tired and suspicious to feel any kind of triumph, she slumped back down on her stool to record the results.

Suddenly a half-formed image ghosted through her

mind, only a brush of sensation at first—a sensual tingling of skin, a slow blooming of pleasure. Hermione sat bolt upright, her eyes wide and her mouth open. Then her whole world reeled, and she felt herself lying beneath a man whose naked body moved slowly, deliciously over hers. Warm lips and hot breath, skin savouring skin, her arms wrapped tight around a wiry back, wings of his black hair brushing against her face. Her experienced thighs opened, and she surrounded his hot, hard flesh with eager joy.

Oh, yes... oh, oh...

Then the sensations vanished, as if a door had slammed in her face. Shaking and aroused almost past sanity, Hermione buried her face in her hands and willed herself to calmness, ignoring her clamouring need for release as she'd ignored the enticing food. Knowing more or less what had happened didn't help. Quite the opposite. She hated playing the voyeur, hated getting only the dregs of deep intimacy, and most of all, hated that a witch with a shadowy, possibly threatening past could waltz in and seduce Professor Snape in less than a week, when *she* had slaved for years to prove her intellect, bravery, and worth.

This was all wrong. This had to stop. *Now.*

Hermione pushed herself to her feet, stumbled over to McGonagall's office door, yanked it open, and hurtled into the corridor with no other thought than confronting Hawking. She'd made it a few steps when a form materialised in front of her and grasped her shoulders with firm hands, stopping her in her tracks.

'Oi! Hang about!'

She blinked, focusing, and recognised an Auror: the very young one with dark brows and a scowly-looking face.

'Where do you think *you're* going? You know you're not allowed anywhere by yourself during the alert.'

'I—erm—I'm working on a project, and I need to see—' Remembering just in time they were in a public corridor, she stopped herself from saying "Professor Snape" and continued more calmly, 'I must see our visiting professor. She's working in the dungeons. It's extremely urgent. She's the only one who can help me.'

'Doctor Hawking's work area is off limits.'

'But it's an emergency!'

'Look, I'm sorry—' for a moment the young Auror's stern expression wavered '—but I'm not authorised to take you down there.'

'It's all right, Sam. I'll handle this.' It was Tonks, her hair today a brilliant shade of orange. 'Why don't you go hover near the Great Hall? They're all still at dinner.'

Sam scowled, hesitating, and Tonks gave him a grin and made a shooing motion.

'It's fine, honestly. Go on.'

'Right. Well ... young lady—you be careful.'

Tonks took Hermione's elbow and steered her back to McGonagall's office. 'Don't mind our Sam,' she said in a low, cheerful voice, as if sensing Hermione's thoughts. 'He means well, but he's trying to fill a bloody great pair of shoes, so he can be a bit of a prat sometimes.'

'What do you mean?'

Tonks closed the office door behind them.

'He's Mad-Eye's nephew *and* his trainee. Can you imagine? *Constant vigilance* for breakfast! *Constant vigilance* for dinner! And on top of it all, his real name's Sebastian. Poor sod. Now,' Tonks neatly changed the subject, 'you know you can't just go charging off to the dungeons. So what's all this about, then?'

'Sorry. I wasn't thinking clearly.'

'Is there any way I can help?'

Hermione gave Tonks a carefully edited summary of developments on the anti-Cruciatius remedy. 'Even though it's just a NEWT project, Professor Snape insisted I keep him informed about any progress. It could make a difference against Voldemort,' she added. 'I was so excited to get such good results that I—well—forgot for a second about the alert.'

Tonks whistled. 'Don't blame you. Hell's bloody bells. Still, there's no way I can just march you down to the dungeons. But—' she held up a hand as Hermione prepared to protest '—you can get there using the Floo.'

'Students aren't allowed to use the Floo Network!'

'Well *you* can. You *are* a member of the Order,' said Tonks a bit scornfully. 'But,' her expression turned thoughtful, 'I'd be a good idea for me to nip down to Snape's lab ahead of you, to sort of clear the way, if you know what I mean.'

'Right now?' said Hermione, trying not to sound horrified at the thought of Tonks possibly arriving whilst Snape and Hawking might be—no. She

couldn't finish that thought.

'Not just yet,' said Tonks, to Hermione's intense relief. 'I've got to check back first with Sam. But I'll come back as quick as I can.' She gave Hermione a sharp look. 'Are you going to be all right by yourself?'

'Absolutely.' Though how she'd cope if another one of those—*visions*—came back, she couldn't predict. Fortunately, the time passed without distractions, allowing Hermione to collect herself and try very hard to push that searing memory of flesh against flesh to the back of her mind. When Tonks came back, about half an hour later, Hermione was calmly compiling her notes. In a moment she'd rolled them up and tucked them under her arm.

'Okay. I'm ready.'

Tonks eyed the cauldron on its low flame.

'Won't you be needing that?'

'I don't want to move it until I know it's going straight back to Professor Snape's lab. So I'll ask him to check these notes first.'

'Right.' Tonks threw a handful of powder into McGonagall's fireplace, and the flames flared green. 'Severus Snape's office!'

Hermione waited. And waited. Minutes crawled by. No sign of Tonks. But the flames burned green, so the Floo was still active. What was going on?

How much longer should she wait?

It felt as if *hours* had crawled by.

'Bloody hell,' she muttered. Clutching her notes to her chest, she said loudly, 'Severus Snape's office!' and stepped into the green fire. For a dizzying, unpleas-

ant moment she seemed to drop straight down before landing with a thud, her stomach between her teeth. Shaking ashes out of her hair, she emerged from the fireplace and looked around. Yes: this was Snape's office, and she briefly thanked Merlin and his minions that the Potions master wasn't there to witness her untidy (and no doubt unwanted) intrusion.

Then she heard voices coming from the lab. Her heart hammering, she crept to the half-opened door to listen.



After an initial rush of gratitude that Tonks had not dropped in a few minutes earlier—when he and Gwen had emerged together, blinking like owls, from the dimness of his bedroom into the bright light of his lab—Snape had been less than pleased to hear that Hermione Granger wanted to see him.

'Sorry,' Tonks said again. She stood well away from him, only a few feet away from his office. 'But she seemed very upset. I thought it best to come and tell you right away.'

Tonks didn't seem in the least apologetic. But—damn it, he couldn't just dismiss this. What if Miss Granger had experienced a break-through in her NEWT project? If she had, he needed to know. Dumbledore needed to know. If even an eighty-percent version could make a difference, imagine what a much more potent remedy could do.

'Look, Snape—' a respectful "Professor" was too much to hope from the likes of Tonks—she charged out into the corridor and would've gone straight

for the dungeons, she was that upset. If she's onto something the Order can use, then don't you think you ought to at least *listen* to her?'

'Severus.' Hawking's voice was very low. 'I think Tonks is right. Hermione should come here.'

He threw his lover a puzzled, uneasy glance. She had retreated to the other end of the lab and was leaning against the long table, arms tightly crossed beneath her shawl. *I'm trying to avoid close contact. I may last longer if I do*, she'd said.

Oh, bloody fucking hell.

'Right,' he said sourly to Tonks, and the young Auror turned and shoved the door of Snape's office wide open. Hermione stood there, looking horrified, clutching rolls of parchment to her chest as if her life depended on it.

'Oh,' said Tonks.

'I—I'm sorry, Professor,' Hermione stuttered, her face turning crimson. 'I just—I only —'

'How long have you eavesdropping?' His voice was low and furious.

Hermione raised her chin. The familiar gesture disturbed him.

'I only just arrived, Professor. Tonks was gone so long I was getting worried.' Her tone was calm, reasonable. 'She had already given me clearance to use the Floo, so I broke no rules.'

'But you were about to rush down to the dungeons by yourself. That's a serious misdemeanour, warranting at least fifty points from Gryffindor.'

'Snape, that's not fair,' said Tonks, frowning. 'You only know that because I told you.'

'I'll accept a penalty if you feel you must give it,' said Hermione, her voice low and urgent. 'But Professor, please look at my notes. I don't know why or how, but my Cruciatus remedy—it's—I've analysed it at least six times, and the result—well, you can see for yourself.' She unfurled her parchments, looked around helplessly for a surface to put them on, and seeing none, squatted and spread them out on the floor.

'Tonks, would you please excuse us?' said Snape.

'Don't you need an observer?' she shot back, her expression cheeky.

'The headmaster is observing this evening, and we're expecting him any moment. Please leave.'

Tonks gave a bright, false smile. 'Always a pleasure, Snape.'

'Insufferable brat,' Hermione thought she heard Snape mutter under his breath as he crouched beside her to scan her notes. She moved a few inches away from him. He appeared not to notice.

Hermione hadn't looked over at Hawking once, though she was acutely aware of the older woman's presence at the other end of the room—like heat, like a force that could devour her. Now she heard a soft rustle and sneaked a quick look to see Hawking turn her back on them and attend to what looked like a motley collection of ingredients on the far end of the long table.

They're supposed to be finishing the tenth sequence tonight, aren't they? Is that what they were doing an hour ago?

Beside her, Snape gave a surprised grunt. 'This is intriguing,' he said, pointing at her record of the latest analysis. He gave her a sharp look. 'Are you



sure these results are accurate?’

‘If my Analysis spell is accurate, then so are the results,’ said Hermione, with a defiance that surprised both of them. ‘Each time I’ve tested it over the past two days, it’s indicated ninety-eight percent effectiveness.’

‘Ninety-eight percent?’ said Hawking sharply. Hermione and Snape looked up. She had turned to face them again, her face alight with curiosity. ‘That’s more than remarkable; that’s astonishing. How did that happen, Miss Granger? What did you do?’

‘Nothing,’ said Hermione.

‘What?’

‘I said—nothing.’ Hermione rose to her feet. ‘As you know, Doctor Hawking, my project was removed from this lab Saturday morning. I have added nothing to it since. All I’ve done is some reading and testing. That’s it. But somehow the remedy was—altered. And I can only conclude it happened before Saturday morning. When it was still in this lab.’

Hawking fixed blazing brown eyes on Hermione. ‘What exactly are you suggesting?’

Snape rose to his feet and reached out a hand as if to restrain Hermione.

‘On Thursday night, you said I should “consider alternatives” and “try something unusual” for my project.’ Hermione’s voice was still calm. ‘I’m simply wondering if you may have—erm—decided to act on those suggestions. As a way of helping me.’

Hawking’s face was pale, the lines around her mouth pitiless. ‘Helping you? Without your permis-



sion? That’s called *tampering*, Miss Granger. At least do me the courtesy of saying it directly.’

‘Miss Granger, is that what you think has happened?’ Snape’s voice had sunk to a deadly whisper.

‘There is no other obvious explanation,’ Hermione said coldly.

‘I did *nothing* to your project!’ Hawking took a step toward Hermione.

‘Gwen!’ Snape moved toward the older witch, holding a hand out as if to stop her. Hawking brought herself up short, stepping back against the table. ‘I did nothing,’ she said, her voice calmer. ‘Listen to me. Even if I’d wanted to do such a thing, I couldn’t have. Professor Snape was taken ill on Friday morning. On Friday afternoon and all night, I was in the hospital wing with burnt hands.’ She smiled grimly. ‘You bounced my own *Incendio* spell back on me.’

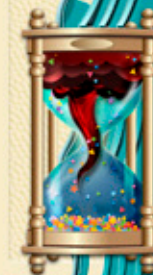
Oh hell, damnation, and chaos. Of course. *Of course*. Hermione’s face burned, and she dropped her eyes, mortified almost beyond words.

‘I—I’m sorry,’ she mumbled. ‘I don’t know—I’m not—’

‘Miss Granger.’ Snape’s voice was firm, no longer furious. ‘I believe you when you say you didn’t alter the potion after it was moved from this lab. But—’ his eyes bored into hers ‘—something *did* happen. Perhaps you simply can’t think of it.’ He faced her. ‘Are you willing to place your memories of your past two days’ work in a *Pensieve* for observation?’

Hermione stared at Snape.

‘It won’t hurt, foolish girl. It will simply help us spot important patterns or links in your thoughts.’





‘Erm—would this happen now?’

‘Of course—*now*. The sooner the better. Or you may go back to McGonagall’s office and reconstruct the past two days yourself—with considerably more care and attention this time.’

‘Will it only be my memories from McGonagall’s office? No others?’

‘I couldn’t be less interested in your other memories, Miss Granger.’

Oh, god. Suddenly she wondered if he knew about her unwanted excursions into Hawking’s mind. Her face burned. But no; she couldn’t think about that now. She had to focus on the main problem. And truth be told, she wanted to know what had happened even more than Snape did. So if the Pensieve was the only option...

Within ten minutes of her agreeing to go through with it, Dumbledore had appeared with the Pensieve and had begun instructing Hermione on how to extract the desired memories and deposit them into the large stone bowl.

‘I’ll get started on the next sequence.’ Hawking made as if to go back into the lab.

‘It’s all right if you want to stay,’ Hermione said rapidly.

Hawking hesitated, but then shook her head.

‘No. Thank you. I’ve had quite enough of Pensieves,’ she said, and went out into the lab.

‘Quite so,’ murmured Dumbledore. ‘Don’t concern yourself, Miss Granger.’

A few moments later, she, Snape, and Dumbledore



were seated around the stone basin. Hermione couldn’t keep her eyes off the silvery, hypnotically shimmering contents—Harry had once said it was like liquid light.

‘Now, Miss Granger, place the tip of your wand beneath the surface and stir gently.’

She did, and gasped as an image of Professor McGonagall’s office rose up above the basin, revolving gently. It was all very clear: McGonagall, Hermione (looking extraordinarily miffed), and the little table behind the Gryffindor screen, where her cauldron and parchments had been carefully placed. And then voices. McGonagall was explaining that her project had been moved and that her services as an Order observer for the Carborundorum project were not longer required.

I’m sorry the Order won’t trust me enough to continue working in Professor Snape’s lab.

—There wasn’t time to discuss it with you first.

Has something happened? Is it Professor Snape? Is he—worse?

—We’re doing everything we can for him.

Then McGonagall left, and Hermione watched herself grip the edges of her little table, close her eyes, and weep. She saw tears fall onto the table... and into the swirling indigo depths of her Cruciatu*s* remedy.

Dumbledore touched his wand to the Pensieve, and the memories sank back inside.

‘Tears. That explains it,’ said Snape, his tone deeply satisfied.

Hermione took a shaky breath, and Dumbledore looked at her, his face full of concern.

‘Are you all right, child?’





She nodded and said, almost in a whisper, 'I honestly didn't remember that.'

'Of course not,' said Dumbledore briskly, as if being unable to recall a key ingredient that improved an experimental potion by almost twenty percent were the most natural thing in the world. 'Now, let's restore your memories to you, and then I must return this Pensieve to its rightful place. Severus, Doctor Hawking—I shall be back shortly.'

Snape waited until after Dumbledore departed before saying another word. Hermione braced herself for his invective. But he startled her by saying in a neutral tone, 'I believe you made some use of Vladislav's reference to an ancient potions grimoire listing the properties of bodily fluids.'

This sounded like a prelude to a NEWT question. She tried to re-focus her mind and think like an intelligent witch.

'Yes,' she said with an effort. 'But I haven't referred to it for a few days.'

'Do you have it with you?'

'Yes.' She pulled it out from the sheaf of other parchments, unrolled it, and in a moment had found the list. Snape took one end of the parchment and ran his finger down the list rapidly.

'What does it say about tears?'

She peered at the parchment. 'Tears,' she murmured. 'The female's are preferable.' She snorted, not noticing Snape's mouth twitch in a slight smile. 'In order of potency... tears from physical pain—monthly courses, childbirth. Stronger are tears from women



rejected by an errant groom or unfaithful husband. Strongest of all are the tears of loss—from death.'

Then, in shock, she stopped reading. But Snape had already spotted the final passage.

'A lover's death untimely, yields tears of greatest potency,' he read softly.

An awful silence followed. Hermione couldn't look at Snape.

'Right,' he said briskly, rising from his chair, gathering up the parchments, and thrusting them at Hermione. 'I want you, with the headmaster's help, to retrieve your project from Professor McGonagall's office and bring it back here right away. Then tomorrow we'll need to test it. I'll be the subject, obviously, but we'll need someone else to cast the Cruciatus Curse.'

'Erm—' Hermione struggled to her feet. 'Professor, I'm not sure I can—'

'You? You're entirely unsuited, and I blame myself for not realising that before our last test. But perhaps Alastor Moody will oblige.' He gave the ghost of a wolfish grin. 'Go back to Professor McGonagall's office now, Miss Granger, and wait for the headmaster to join you.'

'Sir.'

About to go back into the lab, Snape turned back and frowned. 'Now what?'

'I'm sorry for my unprofessional conduct toward Doctor Hawking. And for being careless with my potion.'

'Indeed. For a student of your abilities, you were extraordinarily and unacceptably careless. Normally, that warrants an automatic failure for the Potions NEWT'

'I understand,' Hermione whispered.



'Miss Granger, have you read *The Compendium of Magical Accidents*?'

She lifted her head, puzzled at the change of topic.

'Yes, but over a year ago.'

'Do you remember the description of how Samantha Goodheart discovered Blood-Replenishing Potion?'

Hermione's eyes widened.

'Do you mean when she—?'

'If a spider web hadn't drifted into Goodheart's cauldron, we might not have that remedy today. A felicitous accident.' Snape's face was expressionless.

'Oh.'

'Now,' said Snape, when Hermione had absorbed this thought, 'we all have work to do. Go and see to your project.'

'I owe Doctor Hawking an apology,' said Hermione quietly.

'I doubt she has time for such self-indulgence, Miss Granger,' and he swept out of the office with a scowl.



HERMIONE TRIED to quell her anxiety about the Cruciatius remedy being moved by reminding herself that none other than Dumbledore would supervise the operation. Under his direction, the cauldron was carefully removed from the flame, covered, and transported via house-elf from McGonagall's office to Snape's lab. 'This is how we moved it before,' Dumbledore explained to Hermione. 'Taking it through the Floo Network might have introduced impurities.' At that point Snape took over, using his wand to place the remedy on what Hermione still thought of as "her" small table. He wasted no time igniting a low flame beneath the cauldron.

When Dumbledore asked for an update on the testing protocol, Hermione bit her lip, wondering how much Snape would say about why she could no longer effectively cast Cruciatius on him. But Snape explained in neutral terms that it would be best for Alastor Moody to cast the test-Curse. Dumbledore agreed readily, and to her relief, Hermione's name never even came up.

But the headmaster drew the line at Snape as the subject.

'You were in the hospital wing only a day ago,' the elderly wizard pointed out. Snape's brows drew down in a



black line. 'It would be foolish to put yourself at risk now.'

'I've fully recovered.' A thin flush rose in Snape's sallow face. 'And if this remedy's as effective as I expect it to be, I won't be harmed. Besides, I know better than anyone how to gauge its capabilities.'

'I volunteer,' said Hermione. Both men swivelled their heads to her, astonished. 'It is my remedy,' she added, with a hint of pride.

'Dear child, that's out of the question,' said Dumbledore, his tone gentle.

'Why? If what Doctor Hawking says is true, we'll be fighting for our lives in three days. So what difference would it make?'

'Miss Granger, *think*. Do you honestly believe any Hogwarts staff member or Auror in his or her right mind would cast an Unforgivable on a student?' said Snape with venom.

'Oh.' She felt crushed.

'Miss Granger, your courage and sense of responsibility do you great credit,' said Dumbledore. She looked up, relieved, to catch the faintest hint of a twinkle in the blue eyes behind the half-moon glasses.

At length the two wizards agreed to conduct a test the following afternoon, with Snape as the subject only if his health suffered no setback in the meantime. That settled, Snape began moving toward the long table where Hawking was sorting ingredients, and Dumbledore turned to Hermione.

'Miss Granger, I can't congratulate you enough on your remarkable achievement. What you've done is nothing short of revolutionary.'



'Erm, thank you, Professor.' It was nice of Dumbledore to acknowledge her work. But Snape's oblique concession—*If a spider web hadn't drifted into Goodheart's cauldron*—meant ten times more.

'Now, you must be tired. Use the Floo to return to Professor McGonagall's office, and she will escort you to Gryffindor Tower.'

'Could I have a word with Doctor Hawking first, if she doesn't mind?'

Snape froze in mid-step. Hawking raised her head sharply.

'Alone, if—if that would be all right,' Hermione continued.

Without a word, Hawking swung away from the table. Making a wide circle around Dumbledore and Hermione, she walked quickly toward Snape's office. 'In here,' she threw over her shoulder.

Unable to help herself, Hermione flashed a glance at Snape, who had turned to follow Hawking's movements. His expression looked angry and drawn. Worried. But that made no sense. What did he think was going to happen?

Holding her head high, she followed Hawking into the office. The older woman, already seated behind Snape's desk, waved Hermione to a chair in front of the desk, and then leaned back, crossing her arms, her face shadowed by the dimness of the room.

'Well, Miss Granger?' Her tone was flat, neither curious nor accusatory.

Hermione took a deep breath. 'I want to apologise for—well, implying you did something to my project. I





was upset, though I know that's not an excuse.'

'You did more than imply. Though I might have thought the same thing in your place.' A faint smile flickered, vanished. 'But ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the cause of a problem is human error—not a conspiracy, and not malice.'

Hermione stared at Hawking for a moment. Then without warning, all the questions that had churned inside her for the past several days rose up like a tidal wave.

'What happened to me in the Defence class? Did all that power come from you? Why do I keep thinking—keep feeling... what you feel?' she stopped, embarrassment choking her for a moment, then burst out, 'What are you *doing* to me? And *why*?'

'I—' Hawking half rose, extending a hand, almost as if she might come toward Hermione, even reach out and touch her. But Hawking pulled herself up short, folded her arms again, and walked away from Hermione, toward the shelves of potions ingredients.

'When you've worked as much with defensive magic as I have, you have to expect dangers. Complications. Undesirable effects.' Hawking's gaze was expressionless. 'Let's just say I regularly experience those. What you're feeling is a kind of secondary effect. I can control it a little, but it's unpredictable.' She looked down at the floor. 'And sometimes powerful.' She hesitated a moment, and said sadly, 'It can't be helped. As to what it must be doing to you—all I can say is, I'm so sorry.'

'But why me?'

'I don't know.' Hawking met Hermione's eyes



steadily. 'I suppose it's possible we have something in common—a location, perhaps, like this lab. We're both vested in this place. That's only a guess. As I've said, this effect is unpredictable.'

'I think,' said Hermione softly, 'that what we have in common is Professor Snape.'

Hawking lifted her chin, her gaze still steady, but Hermione saw how her hands tightened around her elbows.

'You may be right,' she said, her voice very quiet. 'But only for a little while longer. I can't stay here.'

Hermione could barely hear the other woman's voice through the pounding of her heart.

'I would have liked to work with you,' said Hawking. 'You have such tremendous potential. So many possibilities. I hope you'll be able to realise them.'

'Were you able to?'

'In the end, a little—yes.'

They looked at each other until Hawking raised a hand and passed it over her face.

'I must get back to work.' But Hermione saw how she swayed slightly on her feet and how drawn and tired she looked.

'Are you all right?' she asked the other woman quietly.

Surprised, Hawking met Hermione's gaze. 'Yes, of course. I'm just a bit tired. Now—you should go.'

It seemed there was nothing more to say. Hermione walked over to the fireplace and scooped up a handful of Floo-powder. Suddenly she turned back to Hawking.

'Does Professor Snape know you're not staying?'

Hawking looked taken aback, but nodded.





The question had to be asked. 'Is he planning to go with you?'

Hawking gave her a long, considering look.

'Where I'm going, he can't follow,' she said softly.



'So what happened in Dumbledore's office?' Pansy leaned close to Draco and whispered the question as all around them in the Great Hall, students chatted and finished their pudding.

'Oh, he looked at me sadly, and said how important it is in these dangerous times to meet my responsibilities as a prefect and serve as a model to other students,' said Draco with a sneer. 'And we didn't even fight the Weasley bitch. But I suppose old Dumbledore has to show the flag.'

'Was Potty there?'

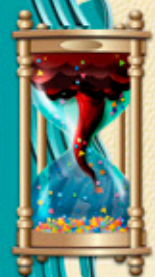
'Naah. Maybe he got his little lecture earlier. But do you know what really pissed me off? He had the gall to say that I need not fear any prejudice from Hogwarts staff because of my father. That no one holds his "alliance" against me. Well, fuck the old bugger.'

'D'you think you've convinced him you're going to be a good boy? The last thing we want is Dumbledore breathing down your neck.'

Draco reached under the table and let his hand glide lightly over Pansy's skirt-covered thigh.

'Oh I think so,' he whispered. 'I even cried a bit at one point. The old fart can't resist that; he's so fucking sentimental.'

Pansy smiled. 'Hmm. Nice touch.'



Since not even Draco could get away with annexing the entire Slytherin common room right after dinner-time, he'd arranged an alternative meeting place. He and Pansy, with Crabbe and Goyle, meandered casually through the crowds of students in the Entrance Hall. Since it was too dark and rainy to go out to the courtyard, the place was packed with students lingering and chatting on their way to prep, all ignoring the scowly-faced young Auror standing stiffly, his arms folded, at the foot of the wide marble staircase.

'Right,' said Draco quietly to Crabbe and Goyle when they found the short, dark corridor leading to a single door at the end. 'Stay out here. Look useful. Maybe go find Daph or Millicent or Nott. But come back here in about fifteen minutes, and keep an eye on that Auror. If he starts to come over here, distract him. Got it?'

Goyle and Crabbe looked at each other.

'How should we distract him?' said Goyle.

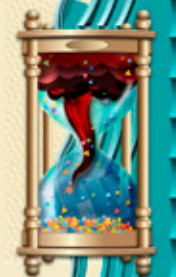
'Oh for god's sake,' Pansy snapped. 'Use your head. Ask him what it's like to be a trainee. Ask him if it's boring to patrol the dungeons in the middle of the night. Whatever.'

'Right,' said Crabbe. They moved away and inserted themselves into the crowd.

In a few seconds, Draco was knocking on the door of Filch's office.

Pansy wrinkled her nose at the faint smell of cooked fish, but when she saw the polished chains and manacles hanging from the ceiling, her eyes widened.

'I take it the Polyjuice is ready?' asked Filch, when he'd settled his two visitors in wooden chairs and





seated himself behind his desk. Mrs. Norris, her eyes glowing, leapt lightly up onto the only part of the desk that wasn't covered with misconduct forms, turned herself around twice, then lay down. Pansy threw the cat a poisonous look.

'Of course,' said Draco with a slight smile.

'Except for adding the hair, of course,' said Pansy, sounding bored. Filch ignored her.

'If you please, Master Malfoy—review your plan again for me.'

When Draco had told him, Filch nodded. 'Ah. They won't be able to resist a challenge, will they? And Lupin will add a touch of authority. But you must time things carefully. You need to get them down to the dungeons just before eleven.'

'We could do it earlier,' Pansy said pettishly.

'Eleven is when the house-elves considerately take tea round to the two Aurors on patrol,' said Filch.

'So?' Pansy folded her arms and frowned, but Draco leaned forward in his chair, frowning thoughtfully at Filch.

'You're going to put something in their tea, aren't you?'

Filch smirked.

Pansy stared at Filch. 'A potion!' she snapped. 'Did you steal it?'

'Absolutely not,' said Filch, sounding hurt.

'Which potion? Sleeping Draught? Truth-potion?' Pansy hesitated. 'Veritaserum?'

'Whatever it is, it won't kill the Aurors, if that's what's worrying you,' Filch said, a sneer edging his voice. 'It will allow me to—shall we say—*ensure* that



they willingly and correctly dismantle the wards binding the door of the old potions room—or had you forgotten about the wards?'

Pansy flushed. 'No, of course not,' she muttered.

Filch inclined his head, giving them what passed for a benign smile. 'Now,' he added briskly, 'as an extra precaution, I'll be in the background as you bring your little friends down to the dungeons. If an Auror or teacher should intercept and question you, I'll step in and say you're violating the alert and possibly curfew as well. No one will interfere. No one will suspect anything. The worst outcome is that we'll have to delay your—erm—prank for one more day.'

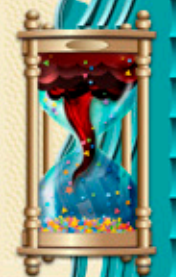
'Just make sure that doesn't happen,' said Draco, his voice flat.

Filch's rheumy eyes flashed for a moment with fear and anger. 'I'll clear the way for you, you can be sure of that,' he said, his voice flat.

'And what makes you think *you're* not being observed?' Pansy threw at Filch. 'If I were Dumbledore, I'd be keeping an eye on you.'

Filch gave her a wide, fake smile. 'Why bother? There are wards and Aurors on patrol day and night—bored out of their skulls, I might add. I very much doubt Dumbledore has any more resources to spare.'

'I agree,' said Draco, earning a surprised look from Pansy. 'I don't think Dumbledore's watching Filch that closely. He seemed really distracted when I saw him before dinner. I think the old bugger's stretched past his limits. The Ministry aren't helping him much. I happen to know it's no accident they've





sent him only a few Aurors: half of them doddering old farts like Moody; the other half trainees. As if they'll be much of a challenge.' His lip curled.

'Well said Master Malfoy, if I may,' said Filch.

'Anything else?' Draco rose to his feet.

'Wait,' said Pansy, and turned to Filch. 'You haven't said what will happen once we've taken them into the fifth passageway.'

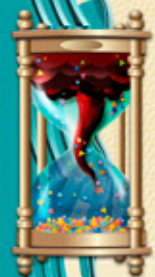
'Someone will be there to meet you,' said Filch, with a yellow-toothed grin. 'I promise.'

'Okay... so... we're just doing this to scare the piss out of Granger, aren't we?' said Pansy, her voice wavering just a bit. 'Nothing else is going to happen.'

'She'll be scared, all right,' said Draco, and patted Pansy's arm.



Ginny had been alone in a corner of the Gryffindor common room for about half an hour now. Curled up in one of the squashy chairs, she had a book on her lap but had spent most of the time gazing into the fire. She had barely paid attention to Harry and the other members of the D.A. who—as soon as they'd piled back into the common room after dinner—had squared off and, amidst much applause and many rude comments, had started an impromptu practice-session using what Lupin called 'nuisance weapons.' Harry took charge, putting his friends on the defensive by hurling a barrage of fire-fingers, followed by slime-balls, then flying ice-cubes, then several sets of giant chattering teeth, and finally, to Ron's dis-



quiet, a hoard of eight-legged mosquitoes, each the size of a small dog. The room filled with laughter, cries of disgust, and frantic shouts of *Referio!* and *Protego Adamant!*

'Not bad, you lot,' said Harry, relenting at last and grinning as Ron stomped on a giant mosquito he'd felled with *Petrificus Totalis*. The thing convulsed, its legs wriggling.

'Oh, stop! That's *disgusting!*' Parvati made a face and waved her wand. '*Scourgify!*' The remains vanished.

'Cheers,' Ron muttered. He checked the underside of his trainers and threw a hurt look at Harry. 'You bloody enjoyed that, didn't you?'

Harry clapped Ron on the back. 'Always a riot to see you coping with insects.' His eyes wandered back over to Ginny and, frowning slightly, he made his way over to her corner.

'Hey Ginny,' he said softly, dropping to a chair beside her.

'Hey Harry.' Her tone was flat, and she kept her eyes on her book.

'All right?'

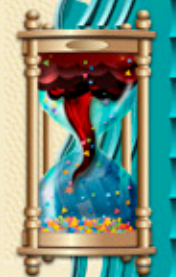
'Yeah.'

'So... you didn't join our little D.A. practice.'

'Didn't feel like it.'

'What's wrong? You're not bothered about what happened with Pansy, are you?'

Ginny turned to him, her face tight with anger. 'That bitch started it, and we lost a hundred points, and you were the one who got in trouble with Dumbledore! How bloody fair is *that?*'



Harry stared at her. 'Erm—so you're not pissed off with me, then?'

'With *you*? Why ever for?' Her expression softened. 'I've been feeling awful about it, Harry. I'm really sorry.'

He shook his head. 'Nothing to be sorry about. It wasn't your fault. Besides, just between you and me—' he leaned a bit closer to her '—Dumbledore told me he figured the Slytherins had started it, and he expects me to keep a sharp eye out for dissension, as he called it, and put a stop to it. He took the hundred points to make it look fair; he said it's bad strategy for him to look as if he's favouring one House over another right now.'

Ginny looked thoughtful. 'It sounds as if he's putting a lot of trust in you, Harry.'

Harry snorted. 'It's not about trust. It's about the bloody prophesy. Dumbledore's trying to make sure I'm in the right place at the right time, that's all.'

'And that bothers you.'

Harry looked uncomfortable. 'Well, I'm being used, aren't I? But—he's also right. I mean, whenever I think of my mum and dad, and—' he swallowed '—Sirius, and Cedric, I want to fulfil the prophecy. I want to blast Voldemort off the face of the earth. And Dumbledore knows that.'

'He cares for you, Harry.'

'Yeah, well.' He put a hand on Ginny's arm. 'Look, I don't want you to worry about Pansy any more, Ginny. Besides, you were brill.' He grinned. 'You didn't need my help or Ron's. You could've hexed

that stupid cow from here to next week with your wand tied behind your back. You're ten times more powerful than she is.'

Ginny, her lips parting slightly, stared into Harry's piercing green eyes. 'You think so?' she managed.

'I know so.' His voice lowered. For a long moment, they looked at each other. Then Harry, with a quick laugh, drew back. 'So don't miss any more D.A. practices, okay? You're needed.' He pushed himself to his feet and held out a hand. 'C'mon.'

Smiling into his face, she let him help her up.



About half an hour after Draco and Pansy left his office, Filch slowly raised his head, feeling his spine creak.

He'd been hunched over his desk, carefully measuring out the powder that the house-elf in his thrall would obediently add to the Aurors' tea. Briefly and with a touch of sadness, he reflected on all the lost opportunities for wreaking devastation and mayhem through subtly poisoning random Hogwarts meals. He'd even proposed that idea to Lucius Malfoy over two years ago. 'Interesting,' had been the response. 'Tempting. I doubt anyone would suspect you. But the question is—would they suspect Snape?'

If Malfoy had taken the idea further, He Who Was Highest Up had apparently vetoed it. When Filch broached it again a few weeks later, Malfoy had been dismissive. 'It's too messy. It wouldn't satisfy our Lord's larger goals,' he'd said vaguely.

Since then, Filch had had to content himself with



poisoning rats. This wasn't entirely unsatisfactory, since there was always a slim chance one or two of the rats were Animagi.

Rats. That's what had roused him. A faint scuttling behind his bulging filing cabinet.

'Mrs. Norris? All yours, my love,' he called softly. No response. He looked around, frowning.

That was a bit strange. She didn't usually go out on her patrols until very late.

Ah, well. She'd be back soon enough.

Filch bent over his desk again.



The clock in Snape's office—a reassuringly ordinary clock with normal hands and numbers—had just chimed eight when Dobby appeared in the middle of the lab. He bore a tiny piece of rolled parchment and a worried expression.

'Headmaster, sir? The Headmaster is to read this please, sir, and come straight away.'

Straightening up from where he had been recording the substances Hawking had measured, Dumbledore frowned and took the parchment. The next moment he was walking quickly toward Snape's office.

'I must go. But continue without me, please,' he said over his shoulder to Hawking.

Snape, sorting ingredients in his store, stared as the older wizard strode to the fireplace and took a handful of Floo powder.

'What is it, Headmaster?'

'Something I must take care of immediately. I



hope to be back within half an hour.' Green flames roared up, and Dumbledore had vanished.

'Any idea what *that* was about?' Hawking asked Snape when he crossed back into the lab a few moments later.

'None. How far along are we?'

'I'd say only two more hours before the end of number ten, thanks to the headmaster's help. I'll finish the measuring, if you don't mind taking over the recording. Then all we have to do is the sequencing.'

'Without an observer? Perhaps we should call Moody back in.'

'I'll pretend I didn't hear that.'

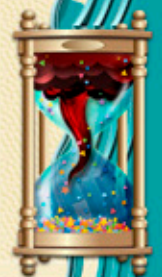
They worked quickly and quietly for about fifteen more minutes. Finally, Hawking straightened up with a sigh. 'Done.'

'That last one again, please?'

'Wormwood, ten minims.'

'Very good.' He tucked his quill in a pocket of his waistcoat and put the completed list on a pile of other tenth-sequence parchments. He topped the lot with his silver paperweight. 'I think you should rest before the sequencing. I'll clean up. Do you need more Elixir?'

'That wouldn't be a bad idea.' Hawking closed her eyes. When Snape brought her a mug, she took it with a nod, downed the contents with a grimace, and rested her head and forearms on the table. Snape, meantime, busied himself in his office, moving ingredients back to his store. When he glanced into the lab a few minutes later, Hawking was sitting up and scribbling in her notebook. He decided to leave her to it.





He finished clearing up just before his clock chimed eight-thirty and went back into the lab. No Dumbledore. Hawking, her legs twisted like an eight-year-old's around the stool, was still writing, but she stopped a moment or two after he came up to her. Without haste, she closed her notebook.

'I will want you to read these notes after—everything's over,' she said without preamble. 'Will you do that for me?'

'If you insist.'

'I won't *be* in a position to insist,' she said a bit sharply. 'That's why I'm asking you now. I'll put a seal on it that only you can open. Promise me you'll read them.' Her eyes captured his.

'I promise.'

She smiled. 'Like being a Secret-Keeper, but I hope less perilous.'

There was a brief silence.

'I've been meaning to ask you something for quite a while now,' she finally said.

Snape looked at her, his expression a bit wary. She pointed at the silver paperweight.

'I remember that from my seventh year project. It's not—a real hand, is it?'

Snape gave a dry laugh. 'It looks convincing, doesn't it? I think of it as something Muggles would call a *memento mori*. I commissioned this from a Knockturn Alley artist three years ago, soon after what happened to Peter Pettigrew. It reminds me: Never underestimate the enemy. Never assume the enemy will see reason. Never expect the enemy to have mercy.'



'And be prepared for the worst,' said Hawking in a low voice. Without warning she reached for Snape, wrapping her arms around his waist and drawing him against her. He stood, unresponsive, in her arms for a moment before putting his arms around her shoulders. Then he rested his chin on top of her brown-and-silver hair and closed his eyes.

They might have stayed that way for minutes, or even longer, without moving. But suddenly he gave a start and pulled away from her, frowning at his left forearm. Hawking looked up at him, eyes wide.

'What is it, Severus?'

'My Dark Mark. It's—I can feel it.'

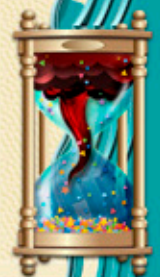
The disabled Morsmordre symbol had darkened, the blurry lines pulsing faintly.



Dumbledore's office was lit more dimly than usual, the portraits barely visible. For several minutes after his uninvited and yet long expected visitor had left, he remained seated, fingers steepled, staring down at the parchments on his desk without seeing really them.

The report he'd just heard about Filch's plans presented him with a terrible dilemma. He now faced a decision he'd long anticipated and yet, right up until a few minutes ago, had desperately hoped he wouldn't have to make.

'I didn't ask for this,' he whispered. 'But I must do what I can with what I have.' As if to mock him came the memory of Severus Snape's bitter reaction over





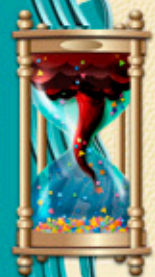
a week ago to that argument: *Which includes sending children to their deaths?*

He went over his options again.

One. Confine Filch to his office and Draco and Pansy to their common room. Then go as planned with Hawking on the late-night harvesting expedition to old Argus' hideous crypt. Advantage: no individual students are put in danger. Disadvantages: if Filch and his party don't appear at the crypt as evidently expected, Voldemort may unleash a pre-emptive and devastating overnight strike. As well, no time to prepare the remedy for the Carborundorum Curse. The result? Mass slaughter, and Hawking's bleak future. Risk to Hogwarts: unacceptable.

Two. Give Filch, the Slytherins, and their intended hostages just enough time to arrive at the crypt before leading a party of Aurors on a recovery mission. Advantages: The students may escape being harmed; Dumbledore would still be able to harvest the key ingredient for the eleventh Carborundorum sequence; and any Death Eaters expecting to meet Filch and his party will also be immobilised—prevented from alerting Voldemort and invaluable for their information. And—Dumbledore couldn't help the tempting thought—*I will appear to have done something instead of helplessly waiting.*

Disadvantages: many. The Aurors might be outnumbered. The Death Eaters might have enough time first to injure or even kill the students being immobilised. Worst of all, Voldemort himself might meet them in the crypt—and without the Carborundorum remedy, no

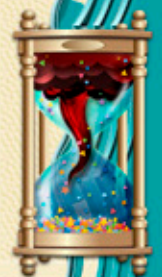


one would prevail against him—not even Harry Potter. And then nothing would stop Voldemort from penetrating Hogwarts. The result? Mass slaughter. That bleak future again. Risk to Hogwarts: unacceptable.

Three. Do nothing. Hold back. Lull Filch and the Death Eaters into thinking they've succeeded. Have his observer spy and report back to him throughout the night. Hope that in the meantime no Death Eater would dare touch Harry, at least. Hope that their leader would not be waiting at the crypt, but would time his arrival for later, with the hostages exhausted and demoralised. Or if he were waiting for their arrival, not kill them right away, but enjoy the moment, savour the victory. Dumbledore had gleaned enough insights into his former student's *modus operandi* to think this might be the case. The students might even live long enough to be rescued by Aurors armed with Carborundorum and its remedy.

Which meant he had to retrieve, *right now*, with little more than two hours to go before eleven o'clock, the substance Hawking needed. Though Hawking had insisted that only she could harvest it correctly, he had learned enough about Carborundorum over the past several days to be reasonably sure of his competence. By the time he returned with the "sweat of the dead," she and Snape would be close to finishing the tenth sequence. They could have all the sequences locked and—he hoped—the remedy in place well before daybreak.

This option offered all of them the best chance of buying the time needed to finish the Carborundorum project. The entire wizarding community



would have a fighting chance to eliminate not only Voldemort but his insane Pureblood movement.

However... the risks to the individual students were appallingly high. If they were badly injured, tortured, or killed, then no matter what happened afterwards, Dumbledore would go down in history as the calculating zealot who sacrificed children on the alter of war.

He couldn't take Minerva into his confidence. Nor Moody. Nor anyone. It would be unfair to involve anyone else in this terrible decision. The burden and the responsibility must be his. Alone.

Dumbledore raised his head and took a deep breath. 'So be it,' he said softly.

Fawkes gave a musical, sympathetic cry. Fluttering to the headmaster's shoulder, he rubbed his beautiful head against the old wizard's cheek, and Dumbledore closed his eyes. After a minute or two, with a low 'Thank you, my friend,' he sent the phoenix back to his perch.

'And I mustn't forget these,' he muttered. He pulled open a tiny drawer and took out a tiny gold hourglass attached to a slender chain, followed by what looked like a small glass ball. Tucking both objects into his robe, he pushed himself slowly to his feet and made his way over to the fireplace.

'Well, well,' Phineas Nigellus murmured after Dumbledore disappeared into the green flames. 'I don't envy Albus now, poor old beggar. Though if he finally gets rid of Aleister Argus' bloody stupid display, at least some good will have come of all this.'



HURRYING INTO the potions lab, Dumbledore hesitated when he saw Snape and Hawking standing close together, her hand holding his left wrist, both staring at Snape's Dark Mark.

'Is it painful?' asked Dumbledore, frowning in concern.

'Not nearly as much as it used to be, but that's not the issue.' Snape's tone was carefully calm. 'I have no way of knowing whether this summons is for a briefing or something worse.'

'The battle I remember was on Hallowe'en,' said Hawking, white-faced, 'but we both know my presence has already disrupted that original timeline.' She faced Dumbledore. 'Has Voldemort decided to attack tonight?' She took a deep breath. 'If he has, then god help us.'

'I don't know for certain,' said Dumbledore. 'But I do know we must move as quickly as we can. Doctor Hawking, can you put all eleven sequences together tonight, immediately after finishing the tenth?'

'Finish the weapon tonight? Impossible!' Snape cut in before Hawking could respond. 'We need most of tomorrow to prepare the material for the eleventh sequence.'

'Could I have a private word with you, Doctor Hawk-



ing?’ Dumbledore indicated Snape’s office.

‘If you have a plan, shouldn’t I know about it?’ The Potions master glared at Dumbledore and then at Hawking, who dropped her eyes. ‘I thought we’d established that I can be trusted.’ His voice dripped venom.

‘That’s not what this is about, Severus,’ said Hawking. ‘Please.’

The headmaster, meeting the younger wizard’s furious black eyes, put a hand on his shoulder. ‘Bear with us only a moment, Severus.’

As soon as Dumbledore closed the office door, Hawking shook her head. ‘I can do what you ask, but it’s terribly risky. Even one small mistake would ruin everything.’

‘I’m understand, and I wouldn’t be pushing if it weren’t urgent.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘You *do* think he’s going to attack.’

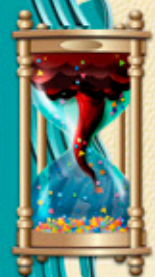
‘Perhaps not in the way you remember it, but yes—I have reason to believe he’ll make a move within hours. But if we can be ready...’

Hawking sighed. ‘Which means you and I must go to the crypt as soon as I’ve finished the tenth sequence.’

‘Not you, Gwen. I, alone. And I must do it within the next two hours.’

She stared at him, stunned, then rounded on him. ‘You can’t. That won’t work.’ She paused, then said in a more measured tone, ‘With respect, Professor, you don’t know exactly what to harvest, or how.’

‘You can’t be spared for this expedition,’ said Dumbledore, ‘not with so little time left to finish the project. But,’ he added, ‘I’m not planning to try and extract what you need myself. Instead, I’ll bring



one of the corpses to you here.’ At her look of shock, he said, with the ghost of a smile, ‘Don’t forget I also promised the Order to dispose of the bodies. The time has come to put them to rest.’

After a moment, Hawking nodded. ‘And if the material isn’t yet extracted, I won’t have to use it within four hours. That buys us more time.’

‘No—not more time. Just an element of safety.’

‘I see. But—how do you propose to transport an *entire* corpse here in secret? To me that sounds even riskier than the two of us going to the crypt.’

‘Mobilicorpus, Disillusionment, and one or two other strategies should suffice,’ said Dumbledore with the ghost of a smile. ‘But if any of those should fail, I hope I have a back-up.’ He reached into his robe and placed on Snape’s desk a tiny hourglass hanging from a thin gold chain. Hawking gasped.

‘Is that my Time-Turner? I thought it was gone. Where did you find it?’

‘In my office last Monday, shortly after your owls for me and Severus arrived.’

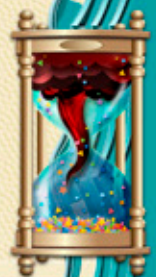
‘Last Monday?’ she said, astonished, and then frowned as if gnawing on the problem.

‘Can you tell me,’ said Dumbledore rapidly, ‘whether it has any magical properties left?’

After a slight hesitation, Hawking took out her wand and waved it over the Time-Turner. A faint halo of golden light flared for a moment.

‘There’s some—but very little. Perhaps enough to move a small object several days backward or forward.’

Dumbledore picked up the tiny device and looked





at it intently through his half-moon glasses. 'Will it move a person—alive or dead—elsewhen, even just a few hours?'

Her eyes widened as she grasped his meaning. 'You mean, if your other strategies don't work. Or if...'

'If I find myself in an unexpectedly tight place,' Dumbledore said, with grim humour, 'I would like to be able to shift the corpse, at least, by an hour or two.'

Hawking shook her head. 'Even if you or I could retrieve that corpse safely from whenever it is, using the Time-Turner that way will probably drain all its remaining magic.'

Dumbledore's expression darkened. 'The first problem worries me less than the second.'

'Why? Were you planning to use the Time-Turner for something else as well? Is that why you kept it?'

The old wizard took a small glass globe out of his pocket and placed it in Hawking's hand. 'Last Monday I found this on my desk with your Time-Turner. It contained a message from you—from sometime in the near future—urging me to let you come to Hogwarts.' He looked at her intently. 'Your message tipped the balance when I was trying to decide whether to invite you here. It's quite possible that without it, I would have refused your offer.'

Hawking stared at the little globe. Finally she said, 'Consider this, Professor. If we succeed in defeating Voldemort, there'll be no need to make sure I come to Hogwarts. The past I remember, the one that became my future, will be changed. In the best case, this eddy of time will rejoin the original



current. Which means it might not matter whether I send a message to you or not.'

Dumbledore shook his head. 'Can we take that chance?'

'I wish I could say. It's even possible is that if I send the message to you triggering my visit, this eddy will just loop in on itself.'

'Repeating the same events over and over.' Dumbledore's voice was grim.

They stared silently at the Time-Turner and the globe. Then Dumbledore straightened his shoulders.

'We'll come back to this question later. For now, I'll take the Time-Turner as a back-up.'

'I understand.'

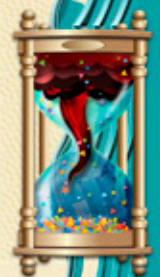
Dumbledore tucked the tiny device back into his pocket. She expected him to open the office door, but instead he touched her jaw with the tips of his fingers. His faded blue eyes were gentle and infinitely sad.

'Whatever happens, it has been an honour, Hermione.'

Her eyes filled suddenly with tears. 'For me as well,' she managed.

He let his hand drop and turned away from her. 'Now. Let me talk to Severus. To forestall any arguments—' he shot her a wry glance '—I'll say I've convinced you to use real "sweat of the dead" instead of synthesising it; under the circumstances there's no other choice.'

'At least that last part is true,' Hawking muttered as Dumbledore opened the office door. Taking a long breath, she followed him back into the lab.





'Are you sure?' Harry said in disbelief when Seamus had finished speaking. All around the Gryffindor common room, heads turned with surprise.

'They're calling it a friendly challenge,' said Seamus, his eyes bright, brandishing the scroll he, Dean, and Parvati had found moments ago lying on the floor outside the Fat Lady's portrait.

'And Lupin's going to be there?' Harry reached for the scroll.

'Yeah. And Moody too, they say.'

Hermione had returned to the common room soon after the impromptu D.A. practice but had stayed away from the crowd, almost burying herself in a welter of parchments. Harry and Ron, and even Ginny—after a quick word—had recognised the telltale signs of Hermione in a funk and had left her alone. As her friends' excited reaction to Seamus' announcement penetrated her concentration, she looked up and frowned. Ron noticed her glare.

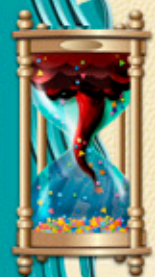
'Hermione. Come over here. You really should take a look at this.'

'I'm busy, Ron.'

Harry pushed his way over to her and waved the scroll in front of her face. With an irritated sigh, she snatched it from him and scanned it. Then she read it again more slowly, her eyebrows raised.

'How peculiar,' she said. 'But, well, I suppose it's legitimate if Professor Lupin and Mister Moody are involved.'

'But it looks like Malfoy's idea.' Ron looked surly. 'And anything with his name on it, smells to me.'



'Aw, c'mon,' urged Seamus. 'Parkinson lost us one hundred bloody points, didn't she? This is our chance to pulverise 'em. Legitimately!' Dean, Parvati, and Lavender gave shouts of approval.

Harry clapped Ron on the shoulder. 'C'mon, Ron. You don't mind a little more practice, do you?'

'They say practice makes perfect,' Seamus added.

Ron hesitated, then grinned back. 'I like "pulverise" myself.'

'Ginny—what do you think?' said Harry. 'Care to show Pansy a thing or three?' His grin was almost feral.

'Could do,' Ginny grinned back, her colour high and her eyes flashing.

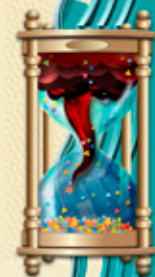
'Wait,' said Hermione, scrambling to her feet. 'Don't even *think* of doing this without me.'

A few minutes later, the Gryffindors surged into the Defence classroom. Lupin, looking serious, and Moody, looking downright grim, stood side-by-side in the centre, and at the far end waited the Slytherins.

'Right. The Slytherins wish to challenge the Gryffindors in a practice attack-and-defence,' said Lupin as soon as they'd settled. His voice filled the room even though he had not used the Sonorus charm. 'Nuisance-weapons only. The usual rules apply; Mr. Moody—who has kindly agreed to help—and I will be watching your moves closely. Infractions mean instant disqualification.' He surveyed the students solemnly. 'Do you all understand?'

'Yes,' said Draco with a smirk. Pansy and the other Slytherins nodded.

'Absolutely,' said Harry, giving Draco a level stare.



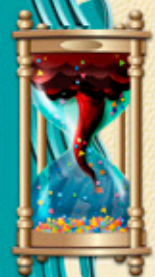


'Each group will attack and defend at the same time to simulate battle conditions,' Lupin added. 'You have one minute to form strategies. Then on my mark, you'll begin.'



Snape, as Dumbledore expected, had been both appalled and impressed by the audacity of the plan to finish the Carborundorum project tonight. However—'You didn't plan to go to that damned crypt with him, did you?' he'd shot at Hawking, and then before she could answer, he'd held up one hand. 'No, never mind. I don't want to know.' 'Quite right,' Dumbledore had murmured, and had then left Snape and Hawking to the task of completing the tenth sequence.

Edgily aware of every second ticking by, he'd nonetheless made it a point to appear as though he were conducting his usual benign surveillance of Hogwarts' overall security. From McGonagall he learnt that all students were now in their common rooms, which eased Dumbledore's mind not in the least. Then he'd stopped by Filch's office and listened blandly to the caretaker's report of a fresh infestation of rats. Mrs. Norris had even hissed at him, which Dumbledore saluted mentally as a nice touch. Next, he'd sauntered down to the dungeons. To Shacklebolt and young Sebastian Moody—the two Aurors patrolling the dungeons this evening—he quietly mentioned he would have to go beyond the ward-boundaries for about an hour to take care of a possible security risk in one of the five passageways.

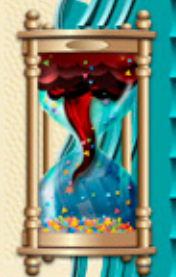


'Can we help?' said Sam eagerly, and Shacklebolt, as an Order member knowing exactly what 'issue' Dumbledore had in mind, shook his head at him.

Dumbledore had given the trainee a benign smile and then left them to it, moving well past the Slytherin common room, not pausing until just past Dungeon Five, where the innermost line of defence-wards began tingling against his skin. He breached them with no effort, and found the stone door into the musty old potions room after about a minute's search. Moving to the old case near the back of the room, he pulled out the third jar from the left on the second shelf from the top (and blessed Miss Granger for the precision with which she'd recounted her adventure). After the case slid to one side, revealing the passageway and letting in a swirl of cold, dank air, Dumbledore breached, with two carefully worded spells, the line of wards that stretched like a fine net across the opening.

He did not conjure Lumos. Though he often had to stoop, he moved along the dank passage almost as easily as any creature of the night. He soon reached the T-junction, took the left-hand turn and, slowing his steps, began counting paces. After one hundred and eleven counts, he stopped, stretching his experienced senses. He appeared to be alone, and decided he could now risk a little light.

'*Lumos Minimus.*' Yet he couldn't immediately find the star-shaped stone in the wall; his pacing must have been off. Those who'd built this passage and chamber centuries ago had been shorter than today's average





wizard. He gritted his teeth. *Patience, Albus. Patience.*

'Ahh,' he breathed after searching for almost five agonising minutes. The stone wasn't quite star-shaped; its lines were disturbingly irregular. Still, all he had to do was press it, slip inside the crypt room, and do what needed to be done. Though he still had over an hour before the Slytherins would be bringing their hostages here, he suspected strongly that someone would be coming to meet them. Soon.

One more precaution. '*Exploro*,' he murmured. From his wand-tip a faint green mist grew, spreading out like a blackboard. Images formed—this passageway, the T-junction farther back, and the room on the other side of the wall. The crypt appeared to be empty.

Dumbledore breathed a sigh of relief. His luck was holding.

'*Finite Incan*—' Then he stopped in dismay as something appeared on the outer edge of the *Exploro* map, at the boundary of the passage, where he knew it headed toward and beyond the Shrieking Shack.

Two living things. Unidentified. Heading directly for him.



Years later, whenever she found herself thinking about that long and terrible Monday night, Ginny remembered bearing down on Pansy with merciless intent, unleashing a barrage of hexes that kept the sullen-faced Slytherin constantly on the defensive. Suddenly her most vicious stinging-hex got through Pansy's defences, making her cry out and clutch her

smoke and fire



right arm. 'Hold!' Lupin called to Ginny, and as she obeyed, he shouldered his way into the fray to help Pansy out of the combat-zone. He sat her down near the door, well away from the action.

Stupid bint! She's nothing but a sack of ego. Through a mix of heady triumph and disappointment that Pansy had been so easy to beat, Ginny tried to spot her next prey. Draco. Ah! At the other end of the room, she caught a glimpse of white-blond hair, and plunged into the mass of darting, lunging combatants, skirting everything from fireballs to the withering blast of the Bleyke Curse as she slowly made her way toward the Slytherin. Suddenly the mass of students shifted, moving closer to the door, and at that same moment Pansy surged to her feet to disappear into the crowd. *Bloody hell!* Ginny redoubled her efforts to get closer to the tight group she thought was surrounding Draco.

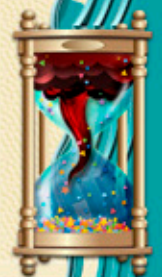
Without warning, someone crowded into her from behind, pushing her against the door to the classroom. Before she could protest, the door opened almost in her face, and she was propelled into the dim corridor outside. She turned, snarling, her wand raised in defence.

Her assailant was Harry.

She let her wand-arm drop to her side, her mouth sagging open.

'Quiet!' he said in a sharp whisper, and pulled her down the corridor away from the classroom, his fingers digging into her arm. 'Shhh. Ginny, sorry. But listen—something's happened. I need your help.'

smoke and fire





'But—' she pointed back to the classroom. 'What about the challenge? We need to go back!'

'Ginny, listen,' said Harry, his voice still a harsh-edged whisper. 'Something's happened. The Slytherins have taken Luna—they're holding her in the dungeons. They put us up to this challenge just to distract us. I need to go down there—and I need you to come with me.'

'Oh bloody hell,' Ginny breathed. 'Are you sure?'

Harry's brows drew together. 'Believe me, it's true.'

'Oh my God. But Harry, you—we—can't just go alone. We need to tell Professor Lupin, or Mr. Moody!'

'No!' Harry hissed. 'Ginny, if we tell anyone, who knows what could happen to Luna? We have to check this out alone first.' He pulled her farther along down the corridor, and unable to resist, she let him. Then he turned her to face him. She could barely see his face in the shadows. 'Ginny, you're the best fighter in the D.A.—better than Ron, even better than Hermione. You and I can handle a few Slytherins if we have to.' The eyes behind the glasses burned into her like green flame. 'Please, Ginny—I need you,' he whispered, and weakly, she nodded.

'I knew I could trust you.' He smiled at her slowly, in a way he never had before, his eyes not leaving hers in a way that both disturbed and aroused her.

Without another word, she let him lead her. The Entrance Hall was deserted. As they crept down the staircase toward the dungeons, he took her hand, curling his fingers around hers in a proprietary way, and she felt another throb of pleasure. As if he knew what effect he was having on her, he looked at her and smiled again.



'What if we run into the Slytherins—or an Auror—or Filch?' she whispered.

'It's okay.' Once at the bottom of the stairs they moved a few feet down the left-hand corridor, then Harry pulled Ginny with him into a small, shadowed alcove. He seemed to be listening carefully, and appeared unaware that he was pressing himself against her. She felt heat bloom between her legs, and she was unable to look at him.

'No one's around—they're in the common room or at the challenge,' he murmured after a minute.

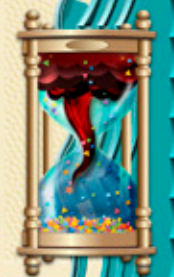
'They'll wonder where we are, though.' Something was amiss, something was wrong... and nothing in this world felt as wonderful as Harry's firm body against hers.

'Naah.' Harry shook his head. 'Not yet. And where we're going won't take us long. Ginny—' he looked at her so intently she had to struggle not to drop her gaze '—I need you to trust me. Will you?'

'Yes,' she said hoarsely. 'Of course.'

'And you won't be afraid?'

'No,' she whispered, and then she closed her eyes in shock and delight as Harry's fingers traced the line of her jaw, sending a shock of pleasure through her entire body. Then the impossible happened: he lightly kissed the corner of her mouth. Without thinking, she turned into him and captured his mouth with a greediness that astonished her. He opened his lips against hers almost shyly at first, then with growing confidence, and gently pulled her against him. Joy sang through her flesh and filled her mind and heart.





Then Harry pulled away. Dazed, she opened her eyes. 'Come on,' he whispered with a quick smile, taking her hand, and she let him lead her down the dim corridor.



After the first two rounds of the challenge, the Gryffindors and Slytherins regrouped at opposite ends of the classroom, whilst Moody stumped up and down before them. His review of their performance was scathing. 'You need to be *much* more vigilant!' he roared, thumping his black staff for emphasis. 'You're leaving far too many openings!'

'Openings?' Ron muttered indignantly. 'Nothing could've gotten through our defences!'

'Except maybe a Dementor or two,' said Harry, scowling. 'Moody's right. We've got to tighten up.'

'Hey. Where's Ginny?' said Ron suddenly.

'Shh,' said Hermione, for Lupin was instructing everyone to prepare for the third and final round, which began with explosions of blue and green flames from the Slytherins and yells of 'Protego!' from the Gryffindors. Maintaining her defences with little effort, Hermione tried to spot Ginny, whom she'd last seen stalking Pansy. A few minutes ago, the Slytherin witch had been sitting out with an apparent injury (inflicted by Ginny, Hermione hoped). Now Pansy was gone. Had Ginny followed her? A bit concerned, Hermione turned in a circle to scan the room, ducking hexes and absently hurling a petrifying spell at Goyle, who crashed to the ground like a felled tree.



Then someone grabbed her arm. It was Ginny. The younger witch pulled her firmly away from the crowd, and Hermione let her, too relieved to resist.

'Where *were* you, Ginny?'

'Quick! I need to talk to you.' Ginny was breathing hard, her eyes unusually bright. She drew Hermione off to the side of the classroom, into the shadows.

'I stung Pansy, and I was trying to get nearer to teach her a real lesson, but bloody Draco got to her first and Lupin let him take her away,' Ginny said in a high, tense whisper.

'So Draco's gone as well?' said Hermione, startled. 'But this challenge was *his* idea!'

'The challenge is a fake! Hermione, listen. I was close enough for a few seconds to hear her and Draco talking. They've kidnapped Luna!'

'What?'

'Shhh! I heard them say she's in that old potions room—the one leading to—you know where.'

'Are you sure?'

'They planned this whole challenge just to distract us.'

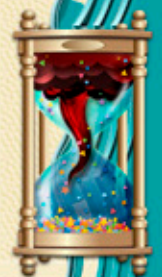
'But why would they take Luna?'

'She's in the D.A.! Do they need any other reason? She must have forgotten to stay with her group. You know how dreamy she is. We've *got* to go to her!'

Something about Ginny's taut expression and the harshness of her whisper made the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck stand up.

'You know we can't go down there alone!'

'We have to,' Ginny hissed. 'If we tell anyone,





who knows what could happen to Luna? Hermione, *please!* We've been down there before, and we know how to hide ourselves. We can *do* this!'

Hermione threw a glance at the Gryffindors. Under Harry's direction, their defences had tightened considerably, but most of the Slytherins were fearsome fighters, and the contest was clearly not over yet. Lupin and Moody, circling the melee and coaching with a furious concentration usually reserved for Quidditch finals, each had their backs to the two young women off in the shadows.

Something felt wrong—as if darkness were crawling over her skin.

But what if Luna was down there in that fearsome old potions room? How could she just do nothing?

'All right. We'll check. But if we need help, we'll come back here instantly,' Hermione whispered.

'Good,' said Ginny, with a strange flash of triumph in her eyes. Without another word, she slipped out the classroom door. Taking a deep breath, Hermione followed.



Dumbledore pressed hard on the star-shaped stone, gritting his teeth as the door slowly opened with a groan that seemed deafening. Dim light the colour of old, clotted blood trickled into the passageway. As soon as the crack was wide enough, the old wizard slipped through into the round vault, his wand raised high.

Nothing alive was there to greet him: only eleven hollow-eyed corpses, sitting stiffly in their stone chairs.

He pointed his wand at the nearest body. 'For-



give me,' he said softly. '*Mobilicorpus.*' The corpse slowly lifted from its throne. Too stiff and dried to straighten out, it floated toward him, gruesomely hunched, its fur-lined red velvet cloak whispering. Dumbledore guided it out the door and settled it gently, still hunched, in the passageway.

Then Dumbledore turned to face the remaining ten mummies. 'I'm sorry I cannot give you a proper burial.' The fairly new trend of burning the dead, the so-called 'Farewell' ceremony that some wizarding communities preferred, smacked too much of paganism for his liking. But in this case, he had no choice.

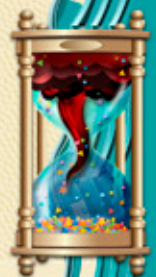
'May you rest in peace,' he said softly, and lifted his wand. '*Incendio!*'

A corpse burst into flame. Within seconds, fire had leapt from body to body. Dried as they were, they flared like torches, throwing a ghastly light on the old wizard's grim face. He backed up, eyes narrowing, watching just long enough to make sure no corpse had escaped the fire.

And then the heat became overwhelming. Falling back into the passageway, he groped for the star-shaped stone and pressed it. The doorway groaned, the fiery gap growing narrower and narrower, until the stone lips grated together and the fiery line vanished, leaving Dumbledore in complete darkness. He breathed in a deep mouthful of the cold, dank air.

'*Lumos.*'

For just a moment he made himself stand still, straining to sense how far away the two Death Eaters were. Though he heard nothing, every instinct warned him





that they were now almost on top of him. There was no time to transport the body using Mobilicorpus.

He had only one recourse. It was terribly dangerous. But he wouldn't allow himself to think about that.

Crouching down beside the corpse, he put his arms around it as if embracing a dear friend. He took a deep breath, marshalling all his will and every ounce of his power, and Disapparated, taking the dead weight with him.

Less than a minute later, two black-robed figures stood outside the closed crypt. The woman sniffed the air, frowning.

'Something's not right,' Bellatrix Lestrange murmured. 'I smell burning.' She raised her wand.

'So do I,' said Lucius Malfoy, his expression grim. 'No—' he added as Bellatrix began to utter an opening spell. 'That won't work.' He moved the faint silver light of his wand-tip over the surface of the wall. 'Ahh.' He pressed against the irregular star-like shape embedded in the ancient stone. The hidden door groaned open...

...and the two Death Eaters staggered back, coughing as acrid smoke roiled into the passageway. As one, they turned and ran back down the way they'd come. Once clear of the smoke Bellatrix, taking deep breaths, waved her wand in a great arc around her head. '*Spiraculum!*' Malfoy did the same. They turned back, moving much more cautiously, their air-bubbles allowing them to breathe.

The smoke had begun to dissipate by the time they regained the door to the crypt and tried to peer



inside the blackness. 'There was light before,' muttered Malfoy. '*Lumos.*'

The eleven stone thrones were empty except for piles of ash, some of it stirring eerily in the faint breeze from the passageway.

'Dumbledore,' said Bellatrix, her voice flat.

'How nice of him to leave us a calling-card.'

The two Death Eaters stared at each other.

'What now?' she said, raising her eyebrows.

'We meet my son and his guests as planned,' said Malfoy, sounding unconcerned. 'Then we take them back the way we came.'

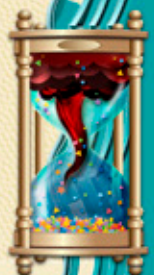
Bellatrix took a few steps into the crypt, the reddish glow from her wand-tip playing over each throne. 'Lucius,' she said, after a few moments. 'Look at this.'

He joined her, and both peered at the nearest throne. It was almost entirely clear of ash.

'It almost looks as if this one didn't burn,' Malfoy murmured. Bellatrix looked at him, puzzled.

'Is that important?'

Malfoy gave an ironic laugh. 'It might mean a slight change in our Lord's plans for the evening.'



CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

the shape-changer

AFTER HERMIONE'S AND GINNY'S adventure in the fifth passage, Dumbledore had seen to it that the old potions room now lay well within the outermost line of wards protecting Hogwarts. Yet two figures—one tall, one much smaller and curiously hunched—suddenly materialised within the old potions room with a loud 'crack' of displaced air, sending eddies of dust whirling. As the small hunched figure slipped to the ground, the tall one leant, panting, against the cold wall. He stayed that way for several minutes. Then, still trembling a bit, he pushed himself upright.

'I think it will be a while,' Dumbledore muttered to himself, 'before I try *that* again.'

The Four Founders had sensibly decided that a headmaster or headmistress should have the ability to Apparate within Hogwarts' boundaries in an emergency—but the power needed was enormous. To do it whilst carrying a dead weight was, Dumbledore imagined, a feat beyond the capabilities of most wizards. It had all but drained him.

Yet now he had to conjure an adroit combination of Mobilicorpus and Disillusionment to ensure he and

the shape-changer

the mummy made it to Snape's lab undetected. For there was no possible way even he could Apparate past Hawking's triple wards and remain un-Splinched.

Ah, well. At least, by the skin of his teeth, he'd avoided having to use the Time-Turner.

With a tired sigh, he began to cast the Disillusionment Charm.



Hawking and Snape were about halfway through the precise dance of arranging the tenth-sequence ingredients and spells into their final order when an alert sounded. Hawking's head snapped up, but the hand holding a phial of extract-of-yew remained steady.

'One of the triple-wards,' she breathed.

'I'll check it. You can't stop what you're doing.'

'Oh—bloody hell. All right. But stay out of sight!'

'I haven't forgotten I'm supposed to be dead,' Snape said coolly, then took his wand and strode into his office, closing the door behind him. He was gone for several minutes, during which the wards shrilled twice more, and Hawking winced in sympathy.

Then came several faint scrapes and thumps from the office.

'Severus? What's happening?' With great care, Hawking put down the container she'd been holding, then pulled her wand from her right sleeve. Another faint thump, and Hawking moved quickly toward the closed door, her wand extended.

Then the door opened a crack. 'Gwen, put down your wand. Everything's all right,' came Snape's

the shape-changer



voice. 'It's Albus. He's here.' Slowly, the door opened all the way. Snape was standing on the other side.

'I knew you'd be ready to attack, and I've learnt to respect your training,' he said, with the hint of a wry smile.

'Erm—quite,' said Hawking, unsure whether to find that comment flattering. 'Where is he? Is he all right? Did he bring—?'

'Yes, I am, and yes, I did,' came Dumbledore's voice from behind Snape.

Hawking pushed past Snape into the office. Dumbledore sat calmly behind Snape's large desk, forearms in front of him, hands folded. He looked every minute of his one hundred and fifty-odd years.

'My compliments, Doctor Hawking.' His voice sounded flat and weary. 'Breaching your wards took considerable doing.'

'Why didn't you use the Floo? Oh.' Hawking stopped short. On the floor in front of the desk was a lumpy shape the size of a large child, covered with a black cloth. Hawking pulled up short, looking from the shape to Dumbledore. Then she crouched down and pulled the cloth away. At the sight of the brown, wizened little face, she frowned in pity.

'Will it be useful?' Dumbledore asked.

Hawking held her wand over the mummy. *Analyse.* After a moment, she nodded. 'Yes.' Her voice sounded hoarse, and she cleared her throat. 'Yes, I can use it.' She rose to her feet a bit stiffly. 'Thank you.'

Dumbledore took a deep breath and inclined his head.

Snape put both hands on his desk, staring down at the headmaster. 'Did you see anything signifi-



cant, Albus? Do you know anything more about Voldemort's attack-plans?'

'Two Death Eaters were coming down the fifth passageway toward me, obviously planning to visit the crypt.'

'Then they'll see a body missing! If one of them knows anything about Carborundorum, they'll know where we stand!'

'Yes and no,' said Dumbledore. He rubbed his eyes, and then sat up straight, looking directly at Snape. 'I burnt the other ten bodies. The crypt should be in ruins by now, making our trail more difficult to follow. At least I hope.' He sighed. 'It pained me to put them to the fire, but I had no other choice.'

'Erm—in my future, we've been burning our dead for years,' said Hawking. 'Carborundorum made "proper burials" unwise.'

'Ah,' said Dumbledore. 'Quite so.' He looked sad.

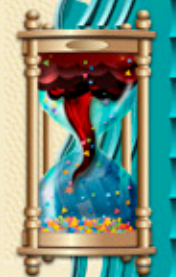
'If we could leave the discussion of funeral customs to another time, I'd be grateful,' said Snape, his tone edged with sarcasm. 'Albus, what are you going to do now?'

Dumbledore pushed himself slowly to his feet. 'I have sources to monitor and preparations to finalise. So I shall be in my office.'

'I can still feel my Dark Mark.' Snape's voice was harsh. 'I can't tell what it portends, but shouldn't you at least alert the Order?'

'The Order stand ready, Severus, but we need the Carborundorum weapon.'

Hawking put her hand on Snape's arm. 'We must get back to work, Severus.'





After a long look at Dumbledore, and then a grudging nod, Snape indicated the covered corpse. ‘Gwen, do you want this in the lab?’

‘Yes, thank you.’ She stood back as Snape levitated the gnarled shape and moved it with care out the office door. As she was about to follow, Dumbledore touched her arm.

‘Thankfully, I didn’t need to use this.’ He dropped the Time-Turner into the palm of her hand. ‘Have you given any more thought to the message?’

‘Yes, but I keep coming up with the same non-conclusions.’ Hawking sighed. ‘I’m still not convinced that trying to join all the loose ends is wise. On the other hand, *not* sending the message could be the worst possible choice.’

The old wizard was silent. Then he shook his head, moved toward the fireplace, and threw in the Floo powder. As the green flames roared up, he gave her a piercing look over his shoulder.

‘You’ll know what to do when the time comes.’ A second later, he was gone.

‘I bloody well hope so,’ said Hawking to the empty room.



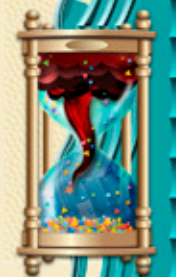
Filch felt he had every right to be pleased with his night’s work so far. He checked his pocket-watch. A quarter past eleven, and all was unfolding as planned. About an hour ago, he had handed his little dose of powder over to that scrawny little Tiffany, who’d once had occasion to—erm—*polish* the chains in the



caretaker’s office. Filch had only to lift an eyebrow to secure the house-elf’s stammering promise to doctor the Aurors’ late-night tea. Afterwards, to the casual observer, Shackbolt and that little wet of a trainee appeared quite normal. But when Filch, in a friendly and respectful manner, had told them that Dumbledore needed them to dismantle the wards near Dungeon Five and at the head of the fifth passageway, they’d obeyed him without question. He’d led the two Aurors from one spot to the other, guided them into and out of the old potions room, and then when they were done, told them kindly to go to the kitchens and stay there for an hour or so.

Very satisfying results all round. Much better than the Imperius Curse.

And by the Eleven, when a youth who’d looked exactly like the Boy Who Should Be Dead, with Little Miss Weasley in tow and thoroughly enthralled, had entered the old potions room where Filch had been waiting—well, he admitted to himself the resemblance had given him a bit of a turn at first. But then the eyes of Harry Potter had sought out Filch, well back in the shadows and cradling Mrs. Norris, and Filch had nodded, and Draco had felled the unsuspecting Weasley chit with ‘*Petrificus Totalis*’ and then floated her into the fifth passageway. The same thing a bit later, when Pansy Parkinson in the guise of that self-same Weasley chit had lured the Mudblood into the room. Parkinson had had to work a little harder to distract Granger long enough to petrify her, but the results were the same: very satisfying.





So much for 'Gryffindor courage.' More like foolhardiness. Such simpletons.

Though Pansy Parkinson wasn't much better than a slag, in Filch's humble opinion, she was bright enough to have produced a nice potent batch of Polyjuice. Still, it was a good thing little Master Malfoy had taken his father's advice—passed along discreetly by Filch—not to tell her all the intricacies of their plans. Parkinson might have put her foot down and said no to the Polyjuice if she knew that this night's work would involve far more than putting Hermione Granger in her place.

In any event, Draco would soon be dealing with her.

'Well?' Pansy, still looking like little Miss Weasley, wrapped her arms around herself in the cold of the fifth passageway and glared at Filch. 'You said someone would be meeting us.'

'Any moment now,' said Filch. He gave Draco a meaningful look. The young wizard nodded and, still wearing Harry Potter's outer form, put his hands on Pansy's shoulders.

'Pansy, you've done brilliant work tonight.'

'Thanks.' She gave a twisted smile. 'But I can hardly wait for the damned potion to wear off.'

'Oh, I don't know.' Draco grinned. 'I like red-headed women.'

'Really.' Pansy cocked her head. 'Maybe we should try this again when we're not so busy.' She gave him a slow smile.

Filch cleared his throat.

'Listen, Parks,' Draco hurried on, 'I don't need



you from this point on. You can go back now. Filch'll take you to the common room.'

Pansy stared at Draco in disbelief. 'Don't need me? What the hell do you mean? Of course you need me!' She pointed to the two motionless young women. 'You can't drag both of them along without my help.'

'I'll have help in a few minutes. Now just go.'

Pansy stared back, her eyes furious. 'All you really wanted was the Polyjuice, wasn't it? Why am I not surprised?'

'It's your choice, Pansy, but if I were you, I'd leave right now. I really would,' said Draco, his voice taking on an ugly edge.

'Make me, you little prick!' Pansy yanked her wand out of her sleeve, but Draco was ready for her. A second later, Pansy crumpled to the earthen floor beside Hermione and Ginny.

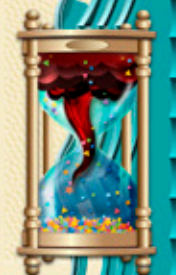
'Oh, fuck,' said Draco after a moment.

'Nicely done, Master Malfoy,' said Filch, his tone most carefully not ironic. Draco shot him a resentful look and then turned away.

'Take her back before my father gets here,' he grunted. 'But make sure you meet us later.'

'Your father knows he can rely on me,' said Filch, swallowing his anger at the gall of this upstart boy.

When Filch stooped down toward Pansy, Mrs. Norris leapt out of Filch's arms. By the time the caretaker had managed to sling Pansy over his shoulder, the cat was back in the old potions room, stalking back and forth before the hidden door. As Filch caught up with her, she glared at him and gave a low yowl.





'Yes, my love. Be patient,' he wheezed. As soon as he had let them out into the main dungeons, Mrs. Norris raced away down the corridor.

'That's twice in one night she's run off like that,' Filch muttered, staggering under Pansy's weight. 'I hope nothing's ailing her.'



The Gryffindors were beating back the Slytherins, and Ron had just hit Teddy Nott with an enormous slime-ball, when Lupin shouted 'Stop! *Finite Incantata!*' All hexes and their effects vanished, and the puzzled students turned to their Defence professor.

'Where are Miss Granger and Miss Weasley?' said Lupin, grim-faced.

Startled, Harry and Ron looked at each other, and then at all the other sixth- and seventh-year Gryffindors.

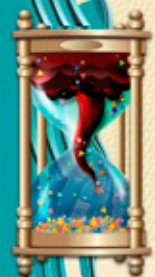
'I thought they were behind us, backing us up,' said Harry, frowning.

'Wait... Draco's gone too!' said Daphne Greengrass.

'Always knew the ferret was a bloody coward,' Ron muttered.

'I authorised Mr. Malfoy to escort Miss Parkinson back to the Slytherin common room.,' Lupin said tensely. He circled around the students, this time counting heads. There should have been two red-heads. Now there was only one. All the Gryffindors turned to each other, looking around in growing anxiety. No Hermione.

'You.' Moody rounded on the group of puzzled Slytherins, his magical eye rolling in the direction



of Crabbe and Goyle. They stared at the floor, shuffling their feet.

'Well?' Moody barked.

'Don't know anything,' mumbled Goyle.

'Didn't see anything,' Crabbe said quickly.

'Oh, really?' growled Moody.

'Erm—Mister Moody.' Blaise Zabini, looking as cool as if he'd been lounging all evening in his common room, stepped forward. 'Not everyone in Slytherin House follows Draco Malfoy around like lapdogs. I can't speak for Crabbe and Goyle—' he looked at them with contempt '—but the rest of us don't know anything about Weasley and Granger.'

'And I had nothing to do with—whatever it is,' said Teddy Nott, wiping slime off his face.

'But maybe we can help,' said Daphne earnestly.

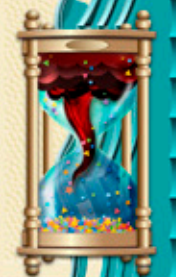
Moody stared at the young people for another long moment and then turned away from them, his magical eye ceaselessly scanning the classroom.

'Maybe they went back to the common room,' said Parvati, her voice trembling a bit.

'But why would they do that without letting anyone know?' said Dean.

'All of you, go back to your common rooms right now,' said Lupin, his voice hard. 'Harry, you lead the Gryffindors. Once you're there, send someone to the dorms right away to check for them, and then wait for Professor McGonagall. Daphne, you take the Slytherins. Alastor—' he turned to Moody, 'would you come with me? We must tell Minerva.'

'Oh bloody hell,' Ron groaned as the Gryffindors





surged out of the classroom.

'Even if they did go back to the common room or the dorm, they'll be knee-deep in shite when McGonagall finds out,' said Seamus, his expression worried.

'But they wouldn't just leave without saying anything!' said Parvati.

Ron and Harry shot each other a grim look. *Oh, yes they would.*

When they got to the Fat Lady, Ron wasted no time. 'Did Ginny and Hermione come back here a while ago? By themselves?' he demanded.

The portrait sniffed. 'Well, there've been so many comings and goings lately. How do you expect me to keep track?'

'Please!' Parvati looked up at the Fat Lady beseechingly. 'We think they might be missing.'

The portrait's expression softened. 'Oh dear. Well, I'm afraid no one came back through here after you lot left earlier.'

As soon as the Fat Lady let them into their common room, Parvati and Lavender dashed up toward the girls' dorm. The rest stood in a tight, rigid group, faces turned toward the stairs. Within two minutes, Parvati and Lavender came clattering back down.

'They're not there. We looked everywhere,' said Lavender, out of breath. Parvati was blinking back tears, and after a moment, Dean put an arm around her shoulder.

'Fuck this,' Harry growled. He tugged at Ron's arm, pulling him toward the boys' dorms. 'Come on.'

'But—we're supposed to wait for Professor McGonagall!' said Lavender shrilly.



'Tell her we'll be right back!' Harry yelled as he and Ron took the stairs two at a time.

'The Marauder's Map.' Ron pounded a fist into his hand as Harry ran to his bed and yanked his trunk out from beneath it.

'We can try,' said Harry, spreading the scroll out over his eiderdown. 'Last time I looked, it didn't want to show me the fifth passage.'

'You think they've gone back *there*, don't you. Oh, shit.' Ron had gone white, his freckles standing out.

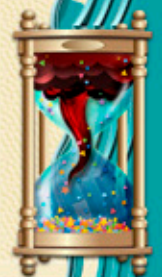
Harry waved his wand over the blank parchment. '*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*' Gradually the Map's whimsical images appeared, growing more distinct with each second. There was a great deal of activity, even this late, and the Map seemed alive with movement and names.

'Show us the dungeons,' said Harry, his voice tense. The Map obliged. The Hufflepuff common room was far from empty, and the Slytherin common room showed that several of the sixth- and seventh-years who had participated in the challenge were still up and about. When Ron saw the forbidding upheld hand in front of Severus Snape's office, lab, and private rooms, he gave a start and grabbed Harry's arm.

'How do we know they're not with Snape and Doctor Hawking?'

'Snape's rooms are too heavily warded—the Map won't show us. See?' Harry tapped the map. The warded area became filled with solid green, and the words 'Private. Don't even try' scrolled beneath the hand.

'Trust Snape,' said Ron in disgust.





They scanned the hospital wing next, then in quick succession the library, the Great Hall, the Owlery, and even the Headmaster's Tower, where a banner labelled 'Albus Dumbledore' moved restlessly back and forth, as if pacing.

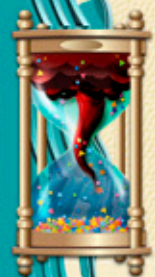
'Look.' Ron pointed to a cluster of banners in McGonagall's office. At that moment, 'Minerva McGonagall' split away from 'Remus Lupin' and 'Alastor Moody' and began moving at a rapid clip toward Gryffindor Tower. 'Uh oh,' said Ron.

Lupin and Moody separated, Moody heading toward the second floor and the 'Lupin' banner descending to the Entrance Hall, moving quickly toward the stairs leading to the dungeons. 'I'm sure Lupin's checking out Snape's lab,' said Harry, frowning. Then he shook his head. 'But I don't think they're there.' He looked at Ron. 'I think we both know where they are.' He tapped the Map, and again it showed them the dungeons.

'What the—?' Ron pointed. The banners 'Argus Filch' and 'Pansy Parkinson' were moving slowly past a sketchily drawn area labelled 'Dungeon Five' and heading toward the Slytherin common room.

'Parkinson,' Ron said, his voice low and furious. 'And Filch. Bloody fucking hell.'

'But where's Malfoy?' Harry muttered. 'This isn't making sense.' His wand stabbed at the edge of the Map, just past the point where Filch's banner had first appeared. 'Show me more!' he commanded. At first, nothing happened. Then slowly, an unpleasant face—almost a caricature—of an ageing man with



black hair, a thin moustache, and a cruel mouth emerged on the spot Harry's wand had touched. There was no identifying banner.

'D'you know who that is?'

'No,' said Harry.

'What an ugly git.'

As they stared, a tiny speech bubble appeared beside the caricature. *'Beyond these walls lies what you've lost, though finding will exact a cost. Come—brave the darkness, cold, and grime. Make haste! You're running out of time.'*

'Is that a message for us?' Ron whispered. He and Harry looked at each other. Suddenly another speech bubble appeared beside the first. As the letters formed, Harry groaned.

I'm lost... find me! Find me!

'What the hell does *that* mean?' said Ron, his voice choked. Harry took a deep, shaky breath and, in a few quick words, told Ron about the dream he'd had last Thursday night about hearing Hermione scream.

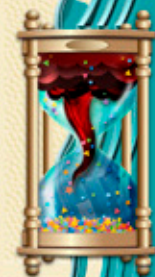
'Ron, I've got to go down there,' he finished.

'Alone?' Ron turned white as Harry nodded. 'No fucking way! We'll get Dumbledore and the rest of the Order. The D.A.!'

'No! That would look like an invasion. Don't forget: I *know* Voldemort.' For a moment, Harry's face looked so grim that Ron drew back from him a little. 'If he thinks we're going to attack, he'll kill Ginny and Hermione.'

'Harry, what makes you think you can just go and rescue them without any help? He'd kill you too—in a second.'

'What makes you think I won't kill him? The





prophecy says one or the other of us, right?' Harry took a deep breath. 'Look, Ron, all I know is that I've got to go down to that crypt.'

'Not alone.' Ron's eyes blazed. 'I'm going with you.'

Harry looked at his old friend, and a smile quirked the corners of his mouth.

'How good's your Disillusionment Charm, Ron?'

'Bloody awful.' Ron reached down and tapped Harry's trunk. 'But you've got something in *here* that'll work much better.'



Professor McGonagall was unimpressed, to say the least, by the fact Harry and Ron had not been waiting with the other students in the Gryffindor common room when she'd arrived. After fixing the two slightly breathless young wizards with a cold grey stare, she asked a number of questions about what had happened before, during, and after the challenge. She did not appear pleased with the answers, such as they were.

'Very well,' she said at length. 'The senior faculty will now deal with this. You're to go to bed immediately. No one is to step outside this common room before seven tomorrow morning, and then you must all go down to the Great Hall together. Mr. Weasley, as a prefect, you'll be responsible for submitting the head-count to me at breakfast. Is that clear?'

Ron cleared his throat. 'Yes, Professor.' He and Harry carefully did not look at each other.



Moody paced back and forth in front of Dumbledore's desk.

'I failed to be vigilant.' He pounded his black staff against the floor. 'I'm getting old. Useless. Incapable.'

'No, Alastor,' said Dumbledore, his voice calm. 'You had your hands full. Obviously the challenge was a clever distraction.'

'With those two little Slytherins at the bottom of it.'

'Not quite at the bottom, I'm afraid. Merely tools.'

Moody leaned his hand on the headmaster's desk and thrust his head forward, both his normal and his magical eye glaring into Dumbledore's face.

'Did you *know* something was going to happen, Albus?'

'I suspected.'

'They're down the fifth passage, aren't they? To that stinking crypt. Damn it, why aren't you mustering the Order?'

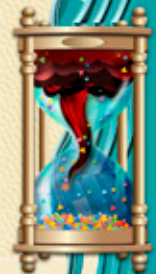
'Alastor, you know as well as I do that we can't risk triggering a counter-attack. We're not yet prepared.'

Moody raised his hand and slammed it down on the desk. 'But we can't just do nothing! Those girls' lives may be in danger! We have a responsibility!'

Dumbledore rose to his feet. 'Alastor, I want you to pass the word to all the Aurors that they're to gather in the Potions classroom at one thirty. I'll inform the senior faculty.'

'Two hours from now! That may be too late.'

'Believe me, only at that point do we have any





hope of attacking with success. Until then, we can't act prematurely.'

Moody's whirling eye slowed. 'Wait. Are you saying the—erm—project will be ready ahead of schedule?'

'All going well.'

'And you're pinning all our attack plans on that?'

'We have no other choice.'

'Have you any idea what a dangerous game you're playing, Albus?'

Dumbledore's tired eyes flashed, and his voice hardened. 'Alastor, I'm not "playing games" because I love the power of manipulating people's lives. What I'm doing, I'm doing for two reasons alone: I love Hogwarts, and I love the wizarding world. They must be preserved.'

'At all costs?' There was a heavy silence. 'And what of Harry Potter?' said Moody heavily.

Dumbledore's gaze flickered. 'His fate is now out of my hands.'

Moody thrust his head forward again. 'Potter's one thing. But playing with other students' lives is another. No one will forgive you for that.'

Dumbledore said nothing.

After a moment, Moody grunted in disgust and stumped away.



Why hadn't he been more watchful? Why hadn't he noticed the two girls were missing? Merlin's balls, thought Lupin in agony, what was he doing pretending to teach defence, when he'd failed to exercise the most basic form of vigilance over his students?



After barrelling through the dungeons and seeing no sign of either the two missing girls or—disturbingly—the Auror patrol, Lupin knew he had no choice but to talk with Snape and Hawking. As a member of the Order and a senior faculty member, he had privileged access to the Floo Network. The nearest fireplace was in Hogwarts' kitchen. Lupin wasted no time getting there.

As he strode into the vast room, he almost collided with young Sam Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt who, looking solemn and somehow purposeless, seemed to be guarding the entrance.

'What are you doing *here*?' Lupin demanded.

'We've been ordered to watch the kitchens,' said Shacklebolt.

'By whom? And why?'

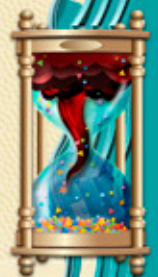
The two Aurors looked at each other.

'Our orders were very clear on this point,' Shacklebolt told Lupin calmly, and Sam nodded.

'They were, were they?' Lupin muttered, looking hard at each wizard in turn. They seemed quite normal, aside from their inability to justify their actions. 'What if I were to tell you those orders have been cancelled, and you need to go back to your regular patrol?' he asked hopefully.

Shacklebolt stared down at him for a long moment, and then shook his head. 'We need to receive the order, Remus.'

Lupin frowned. There was something odd about the way the quiet, stately Auror had said that, but he didn't have time to deal with it now.





'Well—I have orders to use the kitchen Floo,' he said, unable to suppress a hint of sarcasm.

But Shackbolt just inclined his head. 'We'll keep watch meanwhile,' he said.

'Right.'

Moments later, pushing past clusters of curious house-elves and ignoring half a dozen offers for food, drink, and other forms of assistance, Lupin cast the Floo powder. Even as the green flames rose up and took him, whirling, to his destination, he sensed miserably that the missing girls had been nowhere near Snape's lab.

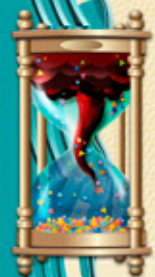
Still, he had to make the effort. Damn it, he had to do *something*.



Though Hermione's eyes were open, she felt rather than saw the two dark-robed figures approach the head of the fifth passage. One of them, a male, said something to Draco, and she recognised the voice instantly: Lucius Malfoy. Free and walking these dark passages, and God knew where else. And with no love of Mudbloods in him. A cold lump settled into the pit of her stomach. The female voice puzzled her, though made her want to shiver and curl herself up into a ball at the menace in it, if only she could move. But when Lucius called the female by name, Hermione felt her heart almost stop in fear and hatred. Bellatrix Lestrange. The woman who had killed Harry's godfather.

Oh God, oh God.

Of course she trusted Ginny—the real Ginny—



who was far too brave for her own good, but they couldn't deal with the situation alone, could they? So naturally, Hermione had planned all along to enlist the help of an Auror as soon as they saw a patrol. But as they'd headed toward Dungeon Five, Hermione had realised with growing dismay that they weren't encountering any patrols. The corridors were empty, and very dim, and Ginny kept pulling her along, whispering 'Come on, come on! We've got to get to Luna!' Then they'd arrived at the place where the door opened into the old potions room, and Ginny had hung back a bit, asking Hermione to open it.

Why, why, *why* hadn't she followed her instincts? The ones that screamed—This is wrong!

Too late.

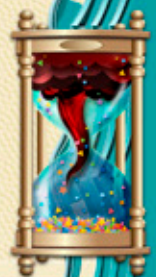
Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson had outsmarted her.

They'd quarrelled, though, and after Draco had cursed her, Pansy had fallen like a shot deer almost on top of Hermione. Then Filch, grumbling, had lifted Pansy up and taken her away. And then she remembered Draco sliding to the floor, wrapping his arms around himself and letting his forehead rest on his knees. Once or twice she'd heard him make strange little gasping sounds—almost as if he were crying.

But that couldn't be.

Now she felt herself being levitated, and then the cold, dank air of the passage whispered over her skin as they moved. She wished she could see Ginny, but her eyes stared up at the pebbly ceiling, lit in fits and starts by the wand-tips of Lucius, Bellatrix, and Draco.

Then they stopped. 'No, not here,' said Bellatrix.





'Your headmaster's gutted this place. See for yourself.' Then Hermione heard the same horrible grinding groan she remembered from almost a week ago, and wished she could close her eyes against the crawling reddish light she knew would emerge. Only it didn't. Instead, she sensed gaping darkness to her left and smelled the acrid remains of a fire.

'Filch isn't going to like this,' said Draco after a brief silence. It sounded to Hermione as if he were trying not to laugh.

'Which means he'll hate Dumbledore even more, if that's possible,' said Lucius Malfoy with satisfaction. A parchment unrolled. 'Accio quill!' said Malfoy, and Hermione heard the sound of writing. 'There,' said Malfoy after a moment. 'That will instruct Filch where to meet us.' The door closed again with a harsh grinding sound.

'So where...?' said Draco.

'The Argus mausoleum,' said his father. 'And then...'

Malfoy said something unintelligible, and Bellatrix laughed.

They all began moving again. Hermione stared up at the dim ceiling until time stretched, dream-like, so that it seemed they'd been moving down this passage for centuries. She'd grow old and die here, and maybe they'd put her body down and leave her to rot, like one of those mummies.



'Filch's meeting up with all of them,' said Dumbledore's observer. 'I don't know when, but it's got to be soon.' He



moved restlessly in his chair. 'So I'd best be going.'

'Once you've rejoined them, it might be difficult for you to report back here again.' Dumbledore paced slowly back and forth.

'You leave that to me.' The observer bared his teeth in a grin, though the expression was hard to see through his long, scruffy grey beard. 'I'll manage.' He glanced a bit scornfully at the only one of Dumbledore's intricate miniature mechanisms resembling a clock. 'I'll aim for half past twelve.'

'Not here, though. The dungeons. I'll let you into the Potions classroom.'

The thin old man nodded once, and then levered himself stiffly to his feet. 'Oof. Don't know how much longer my bones can take all this changing back and forth.' He scratched his beard. 'Hate cats. Goats are much pleasanter. They don't keep thinking they've minds of their own.'

'I forgot to ask you,' said Dumbledore, with a ghost of a smile, 'what happened to the real Mrs. Norris.'

'Pah! That nasty old she-demon? Having a nice long sleep in the dungeons. More than she deserves.'

'Quite.'

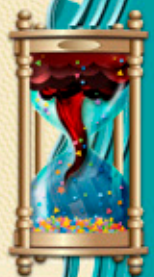
'Course the queen's now a tom, and I can't exactly hide that.' The old man smirked. 'But Filch hasn't noticed.'

'That's fortunate.'

'Right. I'm off.'

'One more thing,' said Dumbledore, his expression turning bleak. 'Watch out for Harry Potter. I'm almost certain he'll be trying to find Miss Granger and Miss Weasley.'

The grey-bearded man looked surly. 'Well, that'll



be a bloody nuisance, him running around. Why don't you stop him?

'Because there's a prophecy involved. It might be Harry's time. I can't interfere, much as I want to. I have to let him go.'

The observer was silent, and then whistled softly. 'Bugger. Well, I don't pretend to understand all of that, but I'll try to keep an eye on him.'

'Aberforth,' said his brother softly, 'you are the only Animorphmagus alive in Britain today. You are virtually impossible to track down and even more difficult to catch. But no matter how many animal shapes you can assume, there is still only one of you against... well, you know what they're capable of. Please, *don't* underestimate the danger.'

'Haven't so far. Won't start now.' Another grin flashed through the scraggly beard. 'Besides, I plan to live long enough to get back to the Hog's Head. That bloody Scree can't pour a decent pint to save his soul.'



the shape-changer

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

the draco effect

A S SNAPE FINISHED POURING the third-sequence ingredients into the large cauldron on the left of the long table, Hawking suddenly gasped and shivered, and the hand holding the parchment for the third-sequence binding spells began trembling. Putting down the phial, Snape caught her under her elbow and made her sit on the stool. Her head drooped.

'You need to rest, even just for five minutes!' he growled. 'This bloody Equilibrium Elixir isn't working any more. You've taken enough to poison ten wizards!'

'It—it's not that,' Hawking said, her voice shaking. 'I'm—oh, it's so dark. So cold.'

Snape grasped her arms. 'What are you talking about?'

'Hermione,' Hawking said faintly. 'It's Hermione. Severus—I can sense her. She's being taken—'

'What? Where?'

She looked at Snape, her expression taut. 'Somewhere dark. She can't move. Severus, I think she's in the fifth passageway.'

From Snape's office came the soft roar of flames and then the sound of someone climbing out of the



fireplace. Snape's head snapped in that direction. 'Albus,' he breathed.

'Severus? Doctor Hawking?' Lupin, brushing ashes from his lapels, hesitated in the doorway between the office and the lab.

Snape frowned blackly. 'What do you want?'

Lupin ventured a few steps into the lab. His face looked haunted. 'I'm sorry to disturb your work, but I'm afraid Hermione and Ginny are missing. Has either of them has been here in the past hour?'

Snape and Hawking exchanged bleak looks.

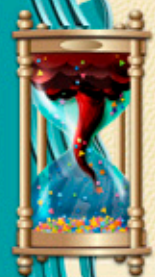
'No,' said Snape. His lips felt numb. 'Miss Granger was here much earlier, but she left before eight.'

Lupin sighed. 'I thought the chances would be slim. Well, thank you anyway.' As he turned to go, Hawking pushed herself to her feet.

'Do you know where she is? Are you planning to search for her?' she demanded.

Lupin looked a bit startled. 'We're, erm, just making inquiries for now. But I imagine—I hope—that Albus will authorise a proper search as soon as possible.' He moved a step or two closer, his golden-brown eyes intent on Hawking's face. 'Doctor Hawking, do you know anything that might help?'

'Remus.' Snape stepped between them, taking Lupin's elbow and steering him toward the office. He had no idea whether Gwen would have blurted out what she sensed about Miss Granger, but this was not the time or place to chance raising awkward questions. Once they were in the other room, he said, 'When Dumbledore organises a search, he



should focus on the fifth passageway.'

Snape wasn't surprised when Lupin only nodded. 'I thought of that as well,' the Defence professor said unhappily. 'I suspect that's where they've been taken.'

'Taken? Aren't you jumping to conclusions?'

Lupin gave a contemptuous snort. 'Oh, come on, Severus. They wouldn't have gone willingly, not after what happened to them last week.'

When Snape hurried back into the lab, Hawking was sitting on her stool, her head in her hands. As he came up to her, she raised her head. She was no longer wasting energy on maintaining her glamour, but only the brown eyes and bushy hair reminded him of Hermione Granger. In so many ways, she was an entirely different person.

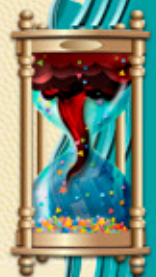
Yet at every turn of events, he was reminded forcibly that she and Miss Granger were, in fact, one and the same.

'Are you concerned that if something happens to Miss Granger,' Snape said, picking his words with care, 'it will have an effect on you?'

'An interesting question,' said Hawking, and Snape knew she was making an effort to think calmly. 'In the classic paradox model of time-travel, her death would mean I couldn't exist, so I could never have gone back in time. But if I didn't go back, she might not die, which means I do exist, travel back, and influence events in some way that causes her death, which means I don't exist.' She gave a brief, hysterical laugh.

'Gwen—you're not making sense.'

'It's not supposed to make sense. But I don't think that classical time-line model applies—not if we're





in a time-eddy spiralling off from the main current.'

'Which means?'

Hawking looked at him, her expression bleak. 'Anything can happen. If Hermione dies, she might pull me with her before I can finish my work, because of the quantum exchanges between us. Or—' she took a deep breath. '—if I fail this time, and she dies, that means neither of us will be able to try again, and all of this will have been for nothing.'

'You have to stop talking this way. We're nearly there.'

Her eyes blazed into his. 'You really have no idea how important Hermione is, do you?'

'Gwen, right now, nothing is more important than this project. If Dumbledore's right about one thing, it's that this weapon is our only hope.'

Hawking closed her eyes and shivered.

'Dark,' she muttered, her face all pale skin and sharp bones—the face of someone dying.



After reporting bleakly to Dumbledore that neither of the girls had been near Snape's office or lab, Lupin returned to the kitchens to see that Shackbolt and young Moody were no longer waiting by the entrance. Cursing under his breath, he pushed once more past the house-elves and, plunging into the main corridor, headed toward Dungeon Five.

He didn't need to go nearly that far. As he approached the Slytherin common room, he heard a sharp, urgent voice. He broke into a sprint, wand at the ready, then skidded to a halt when he saw the two missing Aurors



stooping over the crumpled form of a female student.

'What's happened? What are you doing here?' said Lupin.

Shackbolt, straightening, gave him a peculiar look and said, 'We were patrolling of course, and heard a call for help.'

'When we got here, we found—her,' said Sam Moody. The Aurors stood aside to let Lupin see.

It was Pansy Parkinson. When he saw what was left of her face, Lupin sucked in a shocked breath. 'Whoever called for help, it couldn't have been her.'

'It was a male voice,' said Shackbolt. He nodded at the door to the Slytherin common room. 'Probably one of them.'

'Someone used the Bleyke Curse against her.' Lupin's voice was grim.

Shackbolt shook his head, his face etched with pity. 'Who could have done that to her? And why?' Lupin muttered. *Draco Malfoy*, his mind whispered. *Or someone even worse.* And if Ginny and Hermione were now at their mercy...

'Is she dead?' asked Sam, his voice wavering a bit.

'Not yet. And if she was attacked less than an hour ago, we might be able to restore her—at least partially. *Mobilicorpus!*' The Aurors stood back as Lupin carefully raised the body. 'I'll take her to the kitchens and use the Floo to get her to the hospital wing.'

'Shouldn't we interrogate the students? It's standard procedure,' said Sam eagerly.

'Mister Moody's on his way down—you talk to him about that,' said Lupin. 'Meanwhile, stay here. *Don't*





go back to the kitchens.’ He fixed the two Aurors with a glare before disappearing down the dim corridor with Pansy’s body.

Shacklebolt and Sam exchanged puzzled looks.

‘What’s he on about? We haven’t been near the kitchens all evening,’ said Sam.



After the cold, stifling darkness of the fifth passageway, Hermione felt a strange kind of relief when the rocky ceiling above her grew lower. At least it was something to focus on. Then, still immobilised, she felt her body being moved, feet first, past a very narrow aperture. Her captors weren’t unduly careful, for her shoulder scraped painfully against the rock. Then the passageway was gone, and she was being manoeuvred into a large, dim, high-ceilinged stone chamber. She caught glimpses of what looked like catacombs on each side of her, one above the other—each of them containing a pathetic bundle of rag and bone and, from time to time, a skull, its eye sockets glaring in the fitful light of her captors’ wands.

At last she was lowered, none too softly, to the stone floor. But she was still immobilised. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a dark figure moving around the chamber, and several sconces flared with firelight. Then someone came right up to her, dark robes swirling, and Lucius Malfoy’s sardonic voice intoned, ‘*Finite Incantatem.*’

The moment her limbs relaxed, they started on their own accord to tremble. Malfoy smiled, not



kindly. ‘Feel free to sit up.’ After one or two false starts, Hermione pushed herself up and, wrapping her arms around her updrawn knees, tried very hard to stop her teeth from chattering—from fright, shock, or cold, she couldn’t tell.

She could now see that they were inside a semicircle of stone coffins, and after a moment, she realised her back was against one of them. She forced herself not to scuttle forward. The ornate carving around the flat lid of each coffin marked them as resting places for more well-to-do corpses than, presumably, the lower-class ones relegated to the catacombs. Two even larger and more ornate stone coffins stood in the centre of the chamber. On the fourth wall of the mausoleum was a doorway barred with a rusty iron gate.

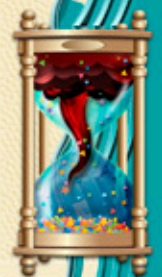
Hermione heard a faint sound. Near one of the coffins to her right, about fifteen feet away, Bellatrix Lestrange had just released Ginny. Hermione saw with a spurt of relief that the redhead was also sitting up.

‘You all right, Ginny?’ Hermione called, then jumped and stifled a shriek of pain when Malfoy hit her right arm with a stinging hex.

‘Yeah!’ Ginny said defiantly and yelped when Bellatrix, hissing ‘Stupid girl,’ stung her.

‘No chatting,’ said Malfoy, no longer smiling. Then he called over his shoulder, ‘Draco? Where are their wands?’ He shoved his own into his belt.

‘Here.’ The younger Malfoy stepped forward, holding out Hermione’s and Ginny’s wands. Hermione expected Draco to be smirking, but he looked uncharacteristically solemn. Then she remembered





that peculiar moment back at the head of the fifth passageway, when she'd thought she'd heard him crying. As he handed their wands to his father, she caught his eye for a brief moment, and he shot her a look of pure hate. Her heart sank. Yet Malfoy held their wands with care, one end in each hand, and as the seconds went by, Hermione allowed herself to imagine that perhaps he would simply put them away somewhere. That he wouldn't do the unthinkable.

Then, with a movement so sudden and vicious that Hermione's breath stopped in her throat with shock, Malfoy raised one knee and broke their wands across it. As Ginny made a sound like a sob, Malfoy, smiling faintly, tossed the four pieces into a corner. Hermione's eyes filled with tears, but she willed herself—with every ounce of strength—not to let them fall.

'And now,' Malfoy said pleasantly, 'it's only fair to tell you that we've been ordered not to mistreat or injure you unless you give us cause. So don't even *think* about trying to speak, stand, or move past this line.' Drawing out his wand, Lucius traced a glowing green half-circle extending about two feet around Hermione, whilst Bellatrix did the same around Ginny. Each young woman could sit with her knees bent or her legs crossed, but there wasn't enough room to stretch out their legs. 'Stay inside that, and keep quiet, and no harm will come to you.'

Malfoy turned away. 'Draco. Bella. I must report to our Lord. I expect to be back within the hour.'

Bellatrix raised her chin, black eyes narrowing. 'Have I been relegated to guard duty, then?'



'You know as well as I do how important these two are.' Malfoy's voice was cold. 'Except for Harry Potter himself, you couldn't be guarding anything more valuable.' He took a graceful, menacing step toward her. 'Or would you like me to report your discontent?'

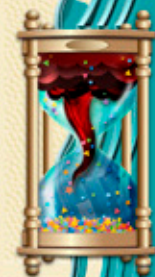
Bellatrix, paling, shook her head. 'No, of course not,' she muttered. Malfoy stepped closer to her, but now he smiled faintly.

'If you're looking for a way to pass the time,' he murmured, 'consider how you might entertain yourself whilst still not harming our guests—at least, not visibly. Or permanently.' His smile broadened. 'I've always admired your—creativity in those areas. And it would be educational for Draco.'

Bellatrix's answering smile turned Hermione's blood to ice.



Harry and Ron heard the hasty, approaching footfalls at the same time. Despite the fact that Harry was hidden by a Disillusionment Charm and Ron—who'd never really mastered that bit of magic—wore Harry's invisibility cloak, they flattened themselves against the wall of the corridor leading toward Dungeon Five. A shadow loomed up, distorted by the torchlight into something vast and inhuman, and then came an even eerier sight: a motionless body floating toward them. Then Remus Lupin emerged from the dimness, uplifting and guiding the floating body with his wand, his face grimmer than Harry had ever seen it before, even that night almost four years ago in the Shrieking Shack.





As the body passed by the two invisible watchers, Harry got a good look at it and immediately wished he hadn't. Half the face was hideously withered, as dried up and blasted as the craters of the moon, with the hair on that side of the head only a thin white frizz. In bizarre contrast, the other half of the face was untouched, the dark-blond hair only slightly mussed.

Harry and Ron stood, rigid as posts, until the sounds of Lupin's retreating footsteps had faded. Then Harry released a shaky breath.

'Did you see that?' he whispered.

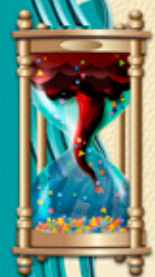
'Yeah.' Ron sounded as shocked as Harry felt. 'Fuck me. No one deserves that. Not even Pansy.'

'One person actually does deserve that—and more.' Harry, shaking off his horror, began moving down the corridor again, knowing that Ron, covered by the invisibility cloak, was watching closely enough to see the subtle ripples of light and dark that indicated Harry's presence. 'At least we won't have to worry about Professor Lupin.'

'No. Only a small army of Aurors and Order members, all at the height of their powers. No problem,' said Ron, his voice edged with sarcasm.

'Ron, mate, have a little trust.'

But as they approached the Slytherin common room, they heard a low murmuring of voices. Shackbolt, the serious young Auror trainee, and Alastor Moody were standing in the middle of the corridor, all looking tense. There was no way Harry and Ron could pass without brushing against one of them—not to mention risking the gaze of Moody's magical



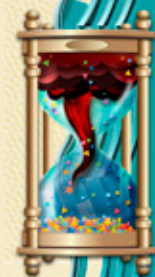
eye. They waited another few minutes, hoping the little group would break up and Moody would stomp away, but the muttered conversation—occasionally punctuated with louder phrases like—'No use asking *them*... what about Dumbledore? ...another hour and a half—' seemed to go on and on.

Finally Harry could stand it no longer. He whispered to Ron, 'Go back a few yards the way we came, then stay right up against the wall. Don't move 'til I tell you.' When Ron stopped, Harry retreated at least a dozen yards or so farther back in the direction of the Potions classroom. He stopped where the light was dimmest, cupped his hands around his mouth, and gave a low, strangled shriek that echoed through the corridor.

Almost before the echoes died, Moody's voice cried out harshly—'Sam, stay here!' Harry heard two sets of feet moving rapidly toward him—one swift and smooth, the other irregular, punctuated by the pounding of a staff. Moody hove into view first, moving incredibly quickly, with Shackbolt right behind him. Harry shrank into himself, thinking over and over—*nobody here, nobody here. Just a wall.* He held his breath and kept his eyes glued to the floor as the two Aurors passed him... and kept moving. When they were several yards past him, still scanning the corridor ahead of them, Harry moved quickly and silently back toward the Slytherin common room.

When he guessed he was at the right spot, he whispered, 'Ron?'

'Here. Harry, that was—'



'Shhh! Stay behind me.'

They ghosted with no trouble past the white-faced Sam, who was pacing in front of the Slytherin common room door, and encountered nothing else on their way to the old potions room until, just past Dungeon Five, they reached the innermost ring of wards.

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' said Ron.

'If you're thinking you're so glad I drilled the D.A. on how to slip past standard wards without being detected, then—yeah,' said Harry with a grin.

'Unless Dumbledore's changed 'em.'

But the wards offered no resistance. Once they were through, Harry called forth a strong light from his wand to illuminate the wall. 'According to the Map, that potions room's supposed to be right about here,' he muttered. He'd left that device behind, of course, since it couldn't tell them anything about the fifth passageway.

'Hermione mentioned a star-shaped stone outside that crypt room,' said Ron.

'Yeah, she did.' After a few moments, Ron spotted a faint, irregular shape ('Does that look like a star to you?' 'I dunno. Try pressing it.'). With a grating sound, a door slowly opened in the wall. They slipped inside, and only when the door closed behind them did Ron pull off the hood of the invisibility cloak. His head appeared, bizarrely floating by itself. Harry tapped his own head with his wand, ending the Disillusionment Charm.

The lit oil-lamp on the long, dusty table gave evidence that someone had been in this room recently. In that dim, fitful light, the two young wizards exam-

ined the shelf of ancient jars and phials. Then they looked at each other.

'Can you remember which jar to move?' Ron said.

'Yeah—well, I think Hermione said—erm—the second from the right on the third shelf from the top.'

Five minutes and at least two dozen combinations of jars and shelves later, Harry slammed his hand down on the ancient wooden table, raising clouds of dust.

'This is fucking stupid! We don't have time for this. Ron, get out of the way!' Harry raised his wand and aimed at the shelf, drawing energy from the fury and frustration roiling within him.

'Harry! What the hell're you doing?' yelled Ron's head as it hastily bobbed away from the shelf.

'*Destruo!*' With a great groan, the shelf collapsed, the jars falling to the floor and smashing. Clouds of dust rose, and Harry and Ron covered their faces. When the mayhem ended, they peered through the dust at the dark, exposed entranceway to the fifth passage. After a moment, Ron, coughing, extended his wand out from under the invisibility cloak.

'Erm, Harry, you've just punched a whacking great hole in the outermost wards,' he said, clearing his throat. 'Why didn't we just ring a bell and shout—"We're here"?''

'Cheers, Ron. C'mon. We've got a few minutes' lead at least. Let's go.'

'Harry.' Ron hesitated. 'Why don't we just—wait? Let Dumbledore and the Aurors find us? And then go with them to find the girls?'

Harry turned to Ron, his face dark with anger.



'We've been through this. But if you don't want to come, you wait. I'm going, no matter what you decide.' Not giving Ron time to reply, he raised his wand, muttered '*Lumos*,' and stepped over the debris into the maw of the passageway.

Ron sighed. 'You tosser.' He raised his own wand and followed.



Dumbledore stopped pacing as a whimsical looking gold device on a nearby table gave an urgent chime. He went over to it and peered through his half-moon glasses at the intricate network of lines that stretched like thin gold threads between a half-dozen or so more solid gold posts. One of the threads near the very bottom was flickering with a red light.

'Harry,' Dumbledore said softly.

He waited for a full minute or two, and then extended his wand over the compromised area. '*Innecto*,' he murmured, and that portion of Hogwarts' outermost ward network wove itself back together.

Moving back to his desk, he tapped the foot-high golden hourglass he'd placed on it after Aberforth's visit. 'It's five minutes later than it was the last time you bothered me,' the hourglass said in a peevish voice.

'The time now, please?' said Dumbledore in a mild tone.

'Three minutes past midnight,' said the hourglass sullenly.

With every fibre in his being, Dumbledore wanted to blast his way into the fifth passageway... find and protect Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny... reduce the



enemy to ashes. He wanted to end this. Just *end this*.

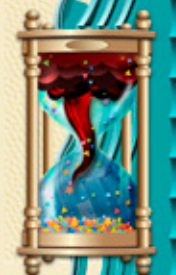
Instead, clenching his fists and taking a deep breath, he resumed pacing. Waiting for Aberforth.



It was easier not to think about what Bellatrix was doing to her. It wasn't painful; the Death Eater had, Hermione supposed, decided to take no chances with the Dark Lord's orders not to injure her and Ginny. Even so, after Malfoy had departed, Hermione's eyes had sought out Ginny's, trying to telegraph courage and hope. She had heard enough about Bellatrix Lestrange after the terrible battle of the Department of Mysteries, and then after her induction into the Order, to know that except for Lucius Malfoy, no other Death Eater was more coldly fearsome.

Now, a long time later (how long, she had no idea), all she could do was keep her arms wrapped around her knees, teeth gritted, breath coming in short gasps.

Though Bellatrix hadn't touched Hermione or Ginny, she'd inflicted on them a series of Horror charms at intervals just irregular enough to drive Hermione almost mad. They'd reviewed counter-spells for the more common varieties of Horror charms in their Master Defence class, but without her wand, Hermione couldn't fully defend herself. All she could do, each time terror jolted through her body, was try to remember and recite the counter-spells over and over in her mind. Coupled with the cold and then growing thirst, Hermione had no energy for any kind of defiance. She had no idea how Ginny was coping.





Then she heard Bellatrix's voice, as if from a great distance, saying, 'This is getting a bit boring.' The jolts of horror eased, and the relief was so great Hermione almost passed out. She sagged to the floor, still curled up in a ball.

'Filch. What took you so long?' she heard Draco say.

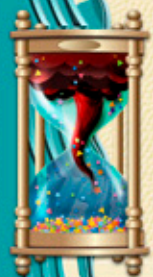
'Who did that to the Eleven?' Filch's voice was deadly. 'Who's responsible for that—that *desecration*?' His voice broke on the last word, as if he were choking on a sob or a scream of fury.

'Draco, tell this Squib he knows full well who burned his precious mummies,' said Bellatrix, her voice dripping with contempt. 'Tell him to go outside and patrol the graveyard. I'll guard the passage-way entrance.' Her tone turned sugary. 'Your turn to watch our guests now, Draco. Have fun.'

'You heard her, Filch,' said Draco. Hermione managed to scrape together some amusement at his attempt to sound as effortlessly arrogant as Bellatrix. Feet shuffled as Filch presumably obeyed and Bellatrix took up her new position. Then a set of footsteps moved past her in Ginny's direction. Hermione cracked her eyes open to see Draco stopping and crouching before Ginny's huddled form. Her hands covered her face, and her body shook with tremors or sobs.

'So you want to shag Harry Potter, do you? Gaggling for it, are you? Aw—too bad I couldn't oblige. You're not bad at snogging, though, you little slag. Perhaps you're a decent fuck.' He chuckled. 'Maybe I'll try you out. Later.'

Hermione felt fury writhing inside her as she



realised Draco must have taken Harry's form to lure Ginny to the dungeons, just as Pansy had taken Ginny's to lure her. Poor Ginny. But, either because she was still too traumatised from the Horror charms, or she was too ashamed or too angry to answer, Ginny stayed silent, keeping her hands over her face.

At length Draco got tired of trying to bait Ginny and turned toward Hermione. She closed her eyes again as his feet stopped just inches from her face. Suddenly a hard object rapped against her scalp, and her eyes flew open in shock. Draco stood over her, his wand extended over her head, smiling with false sweetness.

'Wake up, Mudblood.'

She said nothing.

'Not laughing at me now, are you?' His tone was rich with satisfaction.

She said nothing.

'You have *no* idea how much I'm going to enjoy the next few hours, you smarmy little suck-up.'

She said nothing.

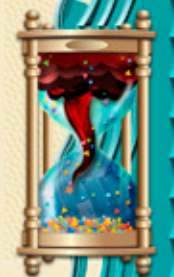
'Or is it—suck *on*? Everyone knows you can barely keep your filthy hands off Snape, disgusting though he is. So I wonder where your filthy little *mouth's* been?'

Don't answer him! Hermione told herself, but her dry lips opened as if someone else were controlling them.

'You think you've killed Pansy, and I don't think you meant to.'

Draco jumped as if he'd been bitten by a wasp, then he relaxed and gave a short laugh. 'That's a good one, Mudblood. Please—entertain me some more.'

'I think you used the strongest Blasting Curse on her.'





But—I'm not sure—maybe you didn't say it quite right, but what happened was an accident, wasn't it?'

Draco's brows drew together, and his grey eyes glittered like ice. 'I meant to scare her. That's all,' he said in a low voice.

'If you're sorry about Pansy, I'll say that,' said Hermione, pushing the words out as quickly as she could. 'If—if you can stop what they're going to do to us, I'll defend you, Draco—I swear it.'

Draco's face paled, and for a moment his wand wavered.

'Just what makes you think, Mudblood, that I give a fuck?'

'Because when you were waiting in the passageway, before your father came,' said Hermione with an effort, 'I heard you crying.'

For what seemed like hours, Draco didn't move. Then he let out a long, hissing breath and stepped back a foot or two. For a brief moment, Hermione felt an incredulous sense that perhaps she'd said the right thing—that she'd managed to speak to something deep within Draco Malfoy that could still feel remorse, or could at least still fear the consequences of his actions.

Then Draco smiled slowly and pointed his wand straight between Hermione's eyes.

'You think you know everything, don't you, you piece of filth. *Crucio!*'

She had time to think—*I failed*—before pain blasted her universe apart.



'God, God!' Hawking wrapped her left hand around her trembling right arm. Snape, moving quickly, cupped



his hands around the phial she was extending toward the large cauldron in front of them, and took it from her gently. Over half an hour ago, shortly after the tenth Carborundorum sequence had been locked into place, she'd been wracked with fits of shaking, forcing her to stop the delicate work of preparing mummified flesh. 'I don't think it's me,' she'd said shortly after the fits had begun, her lips trembling and tears springing to her eyes. 'It's Hermione. She's terrified. It keeps coming and going, like waves. And she's all alone. Oh, Severus...!'

'Use Occlumency to block her feelings,' he'd said, forcing himself—for her sake—to sound as cool as possible. After a moment, she'd nodded and said she thought that might be effective for a while, but she wouldn't be able to keep it up for long. As best he could, Snape had helped her to focus, and after that, Hawking had been able to work with reasonable steadiness.

'It's like black wings beating in the back of my mind,' she'd said a few minutes later. Snape, still fresh from encountering his own demons, had simply looked at her. Nothing more needed to be said.

'Why hasn't Dumbledore come down to check with us?' Hawking had burst out. 'Damn it, at least I'd be able to tell him the girls have been taken into the fifth passageway.'

'We don't know that for an absolute fact.'

She'd thrown him a furious look. 'Yes, we bloody well do.' Snape kept his silence, not wanting to distract her any more, and not wanting to let slip the terrible, gnawing sense that Dumbledore was not doing everything possible to find the girls. That if it would help





protect Hogwarts—if it would help ensure Harry Potter destroyed Voldemort—Dumbledore might be prepared to sacrifice anyone, including the young Hermione. Snape found himself wondering if sacrificing the younger even mattered to Dumbledore, as long as the elder produced Carborundorum and its remedy first.

Had he even thought about how Hermione's death could affect the myriad of futures arising from their actions this night? About how bleak and pointless any future would be without her?

But he couldn't afford to dwell on that. His task was to help Gwen through the next hour. Beyond that, he had no idea, except that once the "sweat of the dead" had been carefully added, in the small, steady amounts called for, the eleventh sequence would be complete. Carborundorum would be ready. Then, presumably, the members of the Order and whoever else was willing and able to stand against Voldemort and his Death Eaters would dip their wands into the viscous, blood-coloured contents of the cauldron, imbuing those wands with deadly power.

'And the remedy?' he'd asked several times earlier that day. Finally, at tea, Hawking had disclosed that in her time, a small handful of exceptionally dedicated witches and wizards specialised in administering the remedy. It was dangerous work, for the wands they wielded could never touch Carborundorum. Quite the opposite: the wands had to be prepared by submerging them in pure, clear water.

Snape had looked politely incredulous. 'Water? Nothing else?'



'Just water.'

'What are the incantations, then?'

Hawking had looked almost embarrassed. 'They're personal to each wizard—whatever works best to help her or him to focus and marshal the necessary power.' Then she'd given him a few examples.

Snape had been astonished past speech.

'They're not incantations at all. And—water. Plain *water*? Are you joking?'

'The water's mainly symbolic, I admit. But think about the force behind those words, Severus. Think about the power they can muster in the right hands. Simple? Yes. Plain? Absolutely. But utterly beyond the reach of anyone who's been swallowed up by Dark Magic. And in the right hands, it works, Severus. I've seen it.'

'Then—why couldn't we have been ready with this remedy days ago? Why go through all this?' Snape had waved his hand at the neatly sequenced ingredients and the parchments inscribed with bitter spells.

'To be honest, I'm not sure if the remedy would even work without compiling the weapon first,' Hawking had confessed. 'But believe you me, we'll need the weapon. I saw the slaughter thirty years ago.' She'd closed her eyes briefly. 'Did I tell you? We'd had our Hallowe'en feast in the Great Hall and then gone up to our dorms. We didn't suspect a thing. Then we were all awoken in the middle of the night and told we had to get out of the castle, it was being invaded from within. It was madness. We all rushed outside—and I realised Harry wasn't there. I think one of the reasons why I lived is that I tried





to get back into the school to find him.’ Hawking had cupped both hands around her mug of tea, her knuckles whitening. ‘Not all the Death Eaters had Carborundorum, but anyone who stood up to them had no chance.’ Her eyes had fastened on Snape’s and then, blinking, she’d looked away.

‘And Potter?’ Snape had asked, carefully sidestepping her unspoken words.

‘Harry never did say exactly what happened, but I suspect he managed to take Voldemort’s wand and kill him with his own curse. Once Voldemort was eliminated, his Death Eaters lost heart for a while. Enough to buy us a bit of time. So we put all our energies into defence. And well, you know the rest.’

Now Snape put the phial of powdered mummified flesh—a tiny amount that Hawking been about to add to the cauldron—carefully on the table. He wanted to take Hawking’s shaking hands in both of his and to will strength and steadiness into her. But instead, keeping his tone neutral, he said, ‘Tell me what to do.’

She shook her head. ‘No. I’ve done this before. You haven’t. If anything goes wrong, the responsibility should be mine.’

‘But you—’

‘Wait.’ Hawking raised her head as if listening. After a minute or two, she let out a sigh. ‘Either I’ve managed to block everything, which I doubt, or they’re leaving her alone for now. She’s still alive—as far as I know,’ she added quickly.

‘Then—are you able to continue?’

She nodded, picking up the phial with steady



hands, then looked at him and gave a death’s head grin. ‘Onward and outward. But Severus, there is something you can get for me, if you don’t mind.’

Snape frowned. ‘More Elixir? I don’t think—’

‘No. More *tea*. As strong as it’s humanly possible to make.’



Hermione had no reference, no language, for such searing agony.

‘Stop!’

The shout seemed to come from inside an endless black tunnel of pain more intense than anything Hermione could have imagined.

And then the pain ended.

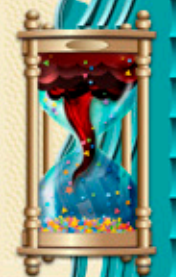
Had she been screaming? Her throat felt raw. Her eyes still squeezed closed, she took a great whooping breath of air, then another, and another. Not again. Please, not again, was her first coherent thought, followed quickly by—*And I imagined I could invent a REMEDY? For THIS? Great sweet Merlin.*

‘I have nothing against the use of Crucio—far from it.’ It was Bellatrix’s voice, and she did not sound pleased. ‘But this isn’t the time or place to be self-indulgent. If you’ve damaged her...’

‘She’s fine,’ said Draco sullenly. ‘See?’

‘She looks far from well to me,’ Bellatrix retorted. ‘Try listening to your father occasionally. That might make a nice change.’

‘You have no—’ Draco began in a fierce voice, and then stopped himself.





'What were you going to say?' Bellatrix's tone was coolly menacing. 'In case you've forgotten, you're the trainee. Out there is the Squib. That leaves me in charge until your father returns, and that means you will bloody well follow my orders. Is that clear?'

'Yes.' Draco's voice sounded strangled.

'Oh good. Now I'm going to go back to the passageway, and you're going to watch our guests. And that's *all* you're going to do. It's not that difficult.'

A pause, and footsteps started to move away. Then without warning a great voice seemed to come out of nowhere, echoing round and round the mausoleum. '*Incendio Contorqueo!*' Hermione's eyes flew open. An instant later, Bellatrix, standing a few feet away from her, gave a terrible, piercing shriek as a fiercely whirling ball of orange flame engulfed her. She screamed again and tried to duck away, raising her wand. The great voice shouted '*Expelliarmus!*' and Bellatrix's wand, flaming, flew out of her hand and arced like a torch into the shadows. '*Incendio Contorqueo!*' shouted the voice again, and Bellatrix howled as another whirling ball of flame engulfed her.

Draco seemed frozen with shock. Only when Bellatrix shrieked again for help did he raise his wand and back up toward Hermione, moving as slowly if he were under water.

Then somehow Bellatrix was out of the fire and running, her hands up around her head, toward the mausoleum entrance and the rain-slicked graveyard beyond. As she fled, the great echoing voice shouted '*Bleyke!*' and a vicious wind whipped up between Bel-



latrix and the entrance. The Death Eater came to a clumsy, skidding stop and tried to turn back, but the wind, grey and filthy, seemed to surround her. Bellatrix gave a short, choked scream, then turned, her hands flailing as if she were trying to tear a spider's web apart, and plunged away into the night.

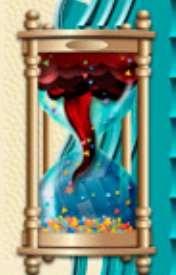
Hermione, shaking, tried to push herself up. Draco was less than five feet away, his back toward her. '*Pro—Protego!*' she heard him gasp, waving his wand jerkily. His head whipped back and forth as if trying to see every part of the shadowy chamber at once.

Then a small dark form leapt up at Draco, attaching itself to his face and shoulders. Draco yelled and staggered back, almost falling on top of Hermione, who shrank back to avoid him.

'Mrs Norris!' Filch, dripping wet, stood just inside the entrance. 'What are you doing? Stop that! *Stop!*' His voice was filled with astonishment and shock.

The bodiless voice seemed to come from all directions at once—'*Incendio!*'—and Filch screamed as his hair and clothing burst into flame. He turned, collided with the stone wall, and finally found the entrance. He staggered, shrieking, out into the graveyard, and Hermione turned her head away against the sight of him blundering away like a ghastly human torch among the wet, leaning gravestones.

Draco gave a pained, furious shriek and Hermione looked up just as he fell backwards on top of her, his hands tearing at the clawed, fanged thing clamped to his head. Without thinking, she pushed at him, frantic to get out from under him and trying to keep her



head down to avoid the cat. She got one leg free and kicked at Draco as hard as she could. There was a howl of pain—either from Draco or the cat, she couldn't tell which. But the kick worked; suddenly she was clear.

As Hermione scrambled away from the melee, she heard running footfalls, and then a light breeze swirled around her. Instinctively, she covered her face and waited for the blow to fall.



It happened in an instant. One moment Hawking was steadily, expertly adding the required small amounts of “sweat of the dead” to the Carborundorum cauldron, Snape hovering almost at her elbow in case she needed his help. The next, Hawking gave a high, keening shriek and convulsed. The hand holding the phial clenched, shattering the glass.

The bits of broken phial, drops of Hawking's blood, and all the remaining powdered flesh fell into the cauldron, disappearing into the dark-red, viscous liquid.



things which enclose

in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which i cannot touch because they are too near
e.e. cummings



HER HANDS OVER HER FACE, Hermione braced herself.

‘*Impedimenta!*’ shouted an ordinary voice only a few feet from her. A familiar voice. Hermione slowly brought her hands down. Yes. She could still move.

‘It’s all right, Hermione,’ said the voice. ‘It’s me and Ron. We’ve got Draco now.’

‘*And Mrs Norris,*’ came Ron’s voice from a few feet to the left. As Hermione stared, Ron’s head appeared in mid-air. He shrugged the invisibility cloak back over his shoulders and gave her a quick, grim smile. He kept his wand firmly trained on the immobile forms of Draco and the cat, their limbs eerily frozen in mid-struggle.

‘Harry?’ said Hermione, her voice a faint croak. Harry suddenly appeared, crouching less than two feet in front of her with his wand poised over his head. She recoiled, giving a faint shriek.

‘Sorry.’ He gave her a quick smile. ‘Are you all right?’

Hermione cleared her throat, nodding. ‘I think so.’

‘What about Ginny?’ said Ron urgently.

‘I’m over here.’ Ginny’s voice trembled a bit, but she was pushing herself up on one elbow. ‘I think



I'm okay.' Harry gave Ron a quick glance and then surged to his feet. In two or three strides he was at Ginny's side. Very gently, he helped her to sit. 'Thanks Harry,' she mumbled, not quite looking at him. Then with a groan, she stretched her legs out in front of her, massaging them.

Hermione noticed that Malfoy's thin green lines had faded. She wondered if anything would have actually happened if they'd been breached. With enormous relief, she stretched her own legs out and felt an unpleasant tingling as nerve-ends protested.

'We have to get out of here,' said Ron, throwing an unhappy look at the mausoleum entrance.

'Wait,' said Hermione. 'Ron—can you release the cat?'

Ron frowned. 'Yeah, but why? She'll just go and find Filch. Maybe even raise an alarm.'

'Didn't you see?' said Hermione. 'It *attacked* Draco. It might look like Mrs Norris—but I suspect it isn't.'

Harry and Ron looked at each other. 'Hmph,' said Harry. 'Well, give it a try, Ron. But I'll get her if she bolts.' He circled around so he stood a few feet behind Ron, blocking the only clear path to the entrance.

Ron aimed his wand very carefully at the cat. '*Finite Incantatem.*' With a yowl, the freed cat sprang away from Draco. As both Harry and Ron swung to face it, wands bristling, the animal paced between them a few times, glowering, and then sat and looked at them calmly, as if to say—'Right then. What now?'

Then with no warning or fuss, the cat began to swell like a misshapen balloon. Ginny yelped, and the young men sprang backwards, wands raised. A second later,



a thin old man with a grey beard was sitting exactly where the cat been. He was wearing shabby brown boots, dark green trousers, something that looked like a grey anorak, and a most peevish expression.

Harry and Ron's jaws dropped.

'Oh, my—' gasped Hermione.

'Kicked *and* petrified within two minutes of each other. Hell's bloody bells—I'm not twenty-five anymore,' the old man grumbled, slowly pushing himself to his feet. Then he jerked his thumb at Draco. 'I'd bind him up nice and tight if I was you. Maybe gag him. That little arse-wipe *bites.*'



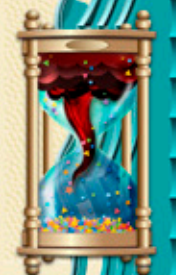
'It's ruined. Useless.'

Snape had no choice but to believe Hawking. What was left in the cauldron in the aftermath of her convulsion wasn't even liquid any more. White, powdery, inert—like sand or salt.

It hadn't been Gwen's fault, though he cursed himself for a hundred kinds of a fool for not having insisted he take control of adding the final ingredient, and for not anticipating Miss Granger—and through her, Gwen—might be attacked by a curse as drastic as *Cruciatus*. What irony: to have Miss Granger's very own remedy against that Unforgivable sitting uselessly in his lab.

'We need to report this to Albus.' He couldn't think of anything else to say.

For minutes now since the accident and since Snape had bound the wounds in her hand, Hawk-





ing had been sitting quietly and calmly in his office, staring into space, whilst he had been pacing, agonising, unable to believe what had happened, unable to fathom that everything they'd been through together and all the time they'd poured into this work over the past week had turned, in one disastrous instant, into a few handfuls of sand.

'What about your remedy?' Snape said a minute later. 'Is there a chance *that* will still work, even without the weapon?'

Hawking stirred and, for the first time since the disaster, glanced at him.

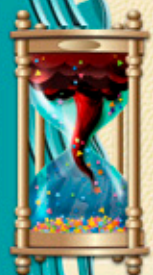
'I'm not sure.' Her voice sounded utterly numb.

'Can't we at least *try*, damn it?' She said nothing, and Snape felt his fury rising.

'So you've resigned yourself to dying, have you?' he lashed out. 'That's all well and good for you—but what about everyone you came here to save? Have you forgotten about *them*?'

Now she looked fully at him, her expression shifting from numbness, to shock, to a fury matching his own. 'No, I haven't.' Then her hand went to the tiny hourglass dangling from its chain around her neck. 'Not for one single moment.' He could tell she was making an effort to keep her voice calm, but what she said next astonished him. 'I need this office to myself for a few minutes. Before we do anything else, there's a message I must prepare. I need you to wait outside until I'm done.' She paused for a second. 'Please.'

Snape struggled for words. 'We're about to face a mass slaughter, and as of ten minutes ago, our only



real weapon is a pile of sand. And you want to do—*what?* Gwen—for *fuck's* sake!'

She surged to her feet, her face a white, furious mask, and raised her wand. '*Get out!*' A blast of hot wind hit him square on, pushing him backwards, staggering, out of his office. The door slammed behind him.

He had his wand out in an instant, but his spells had no effect. Nor did bellowing at her to let him in.

Finally, he slumped down to the floor and sat with his back against the door, feeling as hopeless as he had on that ghastly night in September when Voldemort had "demonstrated" Carborundorum on Bletchley.

How many would die tonight? What if, this time, Hermione Granger was a victim instead of a survivor?

And in the end, did it even really matter?

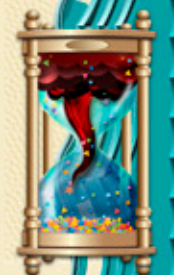


Once again assuming the form of Mrs Norris, Aberforth Dumbledore took it upon himself to patrol the graveyard. Meanwhile, Harry and Ron bound Draco with Incarcerous, and Harry took Draco's wand from him, handling it with delicate contempt, as if it were something dead.

'You could break it,' Ron offered. But Harry shook his head.

'It's not mine to break.' He shoved it into his belt and looked at Hermione and Ginny, who were by now on their feet. 'Where are your wands?' he asked them.

Hermione and Ginny looked at each other. 'Lucius Malfoy broke them,' said Ginny, her voice flat with anger. 'I think the pieces are over there.' She pointed





to a dark corner. Ron, shaking his head, went to investigate, and came back less than a minute later holding four jagged pieces of wood.

'They can't be fully restored,' he said, his expression solemn. 'But you should have them anyway.'

'Aw. How sweet,' said Draco poisonously.

'*Silencio!*'

Draco opened and closed his mouth, his expression furious. Harry lowered his wand.

'We've got to go,' Ron said.

'And leave *him* behind?' Harry jerked his head in the direction of the mausoleum entrance. As if he'd heard them, the cat came streaking back in from the graveyard. It headed toward them, paused, and morphed back into Aberforth, his hair, beard, and anorak damp with rain.

'Nothing out there—except Filch and Lestrangle.'

'Where?' Harry tensed and aimed his wand toward the entrance, but Aberforth chuckled dryly.

'Don't worry. They're in no shape to bother you.' Aberforth nodded at Harry and Ron. 'Good attack, you two. Distracted 'em with the Sonorous Charm, then—' he smacked one fist into his palm '—wham!'

'You might have to explain what you did to Bellatrix Lestrangle, though,' said Hermione, giving Draco a half-pitying, half-contemptuous glance.

Harry laughed once, sharply. 'She killed Sirius. That's all I care about.'

'Come on,' said Ron.

'We have to take him with us.' Hermione said, pointing at Draco. The three young people stared at



her, and Aberforth rolled his eyes.

'You mean—rescue him? Are you insane?' Ron almost shouted.

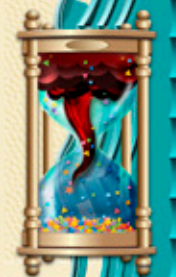
'No. I mean deliver justice. He used the Cruciatus Curse on me,' said Hermione quietly. 'And he—well.' She threw a quick glance at Ginny, who was staring at Draco with an expression of hate Hermione had never before seen on her younger friend's face. 'He has to go before the Wizengamot. That's all there is to it.'

'Wizengamot?' said Ginny. 'Just tip him into an open grave. Maybe he'll be "accidentally" buried. No one would ever know.' She smiled viciously at Draco, and his face contorted with a mix of rage and fear.

'Stop dithering about, you lot,' Aberforth growled. 'This night's not getting any younger, and neither is You Know Who, if you catch my drift.'

They got the drift. Harry and Hermione quickly cast a Protego Adamant shield around all of them. Staying close together, the four young people moved past the catacombs that led back to the fifth passageway: Hermione first, then Draco's immobile form behind her, then Ron—using his wand to guide their prisoner, followed by Ginny and Harry. As they slipped one by one through the narrow mouth of the passage, the cat shot off ahead of them at top speed, vanishing quickly into the dark.

When they were well into the passageway, their wands casting a faint glow around them, Ginny let out a shaky sigh. *We might just be all right*, she thought. As if sensing her relief, Harry touched her shoulder, and when she turned her head, he gave her an encouraging smile.





'All right, Ginny?' he said softly.

Maybe some day she would tell him what had happened between her and Draco-As-Harry. Or maybe not. For now, though, she found she could look Harry in the eyes again and smile back.

'Yeah, I'm all right.'

There was no warning—not a sign, not a sound. A thing like a giant serpent reared up in front of them, its flat eyes glowing dull red. Its fanged mouth opened, and green fire rushed around their shield, licking at it hungrily. Hermione screamed and shrank back, shielding her face, and Ron stumbled backwards into Ginny. As if from a great distance, Ginny heard Harry shouting something... a horrible, hissing voice spat an answer, and there came a sound like thunder. The air around them seemed to rip itself to shreds, and the breath rushed out of Ginny's lungs.

Then everything went black.



Snape wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting with his back against his own office door, lost in dark thoughts, before realising that Gwen couldn't possibly (could she?) have blocked access to the Floo Network. Cursing himself, he ran through the lab into his private quarters. A bit wildly, he cast the Floo powder into his living room fireplace, though he forced himself to enunciate—'Severus Snape's office'—with the usual care.

Gwen wasn't there. Without much hope, Snape pushed open the door to his lab and called her name, even though

things which enclose



he knew in his bones there would be no answer.

Bloody fucking hell and damnation.

He tried to think this through. Hawking had to have used the Floo, maybe even only a minute or two ago. There were only so many secured Floo outlets in the dungeons... and only one Gwen would likely want to access.

In seconds, Snape was stepping out of the fireplace in the guest quarters. He looked around. The cold, rather plainly furnished room had two armchairs, a low table, a four-poster, a dressing table with a large silver wash-basin, and a writing desk. 'Gwen?' he called softly. Nothing. Hoping against hope, he went over to the desk and searched it. Empty—except the bottom drawer, from which he drew out a diary-sized book. The leather cover read NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA, and it was buckled closed with a clasp and what Snape recognised as a powerful Sealing Charm. A small, loose piece of rolled-up parchment was tucked underneath the clasp. Snape pulled it out and unrolled it.

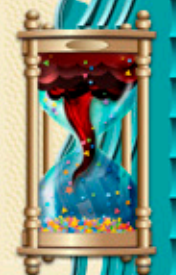
Severus,

These notes will open when you say the name of the place where I was staying in London. Please read them. Then keep them safe until the day Hermione Granger leaves Hogwarts, and give them to her then. After that, it's up to her... and you.

I want to believe that 'All shall be well.'

~Gwen

things which enclose





Hermione,

If Severus Snape is dead, these notes will open for you on or after the day you leave Hogwarts. I think they're self-explanatory. Do with them as you think best. I'm sorry for the hurt I caused you.

~G.H.

The words blurred. Snape shook his head violently. He pushed the piece of parchment back under the clasp, and put the NOTES back where he'd found them.

'Gone to find Miss Granger, of course,' he said softly to the room. 'Is this your idea of a last heroic act?' He felt a white lash of fury at Gwen Hawking and all Gryffindors, past, present, and future, whose misguided stubborn notions of bravery made them think they could go plunging into the dark and stand against Voldemort with just a wand and a Protego.

She'd stood with him when he faced his own darkness; now, he could do nothing less for her—however hopeless the outcome. Besides, if even a second-hand blast of the Cruciatus Curse could shatter her, what chance did she have without his help?

Cruciatus. Snape took a single sharp breath. Yes, yes. *It's worth a try...*

Back in his office and lab, he found a small spatula and, scooping up a thick, indigo measure of Hermione Granger's anti-Cruciatus remedy, he undid his waistcoat and shirt and rubbed it on his chest as he had that night over a week ago. He then put an equal measure of the substance in a small glass jar and tucked it carefully

things which enclose



into an inner pocket of his waistcoat.

He considered leaving a note for Dumbledore, but realised the empty lab and cauldron-full of ruined Carborundorum would tell its own tale.

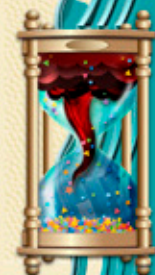


If Hawking wasn't quite sure where to find the entrance to the old potions room, the presence of an Auror a short way past Dungeon Five, just within the first line of wards, solved that problem. Of course he couldn't see her, but she could tell by the way he paced that he was edgy to the point of hyper-alertness. She narrowed her eyes. *Bloody young. Could that still be a trainee—on the front lines, on the eve of battle?* But at least her next move would be easy. She ghosted up behind the young Auror, not even daring to breathe, and then tapped him on the head with her wand. 'You're so tired. Why don't you sit down and have a bit of a kip? There—that's it.' She kept her voice low and kind, weaving the spell tightly around the young man as he staggered, groped behind him for the wall, and sank down against it.

Then she got a good look at his face and, despite its youth, recognised it right away.

'Sebastian Alastor Moody,' she breathed. 'Oh, shit, Sam. What are *you* doing here?' She was sure he hadn't fought in the Hallowe'en battle of her past. Then a most unpleasant thought occurred to her. He was here because *she* was here: her presence a force changing what had once been, to something unknown and unpredictable... more than likely put-

things which enclose





ting her future supervisor in mortal danger.

God, oh god. What a mess I've made. Everything's in shambles. Everything.

'I don't have time for this now,' she muttered through clenched teeth, and slipped through the first line of wards as if they weren't there. Feeling carefully along the wall, she found the irregular stone and pressed it. As the door opened, she stood out of the line of fire, her back against the wall, extending both physical and magical senses. Thus she knew the room was empty even before she entered it, but the sight of the destroyed shelf, the broken old jars, and the gaping blackness of the fifth passageway brought her up short. She froze. Who had done that? Friendly or hostile? She considered, and then slowly extended her wand, tapping into her shrinking storehouse of energy.

'*In absentia—Prior Incantato.*' She was proud of this piece of investigative magic that she'd once helped develop; it allowed Aurors to track a prior spell even if the caster and wand were long gone from the scene. A silver cloud trickled out of her wand-tip, expanded, and revealed the ghostly image of Harry Potter blasting the shelf to smithereens. Despite herself, she smiled fondly. Unsubtle, but effective. That was Harry all over.

'*Finite Incantatem.*' The cloud vanished. But here was something odd: the outermost ward was sound. That bothered her, since *Destruo* would more than likely have damaged it. She frowned. Only Dumbledore would be able to detect and repair any breached wards. Perhaps he'd already been here and



was now heading down the fifth passageway, perhaps with Aurors, all trying to rescue Hermione and Ginny—and now Harry.

Except that *Prior Incantato* had shown no signs of any magic but Harry's.

'Gwen.'

She froze, then steadied herself and turned calmly to face Severus Snape. He leant against the frame of the open doorway, arms folded. But his wand was half-raised, and his eyes, hard and narrow with anger, flicked at the destruction in front of her.

'Your handiwork?'

She cleared her throat. 'No. Harry's.'

'Potter. How predictable.' Snape's voice was a low growl.

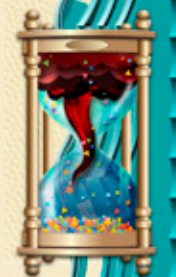
She raised her chin. 'Let's just cut through the arguments, Severus. The only way you'll stop me from trying to help them is to stun or kill me—if you can. Otherwise, let me go.' She closed her eyes a moment. 'This is the only thing left for me now.'

Snape straightened up and took a step toward her, and she tensed. Behind him, the door leading out to the dungeon corridor closed.

'What about the Carborundorum remedy?' he said.

'I have to get to Hermione first. If I don't know what's going to happen to her, I won't be able to... focus.' She took a deep breath. 'But I prepared my wand as best I could, just in case. There was clean water in my washbasin.' She gave a quick, ironic smile.

Snape slowly lowered his wand and moved closer to her. 'I'm coming with you,' he said flatly. 'You need my help.'





She sighed. 'I didn't want to put you at risk. This is my mission, not yours.'

'You can't do this alone. Do you want to waste your energy trying to stop me?'

'Severus, you've been through enough already.'

'And so have you. But to use your own words—let's cut through the arguments.' He took the little jar out of his waistcoat pocket and proffered it to her.

She frowned in curiosity. 'What is it?'

'Miss Granger's NEWT project.' He quirked a smile, his first in hours. 'It's time to give it a proper field-test.'



Ginny hurt all over. She was lying on a cold, hard surface. She didn't want to open her eyes, for something told her that if she did, she might start screaming and never stop.

'I believe they're awake, my Lord.' It was Lucius Malfoy, and at the sound of his voice, Ginny felt despair filling her like smoke.

'Make them sit up, then.' If Lucius' voice filled Ginny with despair, this one froze her soul. A light, pleasant, careless voice—a voice she'd heard years ago during her dark nightmare in the Chamber of Secrets. She felt herself being levitated and pushed into a sitting position against a cold stone surface. *I won't look, I won't look*, she told herself.

Then she felt the touch of cold fingers on her jaw. She wrenched her chin away with a faint shriek. That was all she could move—only her head. Inches away from her, the light, careless voice laughed.



'I found you and your little troubles so boring when you were eleven. But I tried to be kind and sympathetic. I tried to be your friend.' The voice hardened, and she felt her head throb sharply, as if the voice had fangs that could sink into her brain. 'Look at me, Ginevra!'

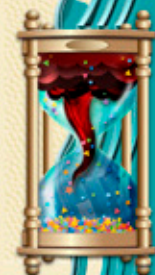
She opened her eyes and found herself staring into the pale, handsome face of Tom Marvolo Riddle. He was crouching before her. Bizarrely, he wore Hogwarts school robes.

'And now... you've grown up,' Tom Riddle whispered. He smiled hungrily, and pain lanced through her eyeballs. She moaned.

'Leave her alone!' Trying to struggle against his Incarcerous bonds, his hair wild and glasses askew, Harry somehow looked more dangerous than Ginny had ever seen him. 'Your fight's with me, not with my friends.'

'Harry,' Ron whispered beside him. On Harry's other side, Hermione raised her head and glared at their captor. A respectful distance away from Tom Riddle stood Lucius and Draco Malfoy. Seeing how pale and disordered Draco looked gave Ginny a tiny moment of pleasure in the midst of her pain.

Tom Riddle's lithe young body straightened up and took a step toward Harry. 'You're hardly in much of a position to fight, are you? Or do you think I'll release you so we can have a proper, honourable duel? The fact is—*neither can live while the other survives*. So there will be no duel. No long discussion filled with angst. No negotiating. No last words.' He looked at Harry, no longer smiling, and his dark eyes took on a reddish glow. 'It's time to end this. And





then I'll be able to get on with my work.'

The thing that had once been Tom Riddle raised its wand.



Hawking breached Hogwarts' outermost wards without—she said—leaving any sign of her tampering ('They're stalwart, but a bit out-of-date.'). From that point on, she and Snape counted on heightened vigilance, minimal light, and as much speed as possible rather than expending her magical energy on Disillusionment. After what seemed like hours, they found an open doorway and stopped, casting their light into the gutted Crypt of the Eleven. Neither could think of anything to say, and after a minute or so, they continued their journey into the darkness.

They had gone perhaps a few dozen yards past the crypt when Hawking gasped, stopping so abruptly that Snape all but collided with her. In front of them appeared two eyes—pale, greenish, lamp-like. Hawking passed her wand in a quick arc over their heads. 'Protego.' Beside her, Snape tensed as the eyes came toward them with frightening speed. Then a cat bounded out of the darkness. As they stared, it gave a long low yowl and paced back and forth in front of them two or three times.

'It looks like Mrs Norris,' said Snape. As he raised his wand, the cat sat up on its haunches, spitting. Then without warning, its shape just—bulged up and out. Then, as Snape and Hawking boggled, a thin, scraggy old man with a long grey beard pushed

things which enclose



himself to his feet.

'No more bloody Petrifying or fireballs tonight, thank you very much,' he said, glaring at them.

Snape tried to speak. No sound came out. He cleared his throat and tried again. 'Aberforth. You—how did you—?'

'I'm an Animorphmagus,' said Aberforth, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. 'Thought I should tell you that if you go on the way I've just come, you'll run into four young fools and their prisoner on their way back to Hogwarts.'

'You mean—Hermione—they're all right?' Hawking's voice trembled with relief. She looked up at Snape and saw him close his eyes for just a moment.

'Last I saw 'em. Shouldn't be far behind me. But I'm overdue for my next report, so I'll be on my way.'

'Wait!' Snape called, but even as he spoke, the old man's body seemed to collapse in on itself. A few seconds later, "Mrs Norris" looked at them steadily and meowed. Then the Animorphmagus sprang past them and vanished into the darkness the way they'd come.

Snape and Hawking looked at each other.

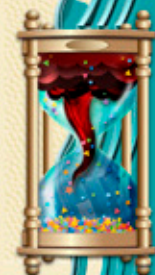
'Well,' said Snape, 'that explains his absence from the Hog's Head. I imagine he's been reporting to Dumbledore since at least September. I hope,' he added sarcastically, 'he's a better spy than he is a barman.'

'Come on!' Hawking raised her wand and moved forward with renewed energy into the dark.



No, Ginny thought, as the Dark Lord raised his wand and

things which enclose





Harry glared at him defiantly. *No. This can't be happening.*

Then from the mausoleum entrance came a commotion—the sound of footsteps and something sliding. The two Malfoys whirled, Lucius extending his wand, and Tom Riddle paused, the handsome face twisting in a frown. Two hooded Death Eaters came in from the driving rain, half-dragging and half-supporting a third hooded figure slumped between them. A moment later, the immobile body of Argus Filch—horizontal and soaking wet—floated in through the doorway, followed by another hooded Death Eater, who was guiding it with his wand.

'They were in the graveyard, my Lord,' said the third Death Eater, his voice muffled and subdued, as Voldemort turned around to face them. The Death Eater floated the body of Filch down to the floor, and the flickering torchlight fell on Filch's face. It was horribly burnt, most of the skin an oozing, blackened mass. Draco winced, but after a slight hesitation, Lucius Malfoy went over and bent down to examine the injured man.

Through eyes narrowed with pain, Ginny saw that her brother had the slightly sick look of a man who had used a weapon without quite knowing how powerful it was. But Harry looked impassive.

'Is he dead?' asked Tom Riddle, his pleasant voice neutral.

Still crouching beside Filch, Malfoy looked up at his lord. 'Not quite.'

'And Bella? I see you're on your feet.' The Dark Lord directed this to the hooded figure still being supported by two colleagues. Slowly the figure raised



its head, and as the hood fell back, Ginny bit back a horrified gasp. Though ravaged by imprisonment in Azkaban, the face of Bellatrix Lestrange had still borne some signs of compelling beauty. Now the skin was grey, withered, scored with cracks like drought-ravaged soil, and the eyes were sunk deep into their sockets. Her thick black hair had fallen out; only a few whitish tufts remained in the wrinkled scalp.

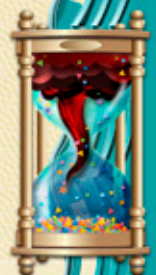
'God,' said Lucius Malfoy softly, rising to his feet. Ron swallowed hard, and Hermione closed her eyes. Draco, looking ill, averted his gaze.

Only Harry looked Bellatrix in the eye, his expression pitiless. Bellatrix's sunken eyes blazed back. Her black lips writhed away from yellowed teeth, and she took a whistling breath.

'I'm well enough to kill, my Lord.' She held up her left hand. It was whole and strong, untouched by the withering blast of the Bleyke Curse. She pointed at Harry. 'Let me kill *him*.'

'He's not for you.' Tom Riddle drew a wand out from under his robes. 'It's slightly scorched, but should still be usable. Don't lose it again.' He tossed it to Bellatrix, who managed to catch it clumsily in her good left hand. 'Now go and guard the exit to the passageway. Do *not* help her,' this to the Death Eater still supporting her, and the hooded wizard quickly sprang back. Then as they all watched, Bellatrix moved, each step a little stronger than the last, away to the back of the mausoleum.

'Avery, Bulstrode, Nott,' said the Riddle-thing. 'Go and join the others outside Hogwarts. Then wait there for the gates to fall.'





The gates...? Ginny shot a horrified look at Harry as the three Death Eaters shuffled one by one back out into the rainy night. Harry clenched his fists and once again struggled against his Incarcerous bonds.

'Oh, don't trouble yourself, Harry. There's nothing you can do,' said Tom Riddle. He took a few contemplative steps toward the supine figure of the Hogwarts caretaker and looked down at the damaged man in silence for a few moments. 'A burnt Squib. How ironic. Will he survive this, Lucius?'

'No, my Lord.' Malfoy's tone was neutral.

'Yet he served me, in his own way. If he should wake up, he'll be in terrible pain.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

'We can't have that.' The Dark Lord raised his wand, and Malfoy stepped back quickly. '*Carborundorum!*' The blood-dark bolt of fire engulfed Filch with shocking speed, licking at him with an almost sentient hunger. Within a minute, nothing was left of the last of the Argus line but a small pile of white powder.

Ginny saw the looks of horror that passed among her three friends. She herself felt curiously numb—all except for the pain in her head, throbbing with each heartbeat.

'So he serves me one more time—by helping to demonstrate the manner of your death, Harry,' said the Riddle-thing, turning back to the four young people. 'Like the Killing Curse, it has no remedy. But unlike the Killing Curse, it has no defence. Nothing—absolutely nothing—can stand against it.'

Harry stared back at him, his face white and expressionless, and then opened his mouth.



'I know you said no last words. No negotiations,' he said in a low, strained voice. 'But what if I told you we know all about Death-by-Fire? That your weapon is no surprise to us?'

'Of course Dumbledore and his pathetic Order know. Severus Snape—' he hissed the name with contempt '—would have told them. It doesn't matter. It won't help you. Now it's time to have done with this.' He began to raise his wand.

'If you kill me now and then try to attack Hogwarts, you'll die,' said Harry rapidly.

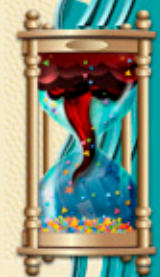
The wand stopped, and the tall, pale young man frowned. 'You're lying. You're hoping to buy time.'

Harry's voice seemed almost taunting. 'If I know something, can you take a chance on killing me without ever finding out?'

The Riddle-thing shook its head. 'I simply can't believe you're willing to betray Hogwarts just to save you and your friends. You're far too *honourable*—' he spat the word out '—for that.'

'Not Hogwarts. Dumbledore,' said Harry viciously. 'The old man's useless. He's kept too much from me, and I'm bloody tired of it.' Harry kept his eyes steadily on the Dark Lord. 'You said "no negotiations." Are you sure?'

Hermione and Ron turned their heads sharply to Harry, their eyes wide. Ginny swallowed hard. *He doesn't mean that. Of course he doesn't mean that.* But then she remembered how Harry had not wanted to tell Dumbledore about her encounter with Draco and Filch in the greenhouses. She recalled all the signs of an anger still smouldering—an anger she'd





never quite understood—and she felt sick.

But Tom Riddle was lowering his wand. ‘Your mind is exceptionally well trained, Harry. I’m not sure I can trust what I might see, even if you let me look.’ His eyes flicked from Harry to Ron. ‘But you are, of course, not the only member of the Order of the Phoenix within shouting distance. How well trained are you, Mr Weasley?’ Ron went, if possible, even paler than he’d been before, but he held the Dark Lord’s gaze with defiance. The Riddle-thing smiled. ‘Not well, I see. I may test that shortly.’

His gaze settled on Hermione, and he gave a cold smile. ‘What about you, Miss Granger? Have you ever been trained in Occlumency?’



‘It’s an hour past midnight,’ the hourglass on Dumbledore’s desk announced. ‘Way past an old man’s bedtime.’

‘Yes, quite,’ said Dumbledore absently, frowning at his intricate, golden network of wards. ‘Aberforth, I don’t doubt your report, but there’s been no sign of them.’

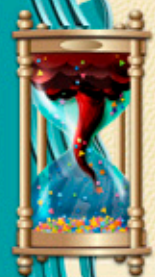
‘Could they have gotten back in without you knowing?’ Aberforth shifted from one foot to the other in front of the headmaster’s desk.

‘Only one person could possibly breach the outer wards without detection—and it’s not Harry Potter.’

‘They were free and clear when last I saw ‘em. And then there’s that whelp Severus Snape and the witch he was with, both heading down the passageway at a fair clip. Should’ve run into the kids by now.’

Dumbledore whirled to face his brother. ‘*What? When?*’

‘Er—right. I was just going to tell you about that.’



At the expression on Dumbledore’s face, Aberforth took a step back. ‘There’d be six largish people in a narrow little passage, towing that nasty young Malfoy—and a bit of a long way for human feet—so I suppose they could still all be on their way back.’

‘No,’ Dumbledore snapped. ‘I mean—what in the name of all chaos are Severus and Gwen doing down there? When they should have been—when they should be...’

‘I thought you must’ve sent ‘em,’ said Aberforth, dismayed.

Dumbledore let out a sharp hiss of breath. ‘Come with me, Aberforth. *Now.*’

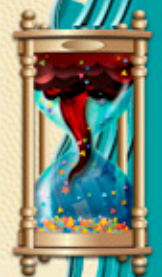
A moment later, the two old wizards stepped out of the fireplace in Snape’s office and immediately discovered the spell sealing the door to the lab. Grim-faced, Dumbledore set about dismantling it, a task that took at least two minutes, whilst Aberforth again shifted from one foot to the other, confused but knowing better than to interrupt.

When the door finally opened, Dumbledore stood very still, taking in the empty lab and then the bits of broken glass scattered around the large cauldron on the long table. Aberforth stayed back as Dumbledore approached the cauldron, looked at its contents, and then, with great care, picked up a splinter of broken glass and inspected it.

‘Blood.’

When he put the splinter back down and turned to look at his brother, his face was white and drawn.

‘I gambled, Aberforth. I gambled. And I’ve lost.’



CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

an intense fragility

WHERE ARE THEY? We should have found them by now.' Hawking wanted to scream but forced her voice down to a murmur. 'Something's wrong.'

In the dimness of the light cast by their wands, Snape's face looked almost death-like. 'It would have been far too lucky an escape. I suspect...' His voice trailed off.

'That Voldemort's found them.'

'Ssst!' Snape grabbed her arm, pulling her to a stop, and doused his light. After a second, so did she. They stood in the darkness, listening, eyes straining.

Snape whispered, 'Ahead of us. I think we're at the end of the passage.'

It looked to Hawking like only a less-dim patch, but as they crept forward, the patch grew lighter. Soon they could see, yards ahead, what looked like a narrow opening into a larger space where torchlight guttered. Just beyond the opening, a shadow moved fitfully back and forth, as if someone were patrolling the passage-end.

Hawking and Snape exchanged a bleak glance. Then Hawking murmured '*Zotheca*'—the sound-deadening

an intense fragility

charm she'd used to prevent Poppy Pomfrey from overhearing them in the hospital wing, when they'd... he squelched that memory.

'This doesn't look good, does it?' she said.

'I suspect it's going to look even worse in a minute.'

'Very uplifting, Severus.'

He gave a soft snort, and then narrowed his eyes as she stepped a bit away from him and turned in a slow circle.

'What are you doing?'

'Looking for evidence.' She lifted her wand. '*In absentia—Prior Incantato.*' Mist emerged from Hawking's wand-tip, and Snape raised his eyebrows as it swirled, trying to resolve. 'Who—?' he began, and then the ghostly image of a great rearing, serpent-like shape materialised. Green fire silently exploded, dazzling Snape's vision. He shook his head to clear it as Hawking muttered, '*Finite Incantatem.*'

When he could see Hawking's face again, she looked almost ill. 'You were right,' she whispered. 'And that wasn't even his deadliest weapon. Oh bloody, bloody hell.'

He looked at her steadily. 'Gwen, if you can't rely on your Carborundorum remedy, then when we go in there, we're probably committing suicide. Do you understand that?'

'I may be. You're not. Severus, you must go back. Go and get Dumbledore. If I can't make the remedy work, *he* may be able to.' Her eyes blazed into his. 'At least it might give us a better chance!'

He stared at her incredulously. 'We've been

an intense fragility



through this—you are *not* going in there alone.’

Her expression went thunderous. ‘Severus.’ She seemed to grow, gathering power, and Snape recognised instantly what she was doing. She’d last bludgeoned him with her will the evening Voldemort had infected him with the worm that had tried to devour his mind. Acting on instinct, he slapped her across the face hard enough to make her stagger and break her focus, then instantly grasped her shoulders so she wouldn’t fall. ‘Listen to me carefully. *Listen!* We must do this together, or not at all.’

She stared at him, dazed and furious.

‘Using your energy to try and force me to go back is futile and foolish. Gwen, will you listen to me?’

After a moment she nodded, white-lipped, and he took a deep breath.

‘Albus has been weighing risks for quite some time. He will do anything to preserve Hogwarts. That means Potter must face Voldemort, in Albus’ view. It’s possible—’ he hesitated a beat ‘—that Albus is willing to sacrifice other lives if he must. Even students’ lives, if that will ultimately keep Hogwarts and the wizarding world safe.’

Hawking looked dumfounded.

‘I don’t believe that,’ she whispered.

He said nothing, but he could tell as her expression shifted from horrified to grim that such a possibility might make strategic sense. Whilst she might not want to believe it, she had to entertain it.

After a moment, he gestured brusquely to the passage opening. ‘If you’re determined to do this,



then we go together.’ He offered her an ironic smile. ‘Unless you’d like to keep arguing the point.’

Hawking bared her teeth back at him.

‘Next time you want to rescue me from my foolishness and futility,’ she said, her tone matching his expression, ‘try a Stunning spell. A slap is so inelegant.’

He inclined his head.

‘First,’ she said, looking ahead at the faint patch of torchlight and the shadow pacing back and forth, ‘we’ll put that patroller out of action. After that—anything goes. Whatever works. The more unexpected, the better.’



‘This isn’t good,’ Sprout muttered. ‘This isn’t good at all.’

‘Hssht,’ said Flitwick, frowning up at her. ‘You’ll alarm the other staff.’

Sprout looked at the expressions on her senior colleagues’ faces.

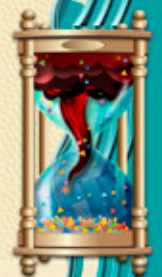
‘They look quite alarmed already, Filius.’

‘Then don’t make it any worse, Pomona.’

Sprout snorted. She, they, and a handful of Aurors were milling around inside the Potions classroom, where only a few minutes ago, the Aurors—after awakening all senior staff—had tersely directed them to gather.

‘If things are so bad that they have to wake us up and bring us down here in the middle of the night,’ said Vector, frowning, her arms folded across her chest, ‘then why aren’t there more Aurors?’

Professor Trelawney joined them. ‘There’s an Auror stationed outside each common room—so I





understand. I foresaw this, you know!’ She clasped her hands together as if pleading. Magnified by her enormous glasses, her eyes looked terrified.

Sprout placed a soothing hand on Trelawney’s arm. ‘We know, dear.’

‘The Aurors are just a precaution,’ said Flitwick.

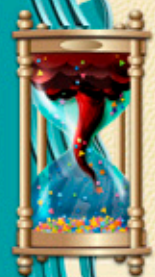
Vector shot him an impatient glance. ‘Really?’ she said.

‘Quiet, please. *Quiet!*’ Shackbolt raised his hands and his deep voice. ‘Professor Dumbledore will be here shortly.’

Quiet reigned for a moment, then gradually the murmuring resumed. As Shackbolt opened his mouth to issue another call for silence, the door leading from the Potions classroom to Snape’s office opened, and one by one Moody, Lupin, Tonks, Bill Weasley, and McGonagall filed out. All looked grim. Then a few seconds later, Dumbledore appeared, looking as calm and matter-of-fact as if he were about to stand up in the Great Hall after dinner and say ‘a few words.’ At the sight of his face, Trelawney’s hands unclenched, and several of his senior staff let out relieved sighs.

No one noticed the cat that slunk, hugging shadows, out of the office and into a dark corner of the classroom.

‘My friends,’ said Dumbledore. ‘As you know, we’ve long been expecting and preparing for a possible hostile move against Hogwarts. I’ve received reliable information that we must be prepared to defend ourselves tonight.’ He paused as a murmur swept through the small crowd. ‘The Heads of House have already awoken the prefects, and they’re bringing the students down to the Great Hall, which will



then be sealed with defensive wards. Minerva will be in charge there, so could all senior staff—except you, Remus—please report to her. Tonks—’ he nodded to her, ‘—will help Poppy secure the hospital wing. Other Aurors, please report to Mr. Moody.’

‘Headmaster,’ said Vector loudly, above the murmurs, ‘Are you saying we’re going to be attacked?’

‘It’s very likely, yes,’ said Dumbledore. Beside Sprout, Trelawney moaned with fear. ‘My friends,’ he continued, almost gently, ‘inside our gates are the most powerful witches and wizards who have ever lived. I know all of you will do your jobs and protect your students.’

The next few minutes saw a kind of organized bedlam: the senior faculty converged on McGonagall, and Dumbledore huddled with the Aurors, who peeled away in various directions after an order from Moody. The headmaster then had a quiet word with Moody and Lupin, who each nodded and left the classroom in the wake of the senior staff and Aurors.

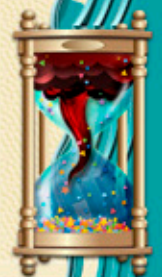
Finally, except for a cat lurking unseen in the shadows, Dumbledore and McGonagall were alone in the Potions classroom. They looked at each other.

‘You’re going down the fifth passageway.’ McGonagall’s voice had that flat edge of someone trying to accept the inevitable.

‘Not alone.’

‘What chance do you possibly have against Voldemort now?’

‘Again, I won’t be alone.’ He came to her and took both her hands. ‘I believe Harry, Hermione, and the others are still alive—especially if Severus and





Gwen are with them. They are all extraordinarily powerful in their own right, Minerva—and acting together, we might prevail.’

‘Didn’t you just give a version of that speech to your colleagues and the Aurors?’ she said bitterly. ‘Albus, you rested everything—*everything*—on Gwen Hawking and the Carborundorum weapon.’

‘So I’d convinced myself,’ said Dumbledore slowly. ‘I thought having that weapon and its remedy would mean an overwhelming victory for us: Voldemort destroyed; his followers disbanded; and Hogwarts safe and free. But Minerva—’ and suddenly his tired eyes lit up ‘—everything happens for a reason. The ruination of the weapon is a terrible accident, perhaps a fatal blow. But isn’t it possible that if we’d had this weapon, something even more tragic might have occurred? Could we—out of the best, noblest intentions—have spawned a new kind of terror in the wizarding world? Perhaps we’re better off without Carborundorum. Perhaps we were never meant to have it.’

‘It would have kept you and the students alive tonight,’ McGonagall said quietly, and behind the square glasses her eyes filled with tears.

‘You mustn’t lose hope.’ His hands tightened on hers. As she shook her head, her tears beginning to fall, Dumbledore raised her right hand to his face, palm up, and kissed it. ‘Promise me you will not lose hope.’ Then he let go of her hands and left the room, his robes swirling. A moment later, McGonagall saw a cat creep out of the corner and follow him.

‘Do what you can for him, Aberforth,’ she whis-

an intense fragility



pered. Slowly, as if cupping something fragile, she closed the fingers of her right hand.

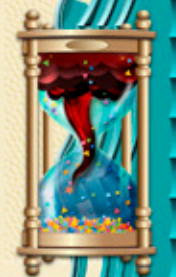


Snape and Hawking never clearly saw who was patrolling the entrance to the passageway. After re-invoking their Disillusionment charms, they’d crept as close to the hooded, pacing figure as they’d dared. But when Hawking had tried to invoke a powerful stunning spell that in her future was used to penetrate Death Eaters’ defences, she’d frowned and shaken her head, and Snape had understood that she couldn’t spare the energy. So he’d used a conventional Stunner, aware that it wouldn’t last more than a few minutes. Still, the figure had slumped to the ground, and Snape had been able to summon the patroller’s wand with no difficulty. Tucking it into the belt beneath his waistcoat, he noticed the wood looked scorched, and frowned, not liking what that might presage.

Then he and Hawking slipped like shadows past the catacombs, slowing as a high, cold voice echoed down toward them. They edged toward it. A young, angry voice replied, and Snape thought—*so Potter is still alive*. With great care, keeping track of each other’s movements by watching ripples of light and dark, Snape and Hawking emerged into the main mausoleum chamber.

Snape took in the scene instantly. A few feet away stood Lucius Malfoy, and his son guarded the doorway leading out to the graveyard. Between the elder Malfoy and Voldemort was a small pile of whitish powder, stirring in the fits of cold wind coming in

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through the doorway. Snape felt a cold, sick dread as he looked at it. Who had been—? And then he saw not only Potter, but the two Weasleys and, yes, Miss Granger, all alive and tightly bound, sitting up against the side of one of the great stone coffins. He breathed again, and finally forced himself to look at the tall, thin figure in black Hogwarts robes facing the four, its back turned to Snape and Hawking.

‘What about you, Miss Granger?’ Voldemort’s voice now sounded almost silky. ‘Have *you* ever been trained in Occlumency?’

Hermione raised her head.

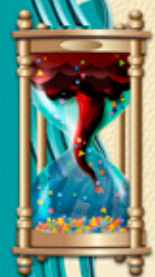
‘Try me,’ she said, looking directly at Voldemort.

No! Snape thought desperately. *Don’t look at him, you stupid girl!* Only Potter had had any Occlumency training to speak of. Voldemort would cut through her mind like a hot knife through butter.

A long and horrible moment passed as Voldemort held Hermione’s gaze. She began to tremble, and sweat broke out on her forehead.

‘Stop it!’ Ron cried. Lucius Malfoy turned toward him, raising his wand. Snape felt Hawking’s hand clutching his arm. Her message couldn’t have been clearer: *We have to do something.*

Then Voldemort made a sound somewhere between a hiss and a chuckle. ‘Aaahh. It seems your visitor made more progress on Death-by-Fire than I’d expected. I knew Snape was lying about that. But it doesn’t matter now. My refinement is so much more efficient. And you know nothing about a remedy, do you? No. Of course not. But... wait...’ His voice



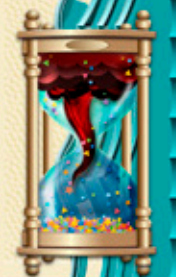
trailed off. A moment later, Hermione moaned.

Snape found Hawking’s arm and squeezed it: *Be ready.* ‘Alive?’ Voldemort’s head reared back, and Snape caught a glimpse of Tom Riddle’s pale, handsome features, now distorted by rage. ‘Snape’s alive? How is that possible? How?’ Voldemort reached down and hauled Hermione to her feet. She was able to stand, though her bonds kept her rigid, helpless to do anything but turn her head slightly and close her eyes as he screamed into her face. ‘You’re protecting him, aren’t you? No—more than that. You’d give your life for him. But you’re a student. The students hate him! *Why would you die for him?*’ He shook her so violently that her head snapped back. With a hiss, he grasped her jaw roughly and stared into her eyes again. Hermione glared back, her face tight with hate and fear.

‘You love him.’ Voldemort’s voice was so low Snape could barely hear him. ‘Well, well, well... you little Mudblood whore. You think *love* will make everything right, don’t you?’ With a sound of disgust, he pushed the young woman away from him, hard.

As Hermione’s immobile body crashed into the coffin, Snape felt Hawking’s body jerk, her hand slipping from his arm, and he heard her grunt as if she were the one being hurled against the stone. As Hermione fell, Snape reached for Hawking, knowing she too was falling. But his fingers grasped air. Feeling as if he were moving underwater, he arced his wand over himself and where he devoutly hoped Hawking had slumped to the floor. ‘*Protego,*’ he whispered.

Then he looked at Lucius Malfoy and felt no sur-





prise to see that the Death Eater was moving in Snape's direction, questing like a bloodhound. He raised his wand with unholy eagerness.

There was no time to think. Snape heard himself shouting '*Expelliarmus!*' and the wand leapt out of Malfoy's hand, hurtling over Draco's head and out into the graveyard. Malfoy let out a scream of outrage, and both Voldemort and Draco whirled toward him.

'Snape!' Malfoy's shaking finger pointed toward a faint, moving shadow several yards away, and Draco paled. Voldemort's lips peeled away from his teeth, his wand arced up and aimed at the shadow, and he drew a deep, gleeful breath. As went Filch, so would his former trusted spy.

'CARBOR—'

'*Avada Kedavra!*' A bolt of sizzling green fire smashed against Voldemort's shields, almost throwing the Dark Lord off his feet. He growled in fury and confusion. He was protected as no one else could be against the Killing Curse; it should have bounced off him. What had just happened? He turned, shaking his head, to see Harry Potter. His nemesis had surged to his feet, somehow breaking his bonds, and his right hand was held high, palm out. He looked at Voldemort, his glasses askew, black hair on end, green eyes like fire.

'*Avada Kedavra, you bastard!*' Another green bolt sizzled from the hand of Harry Potter and once again, Voldemort staggered, brought almost to his knees by the fury of the blow against him.

And the boy was wandless. *Wandless.*

Lucius Malfoy stepped back and away from his

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master's flaring shields, then turned toward his son, who was standing as if frozen, his wand half-raised and his mouth open. Malfoy pointed toward the darkness where he's just seen Snape's shadow. 'Get him!' he screamed. 'He's a traitor!'

'H—how? How?' Draco cried, taking a couple of steps forward. 'I can't see him!'

'Just Stun everything!' Malfoy whirled away from his son and began to circle back toward Harry.

Draco heard a faint noise behind him. He turned, and found himself nose to nose with a rock-steady wand held by his Head of House. No longer invisible, Snape was standing less than four feet away, and his face was without expression. They stared at each other for a second.

'I'm sorry, Draco,' Snape said softly. '*Stupify.*'

As he cushioned Draco's fall, Snape took the young man's wand and slipped it through his belt. Then, bracing himself, he turned and aimed his own wand at Voldemort, whose shield was still roiling with the force of Harry's attack. Suddenly Lucius Malfoy burst out from the shadows and, coming up behind Harry, clamped his hands around the young wizard's neck. Harry's hands came up instinctively, and as the green fire died, Voldemort slowly straightened.

Oh, fucking hell! Snape heard voices yelling (the Weasleys? he saw Miss Granger was still sprawled on the ground) and inched closer, desperately trying to get a clear shot at Malfoy. There was nothing for it—he'd have to Stun both of them to save Potter's miserable life, and then try to capture Voldemort's attention.

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He raised his wand.

'Lucius, you fool!' he heard Voldemort scream as Harry clawed at Malfoy's hands. 'Get away from him!' 'Crucio!' cried a harsh female voice behind Snape.



'Thank you, but that's impossible,' said Dumbledore. 'I must go alone.'

'You'll be killed!'

Dumbledore, apparently unperturbed by Moody's outburst, raised his eyebrows. 'I need you and Remus to act as the first line of defence here in the dungeons. If Voldemort prevails, he'll come in through here—' He gestured at the gaping entrance to the fifth passageway. 'Though you can't match his firepower, you may be able to best him in ingenuity. You can at least make the dungeons very difficult for him to navigate.'

'And these wards?' Lupin asked, nodding at the dark gap.

'Once I've gone through, I'll seal this entrance with an Entombment Charm.'

'That won't stop Riddle,' said Moody.

'No, but it will slow him down, and that could buy precious time. But before that—' Dumbledore's mouth quirked '—I'll do my best to keep him occupied.' As he turned toward the passageway, Moody caught his arm.

'Are you sacrificing yourself out of guilt, Albus? Because you staked your students' lives on a new weapon and lost?'

Without flinching, Dumbledore met the angry gaze of his staunch old friend and critic. After a

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moment, he shook his head.

'I'm too ancient to be a much of a sacrifice.' The ghost of a twinkle lit his faded eyes. 'I assure you—whatever happens, I'm not acting out of guilt.'

'Then what?' said Lupin softly.

But Dumbledore turned away. As he entered the passage, the Animorphmagus dashed between Lupin's legs and dove into the darkness after his brother. A moment later, the entranceway flared with milky light, and Moody and Lupin shielded their eyes.

'Aberforth's useless now. His cover's blown,' said Moody as he and Lupin emerged from the old potions room into the dim corridor, the secret door closing behind them.

'That's not why he's following Albus,' said Lupin quietly.

'No,' said Moody with a sigh. 'I suppose not.'



The force of the Unforgivable, like a vicious kick in the small of the back, made Snape stagger. By some miracle, he didn't fall. But—thank Merlin and Miss Granger and her tears, *there was no pain*. Just a peculiar, slightly unpleasant buzzing over his skin. He turned. The hooded patroller from the passage entrance was advancing on him, one wandless hand pointed straight at him. 'Crucio!' the figure cried again, and the Curse danced over his skin.

Though the patroller's voice was harsh and cracked, Snape recognised it.

'It won't work, Bella,' he said. '*Petrificus Totalis*.' He

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caught a glimpse of her white-rimmed, astonished eyes beneath the hood just before his spell hit her. As her rigid body fell to the floor, her hood flopped back, and the shock of her face made Snape freeze for a moment. Then he dove away from her and rolled behind the nearest coffin.

'Gwen!' he called in a strangled whisper. No answer. Raising himself just enough to see over the coffin, Snape saw their adversary steady himself—though the perfect, handsome Tom Riddle features were beginning to crumble—and level his wand at the struggling figures of Lucius Malfoy and Harry Potter. '*Abscindo!*' Voldemort commanded, and the two flew apart so violently that each was thrown to the ground—Harry near Ginny, Malfoy almost on top of Hermione. Voldemort immediately trained his wand on Harry. '*Incarcerous Intortus.*' Thick ropes lashed themselves around Harry, tangling themselves in double- and triple-knots as he lay helpless, chest heaving and eyes blazing with rage. Several feet away, Malfoy slowly rose to one knee, not quite looking at Voldemort.

'I don't know how you broke free of your bonds just now, Harry,' said Voldemort, and it sounded to Snape as though he were a bit breathless. 'An impressive accident. But you must have realized the Unforgivables can't touch me. Stand up, Lucius,' he added impatiently.

'My lord, I—' Malfoy began, as he got to his feet.

'Later. For now, retrieve your wand and serve me properly, using magic—if you want to live past the next five minutes.'



Swallowing, Malfoy extended his hand. '*Accio wand,*' and Snape stood, his mouth opening to cast a spell that would blast the Death Eater's wand to pieces. He imagined it would be the last thing he would ever do.

'*Traho wand!*' It was Hawking's voice. A thin blue line leapt from behind a nearby coffin and fastened itself to Malfoy's wand. As Malfoy's jaw dropped, Voldemort whirled, his eyes glowing scarlet and his face now as white and crumbling as that of a drowned corpse. As he raised his wand to stop Hawking, Snape cried out, '*Bleyke!*' and every moment of fear and hatred toward the thing he had once considered his master seemed to explode from him.

A Blasting Curse of that magnitude should have felled a giant, but—as Snape had half-expected—it only rocked Voldemort. Still, it was enough. The Dark Lord lost his focus just long enough to let Hawking reel Malfoy's wand toward her.

'*Accio wand!*' Malfoy shouted again, but Hawking, now visible, rose slowly to her feet. She now held two wands—one pointing at Malfoy, the other at Voldemort.

No one moved.

'I'm quite sure,' Hawking said, looking calmly at Voldemort, 'that the wand of your most trusted Death Eater is ready to wield Death-by-Fire. That wand is pointed at you. Are you certain you can defend yourself?'

'Severus,' said Voldemort, looking past Hawking, but carefully holding his wand low. 'You might as well end the Disillusionment and show yourself.' A few seconds passed, and then Snape appeared, his eyes glittering. Very slowly, keeping his wand aimed





at Voldemort, he moved to stand beside Hawking.

The Dark Lord gave a ghastly smile. 'Ah—how touching. Did she somehow manage to save your life, Severus? Is that why you're still alive? I knew there was a chance you'd fight the compulsion I planted within you. But—' and now he frowned '—your soul should have imploded. There should have been nothing but fragments of you left.'

Snape said nothing, and the Dark Lord gave a low laugh.

'A moot point, at any rate. Here's a more relevant question, Severus: is *your* wand able to deliver Death-by-Fire? Is yours, Doctor Hawking?' He paused. 'I suspect not. It occurs to me, Severus, that if you and your lover here (rather used-up looking, isn't she—can't you do better than that?)—that if you'd actually succeeded, you'd have used my weapon against me by now instead of wasting time with parlour tricks. But you failed, didn't you?' The crumbling lips spread apart again in a travesty of a smile. 'You failed.'

'And as for my ability to defend myself? Why not try an experiment, Doctor Hawking: use that stolen wand against me. See what happens.'

With startling swiftness, Hawking raised Malfoy's wand and cried '*Carborundorum!*' As a thin bolt of dark red flame licked forth and curled around Voldemort's shield, he stepped back as if startled, and Snape felt a moment's triumph at the flash of surprise passing over the hideous face. *Ah—he didn't quite expect that.*

And then the flame dissipated, and Voldemort's smile returned.



'What did you think of your experiment, Doctor?'

Hawking stared back, stone-faced, and at that moment Snape realised that Voldemort still had no idea who "Hawking" really was. He didn't know why that realisation seemed important, but he felt a peculiar satisfaction at the prospect of both of them dying without their enemy ever knowing the truth.

'The sad part of it for you is,' said Voldemort, 'that whilst your version of Death-By-Fire can kill only one at a time, mine can kill a dozen souls all at once. Did you know that, Doctor Hawking?' The face, now almost inhuman, tilted down toward the four young people at his feet. 'Did you know that, Harry? I don't think you did. So much for your "information." Well, it doesn't matter now.'

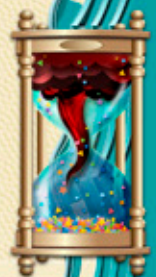
His gaze still fixed on Harry, the Dark Lord slowly raised his wand. Harry heaved against his tangled bonds. Still sprawled on the floor, Hermione groaned and moved her head. Ron and Ginny looked up at their enemy, their faces white and drawn.

'Wait!' Snape moved to Hawking's side. 'Three wands against you, Voldemort. How long do you think you could withstand *that*?'

'As long as it takes for Doctor Hawking's magic to be exhausted,' said Voldemort, his wand still trained on Harry. 'Which shouldn't be long. She's dying, of course. Aren't you, Doctor?'

'I wouldn't count on that. Not just yet,' said Hawking through clenched teeth.

'Try whatever spells you like,' said Voldemort almost airily. 'They won't work. Lucius, you might





want to step away from Miss Granger.' As Malfoy hastily obeyed, Voldemort raised his wand high.

Snape shot a desperate look at Hawking. 'Distract him!' she mouthed.

'*Carborundorum!*' Deep red flame reared up like a cobra from the tip of Voldemort's wand.

Somewhere in the depths of Snape's mind a voice of power echoed. '*Lumen Audentiae!*' he shouted. A jet of silver light shot from his wand and exploded into fragments against Voldemort's red fire. For a moment Voldemort's fire wavered and slowed, but then it grew large and hungry again, and quickly divided into four thick tentacles. With a horrid, almost intelligent deliberateness, each tentacle began to descend. Voldemort gave a splintering laugh of triumph.

So this was how Death-by-Fire could kill dozens at once.

Snape wished he could close his eyes.

'*Aegis Carborundorum adversum!*' Hawking cried out, her own wand aiming above Voldemort's head. From its tip leapt a thin stream of beautiful blue light that swiftly curled itself around the four tentacles of Carborundorum—holding them back from Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny—slowing them down... but not stopping them.

Voldemort half-turned, his wand still spewing blood-red fire. His lipless mouth opened in a snarl of fury and astonishment.

'Severus—touch your wand to mine!' Hawking gasped.

He looked at her, stunned.



'But—'

'DO IT!'

Without a second thought, he laid the tip of his wand against hers, and power jolted through him. Blue light streamed from both their wands, thickening as it reached out and stopped the Carborundorum fire from advancing.

'No!' Voldemort shrieked, and the four fiery tentacles writhed as if enraged.

'The remedy—it's working!' Snape felt as if he could barely speak.

'No. It's not—the remedy. Just—a shield. Aaahh, god!' Her wand hand began to tremble, and she whispered, 'But I can't hold it much longer!'

'What can I do?'

'You're already helping—but—it's not enough!'

Snape looked at her, horrified. Her face, lit eerily by the pure blue light, looked agonised; tendrils of hair stuck to her sweaty forehead.

'Harry!' Hawking suddenly shrieked. 'Ron! Ginny! Get Hermione and get away. *Now!*'

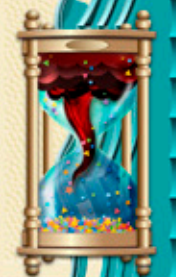
'We're trying!' Harry yelled, and he, Ron, and Ginny struggled, groaning.

'You did it before!' Snape shouted. '*Think, Potter!*'

'You can't do it, Harry. It was an accident. You don't have the power!' the thing that had once been Tom Riddle snarled.

'I can and I will, you fucking bastard, you filth!' Harry panted. Beside him, Ron squeezed his eyes shut as if concentrating every ounce of his being on freedom.

The tentacles of fire spewing from Voldemort's wand





seemed to darken and grow thicker, heaving against Hawking's blue shield like battering rams. Hawking groaned as if in pain, and Snape clenched his teeth, feeling his own wand-hand start to tremble with effort.

'You can, Harry—you will! You can, *you will!*' screamed Ginny, her eyes wild.

And suddenly, Harry's tangled Incarcerous ropes vanished like smoke. He rolled to his feet and leapt to Ginny, his entire being radiating fierce triumph.

'Good work, Potter,' Snape gasped, realising how absurd that sounded.

'NO! It's not possible!' Voldemort's voice fractured.

'Watch me!' Harry snarled, touching Ginny's bonds. They faded, and he pulled her to her feet. Then Harry went for her brother. The moment Ron was free, he and Harry raised Hermione. She staggered, dazed, but was able to stay on her feet with help. Keeping their heads low, the four began to move away from the advancing tentacles of Carborundorum and the thin blue line that was now showing signs of buckling.

'Run!' Hawking's voice was barely a whisper.

'Lucius!' screamed the Dark Lord, turning to keep his wand trained on the four. 'Stop them!' Malfoy threw a desperate look at his master but, keeping well back from the blood-red fire, circled behind Voldemort to intercept the young people. Harry and Ron pushed the young women behind him and faced Malfoy. Harry extended his right hand palm out.

Lucius' sculpted face twitched in a brief, mirthless smile.



'You'll have to do better than that, boy. *Stupify!*' and from his own upraised hand, red light jetted.

'*Protego Adamant,*' said Harry, his voice surprisingly quiet. The attack-spell bounced, and as red light sprayed back, Malfoy jumped away just in time to avoid being hit. His lips drew back from his teeth in fury.

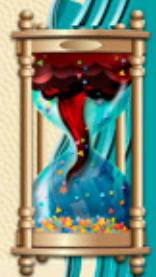
At that moment, the thin blue line of shielding separating the four young people from Death-by-Fire faded, flickered, and died. As Hawking slumped to her knees, Voldemort gave a triumphant howl, and Harry whirled to see the four tentacles of Carborundorum rear up, spread out, and dive toward their victims.

As Snape looked on in horror, Harry stood his ground, tilting his head up toward the hungry death descending toward him.

'*Aegis Carborundorum adversum!*' came a clear, ringing cry from the mausoleum doorway, and the blood-red fire exploded uselessly against a wall of blue-violet light forming in front of the four young people. As goutts of the deadly spell rebounded, Harry, looking stunned, raised both his hands. Voldemort staggered back two or three steps as if pushed, also raising his hands as if instinctively shielding himself against the deflected fire.

One small gout of flame splashed against Lucius Malfoy's right arm. He gasped and slapped at it. But the Carborundorum flame began, like a living, hungry thing, to crawl up his shoulder, and Malfoy let out a high, chilling scream.

'Harry! Don't move!' shouted the voice from the doorway. A black-clad figure, its close-fitting cap





and leather jacket dripping with rain, leapt lithely onto the stone coffin that separated Snape and Hawking from Voldemort. From the figure's upraised wand streamed a scintillating light, its colours pulsing from deepest violet to purest sky-blue. The light spread out the farther it travelled, finally widening and thickening into the shimmering wall that protected Harry and his friends.

'Snape. Hermione. Get yourselves behind the shield. *Now!*'

Snape boggled. *Hermione?*

'MOVE!' roared the black-clad man.

'Do what he says,' Hawking said faintly. Snape reached down and helped her to her feet, and they ran toward the shield. Then, whether by design or accident, a writhing, burning figure staggered into their path. As Snape, revolted, tried to side-step what was left of Malfoy, the burning thing collapsed. Raised by the wind generated by the shield-edge, white ash whirled high and blew into Snape's face just as he and Hawking broke through and past the shimmering light.

When they were well inside the shield, Snape released Hawking, made sure she could stand, and then turned away, shuddering.

Had he *inhaled* some of that ash?

Given more time, he might have been sick. But a high, grating shriek came from outside the shield, and then a fresh gout of Carborundorum exploded against it. Their faces glowed a ghastly purple before the flame died.

'Look!' Harry pointed, and Snape followed his gaze. Through the shield, they could see the mau-

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soleum, wavering as if through a sheen of water. Where the black-clad stranger had stood atop the coffin now shone a glorious silver-blue light with a dark centre, and Snape realised he was seeing their rescuer through his shield.

The tall, rearing shape of Voldemort let loose a blast of Carborundorum, which spread out and dissipated against the stranger's protection.

'It looks a bit like a Patronus.' Hermione, now steady on her feet but still clinging to Ginny, said in a wondering tone.

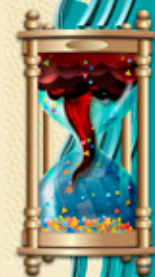
'Yes,' said Hawking quietly. 'It does.' Snape saw, with curiosity and concern, that tears trembled in her eyes.

The blurred shape of their rescuer jumped down from the coffin and angled toward them, his form becoming more distinct as he came closer. He was very careful to keep his wand steady, both to feed the wall of light and to protect himself against Voldemort's furious blasts. As he reached the shield wall, he arced his wand up over his head as if opening a curtain. As he stepped inside the shield to join them, his wand generated a thin, intense beam of electric blue light that spread out above and around them, like a wall of water rippling from floor to ceiling. Outside, just feet from them, raged the tall distorted shape of Voldemort.

'Now *that*,' said Hawking, her voice shaking, 'is a proper Aegis.'

'Only for the next few minutes.' The black-clad man kept his back to them as he faced the shield-wall, his wand held high, light still streaming from its tip. 'You know what we have to do next.' His voice sounded

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strangely familiar, as if Snape had heard it before.

‘Yes,’ said Hawking, and Snape turned to look at her sharply.

She knows this man.

Judging by the uneasy looks Miss Granger and the Weasleys exchanged with each other, they sensed something as well. Potter frowned darkly and took a step toward their rescuer.

‘Who are you?’

The black-clad man made a small movement as if he were about to turn around, but then stopped himself.

‘You’ll know soon enough, Harry,’ he said after a moment. ‘But I swear you can trust me. I’m an Auror and a friend.’ As another dark-red bolt of Carborundum exploded, the shield-wall flared. The stranger let out a huffing breath as if pushing against a heavy weight, and added, ‘In fact, I’ll be screaming for your help in another minute or two.’

‘You sound—You—’ Harry hesitated, and then he took a deep breath. ‘You sound like my father,’ he said, his voice low and intense, ‘but it can’t be.’ He moved closer to the strange Auror.

‘No,’ Ginny whispered, putting a hand out to stop Harry.

Hawking slipped past Harry and, blocking him, putting a hand gently on his shoulder.

‘Harry, this Auror’s a—a friend of mine. I’ve known him for most of my life. I trust him *more* than completely.’

For a few seconds, Harry’s eyes bored into hers as if unwilling to believe her. She looked steadily back. Then he dropped his gaze, and Hawking smiled and squeezed his shoulder.

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As she faced the strange Auror, she wore a tight, hard, expressionless look—like someone trying very hard not to break into tears.

‘Oh. Oh, my dear.’ Her voice shook, belying her rigid expression. ‘I thought—’

‘Whatever you thought, don’t tell me.’ He laid black-gloved fingers quickly against her lips, and she caught that hand in hers.

She knows him very well, thought Snape. Then he almost laughed: at this time of all times—facing a ravaging Dark Lord with their lives hanging in the balance—jealousy pricked him. How pathetically absurd.

‘But,’ Hawking’s voice broke for a moment, ‘you’re not supposed to *be* here.’

‘Actually, I *am*.’ The stranger gave a wry chuckle. ‘I’m just a poor brainless Auror, so I don’t understand it all, but believe me, Hermione—this is the way it’s supposed to be.’

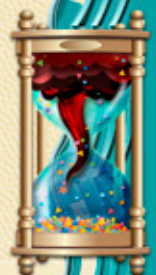
Hermione again. How the bloody hell did this man *know*? And then Snape felt as if he’d been hit by lightning.

This man had travelled back to them from “Gwen Hawking’s” bleak future.

And it was no coincidence that Harry Potter thought this man’s voice sounded like his father’s.



an intense fragility



CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

death and forever

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
compels me with the colour of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing
e.e. cummings

TATIONED JUST INSIDE the Great Hall, McGonagall received a final checklist of names from Blaise Zabini as the last group of students—sixth- and seventh-year Slytherins—poured past the huge double doors. Final tally: all students present and checked off... except four from Gryffindor and two from Slytherin. McGonagall nodded bleakly at Vector, Sprout, and Flitwick, and raising their wands, the four faced the doors. Within a minute, the doors were not only shut and bolted but secured with wards that Dumbledore had set in place ahead of time, waiting only to be activated by him or by his four Heads of House.

‘What about the staff entrance?’ asked Flitwick in a low voice as he and McGonagall made their way past rows of anxious students trying to settle themselves, with a few sharp words from their prefects, into sleeping bags.

‘We’ll have to guard that,’ said McGonagall softly. ‘Hagrid must be able to move back and forth to report. He’s patrolling the grounds now with about a dozen Aurors.’

‘Only a dozen?’

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McGonagall grimaced. ‘Albus was right, of course, not to trust Fudge. The Ministry have sent Hogwarts the least amount of help possible without creating public scandal. If Hogwarts falls, Fudge will say there was nothing he could have done. He’ll play the side that gives him the greatest personal advantage.’

‘How unsavoury.’

As they approached the staff table, a very young Auror (a trainee, McGonagall suspected) standing almost at attention by the staff entrance suddenly aimed his wand at the doorway. McGonagall and Flitwick exchanged a worried glance and quickened their steps.

‘Whoa! Whoa there!’ Hagrid’s enormous bulk emerged, his black hair and beard and his greatcoat dripping with rain. He glared at the young Auror-trainee. ‘S’me, yeh young whelp.’

‘Erm—sorry, Professor Hagrid.’ As the Auror-trainee flushed and lowered his wand, McGonagall gave him a brisk nod.

‘You may go over to the table and help yourself to some pumpkin juice, Mister—?’

‘Moody, ma’am.’

‘Of course,’ said McGonagall. ‘Thank you. We’ll call you when we need you again.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ The young man scurried off.

‘What do you have to report, Rubeus?’

Hagrid looked grim. ‘Death Eaters’r startin’ ter gather outside the gates.’ He managed to keep his great rumbling voice down almost to a whisper.

‘Are they attacking?’ McGonagall forced herself to ask calmly.

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Hagrid shook his head. 'No. They're jus' standin' there.'
'How many?'

'Looks teh me aroun' fifty.'

'Why do you suppose they're not attacking?' said Flitwick.

'Fer the same reason the Dementors'r skulkin' aroun' the edges o' the Forbidden Forest,' said Hagrid.

McGonagall felt the bottom of her stomach drop away. 'Dementors?'

'Yeah. Dozens, I'd say. As fer why they're all jus' waitin', I'd say—fer You-Know-Who's orders.'

McGonagall looked around the Great Hall. 'Well,' she said stoutly. 'We're as ready for them as we'll ever be.'

Which wasn't saying much. And she damned well knew it.



Snape couldn't help himself. He surged toward the black-clad stranger, being careful to avoid the upraised wand-arm, and looked into the Auror's thin, lined face. It was almost unrecognisable under several days' worth of silver-shot stubble, the tell-tale scar covered by the black cap. Only the eyes, despite the lines around them, were still the same brilliant, defiant green. Those eyes glared into Snape's for a few moments, and then their owner said quietly,

'Good to see you're still alive, Snape. I can use your help.'

'It's *Professor* Snape, Harry,' said Hawking very quietly, her eyes dancing with mischief.

A great gout of blood-red flame splashed against the



shield-wall. The dark, distorted form outside the shield was now moving back and forth, almost as if pacing. 'How long can you keep up this shield of yours?' Voldemort's high, cold voice echoed off the walls. 'How much more of this can you stand? And don't think you can try to escape behind it. I'll follow you.' He unleashed another blast, and as the shield flared, the Auror took in a hissing breath, as if in pain.

'Is your wand prepared?' he asked Hawking, and she nodded. 'Good.' He raised his voice. 'That's two of us, at least. But the others can still help.'

'Bloody right,' said young Harry behind them, his face both grim and eager.

'But we don't have wands,' said Ron.

'Won't need 'em,' said the Auror, focusing intently on the shield-wall and still not looking behind him at the young people. He threw a quick glance at Hawking. 'Tell them what to do. Quickly.'

'I need Hermione,' said Hawking, looking past the Auror's shoulder and reaching her hand out to her younger self. Hermione frowned, hesitating, and Snape shot an alarmed look at her elder version.

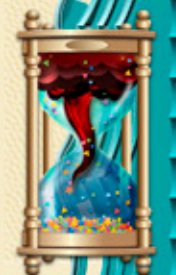
'Gwen,' he said very softly, 'don't touch her.'

'Gwen?' said the Auror, with a raised eyebrow, and she flushed a bit.

'It's a long story,' she muttered. 'Severus—' her eyes met his without hesitation '—I have to.'

'You'll die,' he said, and his throat closed up. She gave him a brief, sad smile and turned to her younger self.

'Remember all the things you asked me about earlier? You'll know now. But I promise that whatever





happens, you won't be harmed.'

'Now?' Hermione's voice was almost a squeak.

'But—we—'

'Yes, Hermione. Now. Take my hand.'

As if carried by the force of that order, Hermione stepped forward, her face now calm, and placed her right hand inside Hawking's left. Gently, the older woman turned both of them so they faced the shield-wall: first the Auror, with Hawking beside him, then Hermione. Hawking raised her wand, and turquoise light leapt from the Auror's wand-tip to hers. Snape thought he heard Hawking gasp, but the next second he caught her eye, and she looked at him almost smugly as if to say—*See? It's fine.*

'Harry!' the Auror called out, and his wand-arm began to tremble with strain. 'Beside me.' As Snape stepped back a bit to give the young man room, the Auror said in a low voice, 'Wrap your hand around mine and focus, focus on the Aegis spell. Snape! Stand beside—erm—Hermione and raise your wand.'

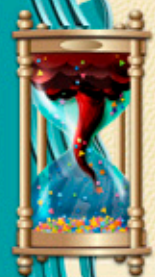
'It—my wand's not prepared.'

'Have you used it for Carborundorum?'

'No.'

'Then it's better than a sharp stick. Just *move.*'

This was not the time to deduct points for ordering a professor around as if he were a house-elf. Coming up beside Hermione, Snape glanced anxiously at her elder version. Gwen's eyes were closed, her expression strangely peaceful, but as he looked at Hermione, he saw her eyes—her entire face—glowing with an eerie rapture, as if the shield-wall shimmering before her



were a book filled with the secrets of the universe. He didn't like the look of that at all.

Snape made himself face forward and raise his wand, and immediately blue light leapt from Gwen's wand-tip to his. He braced himself for the same jolt of power he'd experienced when he and Gwen had touched wands earlier, and power came. Yet this felt different: pure, vast, beyond any experience... almost as wondrous as the astonishing moment three days ago when fragments of his personality, intent on tearing each other's throats out, had instead joined together and saved his life.

'All right—now listen,' the Auror said in a clear, quiet voice. 'This shield isn't just a defence. At its most powerful, it becomes the counter-measure—it'll destroy Carborundorum *and* whoever wields it. But we're going to have to push the damn thing right down Voldemort's throat to succeed, and the more of us doing it, the better.'

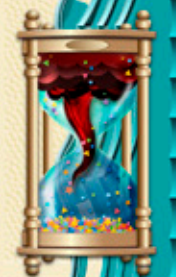
Voldemort gave a dry laugh. 'That's not possible.' He hurled another bolt of flame against the shimmering wall. As the light flaring from their wands flickered and darkened, Snape felt his nerves shudder unpleasantly and the Auror gave a sharp cry. Then the wall strengthened again, and the nasty sensation dissipated.

'We're all right,' said the Auror.

'No. You're weak,' said Voldemort. 'You're going to fail.'

'You said *push* it. How?' Ginny seemed resolute about ignoring their enemy.

'What spell do we use?' said Ron. To Snape, both





Weasleys sounded remarkably calm.

'It's not so much what you say; it's what you *think!*' said the Auror. 'Death-by-Fire, Death Eaters, Voldemort—they're darkness, they're the end, the end of life and light and hope. They destroy everything. Whatever you think, it's got to counter that. It's got to be the opposite—oh damn you to hell, *you fucker!*' His voice rose almost to a shriek as Voldemort, wand flicking almost casually, attacked the shield again. This time the weakening was worse and lasted longer. As it ran its course, Snape glanced at Weasley to make sure he was still on his feet, and then—almost dreading it—looked at Miss Granger and Gwen.

Both women had their eyes closed, almost as if they were listening to something no one else could hear. Pure blue light coruscated around their joined hands, ran down their arms, and softly infused their faces. Snape knew, as surely as if Gwen had spoken out loud, that the woman who had so briefly been his lover was now moving beyond his reach, beyond any experience he could name or imagine.

Then Hermione's mouth opened, and Gwen Hawking's voice said, 'It's like invoking a Patronus. But it isn't just your happiest memory. Think about light. Think about life. Think about everything you once loved, do love, could love.' Then her eyes opened, and she turned to Snape. 'I think even *you* can do that, Severus.'

Snape turned away sharply and focused his attention on the shield, not letting her or anyone else see how shattered he was by the sight of Gwen's quick,



wry smile on Hermione Granger's face.

'The invocation's up to you,' the Auror said, his voice laboured. 'The simpler the better.' He paused, taking several deep breaths, then straightened, his head lifting, gathering power around him like a bright cloak.

'Darkness cannot run out darkness, only light can do that.' The Auror spoke softly, yet his voice seemed to resonate around them, and the light pulsating from the wand he and Harry held grew a bit stronger.

'That's it?' said Ron.

The Auror gave a brief chuckle. 'I told you. Simple. Now you, Harry.'

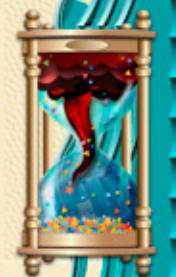
'Erm—against all darkness, let there be light,' said Harry. He sounded unconvinced.

'Simple's one thing,' said the Auror, sounding annoyed. 'But you've got to *mean* it, Harry, damn it!'

Snape saw Harry close his eyes and take a deep breath, focusing and gathering power as the visitor had done. Then he opened his eyes and tightened his grip around the Auror's hand.

'Against darkness, let there be light!' he cried. The blue glow of the wand shifted in colour from pale sky to tropical ocean, then light suddenly cascaded from the Auror's wand-tip, surging against the shield-wall, pushing it away from them and toward Voldemort.

Beside Snape, Hermione raised her head. 'Against death, let there be life,' she said in a low, intense voice, and the shield-wall moved again toward the dark thing just beyond it. Voldemort snarled and hurled another killing blast—this time not at all casually. It dissipated against the wall without weakening it.



'It's working,' Ron whispered.

Then Gwen stood up straight, raising her head high, her eyes blazing like suns. 'Against despair, let there be hope. All shall be well. *All shall be well.*' Her voice rang with a power that sent shivers down Snape's spine. As if in response, the mighty shield-wall before them rippled, and the edges facing outward seemed to bend and rear over their enemy like the crests of waves. Voldemort looked up, grimacing as if with effort, and his next blast of Carborundorum dissipated quickly against the shield.

'Yes, it's working,' said the Auror. 'More!'

Snape tried to look at Gwen. It was as if she had turned into blue-gold light; he couldn't see past the brilliance of it. But beside him, Hermione suddenly gasped and staggered, and without thinking Snape dropped his wand and lunged to catch her arm. On her other side, the Auror supported Hermione with his left hand, and then stared at Snape with a bewilderment that must have mirrored his own.

Gwen was gone. On the floor lay a small pile of her clothing and her wand.

For one sickening moment, Snape wondered if Carborundorum had devoured her. But there'd been no flame. He saw no ashes. He looked wildly around him.

'Snape!' The Auror's voice sounded as if it were miles away. 'Get your wand! *Now!*'

Only when a gout of Carborundorum exploded against the unguarded part of the shield did Snape move. Cursing himself, he snatched up his wand, but under Voldemort's renewed attack the entire shield

had already begun to flicker and darken.

'*Aegis!*' cried the Auror and Harry Potter—one force, one voice—and the shield gathered itself against the fire and once again repelled it.

One spark flew through the shield-wall.

Snape saw it, but his lightning-quick '*Protego Adamant!*' had no hope of working, and he could only watch in helpless horror as the spark—so tiny it was almost invisible—leapt onto Ron Weasley's upraised right hand. The young wizard gave a sharp gasp, and then howled in pain.

'Snape! Don't touch him!' the Auror shouted. 'Harry, for God's sake, *don't* let go of the wand.'

Ron doubled over, his good hand reaching to cradle his injured arm. It was now starting to glow with a lurid light, like clotted blood.

'No! Ron! *Don't touch your arm!*' It was Potter's agonised voice—which one, Snape couldn't tell. Weasley's sister let out a shrill scream.

'*Refrigero!*' From the Auror's left hand came a jet of what looked like ice crystals. They surrounded Ron's right hand and then moved gently up his arm until his entire right side seemed to glisten with frost. Ron stopped shrieking, and for a few seconds he simply stared at his arm. Then he slumped to the floor.

'I hope he'll live,' the Auror said in a low voice. 'But—oh fuck.' He looked at Snape for a long moment, his worn, bearded face lined with grief. 'I'm not sure we can do this without—her.'

'I believe,' said Snape, and it was as if someone else were speaking, 'that she'd want us to try.'



But the shield-wall above and around them continued to darken, its light becoming less pure and brilliant by the second. Voldemort hurled fire again, and the five remaining defenders felt the shield's growing weaknesses shuddering through them as each bolt of Carborundorum exploded and hissed against it.

'How much longer will you last, I wonder?' the Dark Lord called out mockingly as the light of the shield dimmed from deep blue to a violet tinged with clotted blood-red.

At that moment, from somewhere beyond the darkness where Voldemort ravened, beyond the failing shield, a great voice called out: '*Inlumino vivus!*' Golden light arced toward them from across the mausoleum and looped around the weaving shape of Voldemort. He gave a howl of surprise and rage as the light sizzled against his shielding. He whirled and raised his wand against his attacker. But the golden light seemed to tangle him, and he gave a high-pitched snarl of rage as he fought it.

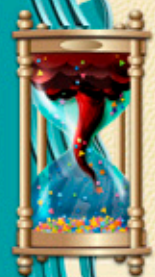
Then a familiar voice called out from the direction of the golden light. 'Harry! Hermione! Are you well?'

'Yes!' Harry yelled.

'Dumbledore,' breathed the Auror. He seemed to gather strength just by speaking the name.

The old wizard's voice filled the mausoleum. 'I can delay him, but *you* must finish this!'

As the Auror and Harry raised their heads in hope, Hermione shook herself free from the grip of the two men on each side of her and scooped up Gwen Hawking's wand, raising it high in her right hand.



Then she clasped Snape's wand-hand with her left. As their fingers joined and his wand began to pulse with azure light, he felt a great shock of memory: *At his side Hermione stands, her wand-tip blazing, her brown eyes blazing, her young face wearing the same look of intense concentration that once irritated him beyond measure.* Power coursed through him, as cold and pure as water running deep beneath dark mountains.

Then Hermione spoke, and Snape hardly recognised the voice that echoed against the walls of this dead place.

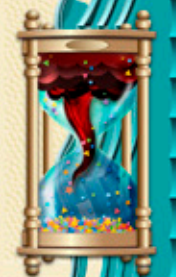
'In one who bears the light, there is courage.' At her words, the shield above them brightened, thickened.

'In two, there is help,' the Auror cried out, and with his words the top of the shield-wall curved, looming again over Voldemort like the crest of a wave.

'In three, there is friendship.' It was Ron's voice, barely above a whisper. Snape looked down as the young wizard who—unable to sit but conscious—raised his good arm high, trembling. Brilliant blue light spread out from his fingers and radiated outward to the shield-wall, which began to bulge toward their enemy. Ron stared at his fingers in disbelief.

Now Voldemort began to back away, snarling and wincing as Dumbledore's brilliant golden light continued to pound remorselessly against his defences. 'You can't—it won't—you *can't win this!*' he screamed.

'In four, there is strength.' Snape felt as though someone else were speaking through him, but as the words left his mouth the shield above and around him seemed to thicken, the violet bands of light rippling as if in eagerness.





'In five,' Ginny's voice now called out, clear and confident, 'there is hope!'

'And in six—there is joy!' Dumbledore cried out to them, his voice radiant. Golden light raced again across the dark, but this time it curved past Voldemort and spread out against the shield-wall. The violet and deep blue bands seemed to dance, and the entire wall brightened into a rapturous turquoise.

The Dark Lord whirled toward the source of the golden light, and his lipless mouth opened.

'Albus!' Snape cried out.

'*Carborundorum*—old fool!'

The six behind the Aegis watched in silent horror as the killing bolt lashed out. They heard Dumbledore shouting something, and deep red fire crawled around what looked to Snape like a ball of blazing golden light. Suddenly, with a sharp, explosive CRACK, the Carborundorum flame broke apart into thousands of sparks that flickered and died as they fell. The golden ball of light dimmed, flared, dimmed again, and went out.

'The shield... keep thinking about the shield!' the Auror whispered.

Their enemy turned slowly back toward them, his shoulders slumped, and they heard him draw in a long, hissing breath. 'The old man's finished.' His voice was ugly with triumph.

'No!' Around the Auror's wand, Harry's fingers loosened.

'And now—so are you.' As the dark horror on the other side of the shield took a step closer to them and raised its wand, it staggered slightly.



'Harry,' the Auror whispered. 'It's time. Now. *Now!*'

White-faced, Harry Potter looked into the brilliant eyes of the Auror beside him. Then, once again gripping the wand tightly, the young wizard took one step forward and raised his right hand against the darkness rearing up before them.

'Against seven, no curse may stand!'

And the Aegis blazed forth, its light laying bare every dank corner and cranny of the mausoleum. In that pure, merciless light, the Dark Lord's crumbling face became a mask of rage and despair. Then, cascading with turquoise brilliance, the Aegis began to curve above the Dark Lord.

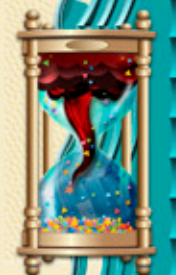
'Let light and life prevail,' came the Auror's voice, much more softly than Harry's. Hermione whispered '*Fiat lux.*'

'No!' Voldemort, raising his wand, took several stumbling steps backward as the wave of light slowly reared up and over him, surrounding him.

'*Nox Noctis Despuo!*' Snape found himself murmuring as a gruff, once-feared voice in the chambers of his mind now uplifted him with its power.

'That's right, Severus,' Gwen Hawking said in his ear. 'All shall be well.'

Before Snape could turn in astonishment and hope toward that voice, there came a sound like a great, vast waterfall. Then it was as if a tidal wave of light too bright to look at roared around them, drowning out all darkness. Against its force, Snape could do nothing but fall to his knees and throw his arms over his head, blinded and deafened by glory.





With a growl of frustration, Hagrid dashed rain out of his eyes and peered again into the roiling black sky where, only a minute or two earlier, he could have sworn he'd seen at least a dozen Death Eaters on broomsticks circling the Astronomy Tower.

'Can' see a thing,' he muttered. 'Bloody hell. Don' like this one bit.'

Then Tabitha, his Auror runner, came panting up to him out of the dark, her face and hood streaming.

'Mr Hagrid!' She pointed toward the main gates of Hogwarts. 'Something's happening out there.'

His heart sank. *Crikey. This it is.*

'Wha'd'yeh mean, happenin'?'

'I—well, you'd better come and see.'

He stumbled after her, slipping on mud and wet stones, until the two tall entrance pillars loomed into view. All the rest of their small Auror band stood tensely before the massively padlocked and warded gates, wands out and ready. Hagrid shouldered his way past them and skidded to a halt, squinting in astonishment. Up until a few minutes ago, the crowd of Death Eaters had been standing shoulder to shoulder in a silence so complete it had sent shivers down Hagrid's spine. Now they had broken ranks. Some were standing in clusters, muttering; others paced restlessly; still others stood staring up at the stormy night sky as if waiting for a sign.

'We thought they were going to attack,' said Tabitha quietly, standing just below his elbow. 'Then suddenly, they just—broke apart. As if they don't quite know what to do.'

Even as the rain lashed his face, Hagrid found himself breaking out into a smile. 'Harry,' he whispered.

Then above the Death Eater mutterings, a woman's voice rose up. 'Fall back! Return to your homes! The Dementors have been called off. There will be no attack tonight.'

'Says who?' came a rough male voice.

'Where's our Lord? Where's Malfoy?' shouted others.

'These are his orders! Obey or die!' the woman cried. 'Do you need more persuasion? *Carborundorum!*' A jet of deep red light exploded high above the heads of the cluster of Death Eaters who'd questioned her. With cries of alarm, those beneath pushed frantically out of the way as the flames slowly sank to the ground and sizzled out.

Less than a minute later, all the Death Eaters had vanished into the rainy night except one: the woman who had ordered the retreat. Turning to face Hogwarts' gates, she raised her wand, and every Auror went on shivering alert. 'Steady,' said Hagrid softly. But instead of hurling a curse, she grasped her wand with both hands and snapped it in half, then threw both pieces onto the ground in front of her.

'What the—?' whispered one of the Aurors.

The Death Eater called out, 'I surrender.' Then with one hand, she slowly pushed her hood back. As her white face and pale hair came into view, Hagrid bit back a gasp, and several Aurors murmured in recognition. She stared calmly at the bristling phalanx of wands, every single one of them aimed at her head or chest.

'What are you waiting for? Go ahead. Hex me.'

She spread her hands apart.

'I think,' Hagrid murmured to Tabitha, 'I'd be'er go report this teh Minerva.'



The mausoleum was dark; only a couple of torches still guttered on the walls. Moments ago, Snape had sat up, dazed, only to see Hermione Granger crumpled beside him on the floor. He had made sure she was breathing and not bleeding, then had propped her against one of the coffins where she sat, head lolling on one shoulder as if asleep. He heard a soft footfall nearby and turned to see Auror, his bearded face split with a huge, joyful grin, bending over Ron. 'You didn't die,' he said softly, his voice catching a bit. When he noticed Snape staring at him he rose, his face closing down. As Harry and Ginny, who had been helping each other to their feet, came over to Ron, the Auror backed away. 'He needs medical attention, but he'll live,' he said curtly, turning away from them. Ginny took one look at her brother—his arm still sparkling with crystals—closed her eyes in relief, then spontaneously turned to Harry and threw her arms around him.

Snape repressed a snort and followed the Auror, who was walking slowly over to the spot where Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort, had been standing moments (or was it hours?) ago. Both men looked down at the black cloak crumpled in a heap on the floor, half-covering a wand that looked scorched beyond repair.

'*Incendio*,' the Auror said, his voice hoarse, and flames began to lick at the black cloak and wand.

'I must see to Draco and Bellatrix,' said Snape in a low voice.

A sound like a gasp or perhaps a sob came from the far side of the mausoleum, where Dumbledore's last incantation had peeled forth. Snape, his blood running cold, slowly turned, and beside him the Auror whispered, '*No*.'

A white-haired, white-bearded figure lay sprawled on the floor, one out-flung hand grasping his wand, the other resting on his chest. Crouching over him, a thin old man with a scraggly grey beard extended his hand and gently touched his brother's forehead. After a moment, Aberforth withdrew his hand and looked over at Snape and the Auror.

'He tried to shield both of us at once *and* hit back at Riddle's curse,' Aberforth said in a low, unsteady voice. 'It worked. But then—' He took a choking breath and bowed his head, his hair falling before his face.

'Oh, fuck,' said the Auror, his voice laced with horror. 'This wasn't supposed to happen.'

'What do you mean?'

It was Harry Potter's voice. The young wizard had come up behind Snape and the Auror, his gaze fixed disbelievingly on the dark corner where Albus Dumbledore lay. Then his eyes moved to the two men.

'Tell me what the hell is going on. *Now!*' His expression was merciless.

The Auror pulled off his cap, ran one hand through his shaggy salt-and-pepper hair, and said a bit shakily, 'Oh, hell. Where do I start? Maybe I should just Obliviate your memories.'



'If you even try, you won't know what hit you,' said Harry, his voice low and calm but his green eyes hard as stone. The Auror kept running his hand through his hair; it was now sticking up almost on end. 'I remember Ron dying, but now he's alive, thank God—at least I have that. But Dumbledore was supposed to live.'

'You're not making sense!' Harry said in a fierce whisper.

'For God's sake, Harry, *look* at me!' The Auror thrust his face into the young wizard's. Snape's hand shot out and pulled the older man back.

'Is this wise?' he hissed. 'You've done what you needed to do. Now *leave!* Go back where you came from!'

'Harry has more of a right to know than you do!' the Auror snapped.

Harry was staring, white-faced, at the Auror. 'You... you're me,' he whispered hoarsely. 'From the future. That—that's why I thought you sounded like...'

'Yes,' said the Auror, his voice very gentle.

'Harry?' Ginny's voice came to them from where she still knelt by Ron. 'Are you all right?'

Harry cleared his throat. 'Yeah,' he said over his shoulder. 'Don't worry.'

Snape said harshly to the Auror, 'Doctor Gwen Hawking and I worked together. She confided in me as well as Albus.'

The Auror and Harry Potter looked at him. Under other circumstances, Snape might have found it bizarrely amusing to be on the receiving end of two pairs of equally brilliant, green, distrustful eyes. Then the Auror dropped his gaze and fumbled at one of the pockets of

death and forever



his black leather jacket. He pulled out a piece of parchment, folded many times into a small, thick packet.

'The Final Battle I remember from my past, and what happened tonight, are two different things. I don't remember tonight's events, so there's not much I can tell you.' The Auror kept his voice very low, looking at Harry earnestly. 'I knew nothing about my mission until a few days ago, when I was given sealed orders by the Head of the D.O.M. and the Minister for Magic.'

He held the little packet out to Harry and Snape. The outer page read—

To

Nymphadora Tonks, Minister for Magic

-and-

*Sebastian Alastor Moody, Head -
Department of Mysteries*

From

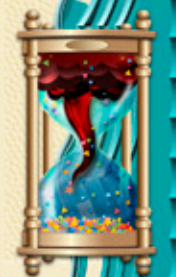
*Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Written on the 5th day of November in the
year nineteen hundred and ninety-seven*

*To Be Opened in the presence of Harry
James Potter on the twentieth day of
September in the year two thousand and
twenty-nine*

Please Exercise

Strictest Security Precaution!!

death and forever





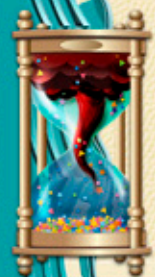
'Tonks!' Harry murmured, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth.

Snape said quietly, his throat suddenly dry, 'But if the battle you and *your* Dumbledore remember was at Hogwarts on Hallowe'en, how did you know to come back four nights earlier? And to this place?'

'I didn't,' said the Auror simply. 'But in my mission briefing, I was told to think of time as currents or eddies rather than lines. Once I started travelling back, I must've been carried to this—er—particular current. As if it was stronger than any other one. But either way, without Dumbledore's letter—' he shook his head '—I never would've come.'

'And we would've died,' said Harry. He looked over at Dumbledore's body, and suddenly his face drew down into lines of grief, making him look far older. 'I thought he cared more about using me to kill Voldemort,' he whispered. 'I didn't want to be used. I wanted to do this without him. Oh, God.'

'Harry, no.' The Auror put a quick hand on his shoulder. 'Don't start thinking like that,' he said very quietly. 'Nothing was your fault. You and he—all of us—we did what we had to do. Listen—in my past, hundreds died here. *Hundreds!* Including Ron. And—' he shot Snape a furtive look '—and, yes, so did Voldemort, but Carborundorum set the stage for years of grief and terror. Harry—' again he faced his younger self, green eyes burning into green, 'I know I said—*this wasn't supposed to happen*—but now I'm wondering: was it? Harry, maybe Dumbledore didn't die for nothing.'



A tear ran down Harry's cheek, but he kept his gaze steadily on the older man.

'Gwen—Doctor Hawking said she suspected her presence had already changed things,' said Snape, still very quietly. 'But she wasn't sure how.' He slanted a look at the Auror. 'I suppose we just have to hope that Dumbledore's orders will never be needed.'

'In that case, you should have this.' The Auror offered the packet to Harry. 'Read it if you want to. Then—well—I suppose you can pass it along to Snape.'

'Are you sure?' said Harry, and Snape knew the Potter brat wasn't referring to his reading the letter first.

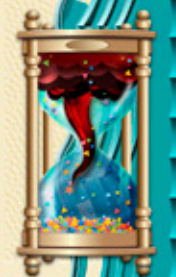
The Auror gave the former Death Eater a measuring glance. 'Call it an unexpected survivor benefit,' he said, his voice flat, and then turned toward the mausoleum exit.

'Wait!' Harry wiped a hand across his cheek. 'Will you—can you come back here again?' He swallowed. 'I'd like to talk to you.'

The Auror smiled sadly at him.

'No I can't. This was a one-off.' His smile turned rueful. 'Don't ask me to explain in more detail because I don't bloody understand it, but, well, it was because of a time-travel experiment gone wrong that the Carborundorum Curse ended up in Voldemort's hands. That's why Doctor Hawking came back.' He looked directly at Snape. 'Knowing her, she wouldn't have rested 'til she could put everything right. She thought she could do it alone. But she couldn't.'

'No. She couldn't,' said Snape, hating the tightness in his throat.





'Well,' said the Auror a bit awkwardly. 'I was sent to help her. But after I go back—no more time-travel. It messes with the universe too bloody much.'

And the moment he goes back, he'll die. As Snape met the Auror's eyes, the older man glared back defiantly, his unspoken message clear: I know you know. piss off.

'Wait,' Harry was saying, his expression appalled. 'Are you saying Doctor Hawking *invented* the Carborundorum curse?'

'No—but, well—it's complicated,' said the Auror, looking uncomfortable. 'Nothing that happened was Hermione's fault—' He stopped abruptly.

'You mean—Doctor Hawking's fault,' said Harry.

'Erm—' The Auror grimaced and ran his hand through his hair again. 'Ah, fuck.'

Harry said tonelessly. 'Give me some credit. I'm sure I'd have figured it out myself sooner or later.' He shot a quick glance over his shoulder. Hermione's eyes were closed; she looked as if she were sleeping. Ginny, still kneeling beside Ron, fixed Harry and the two men with a disturbingly inquisitive stare. 'Does *our* Hermione know about—any of this? About Doctor Hawking?'

'I suspect she will.' The Auror's voice was soft.

'Is she going to be all right?'

The Auror gave Snape a keen, measuring glance. 'I hope so.' Then he turned away, but instead of moving to the half-open, rusting iron gate leading out to the graveyard, he walked over to where Albus Dumbledore lay, Aberforth still hunched over him.

'May I?' Snape distantly heard the Auror ask.



Aberforth looked up, his face still half-hidden by his straggling hair, and after a moment, nodded. The Auror crouched, stripping off his black gloves, and then gently took the hand resting on Dumbledore's still chest. A deep silence followed, broken only by the sounds of guttering torchlight and falling rain.

'He was already a bit weak, you see,' said Aberforth at length, his tone almost apologetic. 'The second he let up on Riddle to help you lot with your shield, the bastard went for us. We fought like dragons. Then Albus—well, he overreached. I've been telling him, over and over: "You're not bloody fifty anymore, are you?" But he never listened.'

'They won't burn him, will they?' the Auror finally said, his voice hoarse.

'Over my own dead body,' Aberforth growled.

Harry, who like Snape had heard every word of this, abruptly whirled and strode back to his friends. Feeling numb, Snape watched as Ginny rose to face Harry. After a moment, she gathered Harry into her arms, and Snape turned away from that sight to face again the dead wizard and the two keeping vigil over him.

But the Auror was gone.



EXCERPT from a brief letter from Minerva McGonagall to parents of Hogwarts students, delivered by owl post the evening of October 28:

...Whilst we have faced many challenges over the past few years, the destruction of the Dark Lord allows me to say with confidence and gratitude that Hogwarts is now indeed a safer place. My staff and I will continue to provide your children with the best magical education possible. This is what our late Headmaster wished for more than anything, and we honour his life and his memory by carrying on and doing our best...



Excerpts from the front page of THE DAILY PROPHET—October 29:

He Who Must Not Be Named is Dead

Loss of Headmaster Dumbledore a Blow to Hogwarts

By Rita Skeeter

In a stunning act of bravery for which the wizarding world will be forever grateful, Harry Potter—the Boy Who Lived Yet Again—faced down and destroyed the Dark Lord two nights ago. At the same time, he rescued three Hogwarts classmates who had been taken hostage.

Sadly, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore was killed whilst attempting to help Mr Potter rescue the hostages. Professor Severus Snape, completely restored after a recent life-threatening illness, was also on the scene. He survived.

Though Mr Potter himself modestly refuses to comment, reports suggest he used a secret blasting curse developed recently by the Ministry of Magic. Unnamed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that several departments were working on a series of new spells to counter Death Eater attacks.

In a press conference last night, Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge expressed his deep gratitude to Mr Potter for his courage and his cooperation with the Ministry. He suggested that Mr Potter will likely receive an Order of Merlin, First Class.

Fudge also credited his hard-working staff of researchers and Aurors for helping to bring about the Dark Lord's demise.

'I also wish to assure the wizarding public, and particularly all Hogwarts' students and their parents, that we've examined the site where Mr Potter bested—erm—You Know Who. The so-called Dark Lord is indeed most sincerely dead,' Fudge added.

Fudge also commented that Headmaster Dumbledore will be sorely missed. The end of an era for the wizarding world.

funeral service will be held at Hogwarts on Saturday the first of November.



From a page-two sidebar in THE DAILY PROPHET—October 29:

Orders of Merlin Pending for Hogwarts Hostages?

Ronald Weasley, youngest son of Arthur and Molly Weasley, remains in critical condition at St. Mungo's Hospital from a serious injury sustained during the Monday night battle with He Who Must Not Be Named. A hospital source has confirmed that he may lose his right arm.

Sources say that Mr Weasley is being considered for an Order of Merlin, Second Class.

Headmistress Minerva McGonagall has confirmed that Mr Potter and Miss Weasley, who each suffered relatively minor injuries, are now all but recovered. However, Hermione Granger remains confined in the hospital wing with unspecified injuries.

An unnamed source in the Ministry has commented that Miss Weasley and Miss Granger may be in line for Orders of Merlin, Third Class.



From page one of THE DAILY PROPHET—October 30:

Malfoy Widow Taken Alive —Son's Sanity in Question—

The Ministry confirmed that Narcissa Malfoy was captured in the early hours of October twenty-eighth. One source has revealed that Mrs Malfoy may be prepared to reveal a number of Death Eater secrets in exchange for clemency for her son Draco.

As well as being implicated in the Dark Lord's plans to infiltrate Hogwarts, young Mr Malfoy may be responsible for a devastating injury inflicted on another member of Slytherin House, Miss Pansy Parkinson. It is unclear whether she will recover.

A source at St. Mungo's says that young Malfoy hasn't spoken a word since Monday night. 'He just laughs mostly. Sometimes he cries.' Whether or not young Malfoy will be fit to stand before the Wizengamot is uncertain.



From THE QUIBBLER—October 31:

THE CLAIM: The Ministry, under the inspired leadership of Cornelius Fudge, invented a wonderful new defensive curse which Harry Potter ‘cooperatively’ used on Voldemort, who conveniently died.

BOLLOCKS! The former Tom Riddle was the most powerful Dark wizard on the planet, and Potter was the only wizard he couldn’t kill. If the Ministry had anything to do with Potter’s extraordinary feat, I’ll eat the Hogwarts Sorting Hat.

HERE’S THE TRUTH: From Day One, the Ministry’s efforts to control Voldemort’s “Pureblood Movement” have been a massive cock-up. The only reason Muggle-borns and half-bloods today are celebrating the death of this insane racist instead of facing mass slaughter can be summed up in two words: Harry Potter. We owe him, his equally brave mates, and Albus Dumbledore our humblest gratitude for preserving our future safety.

Should Fudge resign? Absolutely NOT. That’s too good for him. He deserves nothing less than to be **SACKED**.

~The Editor

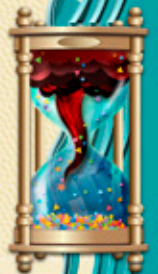


Excerpts from two medical histories at St. Mungo’s—
November 2:

Ronald Weasley: ...the mobility and strength of not only the hand but the entire right arm will remain severely limited. Regular Healer visitations for at least the next several weeks are recommended. In all other respects, Mr Weasley should heal fully. It seems reasonable to suppose that if he convalesces at The Burrow, he will recover more quickly...

Hermione Granger: ...According to Madam Pomfrey, Miss Granger has not spoken since last Monday night, spends much of her time asleep, and eats only when supervised. Today’s examination, however, does not support the hypothesis that she is suffering from the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse.

It seems most likely that Miss Granger is experiencing a form of deep shock as a result of Monday night’s events. It is urgently recommended that a Healer from our Sanus Thickey Ward examine her as soon as possible.





Excerpt from a letter written by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore on the fifth day of November in the year nineteen hundred and ninety-seven:

To Be Opened in the presence of Harry James Potter on the twentieth day of September in the year two thousand and twenty-nine.

... though the Aurors and I scoured Malfoy Mansion for more clues, we found nothing more than this scrap of a note that I was able to determine was written by Draco Malfoy to his father. As you can see, the note bears the same outlandishly future date and the same unexpected Ministry names and titles that I've reproduced (not without some desperation) on the outside of this letter.

On the surface, it seems as if Draco was concocting a fantasy.

However, I have a theory that may seem as outlandish as the date on this letter:

the writer was indeed Draco, but from a time in the future—a Draco who managed to import back into our past a deadly curse not available to us today. If the D.O.M. of a future era were experimenting again with time, or worse yet with Time-Turners, then I would say this supposition takes a great leap toward certainty.

I realize this is a terribly thin chain of evidence on which to hang an argument that might, the more I consider it, have a bearing on the future of the entire wizarding world. But the more I ponder the scrap of Draco's note, and especially the fact that Voldemort unleashed a terrible new scourge on the wizarding world this Halloween, the more I'm convinced that this Carborundorum Curse is not supposed to be here. Perhaps it was never even meant to exist.

And yet it does: even though we have found no parchments, no spells, no clues. I foresee a long and bleak period during



which the Ministry will be compelled to re-create this curse and, somehow, discover a remedy.

More to the point, I believe we're now adrift in an anomalous current of time, being pulled further every second from what should have been, toward a future that never should have been allowed to happen. I cling to the hope that Harry Potter may have a role to play in reversing this terrible occurrence, if indeed that is possible. If there is anything you and he can do, then I plead with you to help us...

I hope you can now see, Minister, why I felt it wise to consign this letter to a vault at Pringott's and to make the instructions for its retrieval somewhat convoluted...

To you, Harry, I will say only this: I believe in you, and in the great goodness of the power you bear. I always shall.



Excerpt from a note attached to the letter written by Albus Dumbledore, addressed to Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. Delivered by hand November 10:

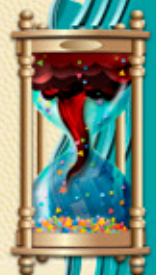
...After Potter passed Albus' letter to me and I read it, I realised it would be inappropriate for me to keep it. As Albus' successor and one of the few privy to the truth, you are the rightful custodian. Therefore, I asked for and received Potter's permission to give this letter to you for safekeeping.

As to the business we discussed yesterday: I thank you for your kind offer to make me deputy headmaster, but I must decline. For many reasons, none of which are open for discussion, I would be a poor choice.

In all other matters, you may count on my support and cooperation.

*Respectfully,
S. Snape*

P.S. I consider that Miss Granger has successfully completed her independent Potions project, so she no longer needs my supervision. I hope this meets with your approval.





Excerpt from a letter to members of the former Order of the Phoenix, delivered November 12. Charmed to self-destruct twelve hours later.

As our final piece of outstanding business, I am able to convey with relief the news that all traces and records of the Carborundrum Curse at Malfoy Mansion have been found and destroyed. To the best of my knowledge, there is no longer any possibility of reconstructing this Curse.

With the death of the former Tom Riddle, the mandate of the Order is fulfilled, and we are hereby disbanded.

I know I speak for our late Secret-Keeper in thanking you all, from the bottom of my heart, for your hard work and dedication.

*Sincerely,
Minerva McGonagall*



Excerpt from a letter from Molly Weasley to Minerva McGonagall, delivered by owl post November 17:

From a letter from Molly Weasley to Minerva McGonagall, delivered by owl post November 20:



From a letter from Molly Weasley to Minerva McGonagall, delivered by owl post November 21:



From page one of THE DAILY PROPHET—December 4:

Malfoy Widow Sentenced to Azkaban **—Son Must Eventually Stand Trial—**

By Rita Skeeter

Hermione Granger and Ginevra Weasley gave two of the most anticipated testimonies, swearing before the Wizengamot that Draco Malfoy used an Unforgivable Curse against Miss Granger. In a surprise move, Miss Granger implied that Malfoy possibly didn't mean to injure Pansy Parkinson.

But one of the most dramatic moments of this sensational trial was during Severus Snape's testimony. 'It's highly unlikely,' he said, with his trademark sneer, 'that young Mr Malfoy intentionally hurt Miss Parkinson, since only an outstanding student can fully control a Bleyke Curse.'



At that, Narcissa Malfoy, chained to the defendant's chair, began shrieking that Professor Snape was right. Her son had been 'forced by his late father to do things he wasn't ready to do—didn't want to do—couldn't do.'

Then she began to sob. 'That's why I surrendered! Don't forget! I surrendered voluntarily! I broke my wand! There were witnesses! Do what you want with me, but don't put my son on trial!'

The Wizengamot has declared that Draco Malfoy must stand trial when he is mentally fit. But the entire wizarding world has been speculating about the state of his sanity.



PERSONAL NOTES: 10TH DECEMBER 1997

My second entry in this crisp new notebook. It seems so familiar to be doing this, yet at the same time strange, as if I'm watching someone else write. But Ethelwyn said keeping a diary would be a good idea. She thinks it'll help me integrate the memories of my older self, "folding and tucking them into my own personality" as she put it.

She seems to think that's a good thing. I'm not convinced.

I can still hardly understand what happened to me, Hermione, on the night of October 27th. All I know is that, before she died, my own future self entered my mind and changed me forever.

I'm still me, fundamentally. I can be with Ron and Harry and Ginny as usual: reading, going to classes,

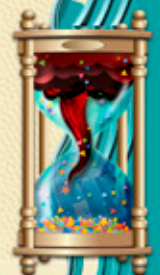


being Head Girl, doing homework—almost forgetting what it was like to be thirty, forty, fifty...

And suddenly I'll find myself thinking like HER. I can't describe it. The world just flips over. Or sometimes memories collide, as if there's a huge train-crash in my mind. Memories, knowledge, feelings—many of them sad. Ron's death, even though he's alive here and now. Harry, rather worn and angry. A bitter red-headed woman, drunk and bloated (Ginny, the memory tells me, which I can't believe). A grey September sky, half-obscured by a great bulky building. A looming sense of crisis. Loneliness.

And something nasty involving Time-Turners, which doesn't surprise me. I hate that memory almost more than any of the others because of the terrible sense of loss that comes with it.

I've pried Harry away from Ginny once or twice to try and talk with him. He's the only one who knows about the effect "Gwen Hawking" had on me. His older self affected him as well, though it seems not nearly as much. He told me it feels like a kind of "echo" which he thinks sometimes amplifies his magical abilities. And that's all he tells me. Well, if that's true, I envy him. He seems incredibly unscathed, and I wouldn't be surprised if that's partly because of Ginny. When I see them, I feel more than just happi-





ness that two people I really care about are finally together. I get the strangest sense of relief... as if some terrible disaster's been avoided.

That's a "memory" I can live with. There are others I can manage—in fact, some are rather fun: late-night chats with mates, the thrill of creating a new potion or spell, working in some—oh—absolutely magnificent labs, lecturing to dozens or even hundreds of people, receiving awards...

The images I can't manage well are the ones with Professor Snape.

They're the clearest of all, which isn't surprising. They come pouring in, usually when I'm trying to relax and clear my mind, or sometimes when I'm asleep. Some are rather horrible, like the night he came to me with Voldemort's compulsion squirming inside him, wanting to control and conquer me, or her—and for a while I was there, inside her head.

But some images are... no, I can't write them down. They're too private.

Oh God.

I miss Severus terribly.

If Professor Snape comes anywhere near me, I'll die. I'm so glad I no longer have to work with him. I haven't even seen him since the Malfoy trial.

I want Ethelwyn to show me how to put all those memories in a Pensieve and lock them away forever.



But I already know what she'd say to that.



Excerpts from notes made in February and March by Healer E. Trickett for case code-named "Dark Man"—placed under a Sealing Charm.

February 14th ...He's been coming to St. Mungo's without fail once a week to visit his former student. Today was the third time I've "happened" to run into him and offer to talk to him, and he finally agreed—I'm not sure why. Didn't get very far, but I didn't expect to. His pride is truly formidable, and it's combined with guilt that he's somehow at least partly responsible for the shattering of that young man's psyche, and grief at the loss of his lover, whom he refuses to mourn. It's a noxious brew to be sure...

February 28th ...Today I reminded "Dark Man" that not so long ago, he demonstrated he has the strength, integrity, and plain old magical force needed to face down a much more powerful enemy than guilt. I told him he's wasting time blaming himself for his former student's situation. He spat at me like a snake, which at least was a response. And then, slowly, it came out: he blames himself





not only for the state of his former student but for the death of his lover as well—another “former student.” Which might also explain why he can’t even face, let alone speak to, his “current student.”

That’s going to be quite a tough net to untangle, but I think we’re getting somewhere...

March 14th ...Today “Dark Man” told me why he agreed to start seeing me. In early February, he’d found a little globe on his desk, with a gold chain and a Time-Turner wrapped round it. He knew what it was right away: a message from his lover, sent into the future. “She was supposed to send it into the past, to D_____ to persuade him to let

her come,” he said. “But she sent it to you instead?” I asked, and he looked shame-faced. “I—I suppose so. But I haven’t listened to it yet,” he said. “I couldn’t. Then to my surprise, he took the little globe out of his robes and put it on my desk. We looked at it for a bit. “I think you’ll need to touch your wand

to it,” I suggested. He hesitated, and I could see he was struggling. Finally, he did.

It was a simple message. She spoke quickly and looked very worn,



poor girl. She mentioned the ruin of their project, but despite that, she was leaving him this message because she refused to believe he wouldn’t survive and that there wasn’t any hope for the future. “Dark Man” turned partly away from me and began staring very hard at the wall. Then, when she told him to

read her notes and pass them to H_____ at the right time, because he’d promised he would, and he owed it to her to make sure she hadn’t died for nothing, he shot to his feet and began pacing.

Finally she said (with a ghost of a smile “Dark Man” didn’t see) that she hoped he wouldn’t forget she had loved him.

At that point, he banged the door open and blundered out of my office, leaving the globe behind.



I waited. A few minutes later, he was back, his face icy-calm. Before he could sit down again, I told him to go away and stay away until he'd finished his required reading...



Text of a note by Severus Snape to Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. Delivered by hand March 30:

Dear Minerva.

Please consider this my resignation from Hogwarts, effective at the end of this school year. My reasons are personal and not open to discussion, but suffice to say I haven't made this decision lightly.

You won't need to provide a reference for me, since I plan to travel for a while—I'm not sure how long. When I do come back to England, I absolutely will not be going back into teaching. I may, however, establish my own small apothecary.

*Respectfully,
S. Snape*

P.S. I have a request concerning Miss Granger. Could you let me know if she expresses any interest in continuing her work with her Cruciatus remedy? If so, I'll provide her with a letter of reference and a list of

appropriate contacts in the wizarding world. -S.S.



PERSONAL NOTES: 25TH JUNE 1998

I hadn't expected to see Professor Snape ever again, so I was a bit surprised to receive a note from him yesterday, just after my final NEWT, asking me to meet him this morning in the Potions classroom. My heart started pounding stupidly before I told myself that he'd probably remembered one more thing I might need for my anti-Cruciatius work.

So, an hour before the final trip I would ever take on the Hogwarts Express, I went down to the dungeons one last time and let myself into the classroom. It was almost unnaturally tidy; even the massive desk at the front of the room—usually covered with essays to mark—was bare except for a small, leather-bound book. I looked around and couldn't help it: I found myself smiling at how intimidating this room had seemed to me as a first-year, and how familiar—almost homey—it looked to me now.

Then I heard a footstep. He was standing in the doorway between the classroom and his office, wearing black trousers, a dark green waistcoat, and a white shirt open at the collar.

But that wasn't what made me gasp and sit down heavily on the nearest bench.



Severus Snape had cut his hair.

It was so short it stuck straight up, bristling, from his scalp. It made him look younger. Grimmer. And almost unrecognizable. Outside the Potions classroom, I wouldn't have known him at first glance.

'I'll say this only once—it's more convenient for travel,' he snapped as he walked over to the desk, clearly annoyed at my open-mouthed astonishment.

'Erm—' I forced my mouth closed. 'Of course.'

'I appreciate your coming, especially on Leaving day,' he said in a milder tone. He picked up the leather-bound book and held it out to me.

'This is yours,' he told me, not quite meeting my eyes. 'I was asked to read it first, which I've done, and then give it to you.'

I stood there. He stood there. Finally, I walked slowly toward him until I was closer to him than I'd been since October, until I thought he had to be able to hear the thudding of my heart.

As soon as my fingers closed around the leather, it felt familiar. I knew what the gold lettering on the cover would say even before I read it. I stood there, the words—NOTES CONCERNING PROJECT NOSTALGIA—swimming before my eyes. 'There's a note under the clasp. Read it,' I heard Severus say as if from a great distance.

Almost blindly, I pulled out the small piece of parchment and uncurled it. '...the place where I was



staying in London,' I read softly, and it was as if another voice spoke through me, her voice. I heard Severus take in a soft, hissing breath.

I raised my head, but his face was expressionless. I knew there were tears on my cheeks, but somehow it didn't matter, or else I didn't care that he saw them.

'Thank you for reading this,' I said, or she said. Severus turned away, facing the desk, his hands gripping its edge.

'Do you know what's in there?' His voice sounded ragged.

I did... and I didn't. Finally I said, 'Not really. But this will help me remember.'

'Do you want to remember?' He didn't look at me.

'I can't help it. It's part of who I am now,' I said quietly.

There was a long silence. Finally I tucked the book under my arm and said, 'Goodbye, Professor.'

'Goodbye, Miss Granger.'

I walked away from him. As I got to the classroom door, I turned around one more time.

It seemed vitally important to say something, though I had no idea what it was supposed to be.

He hadn't moved; his hands still gripped the edge of the desk.

'It was the Hotel Elysian,' I said.



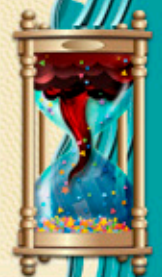


Severus went rigid. Then, slowly, he bowed his head.



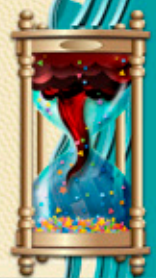
From a page-two sidebar in THE DAILY PROPHET—October 21st, 1999:

Former Hogwarts Hero Strikes Up Partnership





epilogue



epilogue



Though her patented anti-Cruciatius remedy, now standard issue for Ministry Aurors, has been a runaway success, Miss Granger refuses to disclose how much she's made from it.

'Enough to invest in a small apothecary. My business partner is an expert potions-maker,' she told this newspaper. 'We have several new projects in mind.'

"ELYSIAN ELIXIRS" will be located in a discreet cul-de-sac in London, just off the Strand. When asked about the choice of name, Miss Granger only smiled.

When pressed to confirm or deny the identity of her business partner, Miss Granger declined comment.

FINITE INCANTATEM



CHAPTER 1

⚡ The verses serving as epigrams are from ‘Somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond’ by e.e. cummings (w. 1931). His unusual punctuation and spacing are correctly reproduced.

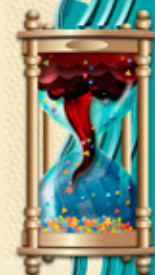
You’ll find the entire poem uploaded in all sorts of places, but this University of Southern California site offers a bonus: more cummings poems. <http://www-scf.usc.edu/~thier/ee/#somewhere> Read and enjoy!

⚡ Harmer, based in London, really exists, but in our current time-period they haven’t tapped into the magical market!

⚡ Quicksilver is analogous to mercury, which though highly toxic isn’t really ‘volatile’ in the chemical sense (thanks, Lara!).

⚡ ‘Carborundorum’ comes from a sort of school-room Latin phrase—‘*Nolite te bastardes Carborundorum,*’ which means roughly ‘Don’t let the bastards grind you down.’ Notably, Margaret Atwood uses it in *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*.

⚡ It isn’t mentioned anywhere in canon that the Ministry of Magic use the letters of the Hebrew alphabet to denote security clearance levels, but I like the notion. Aleph-level would be highest, of course—held by the Minister for Magic herself (yes,



Tonks!) and Department Heads like ‘Sam’ (also see Ch. 2). Bet is next highest, held by deputy ministers and select top-level researchers like Hermione. Senior Aurors like Harry might hold Gimmel but no higher, for their own protection if captured. Dalet and Hey would be held by more junior Aurors and mid-level bureaucrats.

☸ Hermione’s explanation of quantum theory is taken very loosely from Ch. 4 of Brian Greene’s *THE ELEGANT UNIVERSE*. Any mistakes or misrepresentations are entirely mine.

CHAPTER 2

☸ *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*: Sweet and fitting it is to die for one’s country.

☸ About 60 – 65% of the adult human body is composed of water. After hydrogen and oxygen, the next most common element is carbon.

CHAPTER 3

☸ The ‘Bleyke Curse’—a very nasty type of Blasting Curse. The word is an ancestor of ‘bleak,’ and the spell causes the subject to wither physically.

☸ Voldemort’s ‘Our world must be cleansed’ speech borrows some of the cadences and phrasing from a piece of German propaganda called ‘*THE DECENT JEW: A LETTER TO AN ENGLISHMAN, 1937*.’ You’ll find this document, if you’re curious, at:

<http://history1900s.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.calvin.edu%2Fademic%2Fcas%2Fgpa%2Fww2era.htm>

By this use I intend no disrespect, nor am I trying to trivialise the horrendous problem of anti-Semitism. As Alastor Moody might say, we must all exercise constant vigilance against such evils.

☸ A ‘grimoire’ is a repository of spells; the word is a corruption of the Old French ‘gramaire,’ also related to ‘glamour.’ In the Middle Ages, higher learning was sometimes equated with knowledge of witchcraft and the occult.

CHAPTER 5

☸ *Bona fides* in a legal or contractual sense means good faith; freedom from an intent to deceive. It seems to me that unscrupulous folk in the wizarding world could use a Bona Fides Charm for shady purposes.

☸ La Société des sorcelleries de Montréal, for the information of those interested, is a reputable think-tank hidden in plain sight along the lively Rue St-Denis, a street lined with cafés and bistros in the heart of downtown. So much for the “wilds of Canada.”

CHAPTER 6

☸ According to some herbalists, chewing two feverfew leaves per day doesn’t entirely prevent a migraine but can reduce the pain.

CHAPTER 8

☸ Why “eleven”? The negative aspects of the prime or master number eleven include incompleteness, disorganisation, disintegration, disorder or chaos, lawlessness, transgression, peril, and the Anti-Christ (just for fun, take a look at <http://www>.

greatdreams.com/eleven/num11.htm). But the same number is associated with light, balance, synthesis, and peace. Some quantum physicists also believe that our universe is made up of not three, not even four, but eleven space-time dimensions: a mathematical model that helps explain how the different forces of the universe (electromagnetism, gravity, nuclear) are actually unified (see Brian Greene, *THE ELEGANT UNIVERSE*, Ch. 12).

CHAPTER 9

☞ ‘Down, wanton, down!’ is from a poem of the same title by Robert Graves (British, 1895-1985).

☞ It’s difficult to get a clear picture of Hogwarts’ dungeons, but as best I can piece it together from the HP Lexicon, a south corridor takes you toward the kitchens and Hufflepuff common room, and a north corridor would lead you first past the Potions classroom (Snape’s rooms, including office and lab/stores, are adjacent to the classroom), then past the dungeon-level guest apartments, then eventually to Dungeon Five and beyond.

☞ My thanks to Lama for Latin-picking my incantation for uncovering a glamour.

CHAPTER 10

☞ ‘God does not play dice with the Universe’ — Albert Einstein.

☞ I’ve loosely adapted Hawking’s musings about particles and waves from Brian Greene’s *THE ELEGANT UNIVERSE* (Ch. 4). Any errors or misrepresen-

tations of real-life quantum physics are mine alone.

☞ I mention wizard autonomy, but as Jodel’s essay *WIZARDS AND MUGGLES: A SOCIAL HISTORY* sets out, in due course wizards and Muggles separated completely. This fascinating and thorough commentary is well worth reading, at <http://www.redhen-publications.com/Wizards-Muggles.html>

☞ In the Potterverse, there are no ‘supernatural forces even more powerful than Old Magic.’ See ‘ANCIENT MAGIC: MAGIC FROM BEFORE THE DAWN OF TIME?’ by Steve Vander Ark, at <http://www.hp-lexicon.org/magic/old-magic.html#Ancient>

☞ Guarana is a tropical berry that grows in the Amazon region and has a number of medicinal properties. Ginger has been used to treat a variety of conditions; clinical studies have confirmed its curative powers. It can help prevent nausea and vomiting. But please—don’t try to brew Hawking’s hangover cure at home, unsupervised!

CHAPTER 13

☞ Terrorists often manufacture explosives from ‘readily available household ingredients,’ according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

☞ The Malfoy’s family motto can be translated as ‘We pure bloods will conquer’ — or — ‘In pure blood, we conquer.’

☞ DAMPT is the Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics at Cambridge University.

☞ *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy*

is loosed upon the world is from THE SECOND COMING by William Butler Yeats (1865 - 1939).

☰ I'm very grateful to Michaela (michamitschke) for her inspiring speculations, in a June 28 WIKTT posting, about what might happen when the younger and older Hermiones touch.

CHAPTER 16

☰ The title of this chapter is the second line of THE SICK ROSE by William Blake (1757-1827).

☰ In disarming the wards on Snape's bedchamber door, Hawking might use the Latin forms of "first, second, third, fourth" that specifically refer to companies of soldiers: an appropriate visualisation for someone dealing with a powerful set of defences. My grammar, however, may be awry.

☰ The words spoken by the image of Hermione with the rose are adapted from the second stanza of e.e. cummings' 'Somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond' (also see Chapter 1). The actual lines are— 'though i have closed myself as fingers,/you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens/(touching skilfully,mysteriously)her first rose.' The unconventional lack of spacing is correct; cummings formatted much of his poetry that way.

CHAPTER 17

☰ As best as I can puzzle out, *Referio* suggests an aggressive counter-defence that does more than shield a person like *Protego*.

CHAPTER 18

THIS CHAPTER IS DEDICATED TO MOISIE, IN MEMORIAM.

☰ You'll find the meanings of Newfoundland slang words like carawattin' and chucklehead at— <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/dictionary/d8ction.html>

CHAPTER 19

☰ An auto da fe is literally a "judicial sentence or act of faith," usually ending with the public burning of heretics. Also see— <http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/a/m/amw288/>

☰ It's reasonable to assume that by Harry's seventh year, Voldemort will have managed to determine the wording of the entire Prophecy.

CHAPTER 20

☰ Jodel's analyses of events in the Wizarding World between 1945 and 1970 provided much of the foundation for McGonagall's recounting of the Gavin/Ethelwyn disaster. Go forth and read O, THE TIMES ARE OUT OF JOINT! <http://www.redhen-publications.com/Times.html>

☰ The "Great Game" is a reference to espionage. Rudyard Kipling's KIM is considered a classic fictional treatment, and Laurie R. King's recent novel THE GAME riffs cleverly on it.

CHAPTER 21

This is the final chapter of a triptych in which Hawking/Hermione gets a close look at the conflicted mind of Snape. Here are the "new" spells I created:

☰ *Inlusto Obscurus* = reveal or illuminate the unknown

☰ *Contineo* = contain

- ☯ *Extermino* = banish
- ☯ *Inlumino Veritas* = to illuminate the truth
- ☯ *Flamma Ardoris* = light (or flame) of passionate love
- ☯ *Lumen Audentiae* = light of courage
- ☯ *Fulguro* = to be brilliant
- ☯ *Nox Noctis Despuo* = to repudiate gloom and death
- ☯ *Revivisco* = to come to life

CHAPTER 23

- ☯ The title of this chapter's a nod to one of my favourite John Cleese Video Arts films.
- ☯ We know so little about Professor Vector that I see no reason why she wouldn't be a logical choice as acting head of Slytherin House.

CHAPTER 24

- ☯ 'All shall be well: and thou shalt see, thyself, that all manner of things shall be well.' From Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1416), REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE. I see this message as applicable to all kinds of love, not only divine.

CHAPTER 25

- ☯ Jodel made a wonderful suggestion about the Pensieve scene, and Dried Plums provided invaluable help in formulating the physics/magic aspects of this chapter (complete with a mini-quantum physics seminar!). The concept of "multiverses" is explained with clarity and wit in this SLATE article:

<http://slate.msn.com/id/2087206/>

CHAPTER 28

- ☯ Thank you to Sophierom for permission to use some of her comments about Dumbledore's motives ('He makes the tough decisions not because he loves power but because he loves the wizarding world.'). And special thanks to Jodel for being midwife at the birth of a new class of shape-changer.]

CHAPTER 31

New spells (with apologies for any mangled Latin!):

- ☯ *Abscindo*: to wrench away.
- ☯ *Incarcerous Intortus*: a tangled, twisted version of Incarcerous
- ☯ *Aegis Carborundorum adversum*: shield against Carborundorum

CHAPTER 32

- ☯ It was Dr. Martin Luther King who said—'Darkness cannot run out darkness, only light can do that.'
- ☯ The wording of the spell used by the seven against Carborundorum and Voldemort is inspired by a passage from Sherri S. Tepper's splendid novel Gibbon's DECLINE AND FALL. Tepper's quote: '...there is hope in two women, help in three women, strength in four, joy in five, power in six, and against seven, no gate may stand.'

COLOPHON

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign. Some Graphic elements were based upon photographic images shot by Carla Breeze and published by Rizzoli in PUEBLO DECO and L. A. DECO. Note: the actual images were *not* used in this Project. Clip art and stock photography from Dynamic Graphics was used in this Project, modified in Adobe Photoshop, Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop.

Fonts used: Body text is the Prioer Serif family, by Johnathan Barnbrook from Emigré foundry. Titling, pagination, etc., is ITC Anna and ITC Mona Lisa solid. Script fonts used are Handscript Upright and Pen-style from WSI and P22 foundry's Michaelangelo, Monet, Rodin, Hopper (Edward & Josephine), Vincent and La Danse. P22's Morris Golden and Morris Troy are also used as is Richard William Mueller's Primitive. The 'typewriter' font used is Trixie from the Font Shop. Typographic decorations are from Bill's DECOrations and Fontek's Type Embelishments 3. Fontek's Willow and Helvetica Neue were also used in the graphics.

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