

Hayseed's

Dark Gods in the Blood



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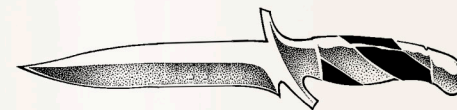


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Hayseed's
Dark Gods
in the
Blood

A Harry Potter Novel





A Prologue of Sorts

*They love nature in so far as, for them, she calls
to 'the dark gods in the blood'; not although,
but because, sex and hunger and sheer power
there operate without pity and shame.*

— CS Lewis, *THE FOUR LOVES*



Harry Potter was dead.

It was unthinkable. Two days before he was
to pass his thirty-second birthday, one of the
greatest heroes of our century breathed his last.

So young, people said as they read his obituary. So
young and so *brave*.

He had survived so much. Survived and triumphed in
the end.

A mere child of seventeen — not even due to take his
NEWTs for another three weeks — had returned to the
school from which he'd been abducted not quite twenty-
four hours before. Bruised and battered — on the brink
of death himself — Harry Potter had dragged the cold,
solemn corpse of his greatest foe through the doors of

the Great Hall and deposited the body unceremoniously at Albus Dumbledore's feet before collapsing himself.

Not only had he escaped his nemesis, as he had so many times before, the exhausted young Harry Potter had finally managed the impossible — the utter, wrenching victory over one of the most evil men that had ever lived.

At seventeen.

There was weeping in the streets and a celebration in every house. And their hero just having presented them with freedom from at least one of the monsters haunting their nightmares, the wizarding community finally granted him his fondest wish.

They left him to his own devices.

Well, more or less.

There were always the few who would recognize the young wizard as he lived his small life. Recognize him and approach him, more often than not. Some would thank him and might even shed a couple tears as they wrapped their arms impulsively around his shoulders. A few daring souls would present him with their children, christened Harry in the aftermath of the wonderful Harry Potter's triumph. Mostly boys, of course, but several girls as well.

He never complained, though, tolerating these few meetings with equanimity. In reply, the public permitted his relative privacy.

His wedding, to a pretty, unassuming Beauxbatons witch



he'd met through a mutual acquaintance, was quiet and only attended by those invited. Even the birth of his son Nicholas went unmolested by the public eye, as did the birth of his second child — a daughter called Alice.

By all accounts, Harry Potter had exactly the life he wanted to live.

And now, inexplicably dead.

The funeral details were kept as classified as the most damning of state secrets. His widow and half-orphans, immediately whisked to Hogwarts under the care of Albus Dumbledore himself, were kept cloistered and as comforted as the circumstances could allow.

There, with the assistance of Harry Potter's stolid best friend, Ron Weasley, the funeral was quietly planned, the arrangements for both a service and a burial were made. A baffling request from Harry Potter's Muggle aunt was made for a genuine Muggle funeral service and not denied. Dumbledore and Harry Potter's widow found themselves quite unable to refuse Petunia Dursley's obviously tearstained letter, although they did wonder to themselves why she felt such a thing necessary.

The great Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts and mentor to the now-late Harry Potter, announced to the DAILY PROPHET in front of the Minister of Magic himself that he was intending to give Harry Potter's eulogy. A shaky Ron Weasley, pale and uncharacteristically quiet as



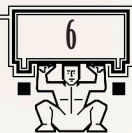
he sat at Dumbledore's side in the same meeting, indicated that he had turned down the offer himself. Dumbledore also added that he would allow the eulogy to be printed in the newspapers, but that the Potter funeral was to be otherwise completely *private*.

This last, announced in a tone that brooked absolutely *no* argument, was an attempt to save Harry Potter in death from the martyrdom he'd tried so desperately to avoid in his life. Public orations of grief usually only serve to resurrect saints, after all.

That did not, of course, keep the requests for details from trickling hesitantly in. A few owls from officials at the Ministry, tentatively arguing that Harry Potter's funeral was a matter of public interest and thus the public should be represented. These owls were, naturally, coldly ignored and went largely unanswered, although Ron Weasley shot off a fiery letter to the Minister of Magic's own pompous request. A copy of said request was later printed, side-by-side, with Weasley's rebuttal on the front page of the *QUIBLER*, although many people believed that those couldn't *possibly* be the actual documents.

And so it came to pass that no one knew where the funeral was to take place, save the closest of family and friends. No one even knew where Harry Potter's *grave* was to be.

Out of respect for their hero, the public allowed this silence to be maintained. As the day of the funeral drew



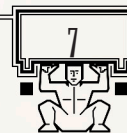
ever closer — a week after Harry Potter's startling death, a mere five days after he would have celebrated his thirty-second year of life — several people were spotted in the streets with suspiciously glistening eyes, in bars sullenly nursing their drinks.

Murmurs rose in the streets, in the bars full of people drinking to forget.

The courageous, glorious Harry Potter, Boy Hero and Kind Savior didn't simply die all of a sudden at such a young age. Especially not, as the *DAILY PROPHET* had phrased it, "at home." And certainly not now — a young man with a budding family and a promising future. He hadn't been in the public eye for more than a decade. Frankly, it made no sense.

The whispers intensified.

Murder.



Chapter One

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly...

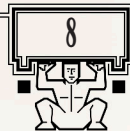
— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



The day that Harry Potter was put into the ground was hatefully sunny and warm. Rays of sunlight sparkled through the stained-glass windows of the Muggle church Harry's Aunt Petunia had secured for his final rites.

A casket glistened at the front of the church, blissfully closed. No one really wanted to see Harry's face frozen in a death mask, no matter how peaceful. Surrounded with flowers, the coffin sat carefully unwatched as the mourners kept their gazes firmly fixed on the Muggle minister, speaking from the pulpit on "a life too short." Only baby Alice Potter, completely oblivious to the day's events, showed any visible interest in the casket, straining in her Uncle Ron's arms to reach out and touch the pretty flowers.

Alice was mostly quieted, however, by the stern look

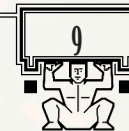


on her mother's face and the openly hostile one on her brother's. Young Nicholas Potter had not spoken a word since his father's death and had only contemptuous looks for the rest of the world. If everyone else hadn't been so listless with grief themselves, they might have worried.

Instead, he was simply permitted to burrow deeper into his mother's side. Françoise Potter¹ sat stiffly in her pew, Nicholas on her left and Albus Dumbledore on her right. Small and wan, she had been nearly as taciturn as her son throughout the entire tragedy. Tears swam in her eyes throughout the funeral service, but she did not allow herself to cry. Only later, when she knew that no one could watch her and pity her grief, was Françoise planning to once more mourn the loss of her beloved.

Ron Weasley, watching his friend's widow closely, was probably the only person in the church who noticed that she was leaning into Albus Dumbledore's side just as her son was leaning into hers. Dumbledore, steel and stoic, had been a pillar to lean on for everyone affected by Harry Potter's death. He had been the first to openly grieve, allowing Harry's family to see his tears. It had been in Dumbledore's gentle embrace that Françoise had begun to cry on that first horrible night; the shared pain a comfort even through its own dark haze.

And further down the pew sat a pale and oddly fragile Petunia Dursley, clutching onto a lace-edged handkerchief



as if it were her sole lifeline. She was entirely focused on the minister, a family friend who was probably surprised to hear of the existence of her nephew, and Ron noticed that she was mouthing the same words he was speaking.

Every now and again, her eyes flickered over the heavy-set man on her right and she gave him a nearly murderous stare. Each time, the man simply coughed uncomfortably and tightened his already strangling necktie, his neck threatening to roll over the sides of his collar in protest. Ron guessed this might be her son, the infamous Dudley Dursley. While Harry and his aunt had come to a fairly familial understanding through the years (particularly once his Uncle Vernon had left his wife for a younger woman), Harry and his cousin had remained firmly at odds throughout their lives. Dudley was probably only attending his cousin's funeral at his mother's vehement insistence.

Alice snuffled in Ron's arms and shifted again, trying to get down. Absently, Ron pulled his attention from the other mourners and concentrated on his adopted niece, making soothing, clucking noises and smoothing down her light curls.

Harry Potter's sun had practically risen and set on this one little girl. He had loved both of his children, certainly, but he and Alice had a particularly special bond. His little Looking-Glass girl, he'd called her.

"What sort of adventures have you had today, little Alice?" he would ask the toddler as he came home from work every

day. "What wonderland have you visited?" Sweeping her up in his arms, he would join in her laughter and listen to her babyish chatter with what Ron thought was cheerful relish.

Ron made a mental note to track down that copy of *ALICE IN WONDERLAND* that Harry had planned to give Alice when she was old enough to read. He would add, of course, a copy of *THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS* to the gift.

That's what Harry would have wanted.

It was unfair, Ron thought sourly, suddenly. *Harry* should be the one to tease his beloved daughter about her quixotic namesake. *Harry* should have to struggle to braid her hair in just the way she wanted it for her first day at Hogwarts. *Harry* should be the one to loom menacingly over her first brave beau.

But Harry was about to be placed into a very large hole in the ground.

Tears prickled at Ron's eyes. Little Alice, sensing his distress, finally stopped twisting in his arms and settled into his embrace, patting his shoulder with her chubby hand.

This, of course, proved to be his undoing, and he wept in earnest. Quietly, unobtrusively, Ron grieved for his dead friend and his children. He caught Dumbledore's eye and accepted the man's complacent nod, tightening his arms around Alice.

He also caught Nicholas' unabashed scowl and frowned through his tears. Harry's death had turned his son into a withdrawn ghost of the bright child he used to be. Unfor-



tunately, Nicholas, who permitted the diminutive 'Nick' only from his deceased father, was, at the age of seven, certainly old enough to know what had happened. To be affected by the severity of it all. Ron hoped fervently that Nicholas hadn't managed to catch a glimpse of his father's body in the chaotic aftermath of his death.

Françoise had been at the market with the children and, upon returning home, she'd found Harry. In the ensuing panic of baffled Aurors unable to detect a hint of Dark magic, of a calmly furious Albus Dumbledore whisking the remaining Potters to Hogwarts, even of Ron himself, standing disconsolately over his best friend and wondering what he could *do*, it was entirely possible that Nicholas' eyes hadn't been completely shielded.

And how could Ron go about asking the child that question? Ron, who still couldn't sleep at night for those horrible images flashing through his mind's eye, ask a little boy if he had the same problem?

Maybe, if Nicholas had indeed witnessed the undisguised horror of the scene, the memories would dull with time. Maybe the boy might even be able to bring himself to speak again. To smile. Anything but that cold look of hatred on his face.

Ron told himself this fervently, hoping it would prove true for himself as well. Hoping that, indeed, the seething trauma of Harry's death might recede to a dull ache. It would never fade completely, of course, but it might become bearable.



He was startled from his musings as the organ struck up some Muggle hymn that he did not recognize. Apparently, the service was over.

Handing Alice over to Dumbledore, Ron rose and approached Harry's coffin for the first time that day, joined by a solemn Neville Longbottom, now far thinner than his chubby youth would have ever predicted, an earnestly tearful Remus Lupin, hair now completely white, despite his mere fifty years, and a recalcitrant Dudley Dursley, propelled to the coffin by his mother's harsh glare.

Ron shook hands with the other three men, struggling to recall what he'd been told of this bizarre Muggle ritual. They were, according to tradition, supposed to carry Harry to his grave. What were they called? Pall-something.

Oh, yes. He had it now.

Pallbearers.

Death's escorts.

Shuddering, Ron picked up one of the coffin's handles, wincing as a fumbling Dudley Dursley managed to drop his. It landed against the wood with a dull thud that caused most of the mourners to jump. Alice let out a quiet, startled cry and Dumbledore pulled her closer.

Slowly, Ron and Neville and Lupin and Dursley bore Harry's body out of the church, feet shuffling and eyes lowered. Once at the entrance, Ron pulled a small, empty tin can out of his pocket and sat it on the ground.



"On the count of three," he told the men, helping them sit the coffin on the ground near the can. "I'll Apparate after you lot with the... with Harry."

"On the count of three what?" Dursley asked irritably.

Ron glared at the man. "Touch the can. It's a... never mind." There was no point in explaining the magic to Dursley. "One... two... three!"

Watching dispassionately as the men Portkeyed to the cemetery, Ron placed a hand on the lid of Harry's coffin a few seconds later and Disapparated, taking his best friend with him.



"Harry Potter was, of course, many things," Albus Dumbledore said quietly. "He was above all things, a loving husband and father," with a gentle nod toward Françoise, who was now cradling Alice in her arms, "a loyal friend," to Ron, who had not been able to bring himself to remove his hand from Harry's coffin since he'd Apparated, "and a good man."

A rustle ran through the small group of mourners, but everyone remained silent and rapt with attention.

"I would feel disloyal toward Harry's name if I dwelt on his childhood achievements," Dumbledore continued, "but I would feel equally disloyal if I let them pass without mention. I was present at Harry Potter's birth — I helped to bring him into this world. I knew him as a young man, full of life and what has



been termed on more than one occasion as 'stupidly brave.'" He allowed himself a wry smile and even Ron's lips twisted at that — a comment that could have only come from the waspish Professor Snape at some point during their school years.

"Harry Potter had been saddled, nearly from birth, with a task that no one should have asked of him. And yet, through everything, he persevered," he said evenly. "Indeed, every person here today owes their lives to this quiet, gentle boy. But when anyone tried to bring this up, Harry would, of course, just smile and shake his head, wanting to speak of happier times." Again, Dumbledore smiled faintly. "I am sorry," he said heavily, "I am sorry that we can now only know Harry Potter through memory, that his children will grow up only being told of how wonderful he *was*, but I can never be sorry that Harry Potter touched our lives and I know that Harry, if he could, would prefer us to consider that. We should not consider Harry Potter 'a life too short;' rather, a life that we are grateful was lived, even in small measure."

Abruptly, then, Dumbledore was silent, head bowed over Harry's grave. The headstone sat off to his left, ready to be placed over Harry in later days — an ominous, hateful final touch..

HARRY JAMES POTTER

31 JULY 1980 — 29 JULY 2012

THE BRIGHTEST FLAME IN THE DARKNESS

Silent tears coursed down the cheeks of nearly every-



one present. Even angry Nicholas wept fiercely, scrubbing at his cheeks and making quiet whimpering noises.

"Love you, mate," Ron whispered to Harry, cold in his coffin, giving the casket one last parting slap before backing away to stand next to Françoise. A warm breeze kissed their cheeks as baby Alice struggled to get out of her mother's arms to explore the grass around her father's grave. Françoise simply clutched the protesting toddler closer, tears wetting her fine curls.

A few mourners approached the casket hesitantly, flowers or other tokens in their hands. Petunia Dursley bore a single white lily, bursting into loud, braying sobs at the sight of it resting on her nephew's coffin. Dudley made a single abortive attempt to turn his mother away, but she rounded on him fiercely.

"Don't you touch me!" she shouted. "One of my beautiful boys is dead and the other one is *glad!*"

Dursley recoiled, trembling hand hanging forlornly in the air. "Mum," he whispered, an agony that even Ron could sense contorting his pudgy features. "Mum, I'm not..."

"Don't be a hypocrite, Dudley," Petunia said, more tired now than angry. She swiped at a few of her tears with that same delicate handkerchief she'd been holding all afternoon. "You remind me of your *father*." But she finally allowed him to silently lead her away from the coffin, toward a car parked a few yards away.

Ron let out an unconscious sigh of relief as Harry's

Muggle relatives drove away. Petunia would be by Françoise's house within a few days, certainly, but through the years, Ron had realized that Petunia was much more bearable outside the company of her abrasive son.

And now, the wizarding community bid its final goodbye to Harry Potter, once the Boy Who Lived.

From somewhere within his uncharacteristically black robes, Dumbledore pulled out a wand that Ron immediately recognized as Harry's. With a single unhesitant gesture, he snapped it over his right knee and Françoise let out a keening cry. Apologetically, Dumbledore laid Harry's wand on the casket, speaking a few words that Ron did not catch.

Finally, Françoise allowed Alice to escape the prison of her arms and the toddler immediately made a beeline for the coffin, patting the wood, finish sparkling in the sunlight, with a little hand. "Pretty," Alice said. "Shiny, pretty."

That was all it took for Françoise to lose her composure entirely, despite her earlier resolve, sagging against Ron and sobbing into his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and allowed a few tears to escape his own eyes, sliding unnoticed into her hair.

Only a few moments passed, however, before Ron felt a warm hand on his shoulder. Looking up from Françoise's head, he met Dumbledore's sad, old eyes.

"Come, Françoise," Dumbledore said softly. "You need to tell Harry goodbye." Leading a still sniffing Françoise



over to Harry's coffin, currently unsurrounded by mourners, Ron swore he saw the stolid Dumbledore's step falter once or twice as they neared their goal.

Not knowing what exactly to do with his hands, Ron shoved them in his pockets and contented himself by keeping an eye on the Potter children. Nicholas was currently in the middle of a circle of adults, tolerating their sympathies with his now-characteristic silence and the usual scowl mercifully not present. Alice was still beside her father's casket, pulling petals off of a daisy that had fallen to the ground and chattering to herself happily.

Ron wondered idly who would have sent daisies to the funeral of Harry Potter.

"Weasley," a quiet, aristocratic voice said from somewhere behind him.

Spinning around, Ron's face immediately settled into the same sort of scowl he'd been seeing Nicholas Potter sporting lately. "Malfoy?" he asked, half incredulous and half furious, "what the hell are *you* doing here? This is a *private* affair!"

Draco Malfoy looked relatively unconcerned with Ron's statement and met his eye evenly. "I came to pay my respects, Weasley."

"Respects," Ron scoffed.

"Yes, Weasley, *respects*," Malfoy echoed, taking a step closer. "Believe it or not, I had — have — respect for Harry Potter. I am also grateful to him for reasons that

your stupid little Gryffindor brain couldn't possibly wrap itself around." His eyes flicked over to the coffin and Ron was shocked to indeed see something akin to respect in Malfoy's eyes. "My most honorable adversary," Malfoy whispered, closing his eyes.

After a moment, however, Malfoy broke his own trance, eyes snapping open and glaring up at Ron once again. "Weasley," he said dismissively, coldly.

"Malfoy," Ron retorted, inclining his head and carefully watching the slight, blond man saunter away.

The crowd was diminishing. Molly Weasley and the twins had long since left, presumably returning to the Burrow. Ginny still lingered in the distance, chatting with Neville Longbottom and placing a tiny hand over his rather larger one in a gesture that made Ron wonder minutely about the nature of their relationship.

Remus Lupin was nowhere to be found, but Ron had expected that. He had taken Harry's death hard, feeling as if he was losing the last of his family and the already prematurely aged man had gained even more lines on his face over the past few days. Ron knew that Remus would retreat even further into his solitary existence now.

Nicholas was now standing near his sister, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his Muggle suit trousers, and he was kicking at a few stones in the grass, scuffing his shoes. Ron thought briefly about going over to the



children but immediately realized he had nothing to say that could improve their situation.

Startled as a hand lay across his arm, Ron very nearly jumped at the voice near his ear. "Are you all right?" Ginny asked him.

Ron looked wonderingly down at his sister. How had she traveled across half of the cemetery in a mere few moments? Glancing at his watch, Ron was startled again as he noted that more than an hour had passed since Dumbledore concluded his short little eulogy. "I'm okay, Gin," he replied with a sigh.

She squinted up at him. "Doubtful," she said. "But I won't push for now."

"Thanks," he said gratefully.

"Mum's having all of us over for supper, you know," she continued carefully. "I know you've been keeping close to Françoise and the children, but they're welcome to come as well."

"I'll see what she thinks about that," Ron said in a non-committal tone. "But I dunno — I think she'd rather be alone tonight."

Ginny appeared to be thinking. "D'you think she would like it if we took the kids over? Mum wouldn't mind — she'd probably keep them through the night if it would help."

Shaking his head, Ron studied Nicholas intently, wondering what was going through the recalcitrant child's mind as he kicked rock after rock. "I don't think they would put up with being away from Françoise. I'll try to

come 'round for supper, though."

"Good," Ginny said, satisfied. "I'm off myself — I've invited Neville to come, as well. I know he and Harry weren't particularly close, but he's really shaken up by everything."

Ron forced a smile and nodded at his sister. "Go on, then."

He continued to watch the mourners leave the cemetery as his sister ambled off toward Neville. His eyes lighted upon one face in particular.

An unfamiliar woman with long hair was standing *very* hesitantly near Harry's headstone, apparently waiting for Françoise to move away from the casket.

After what seemed to be five eternities at least but later turned out to be five minutes, Ron watched, fascinated, as Dumbledore led Françoise away and the woman stepped over to the coffin. She began speaking, although Ron was too far away to hear her words.

Ignoring Françoise's clear plea to leave as she gathered her children and gave him a meaningful look, Ron strode over to the coffin, ire rising. Who was this woman and what did she think she was doing, invading the most private funeral in all England? At least Malfoy'd had more than a passing acquaintance with Harry in the past.

"Can I help you?" Ron asked her icily.

The woman gave him a sad look. "Hallo, Ron," she said.

Momentarily taken aback, there was a pause as Ron collected himself in order to speak. "Who *are* you?" he



asked, tone still rather frigid.

"Oh, *Ron*," the woman replied with a sigh.

There was a tickle of memory in the back of his mind and Ron's eyes widened. He *knew* this woman. Or, at least, he had. Many years ago.

"Hermione?" he asked hesitantly. "Hermione *Granger*?"

Chapter Two

He was the only man of us who still 'followed the sea.' The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too...

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



Hermione Granger smiled tiredly. She'd spent the previous two days Apparating and Portkeying halfway around the world to get to Harry Potter's funeral and arrived, exhausted, at the Leaky Cauldron in London only to find that there was not a single room available. By the time she'd managed to track down lodgings in Muggle London, it was nearly three in the morning.

Hermione Granger was exhausted, mentally and physi-

cally. No small wonder, then, that all she did was smile at Ron Weasley as he goggled soundlessly at her.

"But, but you're..." he stammered after a few moments.

"I'm back, Ron," she said gently. "I couldn't stay away. Not now."

He had recovered sufficiently from his shock to comprehend her words, at least. "You're back?"

"I'm back," she repeated.

With nowhere near the level of exuberance that Hermione usually associated with Ron, he walked around the casket and pulled her into a fierce hug. "You're back," he said unnecessarily in her ear. "Hermione —"

Patting his shoulder, she extracted herself from his arms. "I don't think now is the time for such a long story, Ron."

"Hang on," he said, recovering himself further. "How did you know...?"

"I remembered something Harry said in our seventh year," she replied wistfully. "He said he wanted to be buried beside his parents." Hermione looked around the small cemetery in Godric's Hollow, taking in the three Potter headstones, the last one on the left by far the newest, flecks of quartz in the marble glittering in the horribly persistent sunlight. "I couldn't *not* be here, Ron."

He hugged her again, as if reassuring himself that she was real. "We *were* awfully maudlin children, weren't we?"

With a chuckle that may or may not have been a sob as



well, Hermione reached out a single hand to caress the top of the casket. "I can't believe this," she whispered. "It's not *right!*" Her conviction surprised even herself.

"Right or not, love, it's real," he said sorrowfully. Swallowing mightily, Ron forced the next painful words out in a rush, as if by saying them over and over, he might come to believe the truth in them. "Harry's dead."

"Harry's dead," Hermione agreed in what would have been a thoughtful tone, save the slight tremor, trying out Ron's mantra for herself. "Harry's dead." Quiet, contemplative, hand lingering on the wood and wishing she could see his face one last time but knowing she didn't actually want to. She would rather hold her memory of Harry's easy smile and snapping eyes, not the still death mask she knew rested under the coffin lid.

Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley stood over their best friend's grave for some time, not speaking, not touching.

"Goodbye, Harry," Hermione whispered, bowing her head over the coffin and finally turning away.

Moment broken, Ron followed her with one last backward glance at their friend. "Hermione," he said, taking advantage of his long legs to catch up to her. "Hey, Hermione!"

"What is it, Ron?" she asked, smoothing out an invisible wrinkle in her robes and pushing a curl out of her eyes.

"Well, it's just..." he began. "Mum's having everyone over for supper tonight, you know, and I know she'd love

it if you came."

"Ron," Hermione sighed. "I don't think —"

"No," he said forcefully. "*Everyone* would love to see you again. And I've promised to go 'round myself, once I've gotten Françoise settled with the kids wherever they're going to stay tonight."

"Françoise?" she asked curiously, supper forgotten.

"Oh, that's right," Ron said, more to himself than her. "You wouldn't know, would you? Françoise is Harry's wife." To his credit, his voice only cracked once on the word 'Harry.' "I think she might try to go back to the house tonight. She and the kids had been staying at Hogwarts, with Dumbledore, you see. But I think she's going to want to go back home and she shouldn't spend the night there in that house alone. It's where..." he hesitated, trailing off.

"I understand," she said, a reassuring hand on Ron's arm once more. "And that's true. She should be surrounded by her friends at a time like this."

"A time like this," Ron said mockingly, but without cruelty. "Why is it there aren't any proper words for what's happened? 'A time like this.' A time like bloody *what?*"

Hermione pulled him unhesitatingly into an embrace as his face crumbled and he began to cry in great heaving sobs. "Shh," she clucked into his ear as he wept into the crook of her neck.

"He's dead, Hermione! He's dead and there was nothing I could



do! Nothing *any*one could do,” Ron cried into her shoulder.

“I know, Ron,” she whispered. “I understand.”

“You don’t,” he said disconsolately, lips moving across her now wet skin. “No one does.”

Hermione remained silent at this, heart crumbling at the little boy timbre in his voice.

“Bloody hell, Hermione, my *best* friend in the whole world is dead! It’s like... I don’t know what it’s like!” he roared, finally lifting his head from her neck and giving her a little shake. “A part of me is missing and I keep looking around for it. If you understand, Hermione, please, for Merlin’s sake, explain it to *me*!”

Still quiet, she allowed herself to be pulled into another hug.

As it was, Hermione very nearly jumped out of her skin as she felt a small tug on her robes somewhere in the vicinity of her knees. “Unca Ron?” a tiny voice asked.

Sniffing, Ron released Hermione immediately and dropped into a crouch, hands on his knees. “Yes?”

A little girl of no more than two years old, with blonde curls and round blue eyes, gazed adoringly at Ron. Hermione wondered who this china doll of a child was. “Unca Ron,” the girl repeated. “Mummy want. Bus gone.”

His tears were mostly gone. “All right, sweet,” he told the girl, tapping her nose and picking her up in one practiced motion.

The girl stared at Hermione with a wrinkled little nose. “Who?” she asked bluntly.



“That’s Hermione, sweet,” Ron told her softly, tickling her belly and eliciting a babyish giggle. “And Hermione, this beautiful little girl is Alice Potter.”

Eyes wide at the thought that this was one of Harry’s children, Hermione offered the girl her best smile. “It’s *very* nice to meet you, Alice,” she said.

Nodding, the girl buried her face in Ron’s chest, apparently overtaken with sudden shyness.

“She gets like that sometimes,” Ron said apologetically. “But she’s usually a chatterbox, once she gets to know you.”

Hermione grinned as Alice shouted indignantly into Ron’s robes, “Am not box!”

“Oh, yes, you are, you little monkey,” Ron teased. “But come on, we’ve got to find your mother.”

“Consider your goal accomplished,” a tired voice said from behind Hermione.

Turning around, she saw a pale woman with hair that was slightly more blonde than brown and swollen eyes. “Françoise Potter?” Hermione asked carefully.

With a short nod, the woman scooped Alice out of Ron’s arms and frowned at Hermione. “I am. Who are you?” she asked in a tone just short of accusing.

“Françoise, this is Hermione,” Ron replied. “Hermione Granger. You remember —”

“I remember,” Françoise said coldly, giving Hermione what could only be described as a jealous look. “It’s... it’s



nice to finally meet you, Hermione."

"Likewise." There seemed to be nothing else she could say. *Why don't you seem to like me?* didn't seem to be a good thing to ask at the moment.

"Ron." Turning away, Françoise seemed to be ready to ignore her. "I told Albus that I'm planning to take the children back... back home this evening. Would you... I mean, do you mind...?"

He smiled sadly at her and gave her a sideways embrace. "Of course not, Françoise. I wouldn't *let* you stay there alone tonight at any rate and I'm glad I don't have to bully my way in now. Would you like to leave right now?"

Her trembling lip belying her calm, Françoise Potter nodded once jerkily. "I just have to collect Nicholas — he's got away again. Albus was kind enough to provide me with a Portkey."

"Where *did* Nicholas get to, anyway?" Ron asked, shoving his hands in his pockets and scanning the cemetery.

With a frown, Hermione began to survey their surroundings as well. Quite possibly, Nicholas was Harry's son, but she wasn't about to ask this cold, falling apart woman about it. But a slight movement around an older, crumbling headstone caught her eye. "Is that him?" she asked cautiously, pointing.

Squinting, Ron nodded and began striding across the field, an awkward silence falling between the women, disrupted only by Alice's few noises as she toyed with her mother's hair.



Soon, although not soon enough for Hermione's tastes, Ron came back carrying a sullen little black haired boy of indiscriminate age. There was a visible distance between the two, quite unlike Alice's previous clinging. Nicholas Potter kept as much space between himself and his Uncle Ron as he could possibly manage. "Ready to go?" he asked Françoise, who just nodded again. "I'll see you at Mum's, then?" he asked Hermione awkwardly. "For a bit, at least."

"I'll be there," Hermione promised as she watched Ron and the remnants of the Potter family place their hands on a stone that proved to be a Portkey.

She watched the empty space that they'd occupied for some time before Disapparating herself.



"Yes?" the petite redhead asked with some confusion as she opened the door.

Hermione squinted unbelievably at her. "Ginny? Ginny Weasley? My God, you haven't changed a bit!"

Clearly surprised, Ginny narrowed her eyes. "And you are...?"

Grinning, Hermione resisted the urge to sweep her in her arms. "If you have to ask, Ginny, then maybe I should just leave."

It clicked, then, and Ginny's eyes widened as a smile spread across her face. "Hermione, is that you?" she breathed.

"In the flesh."

The two women exchanged a laughing embrace as Ginny



pulled her through the door and into the familiar Burrow. "I can't believe it," she chattered. "Mum will be so surprised."

"Surprised at what?" came Molly Weasley's voice from somewhere near the kitchen. "Ginny, are you taking in strays again?" she asked as she walked into the hallway, dusting off her floury hands on her apron as she took in her newest visitor.

"Mum," a grinning Ginny began, "you're not going to believe this —"

"Yes, yes," Molly said impatiently. "Well, Hermione Granger, as I live and breathe, I never thought I'd see *you* here again. Maybe you two wouldn't mind getting your hands dirty and setting the table?"

And some things never change, Hermione thought wryly as she found her hands suddenly overflowing with forks and knives as Ginny struggled with her pile of plates.

"I've no idea how Mum recognized you," she said. "You look so *different*, Hermione. So... I dunno, grown up, maybe."

"It *has* been a while," Hermione agreed, arranging her handfuls of silverware in what she hoped was an acceptable fashion around the tables. "How many people are going to be here tonight, anyway? Ron didn't say."

"Oh, so you talked to Ron, then," Ginny said, distributing her plates with a wand flick.

"Cheater," teased Hermione. "Yes, Ron's the one who invited me, actually. He wanted to get Har — erm, Françoise and the children settled at their house."



Eyes rounding, Ginny actually stopped folding napkins long enough to stare at Hermione. "You mean, they're going *back*?"

"Why not?" she asked, genuinely confused.

"Boy, I could *never* go back to the place where *my* husband died. Not to live, I mean," Ginny replied. "I always knew that Françoise had a backbone, but Merlin! It would give me nightmares." With a little shiver, she resumed her work on the napkins.

"Oh," Hermione said in a small voice. It occurred to her as she borrowed one of Ginny's carefully folded napkins to wipe one of her thumbprints off of a spoon that she actually knew very little about the whole thing. "Hey, Ginny?" she continued in that same little voice.

She grunted noncommittally, beginning to distribute the napkins and grimacing as she came up one short.

"How did... how did Harry die?"

Ginny's eyes closed. "I don't know," she admitted. "No one will talk about it, to be honest. Françoise knows, of course, and Ron, too, I think. Maybe Dumbledore, even. He was at their house right after..." Clearing her throat after the long pause, she continued in an even quieter voice. "It was so sudden, Hermione."

Hermione blinked at the *fear* in Ginny's tone.

"I mean, if he'd been sick or something, maybe... but all of a sudden, there Ron was, standing in the kitchen, all covered with soot and Floo powder. 'Harry's dead, Gin,' he told



me," she said, eyes still closed. "In a sort of scary, quiet voice. Not like Ron, you know? He's usually so loud and happy. And that's all he would say, over and over. 'Harry's dead.'"

She remembered Ron from the funeral sadly.

"Anyway..." Ginny straightened up and opened her eyes. "The papers just said he 'died at home,' whatever that means," she said briskly. Matter-of-factly, she folded another napkin and laid it by the last plate.

"Doesn't that usually mean... suicide?" Hermione asked.

With a little shrug, she began fiddling with a corner of the tablecloth. "Come on, Hermione. Harry Potter went to hell and back without killing himself."

Hermione caught herself fidgeting with the spoon she'd been polishing and willed herself to put it down. "I know," she replied. "I know. It's just..."

"Frustrating," Ginny completed with a sad smile. "And you, dropping into the middle of it all, not even knowing the pitiful amount that I do. Why *did* you come back, anyway, Hermione? It's been so long."

Shaking her head, she wondered how to answer such a question. "I had to."

Ginny studied her with narrowed eyes. "I'll let it pass," she told her. "For now. But only because I know Mum will be setting out supper in less than ten minutes. I can smell the bread baking. Want to go roust everyone out of their hiding places and give them a good surprise?" she asked,



mood shifting abruptly.

Hermione allowed herself to be pulled along good-naturedly. This was certainly the Ginny Weasley she remembered — perceptive and exasperating all in one breath.

The Burrow was far more full of people than she'd originally thought. All in all, she and Ginny laughingly dragged nearly a dozen people out of various rooms with the promise of a Molly Weasley feast. As Ginny had surmised, nearly every single person they saw was absolutely floored by the sight of a shyly grinning Hermione announcing the meal. The few that were unfazed simply hadn't known Hermione very well previously — Charlie Weasley and his small family, and Bill and his new bride.

Neville Longbottom's reaction was by far the most hilarious — he didn't speak a word for a full two minutes, mouth and eyes growing increasingly wider. "Come on, Neville," Hermione had chirped. "It's not like I'm a ghost or anything."

"You might as well be," Neville replied faintly, letting Ginny take his arm and lead him out of the sitting room without another word. Arthur Weasley had followed him, flashing Hermione a jovial grin.

And now the entire group was seated in the dining room, platters of food clattering loudly as they were passed back and forth and silver clinking against plates as people began to eat. Hermione frowned at the empty chair on her left as she sipped at a glass of water.



"Oh, Ron will be along shortly, dear," Molly said, catching her look. "I know he wants to make sure the children are..." Trailing off, she sighed forlornly, tearing a piece of bread into crumbs on her plate.

"Oh, Mum," Fred said tenderly, patting her arm.

Her eyes were suspiciously bright. "I can't help it, dear," she replied. "One minute, I'm fine, everyone's fine, and then it just comes crashing back down. That poor, beautiful boy."

"It was a lovely service," George tried. "Even the Muggle bits."

"And the flowers were nice," Fred continued, picking up his brother's train of thought. "Even those ridiculous daisies that Dursley fellow carried in."

"I wonder," Molly said, ignoring her sons' efforts, "I wonder if those babies will ever know how much their father loved them."

"Of *course* they will," Ginny exclaimed from Hermione's right. "Mum..."

Bowing her head for a few moments, Molly finally emerged tear-free but sniffly and picked up her fork again. "I'm sorry," she said to the table in general. "It comes and goes, like I said."

"Nothing to apologize for," Arthur told his wife gruffly, causing Hermione to suspect that he was fairly near weeping himself. "Perfectly natural."

"Well..." Molly said sternly. "We shouldn't be talking about such things, in any case. We should be happy. Harry

would want us to be happy."

Personally, Hermione thought that above all things, Harry would want them to be honest, but she wasn't about to say that out loud. It would be better to simply allow Molly her own convictions.

"Hermione," she said suddenly. "I'm sure you've got an interesting story for us."

Coughing into her water and uncomfortable with the sudden attention, Hermione tried desperately not to fidget with her napkin. "Not much to tell, really," she stammered. "I was gone for a while and now I'm home for a bit." She offered Molly her best smile.

Ginny nudged her childhood friend. "Come on, Hermione, there's got to be more to your life than that. You've been gone for what, ten years?"

"Thirteen, actually," said Ron's tired voice coming from the kitchen. He came into the dining room with a self-deprecating smile and slouched down into the empty chair. "Well, nearly at any rate. Sorry I'm late, but Alice wanted a story."

"How is everyone?" Molly asked.

Shrugging, he began piling food on his plate. "As well as can be expected, I guess," he said. "I'm a bit worried about Nicholas, though. He hasn't said anything all day."

"He hasn't said anything all *week*, Ron," Ginny corrected gently. "But we've all been rather busy, I think."

"I don't like it," he continued through a mouthful of potatoes



and ignoring his mother's warning cough. "He looks so angry."

"For Merlin's sake, Ron, his *dad* just died," Fred exclaimed. "What, d'you want him to be pirouetting 'round the house?"

"He hit Alice right before I left," Ron said dully. "She asked where Harry was and Nicholas just hauled off and slapped her in the face."

The table was momentarily silent as everyone processed this.

"She's... she's all right?" Neville finally asked.

"More stunned than hurt," he replied, taking a huge bite out of his freshly buttered slice of bread. "They've had their squabbles before, but he's never just hit her out of the blue like that."

"It will take time," Arthur told his son with a jerky nod of the head. "It always does."

For a good while, the only sounds in the room were the usual eating noises — forks clinking against plates, a few quiet requests for dishes, and Fred's typical slurping as he gulped down glass after glass of his mother's apple cider.

"That's disgusting, you know," George said to him, frowning.

"Why, George, I never knew you cared," Fred retorted sweetly, deliberately slurping more loudly and wincing as Molly abruptly slapped the back of his head.

"Stop it," she scolded. "There will be none of that tonight." She did not, of course, elaborate.

Supper was a surprisingly solemn affair. Hermione won-



dered at the lack of the usual Weasley rambunctiousness. Even at the darkest moments of their strange childhoods, the Weasley clan could always be counted on to keep everything in proper perspective. Perhaps it took this — the death of a beloved son — to bleed that life out of them.

The silences — and there were many — were strained and the conversation deliberately light. Hermione heard all about Wimbourne's Quidditch prospects (courtesy of Ginny, who apparently worked with the team in some way that Hermione couldn't figure out) and all about some interesting new project development in the twins' ever-burgeoning shop. By the time Molly brought out dessert, all safe topics seemed to be exhausted. Arthur timidly asked his eldest grandson how he felt about entering Hogwarts this next term, but the table fell ominously silent as everyone probably considered in unison that *Harry* had attended Hogwarts.

Hermione was once again cajoled, over blueberry cobbler, to regale them with tales of her mysterious adventures, but she demurred again. It was curious, but she found herself rather surprised at her sudden belief that it was none of the Weasleys' business where she'd been and what she'd done. She allowed them to pry out of her the fact that she'd spent most of the past decade in Tibet, but nothing more. Ron had raised his eyebrows at her, a blueberry husk between his teeth catching her attention



for no apparent reason, but remained silent.

All in all, Hermione bid farewell to Molly Weasley and her clan with something much like relief, allowing Ron to walk with her to the front gate.

"Françoise would like you to come by the house tomorrow," he said with no preamble.

She was glad for the darkness masking her awkwardness at the thought of encountering that woman once again. "Really?" she asked skeptically.

Ron sighed — she knew, even though she could not see it, that he wore his familiar look of exasperation. "All right, fine," he replied. "I want you to come by the house tomorrow. I think you ought to talk to her. Besides, I'd like to spend some time with you, you know."

"I don't know what we have to talk about," she said. "But I'll come."

"Excellent." His teeth flashed in the starlight. "Come by the main Ministry building tomorrow morning around, say, nine? I'll meet you at the front and we can Floo on over."

"The Ministry building?" she echoed, curious.

She felt a finger tap her nose playfully. "My goodness, you *have* been gone for a long time," he retorted. "You do remember where it is, don't you?"

Falling back into old habits long forgotten, Hermione grinned at him. "Shut up, Weasley. I'll be there."

"I know," he replied earnestly.



And then he was gone. Probably gone back to Harry's widow — he'd already said he wasn't going to leave her in the house alone for the night.

Wondering at what she'd stepped into, Hermione Disapparated herself, regaining her balance quickly as the contents her hotel room came into view. She told herself that she should go to sleep, that today had been very emotionally draining and tomorrow was not looking to be any better, but her eyelids simply refused to close.

Somewhere around one AM, she simply gave up on the notion of sleep and threw off her blanket with a huff. She turned on the television, marveling at herself, falling into childhood habits so rusty from disuse that it took a moment for her to recall how to operate the remote. It *had* been a long time since she'd been around Muggle technology, after all.

Settling on an old black-and-white sitcom whose name she could not recall, Hermione tried to lose herself in the mindless banter. Trying to forget why she was back in England for the first time in her adult life and utterly failing.



Chapter Three

"I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally," he began..."yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river..."

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



The house was immaculate. Sparkling clean, the sun glinted off the white countertops in the kitchen and shone on the polished hardwood floors peeking out from under thick rugs. Harry Potter had lived here and, according to Ginny Weasley, he had died here as well. Hermione suppressed a shiver as the front door opened.

Françoise Potter was, again, cold but polite, inviting Hermione in and offering her tea in a monotone, accepting Ron's perfunctory kiss on her cheek without expression. "I am so glad you could make it," she told Hermione in a tone that suggested the exact opposite.

"Thank you for inviting me here today," Hermione replied, pasting on a fake smile and accepting a teacup



with good graces.

They sipped their tea in silence, Ron looking back and forth between the two women as if he was about to speak but deciding against it.

Oddly enough, it was Françoise who broke the ice, setting her cup down on the tray with only a small rattle. "So..." she drawled, tucking an errant lock of hair behind one ear, "did you have a pleasant trip, Hermione? I can call you Hermione?"

"Oh, of course," she replied, disconcerted. "And I must confess, my trip was somewhat lacking. But that was my fault — it *was* hastily planned and I had some difficulty getting into the country."

"Really?" Françoise asked perfunctorily.

Shrugging, Hermione found herself telling this woman far more than she'd originally planned. "One of my Portkeys took me through Russia and they've apparently got a bit of a quarantine in certain parts right now, so England was rather reluctant to let me in without complete documentation of my whereabouts."

"Russia?" she echoed. "Where were you traveling from?"

"Tibet," she said, hoping Françoise wouldn't pry.

She didn't. "Oh, how interesting," she replied blandly. "I've never been to Tibet myself, but we were in Italy a couple of years ago. I'd always wanted to see Florence, you know, and..." Trailing off, a single tear trickled down her cheek as she collected herself.



"I'm sorry," Hermione said, not knowing exactly why she felt the need to apologize.

Françoise waved a hand through her grief. "Everyone is," she said. "I am, too."

Ron coughed into the awkward silence, pouring himself some more tea. "How're the kids?" he asked her quietly.

"Still sleeping," she said. "I heard some rustling from Nicholas' room this morning after you'd already gone in, but I didn't want to bother him. He hasn't been sleeping well. But Alice should be up before much longer. She usually wakes up around nine-thirty."

"Late sleepers, your kids," Ron said, squeezing some lemon into his cup. "I remember when Ginny was little she used to wake us all up at the crack of dawn. That's an awful way to get up, you know — some little brat jumping up and down on your bed, shouting. She still does it at Christmas."

Hermione smiled at her saucer. "I always thought she was such a quiet thing when we were young."

"Quiet?" Françoise asked with a raised eyebrow. "Ginny Weasley?"

"Well, she was always so nervous," she defended herself. "Around... Har — Harry." There — almost no stumbling over his name that time. "Took her *years* to loosen up around him. He hated that. Always wanted everyone to treat him like a normal kid."

Ron met her eyes with a faint smile. "He did, didn't he?"

"Even though he wasn't," she agreed, sipping at her tea.



Françoise regarded their unfolding camaraderie with narrowed eyes, studying them intently, emotionlessly.

All three adults jumped, however, as an unmistakably young cry floated down the stairs. "Ah, that would be Alice," Françoise said, standing hastily.

But Ron beat her to it, already standing at the foot of the stairs. "I'll get her," he said. "You two stay put." And he was gone. Leaving Hermione alone with her, with Harry's widow.

They watched each other carefully, Hermione still sipping her now lukewarm tea, Françoise folding and unfolding her hands in her lap, not seeming to know where to put them.

"Why did you leave, Hermione?" Françoise asked abruptly, startling Hermione so that a fair amount of tea sloshed over the rim of her cup and into her lap.

"What?" Apparently Françoise did not believe in pulling her punches.

She continued to regard Hermione as if studying her under a microscope. "I've always wondered about you," she said briskly. "The great unknown in the equation, you see. The little girl standing beside Ron and... Harry," she choked out, "in all the school photographs. He talked about you," she said wistfully, surprising Hermione with her sudden warmth. "He told our son stories about you from school. He loved you," she said bitterly, again changing gears with an abruptness that left Hermione breathless.

"And I loved him," she admitted. "But we were never in love."



"Of course not," Françoise said matter-of-factly.

Hermione let out a breath she hadn't been aware she was holding. At least *that* wasn't it.

"But he loved you and you left him," she continued. "You left him like so many other people he'd loved. You see, Hermione, I always wondered. I always wondered how you could *do* that to him."

Bewildered, Hermione didn't think before she let a reply tumble over her lips. "I didn't leave because of him. Or because of Ron, either."

"Then *why*, Hermione?" Françoise pressed. "Why did you leave? Harry never knew — he never understood, Hermione."

Stop saying my name, she wanted to shout. "I left because I needed to," she settled on, wincing at the inadequacy of it.

"I hated you for it," Françoise said in a harsh voice. "I hated you because he couldn't. But now, Hermione, now that I meet you and now that I can look in your eyes, I don't hate you."

If she had known this was the conversation she was to have this morning, Hermione would have probably tried harder to sleep last night. "Why are you...?" she began, unwilling to finish the question.

Françoise laughed shortly, a grim little smile flitting quickly across her lips. "Why am I telling you this?" she asked. "I don't *want* to hate you. Maybe one day, I can even forgive you. But I just wanted you to know about the



look of hurt in his eyes whenever he thought about you."

Breathing in sharply, Hermione was surprised at how that cut her. Eyes widening, she was certain Françoise could see the pain in her expression.

And in that moment, she knew. She knew what Françoise was trying to do and she knew what she had done. "I am sorry," she said. "I am sorry for the pain I caused him and," she added after a slight pause, "I am sorry for the pain that I caused you through him. But I cannot be sorry for how I have lived my life. If I had stayed here, I would have caused far worse damage. I would have come to resent everyone around me, hated them, even, for imprisoning me. There would be no fond memories. Can't you see that?"

Françoise sighed. "There are always two types of sight. I can understand your meaning, Hermione, but it will be a long time before I can bring myself to *believe* it."

Bowing her head, Hermione accepted the closest thing to forgiveness she would be offered. "All I can ask is for understanding."

"Perhaps, Hermione, we may someday be friends," Françoise offered.

"You would be a formidable ally," she said with a hesitant smile. After a pause, Françoise returned it and Hermione allowed herself to believe that they might be able to reach an understanding after all.

"She is," Ron said from the stairwell, "a formidable woman. The



only one I know, in fact, who successfully tells Harry what to do."

"For-mud," Alice chirped in Ron's arms. "Mummy for-mud."

"That's a bright girl," he told her, setting her on her unsteady feet. "As long as you keep that in mind, you and your mum will get along just fine."

Alice tugged impatiently at the little dress Ron had put her in, lifting the hem as she tottered toward Françoise. "Dress," she complained with a frown. "Itchy."

"You look cute, though," Ron told her. "And you picked it out your own self, young lady."

"Itchy," she repeated, pulling harder. "Wuh!"

"Oh, all right," Françoise told her daughter, efficiently stripping off the dress and leaving the toddler clothed only in a diaper. "You little nudist," she said fondly, watching Alice take off toward the kitchen as fast as her feet could carry her. "She hasn't been wanting to wear clothes lately," she told Hermione apologetically.

"That will change soon enough, I'm sure," she replied.

To her surprise, Françoise chuckled and then stood up to follow Alice, carrying the tea tray. "I should fix her some breakfast. And Nicholas will be down as soon as he smells the bacon, I'm sure."

"Do you need help?" Ron offered.

"Since when have I needed assistance with bacon and eggs?" she tossed back, disappearing through the doorway.

"It's nice to feel needed," he said, grinning as Hermione

raised her eyebrows at him. "How are you holding up?" he asked her seriously, switching gears. "I heard raised voices."

"We had a surprisingly frank discussion," she said. "I think it helped her."

"Did it help you?"

"I'm fine," she lied, knowing he was not convinced. "I will be," she amended at his frown, more truthful this time. "I'd known but it still hurts to be told."

"We can talk about it later," Ron said placatingly.

Hermione accepted his offering with a grateful nod, leaning into the hand he placed on her shoulder. "It's harder than I'd ever imagined."

"It will get harder yet before we are through," he said cryptically.

It was her turn to frown. "Since when did you begin prognosticating, Ron Weasley?"

He grinned. "That's not a prediction. That's just truth. Would you like to see the rest of the house? I know Françoise would give you the grand tour, but she's busy feeding the starving masses."

"I know about the parlor," she said, glancing around the room. "And I'm sure you were dying to tell me all about the sconces in the foyer."

"The staircase was just repaired," Ron told her. "Harry always preferred to say 'refurbished,' but that was because he didn't want to admit that his house was falling apart."



Standing, she continued to look around at her surroundings. "It's not falling apart," she retorted. "It looks... comfortable."

"You should have seen it right after they moved in," he said. "Françoise was pregnant with Nicholas and she fell in love with the place, so Harry bought it for her. If I remember correctly, the realtor called it 'a fixer-upper with potential,' which is real-estate babble for 'old, crumbling antique.'"

"It's *Victorian*," Hermione defended. "And they've done a lovely job with it if it was that run down."

"After Nicholas is up and about, you should go up and see the kids' playroom," he said. "Harry got Dumbledore to help him put charms up so that the walls look like whatever game the kids happen to be playing that day. Although it gets confused when both of them are in there — a few months ago, I remember Alice having a tea party in the jungle with a handful of lions and elephants because Nicholas was trying to play safari at the same time."

Hermione giggled. "It sounds like a kid's paradise."

"Oh, it is," Ron agreed. "It was one of the first rooms they finished — right after Nicholas was born."

"I wish..." she said. "I just wish..."

"I know," he said to her unspoken thought. "But there's no sense in regrets, love."

Sighing, she allowed him to wrap a comforting arm around her shoulders. "I try not to regret," she replied.



"But I find it an increasingly difficult battle."

"Battles have a nasty way of doing that," he replied, squeezing her shoulders in an aching familiar gesture from her childhood. "When you start to fight and you see the whole battlefield spread out in front of you, it looks quite easy — endless possibilities for victory. But the closer and closer you come to the end, the worse everything looks."

She wrinkled her nose up at him and pulled out of his loose embrace. "I can certainly tell that *you* grew up playing chess."

"Shut up," he said amiably. "We find our metaphors where we can."

"Well... I believe that you have a staircase to show me," she said, moving to stand by the doorway. "And some sconces. If I'm going on a house tour, I absolutely insist on sconces."

Ron followed her nearly sheepishly. "You might be disappointed there," he answered. "Harry and Françoise are a bit too modern for sconces. There might be an old painting or two, though, that I can pacify you with. Although I don't know a damn thing about them — Françoise dredged them up from somewhere. Apparently they're very artistically significant, you see."

"Lay on, then," she said, allowing him to sidle past her in the archway.

They were standing in front of what Ron thought was an old Vermeer² copy, the only part of which Hermione found remotely interesting was the large, gaudy gilt frame, when



there was a loud knock at the front door. She gave him a questioning look and he shrugged in response.

A few moments later, however, Françoise called out Ron's name from the front of the house. Abandoning the Vermeer copy with something akin to relish, they made their way back to the parlor, where Albus Dumbledore sat complacently on a sofa, cradling a teacup in one hand and balancing Alice Potter on his knee with the other.

"Ah, Ron," he said airily. "How are you holding up, my boy?"

Ron sat down himself in a chair opposite from their old headmaster and folded his hands in his lap. "I'm fine," he replied. "As fine as can be, really."

"Good, good," Dumbledore said. "I just wanted to drop by and make sure that everyone was all right. And, of course, to take a cup of Françoise's excellent tea. Quite exceptional, really."

Hermione found herself blinking back tears as childhood memories of this man came washing back over her. He'd always been in the background, strong and gentle. Apparently, he'd never left. The adoring look on Alice's face as she gazed up at him told Hermione that he'd continued to be a strong presence in the life of Harry Potter, at least.

But was that so surprising? Albus Dumbledore played such an integral, paternal role in Harry's youth — it was probably inevitable for them to extend that relationship through Harry's adulthood.



Short though it had been.

But Dumbledore's wandering eye had finally settled on her. "I see you have company," he said mostly to Françoise, sharp gaze transfixing her own, freezing her in her stance.

She inclined her head. "Good morning, Professor Dumbledore," she said. "It's good to see you again."

A single eyebrow rose and he let Alice scramble out of his lap to tug impatiently at Ron's trouser leg. "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage," he replied politely.

Permitting herself a small smile, Hermione sat down in the empty chair beside Ron's. "It's Hermione Granger, sir," she said, wondering what his reaction would be.

Typical Dumbledore. If she'd thought Molly Weasley was unfazed upon seeing her standing in the hallway, it was nothing to Dumbledore.

"The indubitable Miss Granger," he said, eyes now picking up a decided sparkle. "How *good* to see you again. I'd been led to believe that you were out of the country, though."

"I have been," she admitted. "But I came back, when I heard..."

He sighed and sipped at his tea. "Ah, yes."

They were silent for a few moments as Dumbledore continued to drink his tea. Alice sat demurely in Ron's lap, occasionally reaching up to fiddle with his robes, searching his pockets with the matter-of-factness that only the very young possess.

"And where is young Nicholas?" he asked abruptly, eyes swiveling to fix on Françoise.



Her eyes went down to her lap. "Sleeping," she replied shortly. "Or, in his room, at least."

Dumbledore's gaze was sad. "He has taken this much harder than anyone else."

"He hasn't spoken since..." Ron said, twirling a finger through Alice's hair. "It's been a week at least."

"Unfortunately, I think there is little we can do," Dumbledore replied, setting the cup back in its saucer. "Nicholas must come to terms with everything in his own time."

"What a despicable sentiment," Françoise said abruptly, sipping at her own tea. "Coming to terms... if I live a hundred more years, I won't ever be able to..."

Dumbledore gave a wry little shrug and Hermione could swear that a small grin crossed his face. "Perhaps my... choice of phrasing was inappropriate, then," he said by way of apology.

With a snort, Ron plucked his wand out of Alice's curious hand with an expertise that suggested it to be an action that occurred with great frequency. Françoise herself grimaced at the old wizard and put her teacup back on the tray. "You *do* enjoy playing the impenetrable bastard, don't you, old man?"

Hermione bit back a loud splutter as the tea she'd been in the process of swallowing was threatening to escape through her nose. Laughing outright, Dumbledore leaned over to give Françoise's cheek a fatherly sort of pat. "I never

tire of your candor, child. Most refreshing in a world full of obsequious, pretentious folk."

"Another meeting with Cornelius Fudge, then?" Ron asked knowingly.

Hermione found herself rather stunned at the sense of kinship between the other occupants of the room. A connection between Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter was not beyond the stretch of the imagination by any means, but one between Dumbledore and Ron? She tried to quell her rising amazement as the conversation continued.

"That... that," Dumbledore sighed. "I understand the necessity of politicians, but one could hope for an ounce of competence."

"You and my dad need to chat about Fudge over a cuppa one day," Ron replied. "Fortunately, I don't have many dealings with the Minister myself. We're allowed more of a free license than you Order chappies."

With a minute shrug, Dumbledore managed to convey his utter contempt rather effectively. "I cannot explain often enough to Cornelius that the Order is simply out of his jurisdiction. The funeral business was the absolute last straw. Your father agrees with me on that."

"I wrote a letter when I saw his 'official request,'" he said with a nod. "And work be damned — Kingsley will cover my back to the Earth's end. I'm just glad that *he* didn't get word of the location. When that prat Malfoy showed up, I



thought our cover was well and truly blown."

"Malfoy?" Françoise asked, obviously confused. "Who —"
"Draco Malfoy," Ron amended. "I guess you wouldn't know him. He runs in entirely different circles these days, but we all went to Hogwarts together. I *do* wonder how he found out where to show up — we kept it out of every official document."

"I told him, of course," Dumbledore interjected mildly.

Ron's look was incredulous and somewhat wild-eyed. "You *what*?"

"His motives were not questionable," he continued, calm in the face of Ron's rising anger. "While young Malfoy has not always been allowed to operate under his own moral guidelines, he has improved considerably with age. His request was genuine and heartfelt and if I recall correctly, Ron Weasley, he caused no trouble." This last statement was said in a deceptively gentle tone that totally belied the steel underneath.

"Well..." Ron hedged, clearly dissatisfied with Dumbledore's explanation. "Alice," he said, switching his focus to the little girl still in his lap, taking the wand from her yet again. "I said *no*!"

Discontent with her uncle's recalcitrance to bend to her will, the child screwed up her face, probably in preparation to cry. "Unca Ron..." she tried, with wet eyes and trembling lips.

"You manipulative little devil," Ron sighed. "It won't work on me this time. Here... go back to your Uncle Albus

— you can play him like a violin, I'd bet."

He passed the toddler back to Dumbledore and the girl brightened considerably. "Bus!" she cried, tugging on his white beard with aplomb.

Permitting her ministrations with good graces, Dumbledore just gave her little hand a pat. "Ah, the glories of youth," he said.

"Oh, good," Françoise said sarcastically. "Now he's gone all batty again. I've always wondered about your 'cheerful old man' bit, Albus. Every inch the powerful wizard one moment, a tottering old fellow dispensing gnomonic wisdom the next. 'Fess up — you enjoy every minute of it, don't you?"

"I admit to nothing," he said serenely, bouncing Alice on his knee, causing her to giggle with delight.

Bravely, Hermione threw out her own taunt. "At least he hasn't resorted to offering 'round little candies. I *do* remember he used to do that all the time. Whenever tensions were mounting at Order headquarters, he would always interrupt the argument with a handful of sweets."

"Now, how would you know about that when you were supposed to be tucked into bed like good little children?" Dumbledore asked with a knowing smile.

Both Ron and Hermione reddened slightly but remained gamely silent.

"And as for *that* little tactic," he continued, still smiling at their discomfort, "I have been told by many of my colleagues that I look my least imposing when proffering sweets. It has, through



the years, become a little joke, you see. My way of putting people at ease. With varying degrees of success, of course."

"It never worked on Snape," Ron said with a short laugh. "I remember he would always just say something horrible to you and then keep on shouting."

"Fred and George Weasley must have had their Extendable Ears working admirably well far earlier than I'd originally thought," he commented.

To perhaps distract Dumbledore from Ron's ever-deepening blush, Hermione spoke quickly. "How is Professor Snape, anyway, sir? Still terrorizing students down in his awful old dungeons?"

An awkward silence fell over the room — Ron became very interested in the patterning of the rug under his feet and Dumbledore studied the top of Alice's head intently. Françoise, of course, looked serene as ever and began collecting their teacups back on the tray, disappearing into the kitchen.

"Of course you wouldn't know," Ron said quietly. "Thirteen years." He laughed bitterly.

"What?" Hermione wondered.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore said with sorrow in his voice. "Severus is... not himself."

She did not understand. "What do you mean?"

His eyes were cheerless as he elaborated. "He's been a resident of Perkins Mental Institution up in Yorkshire for these five years past."



Chapter Four

I couldn't let it rest, though; but when an opportunity offered at last to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones.

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



Hermione found it was best if she did not think on her current actions much. Dwelling would only cause second thoughts and then she'd back out and curse herself for the coward she usually was.

Dumbledore's words echoed unpleasantly in her brain. *Perkins Mental Institution.*

Professor Snape had gone mad?

She remembered him vividly from her school years. He was, after all, far more of a presence in her day-to-day life than the mystical, mythical Dumbledore.

And she remembered many things about him. Irritable, irate, and thoroughly unpleasant. A man it took her many years to be able to respect and a man she knew it would take her a lifetime to be able to stand.



And one of the sanest men she'd ever met.

Most wizards seemed to have idiosyncrasies. Dumbledore had his 'barmy old coot' impression, Arthur Weasley had his mad plug collection, Alastor Moody had his killer dustbins. Even that awful old Bartemius Crouch'd wound up having a soft spot for his murderous son that ended up being his undoing. But Severus Snape?

The closest thing she could recollect to a quirk (or even a weakness) that he had was a fondness for being particularly cruel to the Gryffindors in her year. Harry Potter, mostly.

Certainly the Professor Snape she remembered was less of a candidate for a mental institution than she was herself.

All of these thoughts, plus a thousand more that didn't bear further reflection, whirled through her mind as she laid a finger on the grubby sock the toothless old witch held out to her. "Ten o'clock to Yorkshire, dearie?" the hag asked.

As she was jerked forward by her navel, she questioned her motives. As she stood atop a hill and looked down into the actual town of York, she continued to question them.

Even as she stepped firmly through the doorway of Perkins Hospital for the Mentally Challenged, she asked herself what in the nine hells did she think she was about? In her obviously mended robes and with her flyaway hair, what was she *doing* as she marched up to the receptionist's station?

"Yes?" a rather matronly looking woman asked kindly. "May I help you?"



"I'm here to visit a patient," Hermione heard herself saying as if from a distance. "Severus Snape?"

"All right," the woman replied pleasantly. "And your relationship to the patient? Just for records, of course."

"I'm a..." She hesitated. Somehow, 'I'm an old student of his who's dying of curiosity,' didn't sound like the most correct thing she could say. "I'm a friend," she settled on.

Severus Snape's friend.

Who would have thought?

If the receptionist was surprised, she did not show it. "I'll just need your signature, then," she said, holding up a sheet of official looking parchment. "And you'll need to give us your wand," she continued as Hermione scribbled her name. "And any sharp objects you might have on your person. It might be best if you just empty all your pockets. Oh... and your shoes. We'll need those as well."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Is he dangerous?"

The woman smiled sadly. "Only to himself, my dear."



He was already seated at a table in the room when she walked in, feeling oddly vulnerable in her stocking-feet and naked without her wand. Snape simply looked at her passionlessly and quirked an eyebrow.

For her own part, Hermione was silently stunned, feet slipping forward of their own accord, carrying her to the



empty chair across from his.

They'd cut his hair.

There were four things that defined Snape in her mind. First and foremost were those robes, billowing around his ankles and flapping in his wake like so many adoring sycophants. Then, of course, was that hooked, aristocratic nose, suggesting a sort of ruined nobility oddly fitting to his position as a master of Slytherin. But third and fourth went hand-in-hand — those intensely dark eyes, burning with an inner furor as he descended on some hapless student, and that hair, hanging down in his face, worn incongruously long for someone who was otherwise rather practical in his habits.

The robes she hadn't expected to see, but the replacement white Muggle hospital scrubs were still a bit of a shock to her system. The eyes were dull and listless, but the hair...

The hair was the most startling thing. Cropped closely to his head, only the bangs sitting limply on his forehead held a suggestion of the person he used to be.

This man, this shaven wolf, was not Professor Snape. Maybe he had been, many years ago. But Dumbledore had effectively hit the nail on the head.

Severus is... not himself.

And whoever this was, whoever this gray spirit inhabiting the professor's body happened to be, Hermione knew that the Snape she remembered would have held him in the highest contempt.



She kept her silence, however, and waited for this creature to speak.

The man regarded her sullenly, quietly, with the air of someone who feels greatly put upon but would not deign to mention the injustice he was enduring for her sake.

Wondering at herself, Hermione held her own tongue in kind, deciding that she had already made the first move by stepping through the doorway. The next move in the game, then, was most certainly his.

His eyes held hers even as his head tipped slightly toward the tabletop. Inwardly, she cried out as the expected hair did not fall into his face. Perhaps he registered the slight shift in her emotions as the eyes narrowed minutely.

Still, neither of them spoke, choosing to regard each other in mute fascination.

He was even more pale than she remembered, his skin nearly matching the starkness of his scrubs. Not bothering to look under the table, she knew she would see his bare feet. If she was not to be permitted shoes in his presence, he certainly would not be allowed them either.

Maybe he wore socks.

An unexpected giggle bubbled up in her throat. *Professor Snape, are your feet as cold as mine are on this infernal floor?*

He sat back in the chair, arms folded over his chest in a clear dismissal.



But she was not to be ordered about by this... this shade. Hermione remained firmly in her own seat, staring resolutely back at him. If he was fazed by this, it did not register on his features as his eyes met hers forthrightly.

Seconds ticked by achingly — Hermione longed for her watch, sitting in a box under the receptionist's feet along with her wand, her hotel key, and her Oxfords. Her hands itched to *do* something; fingers to tap, palms to rub against her knee. Hermione willed them still.

Even the mere shell of Severus Snape made her fidgety, apparently.

Time stretched out and curved back into itself as she and Snape stared at each other in this sterile box, seated on dry clinical chairs, the table a sanitary landscape between them. She had never felt further away from any human being in her entire life.

His cold, impersonal lack of regard disconcerted her more than the overt dislike he'd displayed throughout her childhood.

Yell, she mentally cried at him, shout, rail, berate me! Anything to convince me that you're alive!

He showed no signs of understanding her inward pleas, continuing in what was beginning to be unbearable silence.

Hermione, continuing to stare into those placid eyes with horrified fascination, still could not convince herself of his insanity. Severus Snape may not have been himself, but he was no madman either.



Why, then, was he trapped here?

A line from a play floated into her memory abruptly — *Stark, raving sane.*

Too sane, maybe. His flat eyes and blank expression could make her believe that. Maybe Snape had stopped dreaming.

Again, laughter threatened to escape her mouth. The thought of Snape *ever* dreaming was appalling at best.

As his gaze bored into her skull, Hermione felt his sanity closing in around her, stifling her. She did not know how much time had passed as they sat in their stuffy little room, but she did know that she could not bear another moment of it.

Hastily, starting a bit at the loud scraping of the chair echoing off the walls, Hermione stood, beating a quick retreat from the room.

If she had been looking at Snape's face, she might have seen the spark of indefinable emotion in his otherwise bleak stare. As it was, she only thought she heard a dry voice whisper in her wake.

"Run away, little girl."



"You have the most uncanny habit of showing up where I least expect you, Hermione," Ron said through a mouthful of sandwich.

She shrugged. "Good intuition."

He grinned, picking up his water glass and saluting her with



it. "Are you *sure* you don't believe in Divination, little girl?"

"Shut up," she retorted amiably, sitting down in the empty chair across from his.

Motioning down at his half-full plate, Ron looked at her expectantly. "D'you want something? I've got a fair amount to work my way through and they're very quick with orders."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Although I confess I would never have thought in a million years that I'd find you at a Muggle café in the middle of London, eating lunch as if you'd done it all your life."

"They make a killer Monte Carlo here," he said, draining his glass. "Not to mention their croissants. I make it a point to eat here whenever I have enough of a lunch break to leave the Ministry."

"The Ministry," she repeated thoughtfully, stealing a chip off his plate. "What exactly do you *do* at the Ministry, anyway?"

"Auror," he said thickly, licking his fingers. "I went into training right after you... well, you know."

"After I left," she supplied kindly, pushing down the little voice in her head that hissed, *ran away, you mean*. That little voice sounded enough like Professor Snape to unsettle her completely. "An Auror, eh?" she said in an effort to ignore her mental discomfort. "What's it like, living out our childhood dreams, then?"

He regarded a chip with a frown. "Boring, for the most part. There's paperwork like you wouldn't believe, and I

work mostly at a desk now. We used to think that being an Auror was fighting evil and making a difference in the world. Mostly, it's just chasing after shadows, wishing you *could* make a difference. We've rounded up most of Voldemort's Death Eaters, though."

Blinking at the subtlety of the shift in subject, Hermione realized that for all of Ron's usual diffidence and characteristic cheerfulness, he'd changed far more than she'd given him credit for. "You have?" she asked, wondering what he was working up to.

"Yeah." Twirling the last chip in his fingers idly and oddly elegantly. "Actually, Snape was a big help in that — six months or so after I finished my training, Snape came out on our side publicly and started hunting down Death Eaters as if his life depended on it. I dunno — maybe it did."

She remained silent, pondering the insinuation.

"In fact," Ron continued with a bleak chuckle. "He was there the day we caught up with one of the last big ones. Macnair. When everything went all to hell."

"What happened?" she asked, curious.

With a little shrug, he swallowed the last chip and wiped his fingers on his robe sleeve, ignoring his napkin neatly folded at his elbow in a gesture completely familiar to Hermione. "We were ambushed," he said. "We had a team of twelve. Snape was at point — he tended to be, you see, since he knew the hideouts better than anyone else. And



he was going in high and I was going in low. What we didn't know was that Macnair had wired his whole damn place to blow. I'd no idea he knew enough about Muggle explosives to do such a thing. And you know what? The crazy bastard *laughed* as he triggered the device. Looked Snape straight in the eye and just hit the button, giggling like a goddamned schoolgirl."

The mental picture was difficult and terrifying. "Oh my God," she breathed.

"Snape was the only one unhurt at the end of it all," he said with a shrug. "Ironical, when you think about it, really. Macnair himself was blown sky-high. We found just enough pieces to know he was dead. But I never will forget that — the stink of blood and burning flesh and Snape in the middle of it all, dragging men out as the building fell apart around our ears. That's when I finally understood what he was — that he wasn't Dumbledore's pet Death Eater on a tight leash. When he stumbled across me, choking on the smoke and clutching onto what later turned out to be Macnair's left arm, he just clapped a hand over my eye and pulled me out. Never said anything about it."

Captivated, Hermione leaned across the table, unable to reconcile this horrible tale with the easygoing Ron Weasley and caustic Professor Snape from her childhood. Mouth open, she found herself speechless.



"Some shrapnel caught my eye," Ron admitted. "And there are some things magic can't fix — I lost twenty-four degrees of peripheral vision on my left side. Just annoying in the day-to-day, but it finished up my career as a field Auror. Can't be effective when all a baddie has to do is sneak up on the correct side to completely blindside you. But the Ministry found me a desk and a place at the Academy to teach when the mood strikes me."

He laughed and there was only a little bitterness in it. "My career was over at twenty-six. Eight months later, Dumbledore announced at an Order meeting that Snape was out of commission. Dad dragged it out of him, where Snape actually was. I guess..." Ron's voice crackled with some unidentified emotion. "I guess after all he'd seen, he just cracked. I know I would have," he admitted freely. "I still wake up with a scream caught in my throat dreaming about that night. Only four of us wound up surviving."

Still stunned, Hermione stared at Ron, not knowing how to react. In that moment, ire and sadness a curious blend in his eyes, she knew. She knew that her happy-go-lucky friend was no more himself than Severus Snape had been. In his place was a hardened young knight who'd discovered that the dragons he'd ridden off to fight had deadly claws and deadlier fire. He was simply better at pretending — that was all.

"I think maybe Harry was happy," Ron said reflectively, another subtle subject shift that Hermione barely caught.



"I *know* Mum was. Happy that I was out of the line of fire. But Harry was, too. We fought about it, you know." His eyes were wounded, now, wounded and reminiscent of the child that he'd been many years ago. "Harry and I entered the Aurory together, ready to take on the world. When he dropped out of training, he expected me to as well, and we fought when I didn't. He and Françoise visited in the hospital — Nicholas was just a little bit, then. And that *look* in Harry's eyes — that almost satisfied sort of 'See what you've gotten yourself into' look..."

He trailed off, apparently trapped in that painful memory. "I saw him today," Hermione said abruptly into the silence. "I went to see him."

Head jerking up, Ron's face was pale. "*What?*" he breathed.

"Snape," she clarified, not liking the hope in Ron's eyes. "I went to see Snape. At the institution."

His face lost its haunted look. "What on Earth for?" he asked curiously. "I mean, I almost did — back after I'd been taken off commission at work, but why would *you* go see him?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I just felt like I needed to. It was *awful*."

"I'll bet," he said with a faint smile. "*He's* awful."

"No," she said slowly, shaking her head. "It wasn't that. It was just... it was awful."

"Did he say something to you, then?"

"Nothing." Hermione laughed shortly, humorlessly. "We

didn't say a word. We sat there for nearly an hour, just staring at each other. And then I got up and left."

"Hrm," Ron mused, pulling his wallet out of a robe pocket and extracting a few Muggle bills. "Strange. Oh well... that's Snape for you, I suppose. It wouldn't be fair to us Gryffindors if he was easy to figure out, now would it?"

She laughed genuinely, then, more relieved than she cared to consider as the good humor returned to Ron's face.

"Oh... before I forget," he continued, laying the money on the table and standing with a quick stretch. "Françoise wanted me to ask you if you'd like to come 'round on Thursday afternoon, maybe stay for supper. If you'll still be in town, that is?"

"I'd like that," she said, hesitating only briefly. "Thursday, eh?"

"Yeah," he confirmed with a broad smile. "Say, when *are* you leaving again, anyway?"

Hermione shrugged, almost unwillingly. "My itinerary is not fixed," she admitted. "And I hadn't really considered how long I would stay here."

He gave her a calculating look. "Someday, Hermione, you'll have to tell me what sort of job you've got that lets you take an open-ended vacation like that."

"Someday," she said, evading his gaze.



Chapter Five

In the street — I don't know why — a queer feeling came to me that I was an impostor... The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though... I were about to set off for the center of the Earth.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



So, Hermione," Molly Weasley began pleasantly, spoon clattering against her saucer. "What have you been up to these past few days?"

She shrugged, still stirring her own brew. "Just poking around, mostly. Seeing what's changed and what hasn't. I was up in Hogsmeade yesterday, Diagon Alley before that."

"And has anything changed?" Françoise asked, bemused. In her lap, Alice chortled and continued to make a mess of her teething biscuit.

"Of course," she replied, taking a small sip of her tea and mentally pronouncing it correct. "I noticed a couple of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes shops that hadn't been there when I was last around," she said with a small smile in Molly's direction.



"Oh, you wouldn't *believe* how the boys' business has taken off," Molly said, taking her cue beautifully. "Why, they've got at least three shops now, in addition to their catalogue. They're talking about going overseas next, branching out into France." She shook her head. "Who would have thought? And they still set fire to the Burrow at least once a month with their 'research.'"

"It's nice to know that *some* people haven't changed," Hermione said wistfully, eliciting a small laugh from the twins' mother.

"And how are your parents doing, young lady?" Molly asked, switching gears. "Have you paid them a visit?"

She froze, knuckles whitening around the handle of her teacup. "I... uh... I am no longer on speaking terms with my family," she finally said, hoping against hope that the usually rather nosy Molly Weasley would know to let it alone.

"Ah," she replied uncertainly. "Erm..."

"Have you made plans for your return?" Françoise inserted smoothly as Molly still fumbled for an appropriate response.

She accepted the effort gratefully and offered Françoise a rare genuine smile. "Not exactly," she said. "I was told to take as much time as I needed. I rather think I'll know when I need to go back."

"And you have been in... China, you said?" Molly asked, obviously digging for information on what was apparently a less volatile subject.

"Tibet," Hermione corrected automatically.



Françoise chortled and extracted her necklace expertly from Alice's questing fingers. "I suppose you've taken up with a pack of monks, then, and you're learning their ninja ways from the lowliest cook, who speaks only in the most cryptic of metaphors?"

Permitting herself an inward smile, Hermione put on her best imperturbable face. "Master Xi is the gardener," she said. "And I am simply learning whatever he will teach me. Thus far, ninjas have not been mentioned."

Her jaw dropped. "You're joking."

"No, I'm not," she said. "The brothers are kind and their Path is a simple one, to hear them speak of it." Her expression turned rueful. "I am, unfortunately, finding it more difficult. I have, however, learned to tell the onions from the weeds and for that the entire monastery is grateful."

"What sort of things do they *do*?" Françoise asked, clearly unsettled by Hermione's admission.

She took another sip of her tea. "Good things. They pray and they chant and they meditate. They also take in lost souls when it suits their purposes."

"You sound like Albus Dumbledore," she grumbled, setting Alice on the floor to explore.

"I ought to take that as a compliment," Hermione said with a laugh, "but I know better."

"Ron and Harry *did* always say you were extraordinarily intelligent," she said.



Molly gave the pair of them an indulgent smile as she finished her tea. "Perhaps we ought to —"

But her suggestion was cut off as a loud knock at the door sounded. Before Françoise could even begin to stand, the door swung open and a thin blonde woman wearing a large smile sauntered in as if she'd done it every day of her life. "Françoise, *darling*," the woman cried, holding her hands out limply.

For her own part, Françoise only sighed minutely as she stood and smiled in kind. "Petunia," she replied, grasping the hands and allowing her cheeks to be pecked.

"How *are* you holding up, my dear?" Petunia asked. Hermione had a sneaking suspicion this might be the infamous Petunia Dursley and wondered what she was doing here.

"As well as I can," she said, returning to her seat. "We were just —"

"Oh, and you have *company*," Petunia continued, glancing around the room. "Molly Weasley," she said in a sweet tone, "how *good* to see you again."

"Petunia," Molly said tersely, lips tightening. "You're looking... tidy."

Petunia finished her survey of the room, ending up staring squarely at a suddenly fidgety Hermione. "And who is *this* charming young lady? I don't believe we've ever met."

Standing reluctantly, Hermione was shocked when the woman actually pulled her into a quick embrace. "I'm Hermione Granger," she said once she'd been released.



"Oh," Petunia said, giving Hermione's shoulder a little squeeze. "You must be one of Har... one of his school friends. I'm Petunia Dursley, and I'm very glad to meet you, my dear."

Before Hermione could properly collect her wits about her once more, Petunia Dursley was seated in a nearby chair, tea in one hand and Alice in the other. "I just wanted to drop by, you see," the woman was saying, "and make sure you didn't need anything."

"No, no," Françoise replied, settling back in her own chair. "We're fine, as you can see."

"Where's Nicholas?" she asked abruptly, shifting Alice on her lap so that her earrings were out of the little girl's surprisingly long reach.

"He's in his room," answered Françoise gamely, keeping a blank face. "He's not been very... sociable for the past few days. I've been taking his meals up to his room, in fact — he doesn't seem to want to come down. Albus feels that he'll come around when he's ready to."

"Oh, yes," Petunia said with a sage nod. "He's got to *grieve*, after all. And he's always been such a sensitive boy..."

Blinking at the woman's prattle, Hermione struggled to recall all that Harry had told her about his aunt through the years. It seemed to be the same woman *physically*, at least — blonde hair, poorly dyed now, with gray roots at the temples, a long, thin neck, and a rather horsy-shaped face, complete with large teeth. She also remembered something about a



nasty temperament and such blatant favoritism toward the repugnant Dudley (who she'd thankfully never met) that she'd struggled to even mentally justify the woman's actions.

Where, then, did *this* lady come from, chatting with Harry's widow and casually bouncing his daughter on his lap? This couldn't be the same person who served Harry cold, canned soup through a cat flap for nearly half of the summer after his first year at Hogwarts. This solemnly smiling, tea-sipping woman had imprisoned her only nephew in a cupboard under the stairs for the first ten years of his life.

Hermione hated her on sight, wanting nothing more than to snatch Alice out of her arms and order her out of Harry's home.

Glancing furtively over at an increasingly thin-lipped Molly Weasley, it appeared as if she shared Hermione's sentiment.

Fortunately, however, Petunia Dursley had only planned on spending half of an hour with the Potter family, finishing her tea and putting Alice back on the ground with a pat on her curly little head. "Well... I'm sorry I can't stay and chat any longer, Françoise," she said, smiling apologetically, "but I've got bridge at Marie Chambers' in a bit and it wouldn't do for me to be late."

"Of course not," Françoise agreed. "It was good of you to drop by, Petunia." She gamely underwent another smiling embrace with Harry's aunt before escorting her to the door and through it, closing it with another one of those polite little sighs. "She means well," she said to Hermione's



confused gaze and Molly's frankly disapproving one.

"I never," Molly harrumphed. "A cat could have raised poor Harry better than that awful woman. He happens to turn out well and she's right there to claim all of the credit."

"Now, Molly," Françoise admonished, sitting down again and pouring herself another cup of tea from what Hermione was beginning to suspect was a bottomless pot of sorts. "Petunia Dursley was nearly as much of a victim of that awful husband of hers as Har — as he was."

Shaking her head, Molly's face looked as if it were set in stone. "She *could* have intervened," she persisted.

"Not in the pattern of behavior for abused women," she argued placidly. "Vernon Dursley ruled his family with an iron fist — she would no more have intervened on Harry's behalf than she would have flown to the moon. All in all," she concluded, turning in her chair as Alice toddled out of her line of sight, "it was probably for the best when he ran off with that young chit and left her high and dry."

Hermione idly noted that she spoke Harry's name without a tremor for the first time since she'd met her.

"She *did* change after that," Molly admitted grudgingly. "I remember — it was right before you and Harry met. That boy of hers was still in university and there she was with no job and with that horrible husband threatening to throw her out of the house so he could sell it. Harry actually took her in for a bit, let her live in his flat while she

got the divorce straightened out. That's when everything changed between them, I guess."

"She realized that he wasn't some sort of changeling babe dropped on her doorstep after all," Françoise agreed with a small chuckle. "Freshen your cup?"

"Oh no, dear, I'm fine."



Ron shot Hermione an apologetic look as he strapped a protesting Alice into her high chair. "It seems as if we might not get to supper, after all," he said.

"I don't see why it's so important to her that — what's his name, again? — he comes down," she replied, rather taken aback by the sight of Ron battling a small child and losing miserably.

"Nicholas," he supplied. "And neither do I, really. If he wants to sit up in his room, doing whatever it is he does up there, who cares?"

She sighed. "There's probably some parenting principle at work here that I don't know about."

Ten minutes later, Ron finally snapped the tray in place on Alice's chair. "Not fair," the baby pouted adorably, lower lip jutting out.

"It's not going to work on *me*," he warned, handing her a cup with a lid on it. "I know you too well."

"Gah!" she cried, throwing the cup on the floor.



"Apparently *both* Potter children are pissy this evening," Ron grumbled, eliciting a small snort from Hermione. He scooped up the cup and put it on the table out of Alice's reach.

Grunting with frustration, she reached for it, curls shaking slightly as she strained. "Want!"

"Are you going to throw it this time?"

Alice put on what Hermione suspected was her most innocent look. "No, Unca Ron."

He picked the cup up and shook it at her. "You throw it and you're not getting it back again. Deal?"

"Deal!" she cried sweetly, pitching it halfway across the room as soon as her tiny fingers wrapped themselves around it.

"Alice!" Ron shouted, fetching the cup again. Hermione smothered her laughter with no small effort.

Eyes sparkling, she held her arms out again. "Want."

"No," he snapped, shaking his head. "I'm not playing this game, Alice."

"Want," she repeated, more frustrated.

"No." Ron crossed his arms over his chest and glared down his nose at her in an uncanny imitation of Professor Snape.

"Want!" she wailed, fat tears swimming in her eyes.

Ron was silent, shaking his head as Hermione gave him a questioning look.

Mere seconds later, the tears were tumbling down her cheeks and Alice was beginning to cry in earnest.

"Erm... Ron?"



"No, Hermione," he said firmly. "She's just doing it to get what she wants. Believe me — I've spent more time babysitting *this* kid than I have all of my other nieces and nephews put together."

Alice continued to wail, Hermione's ears beginning to ring in protest. "Ronald Weasley," came a stern voice from the doorway. "Why is my child crying?" Françoise moved swiftly to Alice's side, making soothing noises. The child soon quieted — Hermione swore she shot Ron a victorious look as Françoise put the cup in her outstretched hands.

"Françoise..." Ron tried.

Shaking her head, she gave Alice another little pat and straightened. "Let's just have supper. Everyone's here and the table is set. Hermione, I forgot to ask, do you eat meat?"

"When it's offered, yes," she said cautiously.

"Oh, good," she replied. "I fully intended to have Ron inquire as to your eating habits, but I forgot and I didn't want to offend your sensibilities. We're having ham. It's Nicholas' favorite. You're not Jewish or Muslim, are you?"

With a small laugh, Hermione shook her head. Where had this slightly worried, rational woman been hiding under the exterior of the cold, angry one she'd encountered a few days ago?

"All right, then," she said definitively. "Let's sit, then. You too, Nicholas."

Blinking, Hermione turned her head and saw the same



little boy she recalled from the cemetery studying his shoe-laces. He moved automatically to the table and took what she assumed was his usual seat, not looking her way once.

Françoise sat down beside her daughter and Ron took the seat at the end of the table not butted against the wall, leaving the chair beside Nicholas empty. The boy froze as Hermione took it, still not looking at her — she realized instantly that this was *Harry's* chair. She tensed and Françoise gave her a curious look. "I —" she began, not knowing what to say.

"It's fine, Hermione," she replied with a slight tremor in her voice. "It's fine," she repeated more firmly, focusing on Nicholas sternly.

Relaxing minutely, she took the bowl full of string beans that Ron pushed at her and began filling her plate with food, tension easing more fully as forks began to clatter against plates. She allowed her mind to drift.

"Anything interesting at work today?" Françoise asked Ron conversationally. And then, to Alice, "No, dear... let me cut that for you."

"Nah, not really," Ron said, swallowing a mouthful of food. "I went over to the Academy for a half-day and gave a self-defense lecture. Those new recruits are awfully scrawny — I wonder what they're feeding them at Hogwarts. You know, someone asked me something that might interest you, Hermione."



"What?" she asked, startled out of her half-listening by his off-handed comment.

He chuckled and she knew she'd been caught out. "One particularly soft looking fellow asked me what it was like to have Potions classes with the old bat Snape. Apparently he's transcended into somewhat of a legend at school."

"Not surprised," she replied with a slight snort. "He was rather brilliant at inspiring terror."

"This man seems to come up often lately," Françoise said blandly. "I hadn't heard his name more than five times in my entire life before I met you, Hermione. And now he's mentioned at least once a day. Who is he?"

"Just an old professor," Hermione said carefully. "But he was a memorable character, you see. I just find it strange that he wound up at an institution, is all."

"I find it strange that you took it upon yourself to visit the old bastard," Ron said, chewing on a roll thoughtfully.

"Ron!" Françoise scolded. "Language!"

He shrugged. "Sorry... kids, don't say 'bastard,' all right?"

Nicholas remained firmly focused on his plate — Alice grinned at her uncle. "'Tard!" she crowed, clapping her hands.

"Oh, good," Françoise said faintly, putting a handful of string beans onto Alice's tray. "Ron, I don't think I'm going to allow you around my children any more."

"Great Merlin, Françoise, who's going to teach your children to swear and cheat at Exploding Snap if I'm not



around?" he teased. "Especially since you've banned at least two of my brothers from entering your house."

She rolled her eyes. "I didn't *ban* them..."

"But you did hex them and throw them out... Fred and George are right terrified of you, you know."

"Ron," she exclaimed. "They turned my son into a puppy!"

"They changed him back," he argued. "And I'm sure he didn't mind much — right, Nicholas?"

Nicholas glanced at Ron briefly — Hermione could not see his expression — and then returned his attention to his plate.

Argument forgotten, both Ron and Françoise were giving the boy a concerned look. Even Alice, sensing the change in mood, gave her mother a perplexed frown. If he noticed (or cared), Hermione could not tell.

"Nicholas," she said quietly, pronouncing his name for the first time, "would you please pass me the rolls? I can't reach them." She wondered for a moment if he would comply.

As if in slow motion, Nicholas' hand drifted lazily toward the basket, fingers taking their time in wrapping around its edges. She watched in curious fascination as he pushed the basket toward her plate, still not looking at her.

Deliberately, Hermione let her hands close over his as she took it. "Thank you, Nicholas," she said demurely, aware that both Ron and Françoise were watching this bizarre interchange avidly.

Startled by her touch, the boy finally looked up into her



face. The blood drained from his cheeks as he stared with horror into her confused eyes.

Hermione idly noticed that Françoise actually jumped with surprise as Nicholas flung himself out of his chair wildly, knocking it over in his haste and backing into a corner, lips curled into an unconscious snarl and frightened eyes still locked with her own.

Françoise started toward her son, a single hand outstretched. "Nicholas, what on Earth...?"

He didn't even blink, just kept eye contact with Hermione. Reminding her more of some sort of feral animal than a little boy, he tucked himself further into the wall, still sneering.

Hesitantly, she reached out her own hand. "Nicholas..."

Nicholas opened his mouth and began to scream — long and loud and wordless.

As the chilling cry shivered its way down her spine, the rational part of Hermione's brain that was still functioning noted that this was the first sound he'd supposedly uttered in nearly two weeks.



Chapter Six

They were dying slowly — it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now — nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



Perhaps it was Nicholas Potter's brief recovery from muteness that sent Hermione back to Yorkshire the following week. As she pulled her fingertips back from the Portkey, staggering in the aftermath of the trip, she told herself rather convincingly that it was, not wanting to try and guess about possible deeper motives.

Certainly the outburst had been shocking — frightening, even. It had taken Françoise no less than an hour to completely calm the child. His scream had escalated quickly into keening, hysterical sobs. Ron, of course, had immediately busied himself with a now squalling Alice, who had decided to join her brother's already deafening cacophony.

For her own part, Hermione just watched.



Nicholas, eventually soothed, was allowed to escape upstairs and Alice was put to bed as her fussing became of a more petulant, sleepy nature. The adults moved to the sitting room, pale and unsettled, sipping at coffee and trying desperately to pretend that the evening had been pleasant.

"I'm sorry," Françoise had attempted to say. "I don't know what got into them tonight."

Shortly after, Hermione left, Apparating back to London and stretching out on the hotel bed. That half-animal, fearful look in Nicholas' eyes haunted her — she didn't know what to make of it.

What had she done to provoke such a reaction?

In truth, Hermione wasn't even sure that Nicholas knew just exactly who she was. She hadn't introduced herself to him and she had no way of knowing if he'd made the connection on his own.

But that look in his eyes.

Even if it wasn't the entire reason her feet were currently carrying her continually closer to Perkins Hospital for the Mentally Challenged, it was a large part of it.

The receptionist offered her a warm smile as the door clattered open. "Good morning," she said. "I remember your face, miss, but I'm afraid I don't recall your name."

Hermione was oddly gratified at the 'miss.' At thirty-one, she knew she probably didn't have many more years to be addressed as such. "Hermione Granger," she sup-



plied with a pleasant smile. "I'm here to see —"

"Severus Snape," the woman interrupted. "I *do* remember that much. Poor fellow — he has so few visitors. You remember what to do?"

Nodding, Hermione toed off her shoes and began emptying out her pockets. She'd actually gone out and bought a thick pair of socks this morning before leaving London, recalling the cold hospital floor tiles with a shiver.

"And your wand, too, my dear," the receptionist reminded her, putting the shoes into a box.

Not five minutes later, she was ushered into the same little room she'd met Snape in before. She noted with some relief that if the tiles were cold today, her feet did not notice it.

He was already seated — at the exact same table as before, actually. Giving her a curious look, he lifted an eyebrow as she slid into the chair opposite his.

They resumed their staring match from the previous week, a corner of Snape's mouth quirking at what Hermione suspected was a rather sullen scowl on her face. She willed her expression not to change, not wanting to relinquish that small bit of control to him.

Seconds stretched into eternal minutes. Having once again lost track of time, Hermione blinked and broke away from Snape's eerily calm stare.

This was *stupid*.

The chair scraped loudly against the tiles as she pushed



it back in preparation to stand. But Hermione froze in place as Snape actually began to speak.

"I have been thinking," he said matter-of-factly, "about who you are."

Her shock at hearing words come out of his mouth was so great that she found herself actually quite literally unable to form a coherent sentence. Deciding that it would be best not to gibber, she remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

And he did. In that same dry, pedantic set of classroom tones she remembered from a childhood that seemed further away by the second. "I will admit that there is something... oddly familiar in your appearance," he admitted. "But I doubt that you are one of my infernal cousins. They have not bothered to claim me for more years than I care to count."

Again, she waited quietly as he paused, whether for effect or to breathe, she did not know.

"My conclusion, therefore, is that that fool Cuthrell has sent you in to spy on me. Well, you may tell him that I have no more to say to him than I have previously. Good day to you, madam," he said in a clearly dismissive tone.

She did not know whether to be amused or angry. In the end, her reaction was mixed. "I don't know what you're talking about," she replied coldly, finding her voice finally.

His eyes narrowed. "Do not play me for a simpleton, please. I may be a resident of a mental institution, but



that in no way brands me an idiot."

"I never said that you were, sir," she said truthfully.

A fist slammed down on the table suddenly, shades of the Snape she remembered more and more apparent in his behavior. "I will *not* talk to Cuthrell!"

"Who *is* Cuthrell?" she asked, trying to placate him with the same calm look he'd been disconcerting her with so effectively before.

"Your employer, I'm sure," he sneered, rearranging his hands on top of the table. "You are casting aspersions on my intellect again, madam."

She stared at him openly, guilelessly. "Truly, sir, I don't know anyone who goes by that name. My name is —"

"I do not *care* what your name is, you little fool!" he cried, exasperated. "Run away and tell Cuthrell that his games are not working."

"But —" she tried, half-afraid of his irate reaction. This Snape was out-of-control — if she'd been frightened of him in her youth, it was nothing to what she was feeling in the pit of her stomach right now.

Is he dangerous? she'd asked.

Only to himself, the woman had replied.

Hopefully that was true.

"Get out," he said in a low voice. "Get the *fuck* out of here!"

Startled by the uncharacteristic expletive, Hermione found herself complying rapidly, beating a hasty retreat



and hating the smile on his face as she left.



Only caring that she was out of that room, Hermione didn't notice the man standing beside the door until she'd actually run into him. Pondering how she'd suddenly gone from standing to sprawled on the ground, the man had to speak before she realized he was there.

"I'm sorry," he said, holding out a hand.

Ignoring it, she pulled herself to her feet. "It's not your fault," she replied. "Actually, *I* should be the one apologizing — *I* ran into *you*."

"Not at all," he said blandly. "In fact, I ought to be thanking you."

"What for?" she asked, mystified.

The man smiled, highlighting his already handsome features. "I'm Jake Cuthrell."

"Oh..." she said, considering this. "*You're* Cuthrell, then. Why is —?"

"Why is Severus so insistent that he not speak with me?" the man — Cuthrell — asked, completing her question for her. Another radiant smile — Hermione was beginning to suspect he was trying to charm her. "I'm his doctor," he said.

"Doctor?" she echoed, hoping he'd elaborate.

He glanced around the corridor with a somewhat furtive look in his eyes, gaze finally coming to rest on the still form of Snape



through the window, not moving from his previous position. "Perhaps we should have this discussion in my office."

Frowning, Hermione followed Cuthrell down the hall, through a number of doors. She eventually found herself sitting in a rather uncomfortable wooden chair in a richly paneled office, Cuthrell fixing her with a penetrating gaze from across his desk that only increased her discomfort.

"Right," he said, shuffling a few papers around and plucking out a few apparently pertinent ones. "As I said, I'm Jake Cuthrell, Severus' primary therapist. I know from the records that your name is Hermione Granger, but your relationship to the patient is listed only as 'friend.' If you wouldn't mind...?" he led.

Shrugging, she stared at his desktop, tracing the whorls in the grain with her eyes. "I knew him many years ago," she said. "When I heard where he was, I just wanted to see him. Dr. Cuthrell —"

"Jake," he supplied warmly.

"Dr. Cuthrell," she repeated firmly. "Would you please tell me what's happened to him? He was always intense, but this... this..."

Cuthrell coughed rather self-importantly, giving his papers another good shuffle. "Well, Hermione..."

Miss Granger! she wanted to shout, voice stuck in her throat.

"Hermione, I'm afraid that Severus is a rather complex case. He's been here for the better part of five years and

has spent most of that time steadily refusing treatment."

"Treatment?" she echoed carefully.

Sighing the sigh of one heavily put upon, Cuthrell finally took his hands off the papers and Hermione glanced up to see the martyred expression on his face. "Despite our best efforts, Severus' depression is complete and devastating. We have resigned ourselves to merely preventing his suicide attempts. Of which there have been many."

"He's suicidal, then," Hermione said. *Only to himself.*

"He was committed involuntarily," Cuthrell explained, "after having swallowed copious amounts of rather painful poisons on no less than four separate occasions. We have not managed to ascertain the reasons for Severus' rather severe depression."

She could not contain her curiosity. "Why not?"

He frowned. "Hermione, Severus Snape has not spoken a dozen words in the last year. Before that, he would talk sporadically but absolutely refused to discuss anything related to his treatment. Fortunately, we no longer have to feed him with an IV."

Hermione gasped, putting her hands to her mouth. She could barely believe what her old professor had come to. Narrowing her eyes, she tried to glare at Cuthrell. "While I appreciate your candor, Dr. Cuthrell," she said. "I confess I do not understand why you are choosing to disclose this obviously sensitive information to me."

With a little chuckle, he resumed rattling papers, push-



ing several into a manila folder she hadn't noticed under the mess. "You see, Hermione, you are the first person Severus has openly spoken to in five years. I am curious as to why and anything you could do to enlighten me on the subject would be helpful."

Wrinkling her brow in confusion, she considered his words. "I am as confused as you are," she admitted slowly. "He and I were never *particularly* close."

"Nevertheless," Cuthrell continued breezily, "I would also appreciate any further efforts on your part."

Her eyes widened. "Are you asking me to spy on him for you?"

"That's unnecessarily harsh, Hermione," he replied with a small wince. "I am simply asking for assistance in Severus' successful treatment. Surely a *friend* of his would be willing."

Standing, she felt her back muscles sigh gratefully as they were released from the confines of that horrible chair. "No wonder he thought you sent me," she said tightly. "Dr. Cuthrell, if Professor Snape won't talk to you, I believe that's between you and him. Goodbye, sir." She turned on her heel and walked toward the door, not noticing him mouth the word *Professor* with a question in his eyes.

But his voice was menacing as he called to her back. "I can restrict your visits, Hermione. You'll never set eyes on him again."

She turned around again to glare at him. "You wouldn't do that, Dr. Cuthrell."

"Try me." He gave her a wolfish grin.



"First of all," she said, returning his grin with a deceptively sweet smile, "he will see that as confirmation of his suspicions and you'll never get another word out of him. And second..."

"Yes?" he prompted impatiently, apparently unconvinced.

"I wonder what Albus Dumbledore would think if he heard about it," she said breezily, smile widening.

Cuthrell's mouth fell open. "How do *you* know Albus Dumbledore?" he asked scornfully. "For that matter, how do you really know *Professor* Snape?"

She laughed then, delighted that he hadn't recognized her name. "You're right," she said in a derisive tone. "He *hasn't* told you anything if he hasn't mentioned Harry Potter."

Hermione deliberately shut the door as she walked out of Cuthrell's office.



He was still there. As Hermione made her way back through the hallway, she saw Snape still seated languidly in the little visiting room.

Taking a deep breath, she made an impulsive choice and pushed the door open, stepping into the room and offering Snape a half-hearted smile. "Hallo," she tried.

His face settled into a familiar scowl. "I saw you squirrel away with Cuthrell," he accused.

"First time I'd laid eyes on him, personally," she said, sitting down. "He's rather unpleasant, isn't he?"



Eyes narrowing, the scowl deepened. "You will not placate me with such blathering nonsense."

"Of course not," she retorted. "That was not actually my intention, sir. I was merely stating fact. He *is* unpleasant."

Snape did not rise to her bait, choosing instead to continue to glare at her in silence.

"Although..." Hermione began thoughtfully, "he did share a few pertinent points on your condition with me. I *am* sorry."

"Sorry?" he echoed with a sharp bark of laughter. "Whatever for?"

"Probably just in general," she said. "Although I wish I could say that I feel sorry for what has happened to you — I just don't think you'd take it well."

He frowned and Hermione got the startling impression that if he were forty years younger, he'd stick his tongue out at her. "You are rather convinced of your own cleverness, aren't you," he sneered. "Who *are* you, anyway?"

"You won't like it," she warned.

"Of course I won't," he agreed uncharacteristically complacently.

Hermione nodded at him. "I'm Hermione Granger."

Snape's expression was immediately shuttered. "Get out."

"I *told* you," she said.

"Come to make fun of old Snape, have you?" he asked bitterly, face twisted with anger. "Well, go ahead." He held his arms out limply, exposing his chest.



"No, I —"

Interrupting her, Snape's anger seemed to intensify. "I had nothing to say to you years ago, Miss Granger, and so I have nothing to say to you now. Get out."

Suddenly angry herself, Hermione remained firmly seated. "Professor," she began sternly.

His face drained of emotion as abruptly as it had arrived, leaving only a tired irritation behind. "I am not a professor any longer, Miss Granger."

"Snape, then," she snapped rudely, jerking her head in a nod. "I assure you, I did not come here to make fun of you or to spy on you or to do any of the wretched things to you that I'm sure you've imagined."

Snape looked increasingly horrified as she spoke. "Oh, sweet Merlin," he muttered. "You're here to *fix* me, aren't you? Miss Granger, I will not say it again — get —"

"I will *not*," she retorted. "I am no longer your student and it's been years since you could tell me what to do. Can we *please* discuss this like rational people?"

"In case you have forgotten, Miss Granger," he said derisively, "I am not rational. I am mad. I have an entire *team* of doctors telling me so on a daily basis."

"Whatever you wish," she said, dismissing him with a wave of her hand. "I am not here to fix you either."

"Well, then, why *are* you here? People will say we're in love.³" This was accompanied by a sly sort of smirk that



made Hermione dimly wish she had her wand.

Reluctant to reply, she hedged for a moment, until she could no longer stand his ever-widening grin. "I don't know why I'm here," she eventually said. "When Dumbledore said where you were, I just felt like I ought —"

"You spoke with Albus?" he interrupted quickly. "When?"

"A couple of weeks ago," she replied.

He scowled and settled back in his chair, irritation turning into a fine sulk. "*Albus*," he spat through grit teeth.

"He didn't tell me to come here," she said. "In fact, he probably doesn't even know."

"I'm sure he does," Snape said with a long-suffering sigh. "He'd make it a point to, if I know him as well as I think I do."

She remained silent, not knowing what to say.

After a few more quiet moments, Snape lowered his gaze to the tabletop. "I think, perhaps, Miss Granger, that it is an appropriate time for you to leave, if you don't mind."

Probably more acquiescing due to his remotely civil tone, Hermione stood and nodded. "Good day, then, Snape."

He snorted as she left. "Good day, indeed."



Chapter Seven

'In the interior you will no doubt meet Mr. Kurtz.'
On my asking who Mr. Kurtz was, he said he
was a first class agent; and seeing my disap-
pointment at this information, he added slowly,
laying down his pen, 'He is a very remarkable
person...'

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



Ron couldn't believe that she'd gone to see Snape again. It had been strange enough the first time, but the second time was completely inexplicable.

Apparently he'd yelled at her, which had caused his therapist to go into a frenzy and ask Hermione to help him figure out Snape. She'd threatened the fellow and gone back to talk to Snape again.

While Ron's opinion as to the general sanity of the entire female gender had shifted minutely through the years, he was still convinced that Hermione Granger at least was completely 'round the bend. At least *some* things never changed.

He pulled his mind back to reality long enough to reg-



ister the fact that baby Alice was currently shoving a box under his nose with a pout on her little face. "Piggy!" she cried, giving the bright box a wave for good measure. "Watch piggy, Unca Ron!"

Sighing, he plucked the box out of her chubby fingers, wincing at the slick feel of what Harry said the Muggles called 'plastic.' Ron had never gotten used to the Muggle technologies that Harry (and probably Hermione, too, although Ron had never asked outright) was accustomed to. He also didn't understand why Harry had thought it necessary to bring his children up with a foot in both worlds, living in a Muggle-built home just outside of a town that was less than half wizarding. Nicholas attended a Muggle school, even.

"For culture," Harry had always said when Ron made some distasteful gesture toward whatever new Muggle toy Harry brought home. Something called a 'comp-tor' for Harry's office, a machine that washed clothes for Françoise that she spent more time complaining about than actually using. The latest of Harry's mad Muggle purchases had been a toy of some sort that had Nicholas thoroughly excited. A 'station-player' or some such nonsense. Ron knew it hooked into the television and Nicholas could play games with it, and that was about as far as it went. Harry had spent literal hours with his son, battling animated monsters and laughing at the fun of it.



And so it was that he regarded the shiny disk that Alice wanted him to put into the machine that made talking pictures with nothing short of abject fear. He finally worried it out of its case, realizing in the last few moments that if he pushed a button, the disk released itself. Unfortunately, though, Ron could not immediately see how he was to put it into the machine. He dimly recalled a little tray to put the disk in from last time (shiny side down, Harry had said with laughter in his tone), but it was nowhere to be found on the machine's front.

Ron sighed, knowing he was bested. "Hey, Nicholas?" he called, turning toward the staircase. "Can you come down for a minute? I need your help."

After a few painful moments, the boy appeared on the stairs, giving Ron a quizzical look.

"The PVC machine," he explained. "The one that makes movies. Do you know how to work it? Alice wants to watch that one about the pig she likes so much. You know... *Babe*."

Wordlessly, Nicholas came down the stairs and plucked the disk out of Ron's surprised hand. He deftly punched a few buttons on the front of the machine, causing it to spit out the tray Ron recalled, and inserted the disk, pushing a few more buttons for good measure. Work apparently done, he turned away from the machine and was halfway up the stairs again before it occurred to Ron to call out.

"D'you want to watch it with her?" he asked hurriedly.



"Only your mum asked me to bring in the laundry as well and I can't be in two places at once."

"Pig!" Alice shouted as the screen flashed up some ridiculously singing mice. Nicholas appeared to be engaged in a mental debate. "Piggy, Nic'las!" she said, crawling up the stairs to tug at her brother's shirttail.

With a decidedly reluctant look, he made his way back down the stairs, sister carefully in tow. Once they were seated on the sofa, quietly watching the television, Ron slipped out of the room and out the back door.

He and Nicholas had never gotten along spectacularly. Probably more through Ron's fault than Nicholas', of course. There was just something about the boy, always had been. Something... disconcerting. Sometimes he had a way of looking right through you, as if he could see just how insignificant you were. It was difficult to befriend that.

That didn't mean Ron hadn't tried to overcome his disinclination. Quite the contrary — he'd made an effort to try and get along with Nicholas. And sometimes it worked. Sometimes they could pretend. But with Harry out of the picture, without the potential for the hurt that he always thought Harry would feel if he realized his best friend and his son did not get along, Ron didn't feel the need to pretend that Nicholas' glares weren't disconcerting. So in the end, he preferred just to leave the child alone. His latest goal was to keep his life as pleasant as possible in the face



of his grief, after all, and glowering seven-year-olds just weren't part of that picture.

Of course, if pushed, Ron would have to admit that this desire unfortunately included the inclusion of one rather cheerful, slightly cynical young man whose life had become so entwined with Ron's own that he found himself unable to leave the fellow's widow and children alone, spending day after day, week after week, with them. On the particularly bad days, Ron could not bring himself to believe that Harry wasn't at work. That he wouldn't come stumbling in, late, laughing and bearing prototypes of his latest creations to put into his kids' outstretched hands.

Nicholas' glares were, if nothing else, a good reminder to Ron that this was not going to happen. That Harry was gone. Dead.

Harry was dead.

He still had not repeated it enough. Harry's ghost still flickered through his mind, invading his thoughts, pervading his dreams, waking and sleeping. It sat on Nicholas' features, on Alice's... hell, even on Françoise's. *Harry's wife*, Ron still thought of her. *Harry's wife* — not just *Françoise*.

Maybe if he stayed long enough, maybe if he repeated his mantra enough, Harry would stay dead. Harry's face would rest in Ron's mind and not on his son's brow. Françoise's smile would once again reach her eyes and not just sit on her face with nowhere to go.



With a soft snort, Ron began unpinning a sheet from the clothesline and folding it awkwardly. He had no place to be questioning Hermione's motives, then. If he was staying with the Potters to kill a man that had died more than a month ago, he had no right to ask Hermione why she felt the urge to visit Snape not once, but twice.

But still...

Snape used to make her cry, Ron remembered. Before he knew what Snape was, just the mention of the man's name used to make his temper simmer. All he thought of were the tears coursing down his friend's face as the man snapped at her one too many times, said one too many unforgivable things. Her appearance, her mind, her behavior, *nothing* was sacrosanct. All through Hogwarts, if asked, Ron would have said that Snape may have enjoyed tormenting Harry Potter the most, but Hermione Granger was an unfortunately close second.

And she went to visit him in the loony bin. When no one else apparently would.

It boggled the mind.

Of course, Ron told himself as he finished the bedclothes and began folding one of Nicholas' Muggle t-shirts, *Snape* rather boggled the mind himself. What was it he heard people say? *A puzzle wrapped in an enigma.*

Severus Snape made children cry, had the temperament of a rabid, starving weasel, and the all the appeal

of a train wreck. But he also pulled people out of burning buildings, seemed to be inhumanly loyal to Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix, and in general sacrificed himself continually on the altar of Good, until it had consumed him completely.

No wonder he went nutters.

Ron began pulling Françoise's unmentionables off the clothesline, quickly dropping them, unfolded, into a separate basket he'd grabbed just for this purpose. He would do anything for Harry's widow... except fold her knickers. *That* was an issue she could handle on her own, not to mention one that Ron didn't want to consider, even for a second.

Pushing this thought out of his head as quickly as he could, his previous musings inevitably returned.

There was one thing he hadn't told Hermione about Snape. Something he always wanted to keep to himself.

Harry didn't know. Harry wouldn't have understood. He couldn't make his peace with Snape like Ron could — he hadn't seen the man in action, wand held outstretched, throwing curses like one possessed, fighting — always fighting — the Enemy. The Death Eaters.

Snape had come to see Ron in the hospital one day.

He'd been at St. Mungo's for so long. The doctors searched and searched for an answer to his injury. Maybe this charm, this potion. Every day, enduring strange side effects and horrible tastes. They kept him in St. Mungo's



for more than three weeks. *Monitoring*, they said.

But Snape showed up one day.

He must have asked Dumbledore about it. Harry hadn't been able to come and see Ron that day, and his mother was off, visiting Charlie and his newest son. Ron was all alone.

And then Snape was there, standing unbelievably awkwardly in the doorway, nose wrinkled at the medicinal smell that permeated St. Mungo's from basement to attic. "Weasley," he'd said, with an even *more* uncomfortable nod.

Ron hadn't believed, until that exact moment, that the self-assured, temperamental Snape could *be* awkward. "Professor Snape," he'd replied cautiously.

His head was bandaged that day — the charm one of the nurses had been instructed to cast had left his eye oozing blood disturbingly, and so it was wrapped up, in hopes of staunching the slow, steady flow. So he had a rather lopsided perspective of Snape approaching the bed, moving jerkily, as if under the control of a puppeteer. He did not speak.

"How are you, sir?" Ron remembered himself saying inanely. "I hear we've been having rather nice weather as of late, and..." He also recalled trailing off at the admittedly hazy view of Snape's withering look.

"I'm not a professor any more," he said abruptly. "Your address was incorrect, then, Weasley."

"You're not?" he asked, sitting up ever so slightly in his



bed. "What happened?"

Snape shrugged one shoulder in a surprisingly elegant gesture. "Last term, I was barely able to attend my own lectures, let alone manage to pound anything useful into the little cretins' brains. Even Sybil Trelawney has been asked to substitute for me lately." His smirk was grim and so Ron knew it was true. "And this term... Albus thinks it would be best if I... distance myself from my former life somewhat."

It sounded momentarily as if Snape had been fired, although Ron would never have believed Albus capable of such a thing. But then he looked into Snape's eyes with his only remaining one and saw a shocking misery in the man's gaze — somehow, he thought that if Snape had been fired, anger would be the predominant emotion. "May I ask what you *are* up to these days, then?"

"You may not," Snape retorted sharply. Ron remembered he looked rather tired. "You are recovering, Weasley?"

Blinking at the subject change, Ron's words were slow and approaching slurry. "I would be," he said in a dark sort of tone. "If the bloody doctors didn't insist on hexing me daily. They think they can find a *cure*..." There was only a trace of bitterness in his tone if he recalled.

"A cure?" he asked, in possibly the politest voice Ron ever recalled Snape using.

"For my eyes," he explained. "My peripheral vision on my left side is nearly gone. If I wasn't an Auror, they'd



have released me two weeks ago, but the Ministry is pushing for my restoration. I'm useless to them now unless the mediwizards can patch me up."

"Useless," Snape repeated and for a moment, Ron had thought he was going to say something truly poisonous. "I hesitate to endorse the Ministry condemning *anyone* as useless," he'd continued in a dry tone, "especially given its history."

He remembered being absolutely stunned. Albus had told him before that Snape had a sense of humor, but he'd never thought he would have any occasion to be witness to it. "Erm... yes..." he finally said, unable to come up with anything else.

And that had been it. Snape stood, made a dismissive sort of grunt, and walked out of the room, leaving Ron to stare after him.

It had been one of the strangest conversations Ron had ever had. And, oddly enough, one of the most comforting.

It had also been the last time Ron had ever laid eyes on Severus Snape. Eight months later, once he'd cobbled himself together enough to make it to an Order meeting, Snape had been conspicuously absent and Dumbledore made his little announcement.

"Severus will no longer be joining us," he'd said, his usually twinkling eyes dulled. "He is under treatment up in Yorkshire and it is likely that he will be there for quite some time."

No one had to ask. Everyone knew that the only place offering 'treatment' in York was Perkins — the mad house. The only



wizarding mental hospital in Britain, as a matter of fact, and one of the more prestigious ones in the world.

Harry had smiled. Pushed his glasses up on his nose, shot Ron a look that smacked of victory, and *smiled*.

And Ron had tried to feel the same way. Tried to muster up all of that old anger. Thought of Snape's scowls and Hermione's tears.

But then he felt Snape's oddly rough hands on his shoulders, tearing a burning shirt off his back, calloused fingers slapping over his face, trying to hold back the blood. Heard Snape's grunt as he heaved a semi-conscious Ron over his shoulders and walked out of the crumbling building. The smell of Snape's sweat, and the smoke, and the blood washed over Ron in that one nauseating instant and he wanted to hit Harry.

Harry, who'd been *allowed* to bow out of the fight. Harry, who had fulfilled his destiny in childhood and was now able to live a life of his own choosing. Harry, who sat at Dumbledore's right hand during Order meetings even though he didn't understand the real mission at hand. "Voldemort's gone," Harry used to say, "Voldemort's gone and we're free to live in peace."

He thought they were warmongers. Looking for shadows in the sunshine.

Harry didn't *understand*.

And in that moment, Ron knew he and Snape some-



how understood what Harry could not. They could see the darkness even through the light.

But the next moment brought a familiar feeling on its heels — shame. Shame and guilt and self-castigation.

Harry was Ron's *best friend*. They had passed through fire for one another time and time again. How could Ron accuse Harry, the friendliest person he knew, of poor camaraderie and claim that Snape — *Snape*, of all people — understood true brotherhood?

Ron *loved* Harry.

And so he smiled gently at his friend's smirk, indulgently, as a father smiles at a wayward son. Harry could afford to hate Snape — he'd certainly earned the luxury. If Ron did not — could not — well, then, he had his own reasons.

The moment passed entirely, then, and Ron thought little of it afterward. A fleeting impulse upon being reinstated at work and saddled to a desk went relatively unnoticed. Ron had the Portkey schedule in hand, staring at the line reading 11:45, Yorkshire.

He could go and come back at lunch and no one would even notice. Snape had visited *him*, after all, be it for reasons unknown. Certainly Ron had the same privilege.

The urge faded even as he continued to look down at the page before his eyes. Why would he want to go visit Snape? Really... Harry would give him hell if he found out. Besides, they probably wouldn't even let him in the door.



He had no real relationship to the man, after all.

Until Hermione had brought Snape up three weeks ago in Françoise's parlor, Ron had barely given him a second thought since he'd successfully talked himself out of that one visit.

And now he stood out in the middle of the Potters' backyard, holding a miniature set of wizarding robes (Nicholas', by the look of it) and regarding them as if he was contemplating the nature of the very fabric of the universe itself.

"Bloody hell," Ron grumbled to himself, tossing the robes into the basket. What was he *doing* out here? The dry laundry was off the line and while he had no real urge to watch that talking pig film with the kids, it would certainly be better than standing outside, thinking about a fellow he'd known in what felt like another lifetime.

But he remained still, frowning at the grass. A bumblebee was lazily investigating a lone dandelion poking through the green blades.

He wondered if what Hermione saw in Snape was the same thing *he* saw in Snape. The same reason he almost wanted to see him.

The bumblebee circled the stalk once, twice, three times before hovering near the yellow petals.

He wondered if what they wanted to see was the thing that made Snape save his life.

The dandelion tipped under the bee's slight weight, nodding gently at no one in particular. A breeze lifted one of



Alice's little dresses, still damp, perched on the clothesline.

If that was the thing that made Snape save *Harry's* life all those years ago, time and time again.

The bee, oddly agile, flew up abruptly, through Alice's dress, from skirt to collar, and out of sight, leaving the dandelion to shake its head forlornly in its wake.

Ron blew out an impatient breath and turned to go inside, leaving his thoughts behind, holding one basket above his shoulder and clutching the other at his hip.

A high-pitched, bloodcurdling scream made him drop both baskets, however, spilling all of the clean clothes along the grass. Running toward the house, Ron tripped over one of Alice's little romper suits, leaving a stark grass stain along its pink front. He swore and ignored it, still running.

"Alice!" he bellowed upon reaching the back door and flinging it open. "Nicholas!" *Damn it*, he thought to himself. They hadn't been out of his sight for more than half an hour.

But the only reply was that same plaintive cry, mixed pain and terror. It chilled Ron to the bone to hear as he flung himself through the kitchen, catching his shin on a chair and his elbow on the doorjamb.

There was blood.

It flowed down Alice's scalp, staining her shirt, staining the floor. Running down her chin, mixed with her tears as she sobbed, looking up at Ron with wide, fearful eyes.

"Oh, *baby*," Ron cried, dropping to his knees automatically

and gathering her into his arms. "You'll be all right..."

He blotted at the blood carefully with his shirttail, trying to find the source. Continuing to shush the baby, he barely noticed as his own shirt grew steadily wetter, from both her tears and her blood.

"Uncle Ron!" came a shrill, terrified cry. "I'm so... I didn't mean to... she *fell*. She was jumping and I told her not to and she *fell*! Uncle Ron!"

Alice momentarily forgotten, Ron looked up at a disconsolate Nicholas, tears running down the boy's cheeks. "Nicholas?" he whispered.

"She hit her *head*!" Nicholas wailed, nearly as hysterical as Alice herself.

"It's all right, Nicholas," Ron found himself saying, outwardly eerily calm as he turned his attentions to Alice's scalp.

The wound was small — a cut near the crown of her head, little more than an inch long and less than the tip of a quill in breadth.

"Alice, hush," Ron soothed. "It's not that bad... but your head, well, it bleeds a lot when you hit it. Let me clean you up and get the bleeding stopped and then I'll patch you right up. How does that sound, my girl?"

The sobs were subsiding into sniffles and the panic was ebbing from her eyes as he spoke in that patient, tranquil tone he'd learned worked best when dealing with the very young. Using a bare hand, he wiped most of the blood off her face,



while applying gentle pressure to her scalp with the other.

"Uncle Ron...?" he heard Nicholas ask in a fairly tear-clogged voice.

The bleeding had almost stopped. "Yes, Nicholas?" That same calming tone.

"Is... is she gonna *die*?"

Ron's head snapped up as if pulled by a string. "*What?*" he asked, feeling the blood drain from his face.

"Is Alice gonna die, like Papa?" Nicholas repeated, almost whispering. "There's so much *blood*..."

There was a rushing sound in his ears as he stared at the child. Ron couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Nicholas..."

So the boy *had* seen, despite their best efforts.

"Nicholas," he said more firmly, steeling himself. "She just fell and cut her head. Come and see for yourself — it's quite small. If you'd like, you can watch me heal her. It won't take a second."

Swiping tears out of his eyes, Nicholas knelt over his sister, a solemn look on his little face as Ron waved his wand over Alice's head and gently murmured the proper incantation. The boy looked relieved as he saw the wound seal itself.

"There you go, little girl," Ron said, kissing the top of her head and tasting her blood on his lips. "All better now."

She made a hiccupping noise that was at least half a sob. "Unca Ron..."

"We've got to get you cleaned up," he continued evenly.



"You're a right mess, you are."

As he scooped Alice in his arms and made a move toward the nearest bathroom, he felt a hand on his shirt, tugging slightly. He looked down. Nicholas.

"Uncle Ron..." he said plaintively, echoing his sister. "I'm —" Nicholas stopped, a curious look on his face as he apparently found himself at a loss for words.

Ron shrugged and gave him a careful pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Nicholas."

Chapter Eight

There were rumors that a very important station was in jeopardy, and its chief, Mr. Kurtz, was ill. Hoped it was not true. Mr. Kurtz was... I felt weary and irritable. Hang Kurtz, I thought.

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



His eyes opened automatically and Severus knew that it was six-thirty in the morning, despite the lack of any indicators in his little room. No clock, no windows, nothing. Just the sound of his breath, steady, even, and damnably persistent.



In and out, in and out. He counted his breaths. One, two, ...
By breath number sixty-seven, the door unlocked and opened as if on its own, a single hand snaking in to flick the light switch.

Due to the nature of its occupants, Perkins Mental Institution operated on regular Muggle electricity, and the fluorescent glare of the lights hurt Severus' eyes.

"Good morning, Severus," a female voice said pleasantly from the other side of the door — he'd made it abundantly clear years ago that he did not want assistance in the mornings. "Up and at 'em."

He did not respond. It would not be worth the breath to insult her — it would just wash off and she'd never consider it again.

Before — or even in the beginning — he would have taken the time. Insulted, berated, and delighted in her potential tears. Oh, the time he had wasted railing at everyone. Albus, Cuthrell, the nurses, the patients...

But now Severus knew. He knew that such behavior was carefully recorded, and each lovely gem was carried carefully home to be related to loved ones, who would make the appropriate noises. "Surely he didn't say that!" he knew the nurses would exclaim as they swapped stories over their lunch sacks.

He had no intention of being anyone's anecdote any longer. Slowly, patiently, Severus pulled himself to a seated position



on his cot. After a few more moments of quiet, he finally stood, throwing his blanket sullenly to the floor. He shucked off what everyone else called 'pajamas' — blue scrubs as opposed to the dingy white that passed for day wear.

They were not permitted underthings.

Somehow, that was the final indignity in Severus' mind.

He knew it was rather foolish of him. Certainly he ought to have resented the days spent in a Full-Body Bind. The countless number of times he'd been stabbed with a Muggle IV needle because he simply did not feel like eating. Or the fact that he was as helpless as an infant any more where magic was concerned.

But no. Severus chose to resent the more mundane considerations.

Morning tea instead of coffee. No newspaper. The relatively inoffensive existences of his fellow lunatics.

No underthings.

He scratched his head lazily as he felt his shirt settle on his shoulders. Some days, he missed his hair. The short stubble that he lathered up in the shower offended him sometimes and he recalled his first defiant haircut — performed *only* after Severus had been Stupefied — with something like fondness.

Now, he permitted it with the same listlessness that he permitted everything that happened to him in life.

Another sharp knock on the door. *Seven*, Severus thought



to himself, contemplating his lengthening toenails. This must be the week for nail cutting.

He met no one on his way to breakfast. Possibly, the staff rather avoided him. Severus did not blame them. If he had some mechanism for it, he would avoid *himself*.

The cafeteria was crowded — the usual jumble of shouting patients and frowning nurses greeted him and he collected a breakfast tray with a small sigh.

These were the hopeless cases. The throwaways.

People like the Longbottom Auror and his wife, *they* were kept at St. Mungo's. Places where they could actively attempt to treat them. Places you couldn't look into the nurses' eyes and *tell* that they'd given up.

Hell... even Gilderoy Lockhart rated St. Mungo's.

The porridge was served in bowls. No cutlery here. And everything was charmed to disintegrate if ever removed from the cafeteria. Severus had once tried to take a tray out, in the beginning, but found his chicken laying on the floor after his tray turned to dust on his fingertips.

He frowned at the weak morning tea. Watery and tasteless. *Everything* was tasteless any more. He was certain that his own *blood* had turned to mere salt water in his veins.

There were only a handful of empty chairs and Severus surveyed them with dismay. In the end, he settled beside a fellow known only as Old Jack. Old Jack was nearly as notorious as Severus himself — silent and petulant, he had a



habit of biting people who got close enough. No one knew exactly why Old Jack was here, but no one really seemed to *want* to know and that appeared to suit Old Jack just fine.

Keeping his chair a good distance away from Old Jack's, Severus picked up his porridge bowl and took a lethargic sip. If he didn't eat, it would get back around to Cuthrell and Severus would find himself bound to his bed, a needle attached firmly to his arm. And a nurse would be assigned to him, twenty-four hours a day, to make sure that needle *stayed* in his arm.

They hadn't been careful enough, in the beginning. The nurse left him once he'd fallen asleep. Severus had been faking, of course, and had the IV out of his arm and into his throat before anyone knew what was happening. He'd managed to puncture his windpipe but got no further than that as the nurse walked back in suddenly, having forgotten a chart.

And he never felt alone again.

It had initially bothered him, having that feeling of perpetually being watched. Took him right back to his days working as an undercover agent for the Order of the Phoenix — right back into Voldemort's clutches. He'd had nightmares. They tied him down and forced Dreamless Sleep down his throat.

The nightmares eventually dissipated and Severus felt oddly drained. As if with them, the nightmares had taken the last vestiges of his feelings. The suicide attempts ceased as Severus genuinely ceased to care.



Perhaps that was part of Cuthrell's plan. Cow him into submission — if he did not feel anything, he might not want to die either.

Severus didn't know any more. That absolute certainty — that desire to end it all — was no longer firm. His resolve was gone.

It was actually *worse* than the void that had settled on him as he watched that stupid little boy drag Voldemort's body through the Hogwarts Great Hall all those years ago. A void that widened with each additional Death Eater he managed to bring down.

He didn't want that life, he'd realized. He'd been reduced to nothing more than a puppet, following Albus' orders so blindly he couldn't find where Albus' will stopped and his own began.

A bell sounded, startling Severus out of his musings as he stirred his tea with a pinky finger. Eight o'clock, then.

Patients began shuffling out of the cafeteria, to their various common rooms and activities. Some of them to therapy appointments, doubtless. And maybe a few of them were going to visitation rooms. He did not know and he did not care.

There were a few activities that patients were encouraged to indulge in. A Muggle contraption that showed moving pictures was set up in a monitored room. Another held various 'safe' games. Muggle crayons and sheets of paper, a couple of carefully warded chess sets, things like that.

Severus himself shuffled to the common room closest to his room. Devoid of any sort of interesting stimuli, it was



not a place that many other people visited. That was part of the reason Severus preferred it.

The rest of the reason was obvious as he painstakingly dragged a chair over to one of the large windows and sat down, staring out through the glass. So many of the rooms in the hospital lacked windows.

It was raining today, Severus saw. The rain made little tapping sounds as it hit the glass, following watery paths down the pane to puddle on the ledge. He put a hand to the glass and felt the warmth under his fingers.

Going to be a hot day, then.

He tried not to pay attention to the passage of time. Not knowing what the day was, what the month was, made it simpler to ignore the slow creeping of time, stretching the boring days into equally dull years.

But the staff disrupted his little mental game. He knew he'd passed five Christmases at Perkins — the therapists thought it would be beneficial to play at celebrating the holiday. Last year, Cuthrell had been the one to dress up as Father Christmas, handing out trinkets and sweets in his stupid white beard and ludicrous stuffed belly. Five years.

Reaching out a single finger, Severus traced the descent of one raindrop as it slid down the glass. His second day out of the first bind they'd put him under, he'd tried to throw himself out of this very window, realizing with dismay that not only had it been warded Unbreakable,



but a Cushioning Charm had been placed as well.

There wasn't a real pane of glass, a sharp corner, even a hard surface *anywhere* in this damned place. He knew — he'd spent the better part of his first year looking.

Severus allowed himself to lose track of his surroundings as he watched the rain fall. If he thought hard enough, he could almost remember what it felt like to stand out in the rain. Water trickling under his collar, wet hair slapping his forehead and cheeks, bare toes squishing mud and grass together. The coolness of his skin in the muggy air. Even the electric feel of the hair on the back of his neck rising as lightning crackled in distant summers of many years ago.

But he couldn't recall the smell.

Rationally, he told himself that rain smelt like a blend of earth and green things. And he could remember *that*. A childhood memory — lying in the grass in early spring, nose to the ground.

There was something else, though. Some indefinable thing that said *rain* — this was what he could no longer grasp. The tenuous memory of rain was slowly but surely escaping him. Perhaps in ten more years, he would forget the feel.

He felt the nurse enter the room. A woman — her heels clacked against the floor. Severus blinked but did not turn around.

"Severus," she said warmly, chirpily. He *hated* the sound of his name on these people's lips. Fully, cheerfully enun-

ciated, *Se-ver-us* — it made his hackles rise every time he heard it. "Severus, you have a visitor."

He did turn at this. Turned and silently stood, wishing he could disconcert her somehow with his behavior.

Walking quickly, Severus took the lead out of the room, not wanting to be led around like a child. "You've been popular lately," the nurse said, unfazed as she matched his stride, walking by his side.

He said nothing.

"My, you've had, what? Five visits this month?" she continued in that voice dripping with false cheer. "I heard from Marcy that a very pretty young lady has been in to see you, Severus."

Keeping his eyes focused straight ahead, he stayed silent. But he could feel the grin on her face as she pointed to the visitation room door.

"Right in there, Severus," she said as he put his hand on the doorknob. "Enjoy your visit."



He didn't know whether or not Miss Granger had changed through the years. It would have been nice to be able to snarl at her, "You're the same ignorant little child from all those years ago," but he wasn't entirely sure. And if nothing else, Severus preferred to be honest.

What's more, he didn't know exactly what Miss Granger *used* to be, either. He had a dim recollection of buck teeth,



frizzy hair, and an irritating tendency to regurgitate textbooks, but nothing further.

Her cronies, Potter and Weasley, stood firm in his memory. Potter, a sneer permanently attached to his face as he sat beside Albus at Order meetings. Passing around pictures of his brat as everyone else obediently cooed, those damnable knowing eyes watching Severus, always. Distrustful. And Weasley — red hair an incongruous beacon as he led Aurors to their deaths at the hands of Voldemort's followers, time and time again. His weight on Severus' shoulders as he pulled him out of Macnair's hideout, the confusion on his face the moment unconsciousness took him.

But Granger... no, she eluded him.

She'd gone away, he remembered with a start as he took the seat opposite hers in the dingy little room. Potter and Weasley went to Albus that day, trying to see if she'd told anyone where she went.

He suppressed a mental snort. As if *she* would have been in a position to speak so familiarly with Albus. Weasley worked with the Order in adulthood, Potter had an honorary seat due to his circumstances, but Granger was nothing more than a glorified childhood friend of theirs.

But she was the one sitting here with him now.

Severus permitted himself a moment to study her. Hair still rather unruly, decidedly shabby looking robes, and a look in her eyes that he could not immediately place. Her



eyes narrowed suddenly at his scrutiny and he had it. Innocence.

Miss Granger was looking at him innocently. There was no dissembling, no calculation in her gaze. No *knowing*.

Well, why would there be? he asked himself. She had not been there. She had not seen what everyone else had.

But her gaze disconcerted him. More than Potter's glares, more than Albus' patient understanding, Granger's innocent curiosity simultaneously frustrated and puzzled him.

He wanted her to go away.

"Well, Miss Granger," he said quietly, watching her blink. "Have you returned with some purpose in mind?"

"I —" she started.

He wasn't about to let her finish. "Convince me that my life really, truly *is* worth living, perhaps? That there are people who care whether or not I'm still exchanging oxygen with the environment? No, Miss Granger... you can tell me nothing that I have not already heard before."

Was she actually *glaring* at him? "No, sir," she retorted in a rather chilly sort of tone. "My intention, actually, was to ask how you were." This was said in a warmer voice, but her eyes were still narrowed.

Stifling a laugh at her ludicrous statement, Severus decided to actually reply. "I am still, Miss Granger, quite mad. Pray, how are *you*?"

She accepted the rebuke silently — apparently, she was



aware of the foolishness of her remark as well. One of her eyelids trembled slightly.

"If you have nothing to say to me, Miss Granger, apart from enquiring after my health, I will bid you good day, then," he said, unwilling to allow this to continue. They had already had two silent exchanges — he was not in the mood for another.

With a little frown, Granger actually opened her mouth to speak. "Does —" She stuttered briefly, clearly discomfited, and Severus permitted himself a small smile at her distress. "Does your Dr. Cuthrell not know you were a professor at Hogwarts?" she finally managed to get out.

Taken aback, Severus actually considered his reply rather carefully. "Not a question I was expecting," he said. "But I believe that Cuthrell is marginally aware of my former profession. Especially given that he was one of my students, many years ago. A Ravenclaw, if memory serves."

"Oh," she replied. "He just... seemed rather surprised when I referred to you as 'Professor' when we spoke the other day."

His eyebrows rose as he considered what she'd just said.

"We spoke at length, I'm afraid," she admitted after a short pause. "He wanted me to... erm... well, bring information to him, I guess. I understand why you don't trust him."

"And you would be telling me this because...?" he asked dryly.

Granger shrugged. "I have no reason *not* to tell you," she said. "And I suppose I felt as if you ought to be aware



of the treatment you are receiving. Besides, I wonder why he jumped on the fact that I called you 'Professor.' Especially since *he* was at Hogwarts as well."

"Probably because I am not in the habit of receiving visitors who address me in such a fashion," Severus replied. "Former students of mine, in general, would not seek me out under most circumstances. You are, Miss Granger, possibly somewhat of a novelty to him." He smirked as her eyes widened — she obviously grasped the subtle insult in his response.

"I find that hard to believe," she said, clearly not willing to rise to the bait. "After all, you spent at least twenty years at Hogwarts — Britain must be practically *overrun* with your former students."

"Twenty-five," he corrected rather snappishly. "And given the subject at hand, I find myself returning to an old question. Why, indeed, are you here, Miss Granger, novelty among lunatics?"

Again, her face shuttered. "I told you before," she said sharply. "I just felt like I needed to come."

"Need," he repeated thoughtfully. "What a curious word, need. We use it far too often, really. We need to breathe, we need to eat. Many children *need* things such as broomsticks, toys, sweets. People *need* trinkets from loved ones, symbolizing, quantifying affection. No, Miss Granger, I don't think that you *needed* to come."



"Why do you insist that I put it into words?" she asked, frustration showing.

Severus let out a long sigh, steepling his fingers under his chin — a gesture that he knew meant nothing to Granger. "Because, Miss Granger, words are all that's left to me."

She did not seem to know what to do with her hands. They went from her lap to the tabletop and then to her hair, twisting a stray curl as she appeared to think. "I'm not... that is to say..."

"Exactly, Miss Granger," he said, interrupting her stammering with something akin to mercy. "You have no reason to be here. And, with that in mind, I suggest that you leave."

Her gaze was suddenly hard, piercing. "If words are so important to you, Snape, then tell me why you chose to speak with *me*, of all people. According to your Cuthrell, you haven't spoken to *anyone* lately."

He glared. Glared at Granger's face, glared at the table, glared at his own fingernails, peeking over the edges of his fingertips. "I do not have to justify my actions to *you*."

"Well, then." Her face was set.

"I see we have reached an impasse," he said, idly scratching the back of his head.

Granger winced — he had no idea as to why. "In what way?" she asked, recovering rather well.

With a shrug, he met her gaze forthrightly. "We have nothing left to talk about."



She actually *smiled* at that. "Have you, by any chance, read Plato, Professor Snape?"

To his credit, he masked his surprise and managed to keep his jaw in place. "Are you suggesting, Miss Granger, that we discuss the Greeks?"

"What, you have other pressing social engagements?" she asked innocently. He did not know how she maintained a straight face.

He ignored her. "Some of his Dialogues are better than others." "And the *Republic*?"

"A sufficient analogy for ethical means, but not an entirely convincing political treatise. If I recall correctly, however, Plato did not intend it as such. I also remember reading it wondering when the old fool would get to the blasted point," he said thoughtfully. "I am sure, Miss Granger, that you have nothing but wonderful things to say about it, however."

She shrugged minutely. "I was always rather uncomfortable with the initial set-up of his ideal city, to tell the truth. The myth of metals struck me as so much brainwashing. Imagine, telling a child that he was *bronze*, just because he didn't happen to be as smart as the one next door.⁴ But you are correct, I suppose. Plato was simply extending a metaphor..."

To Severus' amazement, they actually managed to fill a decent period of time talking about Plato's *REPUBLIC*.



Granger's view of human nature turned out to be far less sugar-coated than he'd originally anticipated. She actually quoted THE PRINCE at one point, excusing herself with a rather wry twist of the wrist. "It is ironic, of course, that Machiavelli himself was not Machiavellian. A true Republican, really. His histories are far less pretentious than Bruni's.⁵ I'm fairly certain he wound up in exile somewhere."

"Thus completing the irony," he commented dryly. "Are you quite finished with the history lesson?"

She blushed.

"I think, Miss Granger, that you somehow believe that you are humoring me," he continued. "But I am certain that I am humoring you."

Granger nodded abruptly, apparently not willing to belabor the point, and stood, chair scraping loudly in the silence. "I will say goodbye, then, Professor Snape."

"I am no professor, Miss Granger," he reminded her, nodding in kind.

And she was gone, leaving Severus to contemplate the closed door quietly, wondering what she was about. For that matter, he wondered what *he* was about.



Chapter Nine

I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



he phone was ringing. Hermione's head was swimming with sleep and the only thing she could remember as she fought her way to consciousness was that it *had* to be the phone, as she hadn't set an alarm.

"Good morning, my lovely," a familiar male voice chirped into her ear as she managed to grunt into the receiver. "And how are you?"

Blinking a few times, the miasma of sleep began to clear. "Ron?" she asked stupidly. "Is that you?"

He chuckled into the phone. "It's me, yes."

"But... you don't know how to use a telephone," she blurted, still feeling rather disjoint.

Again, he laughed gently. "Hermione, I didn't know how to



use a phone fifteen years ago. I *can* be taught, you know."

Coughing, she sat up, letting the blankets fall to her waist. "I'm sure you didn't call to explain to me that you've learned to operate a phone."

"Indeed," he replied, voice still full of warm humor. "I confess I had other motives. You see, Ginny has tickets to the Wimbourne match this afternoon, and I was planning to take the kids. Alice loves Quidditch. But there's been an incident and I have to go into work."

She was confused. "Incident?"

Ron's voice was momentarily sober. "William Summerford — a young chap I work with, just out of his training — was found dead last night," he explained.

"Good Lord!" she exclaimed unthinkingly. "What happened?"

"We don't know," he replied. "But I've got to go in for the day, at least. So, I was wondering if you'd like to go to the game, with Ginny and the kids."

"I... erm... of course," Hermione said, brushing hair out of her eyes. "What do I need to do?"

"Just show up at the Burrow 'round one or so. The match starts at two. I'll drop the kids off this morning — Françoise is going out with Petunia, you see. But Mum's happy to watch them for a bit. Sound good?"

She stood, automatically straightening her nightclothes. "Of course. I, um, hope everything is all right at work, Ron."

"So do I," he said darkly. "Bye, Hermione."



"Bye..." Still rather dazed with sleep, Hermione hung up the receiver, regarding it carefully. She wondered how often Aurors died. By the almost-nonchalance in Ron's voice as he spoke, it must be often enough that he was relatively used to it.

How did one *get used* to death, anyway?

Ron was used to it. By all accounts, he was a relatively well-seasoned Auror and could speak fairly casually about his deceased colleagues.

And Snape was probably used to it. She knew she'd never get a chance to ask him about it, but she was pretty certain that he was very familiar with death and destruction due to the nature of the work he used to do in the Order.

Shaking her head as if to rid herself of such thoughts, Hermione shuffled toward the lavatory. *Quidditch*, she thought ruefully.



"Have you eaten, Hermione?" Ginny asked as she opened the door to Hermione's knock.

Expecting a 'hallo,' or 'good afternoon,' or something like that, she was rather taken aback. "I... yes," she finally said, fully processing Ginny's question. "I ate back at the hotel."

"You're still staying at a hotel?" she asked cheerfully, ushering Hermione into the Burrow. "It's been what, a month now?"

"More than," she conceded, following Ginny through the hallway.



"You know," Ginny replied, waving her toward an overstuffed chair in the den, "you *could* stay with us here. Mum would be delighted to have you. Tea?"

"Thank you," she said. "Tea would be lovely. And as for your other offer, I'm grateful, Ginny, but I couldn't."

"Nonsense," she snapped, reaching for the tea things. "You're like family. Well... like a prodigal cousin, anyway."

Hermione smiled at the gentle jab. "Ron offered me his flat, you know. He's spending all his time with the Potters these days. I'm just not sure..."

"Stay at Ron's then," Ginny said, handing her a teacup. "It'll be a bit messy to start with, but you can soon remedy that. What, d'you *like* paying for a room or something?"

With a little start, she realized Ginny had managed to fix her tea exactly how she usually took it. "That's not it, it's just... I feel like if I stay at Ron's —"

"He'll stay with Françoise that much longer," she completed, preparing her own tea.

"Well... sort of," Hermione acknowledged. "But it's more than that. I just... I don't want to be an imposition."

Ginny laughed shortly as she sipped her tea. "Believe me, Hermione, if Ron thought it would be an imposition, he wouldn't have asked. Fundamentally, he's still the same fellow you went to school with. Happy enough, but none too bright and not very thoughtful of others."

"Oh, I don't know..." she said, thinking about Ron's face



as he gently teased Alice Potter or the look in his eyes as he told her about his job. "He's changed a bit."

"I'm his sister," Ginny said with a shrug. "It's my prerogative to point out the fact that he's a human pig to any and every passerby. But I will say again, if he's offering to put you up, I'd take him up on it. Even if that means sacrificing him to Françoise."

Curious, she swirled the brown liquid around in her cup, wondering what futures it would tell when she finished. "Sacrificing, eh?"

"Françoise Potter isn't my favorite person in the world," Ginny said tartly. "I'll not make a secret of it. But not for the reasons everyone thinks." She gave a soft snort. "Mum still thinks I hate her because I'm still carrying some silly childhood torch for... for Harry."

They were silent for a moment, contemplative, until Ginny picked up her thread again.

"She loved Harry," she continued thoughtfully. "Whatever else she has in her, she had that. Loved him better than anyone else could, I suppose. But there's something hard in her as well. Something that wanted to keep Harry away from the world and all for herself. And when Harry wanted to take Ron with him..."

Pausing, Ginny took another draught of tea and Hermione didn't think she could bear the lull in conversation. "What do you mean, Ginny, 'wanted to take him?'"



Again, that bitter laugh. "Haven't you noticed yet?" she asked, a cynical edge in her voice. "Wherever Harry went in life, he had Ron right there beside him. Don't get me wrong — Ron was happy to be there. *Is* happy to be there. They were a matched set, like. And now... well, now Harry's gone to the one place I *don't* want Ron to follow." She finished her tea.

Hermione ventured timidly into the ensuing silence. "I wondered..." she began, hoping to dispel some of Ginny's obvious anxiety. "Françoise is... well, she didn't go to Hogwarts, so I —"

"Beauxbatons," she replied succinctly.

"She's French?" she asked. "But her English is completely —"

Again, Ginny interrupted her brusquely. "She grew up in England. London, I believe. Her father was a sort of liaison between the French Ministry and ours. But he absolutely *insisted* that she go to Beauxbatons. He's very French, you see. In fact, if I remember, both Nicholas and Alice have French bits in their names. And when she gets angry, her accent is worse."

Terse, clipped, to the point, the tension was not lifting. If anything, it was *rising*. "Are you *certain* this isn't unrequited puppy love?" she asked, a half-smile frozen on her face, hoping against hope that Ginny understood.

"Shut it, you insufferable know-it-all," she shot back.

The two women regarded each other stoically for a



moment and then burst into gales of laughter. Ginny *did* understand, then.

"What's so funny?" one of the Weasley twins asked as he stuck his head in through the doorway.

Ginny stopped laughing long enough to catch her breath. "Nothing you'd understand," she told him, still grinning. "Where are the kids, then? We've got to get going. Match starts at two and it's nearly half-past one."

"I think Mum has Alice in the kitchen," the twin replied. "Nicholas... well, I think Fred has him upstairs. We've been working on this new sweet, you see —"

"Oh, no!" Ginny cried. "Françoise will absolutely *kill* us! George, what have you done to the poor boy?"

The twin — George — threw his hands up in the air. "We can fix it, Gin, I *swear*!"

As if on cue, Fred came walking into the room, holding his hands strangely in front of him, circling the empty space. "What's all this, then?" he asked, all false innocence.

"Don't you give me that, Fred Weasley," Ginny snapped in an unconscious imitation of her mother. "What have you done with Nicholas Potter?"

"Well..." Fred hedged. "The good news is that he's not purple any more. I don't think."

Ginny tapped her foot impatiently and Hermione bit back a grin. "This implies, then, that you've got bad news."

"Now he's invisible," Fred said very quietly, nodding



down at his hands. "But I think I can fix it!" he amended, seeing Ginny's rapidly reddening face.

"Ooh..." she fumed. "I ought to tell Mum. What on Earth did you *feed* him?"

Fred made a complicated motion with his wand as George answered. "A new prototype. We haven't got a name worked out yet. When we're done with 'em, they'll make you turn into someone else for about a minute. Sort of a thirty-second Polyjuice. If we can key it right, the person who gives it to you can determine who you'll turn into."

"Damn!" Fred swore as the empty space that was apparently Nicholas Potter remained obstinately empty. "George, could you...?"

But George's incantation failed as well. "Perhaps if we..." he began thoughtfully.

"Yes," Fred replied. "Together."

As the incantation was repeated a second time and both twins waved their wands, Nicholas shimmered into view, impassive and quiet, watching Fred and George with open suspicion. His dark hair looked distinctly uncombed and his shoelaces were undone.

"Thank Merlin," George breathed. "If Françoise ever found out..."

"I've half a mind to tell her," Ginny spat. "You *know* she doesn't like you feeding things to the kids. And Nicholas, you know better than to take sweets from this pair."



"Well..." Fred said quickly. "No time to talk about it now. You've got to get going if you're going to make it to the match on time. I'll just trot back to the kitchen and fetch the other one, shall I?"

Ginny sighed and took Nicholas by the hand. "I can't believe I'm about to let you two off the hook."

"You know you love us, baby sister," he tossed back as he walked into the kitchen. Possibly unwilling to continue to face his sister's wrath, George followed his brother.

Finally tearing his eyes away from the retreating twins, Nicholas' gaze wandered the room and settled on Hermione. *Not again, not again, not again*, she prayed as his eyes widened and his breathing quickened. He was on the verge of hyperventilating and she was certain he was going to start yelling his head off again.

"Nicholas," she said swiftly, preemptively, mind racing. "Nicholas, I'm not going to hurt you."

Ginny looked first at the panicky boy and then gave Hermione a frankly confused stare. "Well, of course you're not," she said. "Nicholas, what's wrong?"

"I don't know what's wrong," she told an increasingly concerned Ginny. "He's... afraid of me or something. Nicholas, I *promise* I'm not going to do anything," she said as his breaths became even more labored — Hermione had a dim suspicion that this was what a panic attack looked like and if Nicholas didn't calm down, she was going to have one herself.



"Nicholas," Ginny said gently, dropping his hand to wrap her arm around his shoulder in a seemingly futile effort to calm him. "Nicholas..."

Hermione stepped forward cautiously and stretched out her right hand, inwardly wincing as Nicholas flinched. "Nicholas," she said, repeating his name as often as she could in hope of making a connection with the terrified child. "Nicholas, I'm going to touch you, okay? Just to show you that I'm not going to hurt you." Her hand moved closer.

Nicholas shrank into Ginny's side but could go no further, as Ginny herself remained firmly planted.

Even closer now — her fingertips brushed the front of his shirt — and he was actually gasping for air, round eyes gazing at her with that half-paralyzed animal look she remembered so vividly.

She longed to close her eyes, to break contact with his in hopes of relieving the agony, but kept them stubbornly open as her fingers and then her palm encountered his heaving chest. Pressing firmly, Hermione tried her best to smile. "See?" she said as loudly as she dared. "Nicholas, I'm not hurting you."

His breathing slowed a bit.

"I don't know why you're acting like this, Nicholas," she continued, encouraged, "but I want you to know that I'll never hurt you, all right?"

Body uncoiling slightly, he was almost *leaning* into her



touch. And then his eyes slid closed and his breathing became normal and Nicholas was just an ordinary little boy again.

Ginny and Hermione exchanged a glance as he relaxed, neither one willing to speak. Fortunately, George broke the tension by ducking back into the room, holding a joyfully chattering Alice, and before Hermione's wits were properly collected once more, they were out the door.



"Snitch!" Alice shouted excitedly, jumping up and down in her seat and pointing as her curls flailed this way and that. "Snitch!"

For the seventh time, Hermione squinted up at the sky. "Where? I don't see it. Ginny, do you...?"

"I don't know how she manages it," she replied. "I've been to a handful of games with the kid and every time, she sees the Snitch about ten times before either Seeker manages to catch a glimpse of it. Harry's bought her a broomstick already, according to Ron. It was just a matter of convincing Françoise to let him teach her to fly. Which he hadn't, of course. She's not even two, for Merlin's sake."

"I can imagine his joy in discovering his daughter is a Quidditch savant," Hermione said dryly. "Tell me, does she have a full set of Quidditch robes as well?"

Ginny laughed, throwing her head back. "Actually," she admitted. "They both do, courtesy of yours truly. If I recall,



Nicholas used to insist on sleeping in his, didn't you?" she asked him.

He did not answer, but Hermione thought he looked rather abashed.

"*You* gave them Quidditch robes?" she asked. "Oh, wait, that's right. You used to be one of those as well. Quidditch mad, the whole lot of you."

"Says the woman who had a running correspondence with Viktor Krum for the better part of four years. Ron would have given his lucky Keeper gloves to read even *one line* from the letters he sent you, you know," she teased. "I'd say you're just as guilty of it as the rest of us, for all that you didn't play."

Concentrating briefly on not hexing her old friend, a thought flickered through her mind. "I always thought you'd be the one to play professionally," Hermione said. "After all, you were in place for it by your seventh year, if I remember."

With only a small frown, Ginny automatically pulled Alice away from the edge of the stands and back into her seat. "I forgot," she said soberly. "Of course you don't know... what was it Ron said? Thirteen years."

"What happened?" she asked, subdued. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nicholas studying them with open interest, blatantly ignoring the game.

"I fell," she replied with a little shrug. Upon seeing Hermione's quizzical look, she elaborated. "Well... it was an

eighty-foot drop, and I happened to catch my arm against a Bludger about two-thirds of the way down and drag it with me, so when I hit, I didn't hit dirt; I hit metal. Mum was *furious*. She always said I'd hurt myself playing."

"Good God, Ginny," Hermione breathed. "You could have *killed* yourself."

Smiling self-deprecatingly, Ginny pushed Alice into her seat yet again. "Two days later, I very nearly wanted to. Madam Pomfrey healed the breaks and cuts immediately, of course, but my right arm and hand... well, there was a fair amount of nerve damage. Can't grow *those* back."

To illustrate, she held up her hand limply. Curling her fingers around, Hermione noticed they did *not* make a fist.

"Two of my fingertips on that hand are completely numb, and it'll never entirely close again. Can't be a Chaser if you can't hold a Quaffle," she said, eyes studying her fingers with something akin to regret. "My hand is too small to palm it. But I tried. Spent six months pretending I was fine, going to practice and dropping the Quaffle every damn time it got into my hands. Sorry — kids, don't say 'damn,' okay? At least, not around your mum."

Hermione managed a weak smile. "Ginny —"

She silenced her with a little hand flap. "I came to terms with it. And when I got out of Hogwarts, I went into marketing at Manchester — merchandise, charming advertising customers with free tickets, that sort of thing. I'm with



Wimbourne now, hence the tickets," she said, waving an arm at the yellow and black clad players zooming around the stadium. Laughing shortly and what Hermione thought was bitterly, Ginny shrugged again. "And you know all about Ron, right? Such *are* the ironies of life..."

"Ginny —" she tried again.

"Hermione," she exclaimed, exasperated. "I'm *fine*. That was many years ago. And besides, I make nearly as much money in merchandising as I would if I actually was out on the field." This was accompanied by an impish sort of smile. "With the grand exceptions of Ron the Battler of Evil and Charlie the Tamer of Dragons, there, us Weasley brats have managed to do quite well, financially speaking."

A question popped into her mind. "Ginny, I've been meaning to ask, but what did *Harry* do? I know he went into Auror training briefly, but Ron didn't say just —"

She found herself without speech abruptly as a small voice from her left interrupted her. "He worked at Honeydukes," Nicholas Potter said, staring at his shoelaces.

Ginny's eyes bored into the top of Nicholas' head. "What... what did you say?" she whispered.

Clearing his throat, his voice was much louder as he responded. "I said that Papa worked at Honeydukes. He made sweets, like Fred and George, only his didn't make nasty things happen like theirs do. His were funny." But he did not look up.



"Nicholas, you just..." Ginny stammered, reaching out a cautious hand across Hermione to touch his shoulder.

He did not flinch as Hermione had expected. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I didn't mean to —"

"Merlin, Nicholas, you don't have to apologize," Ginny said, turning the touch into more of a pat. "I'm just... I'm glad you feel like talking again."

The boy actually managed a smile.

"Snitch!" Alice shouted again, breaking the moment. "Snitch, Nic'las!"

"Show me," he told his sister quietly. "Point it to me."

Eagerly, she clamored over both Ginny and Hermione to plop down more or less in her brother's lap. "There, Nic'las!" she cried, pointer finger extended. "Snitch there."

He squinted into the sky — Hermione did not know whether he truthfully saw it or not; certainly the golden glint had completely eluded her for the entire game. "I see it, Alice," he said. "I see the Snitch. You're better than *both* the Seekers, aren't you?"

"Both," she agreed, beaming. "Damn both."

"Oh, no," Ginny said, burying her face in her hands. "Françoise is going to be so mad..."

"Maybe she won't notice," Hermione said, trying to be helpful.

At that exact moment, Alice gave her adopted aunts a sweet smile. "Damn damn damn damn..." she sang.

"Well, she *might* notice that," she admitted as Ginny let



out another little moan.

"Hermione?" Ginny said, muffled through her fingers.

"Yes?" she asked cautiously.

"Shut up."



"For such a little china doll, she's certainly a devil, isn't she?" Ginny asked rhetorically as she untangled Alice's sleepy hand from her hair.

"That Cleaning Charm has come in handy throughout the day," Hermione agreed, watching Nicholas hover beside her, clutching at a handful of her robes. Between Nicholas at her side and Alice in her arms, Ginny was having a difficult time of it. "Do... do you want me to take her?" she asked after a moment.

She shrugged minutely. "That would probably be a bad idea. Do you want to wake her up before we can get her back to her mum?"

"Excellent point," she said, considering it.

"Although maybe Nicholas can pull at your clothes for a bit," she said, giving him a pointed look.

He stared down at his trainers, peeking out from under his robes. "Sorry, Aunt Ginny."

Softening immediately, she shifted Alice in her arms. "Nicholas... I just... maybe you would *like* talking to Hermione for a bit. She went to school with us, you know, me



and your father and your Uncle Ron."

Perking up slightly, he lifted his head. "Really?" he asked, looking directly at Hermione for the first time in about two weeks. "You're *that* Hermione? The one Papa talked about in his stories?"

"Uh oh," she said, smiling at him. "I'm afraid that I am, although I doubt I'm as interesting as Har — as your father made me out to be."

He actually grinned. "But you're the one who always got them out of trouble. Him and Uncle Ron. You and your clever plans."

With a self-deprecating laugh, she shook her head. "Nicholas, I don't think your father told you the entire truth."

"Is it true that you and my papa met a *giant* once?" he asked breathlessly, eyes wide. "He said the giant knew your *name*!"

She thought she heard Ginny snicker. "I —"

"And did you really turn yourself into a cat?" he continued. "I always thought..."

Yes. A definite laugh now.

"Ginny, shut it," she said firmly. "I don't want to hear it."

"I'd forgotten about the cat thing," Ginny said through her giggles. "Ron told me about that. And you had a *tail*..."

"Ginny..." she warned. "Don't make me hex you."

"So violent," she admonished playfully, shifting Alice to her other arm. "What would your monks think?"



Hermione sighed. "Your mother told you, didn't she?"

"Of course she did," she said matter-of-factly. "Mum's dead curious about you, even though she won't admit it. She's absolutely fascinated by the fact that you've up and disappeared for all these years and you won't even talk about it. Actually, she's positive you've got a husband and kids socked away in Mongolia or wherever you've been."

"Tibet," she corrected tiredly. "And no. You can tell your mother that I'm still quite unmarried."

"Like Uncle Ron," Nicholas said unexpectedly.

Taken aback, she looked down at his possibly-deliberately neutral little face. "What?"

"Uncle Ron," he repeated with an impatient shrug. "He's not married either. Are you going to marry him? Is that why you came back?"

She blinked and Ginny giggled again. "Erm... no, Nicholas," she said slowly. "Your Uncle Ron and I aren't going to get married. We're not in love."

"But you like him," he persisted.

Sighing, she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Of course I *like* him," she said. "He's one of my dearest friends. But we're not in love. Generally, people marry when they love each other."

"Like Mummy and Papa," he agreed, nodding a bit. "I wish you and Uncle Ron would get married, though. I'd call you 'Aunt Hermione,' then," he said in what she

thought was a rather sly tone.

Ginny laughed. "What a cheeky little boy! Hermione, I do believe he just offered you a bribe in return for my brother's hand in marriage."

"Nicholas," she began, wanting nothing more than to drop the subject entirely. "I'm very sorry, but I'm not going to be marrying Ron," she said firmly.

Immediately, he was downcast. "All right," he said, studying his feet again.

Perhaps her tone had been too harsh. "When we were young, Nicholas, your father used to tease me and Ron all the time about getting married," she explained. "He thought it would be perfect. Ron and I, living in the house next door to him and his wife. He hadn't met your mother yet, you see. But Ron and I didn't like your father teasing us like that very much, so it still sort of bothers me. Do you understand what I'm saying, Nicholas?"

His brow was furrowed. "I think so," he said. "It makes you mad because it always did. And it makes you sad, too, I think. Sad because it makes you think about Papa."

Hermione exchanged a surprised look with Ginny. "A little," she admitted. "But what made you say that, Nicholas?"

"It makes *me* sad to think about him," he said with a little shrug. "And your eyes are sad. I just guessed. Was that okay?" His little voice sounded rather worried.

"Sure," she said after a moment's pause. "Nicholas, can



I ask you a question?"

He smiled a little. "You just did, silly." And then, he sobered. "My papa used to say that."

Treading carefully, Hermione spoke slowly, thinking about each word before she said it. "When — when I was at your house for supper two weeks ago, did — did I make you sad? Thinking about your father?"

His expression was solemn. "You scared me."

"Did you know who I was, then, Nicholas?" she asked, still cautious, curiosity burning her inside and out. Her face felt warm and Ginny was giving her a completely perplexed look.

"Not really," he replied, beginning to look rather confused himself. "But..."

"But what?" she prompted.

He looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I had a dream about you once. Before you came to my house."

Hermione sucked in her breath and she heard Ginny gasp. Apparently she'd also done something to wake Alice, who whimpered in her arms. But Hermione's attention was focused solely on the fidgeting little boy walking by her side. "Do you remember what it was about?"

"I do," he said miserably. "You fought a dragon. You fought him and you killed him. And the dragon was holding my papa prisoner. In a little cage, with a snake beside him. And..."

"Yes..." she whispered, eyes transfixed on his face.



"And you took the snake in your arms," he continued, dark eyes full of pain. "And you let my papa fall down a black hole. You let him die."

Chapter Ten

What more did I want? What I really wanted was rivets, by heaven! Rivets. To get on with the work — to stop the hole. Rivets I wanted. There were cases of them down at the coast — cases — piled up — burst — split!

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



How was the match?" Ron asked Ginny as he took Alice into his arms.

She shrugged. "We lost. Miserably. But on the other hand, Alice saw the Snitch in about five minutes and Nicholas decided to speak again. So, it was an *interesting* day, if nothing else. How was work?"

"It was work," he replied noncommittally.

Hermione watched the siblings shift on their feet, watched the awkwardness mount. Fortunately, Nicholas seemed to note her discomfort. "Do you know how to play



Soulblade⁶?" he asked, giving her robe a good tug.

"Soulblade?" she echoed, drawing a blank.

"It's pretty good," he said, shrugging. "Even though it's really old. My papa got it for me to play on my Playstation. Wanna play? I'll even let you have first pick," he offered graciously, slipping his hand into hers.

Continuing to listen to Ginny and Ron make idle, uncomfortable chat on the front step of Françoise Potter's home, she decided it would be infinitely better to discover what on Earth Nicholas was talking about. She dimly recalled Harry mentioning a 'Playstation' when they were children and thought she remembered that it was a video game system of some sort.

The last video game Hermione had played was probably back in about 1988 — her father loved the old Pac-Man arcade game and would often challenge her to a head-to-head match. That was before she went off to Hogwarts, of course.

She distantly wondered if Harry had done the same with Nicholas and his Playstation.

But he was still tugging on her hand, so she offered him a smile and stepped into the house.

A Playstation was apparently a square little machine made of mostly black plastic. He hit a few buttons expertly and a tray spat out of the front. A couple more button taps later and Hermione found him thrusting a controller into her hand. "You'll figure the controls out," he told her



as he flipped on the television. "They're not hard."

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione had decided that they were actually rather difficult. She found herself squinting at the animated character she'd chosen, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside Nicholas, frantically mashing the first buttons that came to her fingertips. "And you find this entertaining?" she asked as he 'killed' her yet again.

"Sure," he said shortly, skillfully hitting about six buttons at once so that his character executed a hopelessly complex maneuver. "But it takes a bit to get used to the moves."

"I can tell," she replied, deciding she'd never let herself be manipulated into this again if she had anything to say about it.

A male laugh echoed behind her. "Ah," Ron said, coming into the room — he'd apparently put Alice to bed as she was nowhere in sight. "I see he's found someone else to trounce at that Muggle thing."

"I'm... having fun," she said, knowing her tone was sadly lacking. Nicholas gave a little crow of triumph as her character fell seemingly unconscious (or dead) yet again.

"Well..." she conceded.

"Nicholas," Ron said, tapping the boy once on the top of his head. "Your mum wants you in bed. If you're not upstairs brushing your teeth in five minutes, I shudder to think of the consequences."

"One more," he said, not taking his eyes off the screen.

Ron sighed. "No."



"Yes," Nicholas replied defiantly.

Apparently unwilling to push, Ron threw his hands up in the air. "Fine," he said. "But it's your hide when your mum comes in."

"Where's Ginny?" Hermione asked, suppressing a small grin as Nicholas shut off the Playstation obediently and began fiddling with the cords.

"Went home," he replied. "It's been a long day, you know."

"Good night, Uncle Ron," Nicholas said, moving away from the television.

Ron's expression softened. "'Night, Nicholas."

The boy stopped beside Hermione, who was still sitting on the floor, and studied her intently. In a gesture so brief she barely had time to register it, he threw his arms around her neck and squeezed. "'Night, Hermione," he muttered, all but running out of the room.

She stared after him wonderingly.

"I think he likes you," Ron said dryly, holding out a hand to help her to her feet.

Standing, she shrugged slightly. "He just beat me at a video game twenty-four times in a row. I *earned* a hug."

He continued to look at the doorway Nicholas passed through rather thoughtfully. "It's good to hear his voice again."

"I can imagine," she replied. "Well... I suppose I ought to be getting back to the hotel," she continued, feeling the abrupt subject shift acutely.



"Hermione, I wish you'd just stay in my damned flat," he said with a harsh exhalation. "Hell, if you want, I'm sure Françoise would love to have you stay *here*. The sofa is awfully comfortable."

"Speaking of..." she said, hoping to shift the subject again. "Where is Françoise, anyway?"

He frowned. "Asleep, I'd imagine. It is, after all, past eleven o'clock. That match ran rather late. But don't think you're getting out of it that quickly."

"For pity's sake, Ron —"

"No," he exclaimed, raising a single hand to still her protests. "I won't have it. If I have to go to your hotel and tell them that you're a convict on the run with a nasty drug habit and a propensity for lighting fires to get you thrown out, I'll do it in a heartbeat. The flat is yours and I'll not hear another word on the matter. You can move in tomorrow morning. In fact," he said, offering her a devilish grin, "I'll help you move your stuff."

She sighed, thoroughly exasperated. "I've only got one bag."

An eyebrow raised. "You've been here for more than a month."

"It's a big bag," she said, arms crossed over her chest. "Ron, you're being a real pig about this."

"That's me," he replied cheerfully. "So... I've heard all about Ginny's day. What about *yours*?" he drawled.

Shrugging a single shoulder, she sat down in an armchair.



"Not much more to tell than Ginny, probably. I will say that Nicholas Potter is a startling little fellow, though."

He cocked his head questioningly. "How so?"

"Does... does he have the Sight?" she asked hesitantly.

Ron's face split into a grin. "I thought you didn't believe in Divination," he said, sitting in kind and crossing his leg over his knee.

She scowled. "Shut up. And besides... I never said I didn't *believe* in *Divination*," she said, shades of her childhood haughtiness creeping back into her voice. "I just don't think it's all that common. Not true Sight, at least."

Sobering, Ron looked over at her earnestly. "Why do you ask, then?"

"He... said he had a dream about me. *Before* that night. You remember — when he —"

"I remember," he interrupted, a distant expression in his eyes. "So was *that* why he —?"

"So it seems," she replied, finding that her hands did not seem to fit properly in her lap at the moment. "Although it was a rather drastic response, if he only had the one dream. I just wanted to know if it had happened before."

Ron put his hands behind his head, thoughtful. "Not to my knowledge," he said. "Although it may be as simple as Nicholas didn't tell anyone. He's a rather closed-mouthed lad, even... before everything. I think..." He trailed off, looking rather haunted.



"What?" she asked, worried and fascinated.

"I think he saw Harry," he said. "That day. I don't think we got him out of the room fast enough."

Hermione's eyes widened and then narrowed as she pondered the implications of what Ron had just said. "Ron?"

He hummed interrogatively.

"What happened?" she asked dully, staring resolutely at the carpet, tracing the pattern with her eyes. "What happened to Harry?"

So intent was her gaze on the floor that Hermione was actually startled to look up and see Ron's face not six inches from her own, blue eyes grim and dull. "Hermione," he said very quietly, putting his hands over hers. "Hermione, I don't think you want to hear about it."

"Of course I don't," she snapped. "But I *need* to, Ron."

He sat back on his heels, hands hanging limply between his knees. "It's bad, Hermione. And it's not..." He looked up at her and she realized he was near tears. "I've never seen anything like it," he whispered. "I've seen body parts fly across the field in a firefight, I've seen men screaming as they burn alive, but I've never seen anything so... malignant."

A chill ran down her spine. "Ron..."

Tears ran down his cheeks freely. "I was there that morning," he began. "Harry and I were thinking about knocking off work and going to the Chudley match that afternoon — he had tickets, you see. Françoise and the



kids were off doing Merlin knows what."

She was silent, patiently waiting for him to tell the story in his own fashion.

"But I had to work. So I took off, about eight in the morning. I thought..." He paused to gulp in air. "I thought I would skive off about two so we could catch the game. So I came up to the door. But the door was already open. Alice was sitting on the stoop, holding her doll and crying. She didn't... I don't think she knew..."

"And then I saw — God — I saw it," he cried, putting his head in his hands. His knees apparently gave out and he crumpled to the floor, legs curled underneath him. "Françoise... Françoise was standing there. Her mouth was open and her tears... but she wasn't talking. And Nicholas." His voice steadied minutely. "I got Nicholas out of the room. Didn't know, but I think he saw..."

Hermione hated herself as she watched Ron cry into his hands. She hated what she was about to do but knew she couldn't bear not doing it. "Ron... what did he see?"

"All the *blood*," Ron nearly wailed. "Harry — Harry was there on the table. The goddamned kitchen table. And the blood ran down, dripped off... He was fucking *butchered*, Hermione. Gutted like a fish."

She put a hand to her mouth, eyes wide and face white. "Ron, what do you —?"

He cut her off. "I mean just that. Laid open like a fucking



Muggle autopsy. And I saw the look on his face, Hermione. The expression in his eyes. Whoever did that to him, did it while he was *alive*." The tears continued to run, dripping off his chin and wetting his shirt.

Feeling her own eyes prickle, she tried to imagine it and felt something like relief when she realized she couldn't. "Who would...?"

Again, he interrupted her question by answering it before she could even properly formulate it. "We don't know," he said heavily. "Death Eaters, they think. Some rogue faction we didn't manage to track down. But it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter?" she echoed, horrified. "Ron, you can't mean —"

"Of course not!" he cried, some of her own horror reflected in his eyes. "But they won't put me on the case. I've begged Kingsley over and over, but he won't let me touch it. I'm 'too close to the victim,'" he said in a cruel mimicry of whoever it was had turned him away. "But goddamn it, Hermione, other than maybe Severus Snape, I know more about Death Eaters than anyone on the fucking *planet*! And Harry was my *best* friend!"

She realized then that he was *angry* far more than he was sad. "What are they doing, then?"

His hands balled into fists, clenched in his lap. "Routine stuff, probably. What *can* they do? They've got five-year-old dossiers to work off of and a handful of ridiculously



false leads. They're pissing in the ocean, Hermione. / need to work on this. They're still probably standing around, scratching their arses and trying to figure out if You-Know-Who was somehow brought back from the dead when what they need to be doing is a full-blown inquiry into every organization that had a potential reason for killing Harry."

"Nicholas told me he worked at Honeydukes," she said faintly, startled at her own apparent non sequitur.

Ron swiped at his eyes angrily, nodding as he emitted fierce sniffles. "He did. He worked on the charms for experimental stuff. You know, like making Peppermint Toads jump and that sort of thing. That's what's so damn weird — anyone who wanted Harry out of the way would have wanted it ten years ago. Why now? Harry was just a normal chap, with a normal family. There was just no *reason*. Not any more."

"Maybe someone spent ten years planning it," she ventured cautiously. "It sounds... very deliberate."

He shook his head. "That's not how these fellows work, Hermione. And besides, they've had literally *hundreds* of opportunities before. It's not like Harry lived his life in secret. Hell, practically *anyone* could have just walked right up to the damn door and Harry probably would have let 'em in." Smiling a bit, Ron lifted his head to show her his red-rimmed eyes. "Damned idiot," he said fondly. "Too trusting by half."

With a weak snort, she returned his smile. "Didn't you say Draco Malfoy attended the funeral?" she asked thoughtfully.



Ron was silent for a moment. "Malfoy's clean," he said abruptly. "The department's kept a file on his family ever since old Lucius went absolutely bonkers back during our sixth year. But Malfoy the younger was never a Death Eater, or even really an edge supporter of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Just an absolute prat on his own part. No," he said in a decisive tone. "Malfoy wouldn't have anything to do with such a thing. It would be too... unsanitary," he finally settled on.

Thinking about it briefly, Hermione found that she agreed with his assessment of their old schoolmate. "Was... was there any evidence on the scene?" she asked, mind racing. "Do they —?"

"Evidence?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Well... you know," she said. "Like fingerprints or hairs or something. Something to identify the... the killer." The word felt filthy on her lips. She should never have had to say that word in connotation with Harry Potter.

With a wrinkled brow, he studied her carefully. "You mean like *Muggle* police, then," he said. At her hesitantly confirming nod, he continued. "Aurors don't need any of that. All we need is a well-placed *Priori Incantem*."

"What if..." she began. "What if a Muggle was the suspect?"

His gaze was stony. "Muggles can't do *that* to wizards, Hermione."

"There's not a spell for such a thing, though," she said staunchly.



He continued to regard her rather coldly. "I doubt it's an incantation that can be found in a Hogwarts textbook, Hermione."

Bowing her head, she decided to let him break the silence. She noted as she waited patiently that her fingernails were looking rather grubby and the left sleeve of her robe was unraveling at the wrist. She carefully did *not* think about Harry's broken body splayed across a table she'd potentially eaten at.

Oh, God...

"How can Françoise *stand* it?" she breathed, breaking her own mental rule. "How can she bear to go into that room?"

"She cries a lot, I think," Ron replied, softening slightly. "And she has nightmares. At least, I bet she does. Merlin knows I can't get it out of my head, even during my waking moments. It's always right beneath the surface."

"We ate a meal at that table," she said quietly. "Or at least, in that same spot, if it wasn't the same table."

He did not reply.

Hermione smiled wanly at him. "I think I'm going to throw up."



She *did* throw up, in fact. Twice.

Ron had insisted on fashioning her a Portkey back to the hotel. According to him, she was in no condition to Apparate — she'd splinch herself into a million pieces.

And when did Ron turn into this hard, cold... well, *man*?



Fucking butchered, she heard him whisper in her brain. *Like a fucking autopsy.*

She'd seen photographs of surgical procedures — studied them in some dreamlike childhood that seemed several lifetimes ago when she'd idly thought about studying medicine. And her mother told her once about dissecting humans — they'd done it in anatomy classes in university.

And all of a sudden, she could see it

She could see Harry, head thrown back, face twisted despite the relaxation of death, a final image of his killer, his murderer burned into his eyes.

Blood... there would be blood everywhere.

He had been alive, Ron said. Alive when the first cut was made.

There would be blood on the *ceiling*, splattered all over Françoise's lovely white kitchen tile work. Dripping down Harry's body, dripping down the table legs, covering the chairs nearly completely. Puddles of blood.

And the body. Laid open, eviscerated for the world to see. Red and pink and pulsing and — oh, God — the blood...

Hermione dashed to the small lavatory in her hotel room and was sick for the third time that night.

He probably would have passed out, she told herself as she rested her forehead against the cool porcelain. Passed out very quickly. Hopefully.

She closed her eyes and they opened again nearly immediately as the image danced in her imagination. The Harry in



her head had died with his eyes wide open, a faintly accusatory look in them as he stared blankly at her, arms and legs brokenly dangling over the edges of the table.

You let my papa die, she heard Nicholas say in her head abruptly.

There was nothing left in her belly to throw up. Hermione bent over the toilet, gut heaving, nausea turning to slow, hot sobs as it quelled.

Her cheeks and eyes burned as Harry glared at her in her head and Nicholas whispered in her ear. Frantically, she pressed fists into her eyes, hunched in a little ball in the middle of her clinical, impersonal hotel lavatory.

Ron had been right. She *didn't* want to know this.

But she had also been right. She *did* need to know this.

She needed to know why Harry's memory would not find peace. Why his son did not speak and his wife would never cease to mourn.

Slowly, infinitely slowly, her sobs abated, turned to shaky breaths. She was finally able to stand. Swiping at her admittedly soggy face, Hermione ran cold water over her hands, splashing some on her still fiery cheeks.

She looked like hell. Her hair stood out in every possible direction, her eyes looked wild, and her face was flushed. She looked quite mad, really.

Hermione bit out a short chuckle, accidentally snorting water up her nose.



No... *Snape* was the mad one in this entire affair.

And with that, she was suddenly calm. Able to walk back to her bed and sit down. It was late — past midnight. If she had any sense at all, she'd be asleep.

But with the sense of eerie tranquility came a sort of wakefulness. She felt completely alert and vaguely restless. Her eyes scanned the room and came to rest upon a copy of the *DAILY PROPHET*, sitting by her window.

She'd forgotten — she'd requested a weekly copy upon realizing she'd be in the country longer than originally anticipated. Hadn't even given it a glance this morning as she was getting ready to go.

With nothing else to do, Hermione picked up the newspaper, eyes flickering past the front page without so much as a pause.

The obituaries were at the back, tucked between wedding announcements and pages of inane adverts. Mostly old wizards and witches, survived by leagues of great-grandchildren and the like. Their pictures smiled up at her with something like relief in their eyes. She read each one carefully, simultaneously wondering why she was doing this and telling herself to stop.

Working her way backward through the paper, Hermione flipped through Quidditch scores, so-called 'human interest' articles, and drabble about Ministry promotions and the like. Every so often, a particular article would catch



her interest and she would read it, but she was entirely too fidgety to read the entire paper.

"Auror Death Puzzles Investigators," one headline read. Interest piqued, she read the first few lines. "Twenty-three year old William Summerford was discovered at his home early last evening," it continued. "Investigating Aurors on the scene have not ruled out foul play but are reluctant to confirm that rogue Death Eaters could have been involved. Summerford, as a field Auror, apparently had many potential enemies and investigators wish to follow all possible leads. This reporter would like to convey his heartfelt sympathy to the victim's wife and unborn child in this time of need."

Shaking her head, she folded the paper. Summerford was only twenty-three. And he left a family behind.

Like Harry.

But unlike Harry, William Summerford worked in a high-risk environment. Probably had lots of enemies, lots of people who would have wished him ill. It at least made a modicum of sense, even if it was still a horrible tragedy.

Hermione tried to lay in bed once more, pulling the covers up to her chin. But closing her eyes briefly, Harry's face flashed through her mind and she opened them quickly.

She could not do this.

Sitting up in bed, Hermione fumbled for the television remote, resigning herself to a sleepless night. Harry was



just too close to the surface, his dead eyes accusing her of crimes she was no longer sure she hadn't committed.

You let him die. Fucking butchered.

Chapter Eleven

It was a distinct glimpse: the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home — perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. I did not know the motive. Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



Hermione found that she did not even need to bother with a mental excuse. After a painfully long night, she made her way purposefully to the Apparition point nearest her hotel. She did not hesitate as she closed her eyes and opened them to see the nearly familiar Yorkshire countryside.

Perkins was just over the hill.

The receptionist smiled broadly as she stepped into



the front hall. "Let me see..." she said. "Miss Hermione Granger, here to see Severus Snape. How's that?"

"Right in one." She managed a faint smile.

"You know the drill," she said, sitting the familiar box on the edge of the counter and continuing to smile as Hermione obediently emptied her pockets and took off her shoes.

She'd forgotten to put on her thick socks and the cold from the tiles burned her toes. "I don't see why we've got to take off our shoes," she grumbled to herself.

With a chuckle, the receptionist gave her a look of understanding. "I think Severus' doctor likes controlling his patients' atmospheres completely. He's a wonderful doctor, though — Dr. Cuthrell is one of our best."

"How is he, then?" Hermione asked, giving her pockets one last check. "Sn — Severus, I mean. Not Dr. Cuthrell."

"No different than usual," she replied diffidently, sliding the box under her desk. "He's such a quiet fellow, according to the nurses. Rarely an ounce of trouble these days. You can go on back now, dear."

Unhesitatingly, she walked past the receptionist's desk, through the narrow hallway, and up to the door she knew would lead her to Professor Snape.

Snape.

Severus.

The word felt strange in her mind. But indeed, he was certainly no longer Professor Snape and he lacked the fire



and brimstone she'd always associated with Snape. That left Severus.

But it felt incorrect, even as she twisted the cold door-knob under her fingers and crossed through the doorway. *Snape* glared up at her, hand running through his abominably short hair in a rather affected gesture.

She wondered briefly if he missed his former hair.

Hermione sat down, not speaking, and began to wait.

It did not take him long. "Why are *you* back?" he asked, tone verging on contemptuous.

"Why are you *here*?" she countered, surprised to find herself irritated at his question. "If you do not want to see anyone, simply don't come in the room."

Snape sighed and placed both his hands on the tabletop, palms facing downward. "I am not afforded such a choice," he stated coldly. "Although it would be my preference. But the doctors are under the delusion that visitors 'cheer me up.'" This was said in a falsely cheerful, mocking sort of voice. "And so here I sit, unable to do otherwise. *You*, however, being in full possession of your mental faculties, are permitted freewill and yet here you sit as well. Thus, Miss Granger, it is *your* position that is questionable — not mine."

"I thought I made it clear last time that I would not answer such questions," she replied, giving him her best glare. "We appear to be revisiting old ground, Snape."

"I have nothing but old ground," he said witheringly. "It



is simply a matter of choosing the thorniest patches."

Finally beginning to wonder why she thought it would be a good idea to visit Snape on *today* of all days, she decided to give him an easy way to drive her out. "Would you like me to leave, then? Allow you your peace?"

"Feel free to exercise the luxury of choice," he drawled. "Stay or leave, Granger, it makes no difference to me."

"I never thought I would say this," she replied, suddenly tired of him. "But you, Snape, are a liar."

He blinked slowly, cat-like, and his expression did not change. "I am many things," he conceded after a pause. "But never a liar. I always tell the truth." Here, he smiled ferally. "Although it may, at times, require a certain perspective to discern that fact."

Hermione had to think about it for a few quiet moments, but eventually she had to concede that she'd never heard an outright lie, or even a half-truth, cross the man's lips before.

The smile widened. "You see?"

She wanted to hex him. Hit him. See that smile disappear. She hated him.

It widened impossibly further — she'd never seen such an expression on Snape's face before. "Oh, it's not me that you hate, Miss Granger," he said lazily, leaving her gasping with his perception. "Rather, you hate that you're wrong. Or, you fear it, perhaps. You used to, at least."

Frowning, Hermione opened her mouth to object. "I



did not. I knew —"

He seesawed a hand back and forth through the air. "Fear of being wrong, fear of inadequacy, it's all the same thing, Granger. And what compounds it all is that, in most ways — in the important ways — your fears were completely founded. You *are* wrong, girl."

"What?" she gasped, mouth flapping open uncharacteristically. "You can't —"

"The fundamental question one always asks oneself, Granger, is, *Who am I? What is my purpose?* It is rarely a conscious phenomenon, but it is simply an inevitability of life. You, Miss Granger, decided many years ago that you were a hero. Destined for greatness. Your mind would be pitted against the one you saw to be your only possible intellectual rival — Voldemort. Feel free to deny me if I speak falsely, Miss Granger."

Unable to reply, although exactly why, she was unsure, Hermione just scowled at him.

"But you were wrong, weren't you?" he asked, a manic spark of glee dancing in his eyes — it took her a moment to realize it for what it was. "You were wrong. Tell me, Granger, did you hate Harry Potter when he stole it from you? When he dragged Voldemort's body through the hall, did you want to hurt him?"

She breathed in sharply, a physical pain shooting through her belly. Why was he *doing* this to her?



Snape's eyes continued to twinkle hatefully. "I confess, I cannot blame you if you did. Everyone knew that when Voldemort fell, it would be your doing, despite the fact that it would, by necessity, be by Harry Potter's hand. Imagine our collective surprise, then, when the little snot managed it on his own."

A tear fell into her lap. "Stop it," she said dully. He wanted to hurt her because he could and now he was enjoying her pain.

Of course he did not stop. "Not even Albus thought Potter had it in him to do it without your coaching. And I will admit, Potter handled it poorly, rubbing your nose in it like that. Of course, he does have that air about him. Always. Even as an adult, functionless in every possible way in life, he is nothing but —"

She closed her eyes and Harry's dead eyes flashed sickeningly through her mind yet again. "Stop it!" she cried again, louder now. "Don't you *dare* speak of him like that. Not now!"

"And why not now, Miss Granger?" he asked softly, acidly. "Don't tell me you're in *love* with him. Is that why you returned to England? I'm afraid to inform you that Potter is happily —"

Interrupting him again, she was now crying freely. "Harry is *dead*, you horrible bastard," she spat. "Murdered in his own home and I won't let you talk about him in that way. Not when he can't defend himself."



Snape blinked again and the manic glee was gone. "Dead?" he echoed flatly. "Potter is dead? How?"

"Murder," she repeated. "I cannot believe that you did not know about it."

"Sorry," he said, only a trace of bitterness in his tone. "My subscription to the Daily Prophet has been revoked recently."

Still angry, she would not back down. "And you receive no other visitors?"

He scowled darkly. "Any *other* visitors I receive would know better than to mention that name in my presence." His expression became more thoughtful and his hands relaxed on the tabletop. "Murdered?" he asked again. "To what purpose, I wonder."

"They don't know," she replied. "Ron told me they think Death Eaters..."

He waved his hand at her, cutting her off. "Death Eaters," he mimicked nastily. "All Death Eaters fit nicely into three categories. One — irretrievably dead. Two — imprisoned in Azkaban under the Dementor's Kiss. Three — clinically insane." He paused to give her an ironic smile. "None of these include a condition in which committing murder is actually possible. No... your Potter was no longer a Death Eater target."

"Well then, who could have done it?" she asked impatiently, momentarily putting their previous conversation out of her mind.

"That would depend, Miss Granger," he said with a smirk,



"on the nature of his death. Was there, perhaps, a note?"

She gave him a look full of hatred. "He was a loving father of two who was, by all accounts, absolutely besotted with his wife. He enjoyed his job and had a healthy social life. Suicide is at least as illogical as the murder itself."

Studying her with an air of clinical detachment, his voice lacked its prior venom as he spoke. "Even the most mundane of existences, Granger, usually has an underbelly. But I will accept your assessment for the moment. What makes you so sure, then, that it was murder?"

"Why do you care all of a sudden?" she shot back, unwilling to share the details.

An eyebrow lifted. "Mere curiosity, I assure you. 'Care' is an awfully strong word."

Hermione wondered impassively for a minute if the details could possibly shock him. If the horror she experienced could conceivably affect him. Maybe she could hurt him after all. Maybe his own apparent lack of compassion could bother him. "He was slaughtered, Ron said," she said as coldly and objectively as she could. "Split open and bled to death. Like an animal."

Her stomach turned as Snape actually perked with *interest*. "I wonder..." he mused, apparently forgetting her presence momentarily. "No," he finally said. "Not a Death Eater."

Again, she was defiant. "Why not?"

"The only one capable of such a thing would have been



Rodolphus Lestrange. He always had a bizarre fondness for knives. But the man's dead, Granger. Died ten years ago."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked, crossing her arms across her chest.

He rolled his eyes at her. "I witnessed it, Miss Granger. He slit his own throat in order to evade capture." She winced and he continued. "Curious, though. He was alive when whoever did this, you say?"

Her throat was dry as she swallowed. "According to Ron," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. "He said the look in his eyes..."

Snape was quiet, permitting her grief with an air of indifference.

The moment passed and she felt her tears abate. "Yes," she repeated. "Yes, that's what he said."

"Impossible," he grunted.

Hermione blinked, unbelieving.

Voice sharpening, Snape gave her a contemptuous look. "There is not a spell in existence that could do such a thing, Granger."

"The Dark Arts..." she began.

His look intensified. "Miss Granger, do I need to remind you exactly whom you are speaking to?"

She fell silent and waited, hoping against hope that he would continue.

"To my knowledge, then," he amended fiercely. "There



is no such spell. Which means that it is an impossible way for Potter to die. Was he bound?"

"I don't know," she said lamely. "But it's not impossible," she continued. "He could have been —"

Again, he cut her off. "Are you suggesting what I think you are?"

Her gaze did not waver. "Muggles kill each other with knives every day, Snape."

Snape laughed sharply, cynically. "You *are* a stupid little fool, aren't you?" he asked her rhetorically. "*Think*, Granger. How do children become aware of their magical abilities?"

His smirk taunted her, spurned her. "Trauma," she replied shortly. "Well, usually. Heightened emotional states bring out inherent magical abilities."

"Wandless," he added. "And completely unrestrained. I am certain that you yourself experienced such childhood events. Consider further, Miss Granger — what is the usual outcome of these incidents?"

She was confused. "What do you mean?" she asked, feeling rather stupid. "They become aware of their magical talents, of course."

He cocked his head, studying her. "More basic, Granger. If you drop a Muggle child off the top of a ten story building, it will, generally, not survive. However, if you do the same to a wizard child...?"

"It survives," she breathed. "*Usually* completely unscathed.



When I was four, I fell out of the apple tree in our backyard and landed on my head. My neck should have snapped instantly, but I was fine..."

"You illustrate my point, then," he said with a short nod. "And you understand why Potter's death is impossible."

She forgot that she was sitting there, enduring what amounted to an interrogation from awful old Snape. She was too wrapped up in the *knowing*, in the *rightness*. "His wandless magic," she said, wonder in her voice. "It should have *saved* him. The sort of sheer terror that would have produced should have brought out his latent power. It's happened before with Harry, too."

Snape nodded again. "Less common with adults, of course. Takes much more to frighten them. It also has to be a significant enough period of time to register. Wizards can be killed in, well, automobile accidents, for example. Not enough time for wandless magic to kick in. But I imagine it would take a considerable amount of time and inspire a fair amount of terror to saw Potter in two — more than enough for his magic to throw off anyone who was intent enough to try. Kill them, if necessary." And he folded his hands neatly on the table, giving her a look that reeked of superiority.

The anger was back. How *dare* he speak so callously about Harry's death?

"A pretty puzzle, Miss Granger. It *does* make an odd sort of sense, though. Only Harry Potter would be bothersome



enough to die in an impossible fashion like that."

"Shut up," she growled, gritting her teeth. "Leave him alone."

"Have no fear," he said. "I have no intention of wasting another iota of my time on Potter's shade. Let him haunt *your* mind — I am well rid of him." He was quiet, ostensibly gauging her reaction to his words. "Well, little girl, was this visit as pleasant as your last? Did you find it as enjoyable as your academic posturing from before?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I hate you." Fiercely, matter-of-factly, not a shred of deceit in her tone.

He nodded solemnly, accepting the sentiment. "I expect you do," he agreed.

She left him like that, carefully watching her as she deliberately stood and walked out of the room. He did not speak, but she felt his eyes on her back until she closed the door.

As she leaned against the wall beside it, breathing deeply, trying to regain her control, she saw a shadow on the floor that did not match her own. Hermione looked up. Cuthrell.

"Good morning, Hermione," he said warmly. "Just been visiting with Severus, have we?"

"Go away," she said in a tired voice.

He smiled at her. It was just as charming as it had been before. Knowing what he intended from her, however, made it far more repulsive. "I can tell you've been speaking with Severus," he teased.

Not smiling, she looked into his mirthless eyes calmly.



"I do not pretend to understand your meaning, doctor."

"He *does* have that effect on people, doesn't he?" he asked, still affecting cheer. "Pity that all the visiting rooms are warded with Silencing Charms. The head of the hospital thinks it's a good way to gain patient trust, despite the fact that it interferes with treatment."

"I do not want to talk to you," she replied.

"I'm not asking," he said, voice only holding a shadow of a warning. "You spoke with him for well over an hour. He *answered* you, and not just one-word retorts, either. Tell me what you spoke of, Hermione."

"Nothing of any significance to you," she said, looking away. "Or to him, either."

Suddenly, Cuthrell grabbed her chin, forcing her to look into his unexpectedly shrewd gaze. "I looked you up, Hermione Granger. I was curious to see what it was about you that made Severus break his self-imposed silence. I am *still* curious, to be sure. There appears to be no discernable relationship between you two. You were his student while you were at Hogwarts. There is no other connection."

"Fascinating, I am sure," she spat. "Let me go!"

"Why are you visiting him, Hermione?" he asked, releasing her.

She ran a hand over her face, trying to clean the feel of him off of it. "That is none of your concern. Ask *him* for all I care."

He smiled again and it was decidedly less charming. "Do you love him, then? Some silly little schoolgirl crush?"



Unbelievable, but then again, stranger things have happened. Maybe he even loves you in return. Is that it, Hermione? Are you letting him fu —”

She slapped him then, of course.

To his credit, Cuthrell barely paused as he switched gears. “I wonder, Hermione, does Albus Dumbledore *really* know you’re here?”

“Don’t be a fool,” she berated, stepping away from him.

But he pushed forward, both physically and psychologically, stepping toward her again as he spoke. “Dumbledore takes a *great* interest in Severus’ treatment here. He is the next of kin, after all. I would think he would be very put out to find out about anything... untoward going on.”

“I agree,” she said, moving down the hallway and praying he would not follow. “It is a very good thing, then, that no such thing is going on, isn’t it, doctor?”



Cuthrell did not follow.

Hermione was grateful for it as she collected her belongings from the friendly receptionist and bid her farewell. In fact, she managed to stay fairly composed until she reached her hotel room.

There, sitting on her bed, her bag in one hand and an apple in the other, was Ron Weasley. He offered her a cautious smile. “Thought I’d surprise you. It’s my lunch hour.”



Startled, drained, and emotionally charged, she burst into abrupt tears. Dropping to her knees there in the doorway, she buried her head in her hands and damn near howled out her anger and frustration and pain.

“Hermione...” He sounded puzzled. And then a hand on her hair. “Hermione?”

She allowed him to wrap his arms around her shoulders, hands moving up and down her back as she shook with the effort of her tears. “He was *right*,” she wailed. “Damn him and he was right!”

“Shh...” he clucked. “Who was right, love?”

“Snape,” she moaned into his shoulder. “He said... ooh, he said awful things. But they were true. Always true. He never lies.”

“Course he does,” Ron whispered soothingly into her ear. “Snape lies all the time, I’m sure.”

Lifting her head, she looked up at him with tear-stained eyes. “How do you know?”

He smiled in reply. “Well, he was a spy for Dumbledore for all that time, wasn’t he? How was he going to fool a bunch of Death Eaters and one Dark Lord into believing his fidelity if he didn’t lie *once*, at least?”

Giggling through her sobs, she was chagrined when they turned to hiccups. “Well,” she began grudgingly, slowly, pausing to hiccup. “I suppose you’re right.”

“There, there,” he said, giving her shoulder one last pat



before releasing her. "We'll show that mean old Snape, won't we? We won't let him hurt us one bit. In fact, we might even have a little fun tonight, if we let ol' Ron have his way."

"Fu — hic — un?" she echoed, hiccupping in the middle of the word. "Wha — hic — at do you me — hic — ean? Da — hic — hamn it!"

Ron laughed heartily at her distress. "Hermione, I missed you far more than I'd realized."

She glared. "So — hic — hod off, Ron."

With a wide grin, he took her hands and helped her to her feet. "That's a fine way to treat the fellow who's showed up to take you away from all this," he said loftily, indicating her dingy hotel room.

"What?" she asked, sucking in a deep breath and holding it, mentally counting off the seconds. A hiccup escaped through her nose and she blew out, cursing as she did so.

He shook his head and picked up his apple, biting into it. "I never understood how you could hiccup while holding your breath. I've never met anyone else who could."

"I'm spe — hic — hecial," she said sarcastically.

Continuing to eat, he indicated her bag. "I've packed up everything I could see, but I'm sure I missed a few things. So you might want to give everything a last look-see."

"Wh — hic — here are we go — hic — hing?" she asked as she began opening and closing drawers, picking up the odd article and shoving it into the bag.



"I'm running away with you, of course," he said dramatically, taking another big bite. "Hermione, my ravishing loveliest love."

"You're an ih — hic — hidiot," she replied, ducking into the lavatory to scan its contents.

There was a loud slurping noise that she decided she didn't want to know about. "D'you want me to scare you?" he asked loudly.

She poked her head out into the bedroom, carrying her last few toiletries. "Knock yourself out," she said, suppressing a hiccup with little success.

"I know for a fact that Argus Filch likes to go up to the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts late at night and dance around naked with Mrs. Norris," he said with a straight face, cradling the apple core in his left hand.

Hermione made a face. "You're right. I'm sc — hic — hared. But not cured."

He shrugged. "I just want you to know you drove me to this, Hermione. Now... hiccup!" he shouted.

"What?" she asked, startled.

"I want you to hiccup, Miss Granger, now!" he roared, in his best Snape voice. "Do it or I'll hex you from here to tomorrow!"

She blinked, actually trying to produce a hiccup in her confusion at his behavior.

Ron's voice shifted back to its usual friendly timbre. "There. All gone now?"



Zippering up her bag, she realized he had done it. "My hero," she sighed dramatically. "I think I'm ready for you to whisk me away now."

"Great," he said, tapping his apple core with his wand. "Just grab on, then." He held it out.

With a shudder, she shouldered her bag and laid a single finger on the skin of the apple core, trying not to come in contact with the parts he'd bitten around. "You're disgusting, Ron."

Before he could reply, she felt a little tug behind her navel and was jerked forward. As she fell, her eyes instinctively closed, so that when her feet hit the floor again, she realized she had no idea what floor they were standing on.

"Where are we?" she asked, eyes still not open.

"Your home away from home," he replied cheerily. "Mi casa es su casa, love."

Finally bringing herself to open her eyes, the first thing she saw was a huge mass of papers and what looked to be folders strewn across a room that might possibly hold a sofa. And a chair, perhaps. One piece of paper in particular wriggled at her. "Hey, Ron?"

He pitched the apple core into a nearby dustbin. "What?"

"Do you have... a familiar?"

"No..." Ron looked rather confused. "Why?"

Hermione sighed.



Chapter Twelve

Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you — you so remote from the night of first ages — could comprehend.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



The owl that usually delivered Ron's DAILY PROPHET was running a bit late. When he'd found out that Hermione read it, Ron decided not to cancel his subscription as he'd originally planned.

Ron all but lived with Françoise and the kids any more. Periodically, he'd go over to the Burrow for a meal or spend an afternoon at his flat with Hermione, convincing her not to throw out anything that may or may not be important as she decided that there was only so much clutter she could put up with. But any other time, if he wasn't at work, he was at the Potter home.



In fact, she was to join him today. He was looking after the kids while Petunia treated Françoise to something called a 'day of beauty.' Hermione was admittedly fuzzy on what such a thing would entail, but she suspected various bits of bodies would be waxed and therefore wanted to hear no more on the matter.

But Ron had Flooed last night and invited her to spend the day over at the Potters'. He promised fun. She wasn't sure about the 'fun' bit, but it would be nice to spend some time with Ron.

And the DAILY PROPHET was late.

It didn't matter much. She'd already showered and everything but wasn't due over at the house until nine. Ron's admittedly fickle alarm clock had decided to wake her up this morning at six, so here it was only eight and she had little else to do.

There was no television, no radio, nothing of any Muggle entertainment at all. Ron didn't even have any books. Well, that wasn't entirely true. But she had no interest in books such as KEEPER LEGENDS OF YESTERYEAR and what looked to be a collection of more than fifty books on the Dark Arts. She'd only read half of them before and the other half looked rather more unsavory than she'd like to tackle so early in the morning.

So Hermione sipped disconsolately at a cup of tea and stared at the top of the table, wondering what she could

do for another hour.

She'd already cleaned as well as she was going to. Hermione was not a neat-freak by any stretch of the imagination, but she had no interest in living in abject filth either, so she'd gone over Ron's flat rather thoroughly as soon as she moved in. Fortunately, everything came out rather clean and Hermione was fairly content. The bed was comfortable, the furniture wasn't *too* musty smelling, and Ron refused to accept so much as a Knut of rent money from her in the two weeks she'd stayed there. "You've wasted entirely too much living in that dratted hotel," he told her the first time she'd tried to pay him.

A scratching at the door signaled the paper's arrival — finally — and Hermione stood quickly, opening the door and picking it up off the doormat.

As before, she started from the back and worked her way forward. She did not question her reasoning as she did this, really. It just seemed like a good idea.

Advertisements — Gladrags was running a sale next week, she noted — and marriage announcements — good Lord, was that Dennis Creevey she saw smiling down at that pretty young witch?

Obituaries. Hermione read more slowly now, with more interest. An eighty-year-old witch that passed away in St. Mungo's after a protracted illness. A hundred-seventy-year-old wizard in an unfortunate Quidditch incident.



Only a handful of deaths greeted her eyes.

The entry at the top of the page snagged her interest. A young man smiled sadly at her from the photograph. Forty-year-old Alisander Weaver, the obituary read. Died 'at home,' whatever that meant. Survived by his wife and his fourteen-year-old son, currently attending Hogwarts. Weaver, a potions manufacturer by trade, was apparently an upstanding member of his small community in just outside Edinburgh.

Forty years old, she mused, flipping the page over idly. *Dead at forty.*

And he died at home. Hermione wondered once again if that was polite speech for suicide. After all, it would hardly be prudent to say, 'Weaver poisoned himself,' or whatever had actually happened.

Dead at forty.

A wife and son, to boot. *Poor kid*, she thought. His Head of House probably had to tell him. She tried to imagine being sat down by McGonagall at the age of fourteen — in her fourth year, then — and told that her father was dead. That her father 'died at home.' What would she have done? What would this little boy do?

Hermione shook her head suddenly, as if to push the thought out of her brain, not wanting to be alone. Ron would just have to deal with her being half-an-hour early.



"You're early," Ron said as he opened the door. "I was hoping to have the kids properly washed and brushed before you got here — like to show them off at their best advantage, you see. But Nicholas, I believe, is sitting in the den watching television in not much and Alice is nearly ready for her after-breakfast bath, aren't you, love?" he asked the little girl dangling from his hip, covered in sticky substances with juice running down her front.

"No bath," Alice tried. "Not dirty, Unca Ron."

"If I left you out here for much longer, Alice, you'd attract dogs," he said dryly, poking her gummy cheek and eliciting a giggle. "Oh!" Startled, he looked back over at Hermione, who was just standing on the front porch, looking bemused. "Where *are* my manners? Come in. Maybe you could coax Nicholas into some clothes. You do seem to be his new favorite."

"Good morning to you too, Ron," she said, sweeping past him and into the house. "Here I was, thinking I'd get to spend some nice quality time with my best friend, but instead he expects me to work?" She huffed teasingly.

He grinned. "Give me fifteen minutes to scrub the scamp here and then I'll be the perfect host. Tea and biscuits, even."

"Biscuits?" Alice echoed hopefully.

"Oh, not for you," he told her as he walked off into the interior of the house. "I've already fed you too much syrup on your hotcakes as it is. Any more sugar, and you won't



sleep for a week."

The conversation faded and Hermione felt rather awkward lingering in the foyer. Deciding there was nothing for it, she bravely walked into the sitting room alone.

As Ron had said, Nicholas was sitting in the middle of the floor, propped up on his elbows, watching some indecipherable cartoon nonsense flash across the screen. He also happened to only be wearing a pair of briefs and what seemed to be a perfectly serviceable pile of clothes was heaped to one side. Suppressing a laugh, Hermione coughed softly to announce herself.

Nicholas jumped a bit, rolling over and eyes widening as he saw who it was. "Oh!" he cried, leaping to his feet. "I'm sorry... please don't tell Uncle Ron... or my mum either," he said as an afterthought. "I'm supposed to be dressed."

She nodded at the clothes now at his feet, as straight-faced as she could manage. "So I'd gathered."

Fumbling slightly, he pulled on the trousers and t-shirt lying on the floor. "Mum lets us wear Muggle clothes on the weekend," he told her, grunting slightly as he awkwardly buttoned up his little jeans.

"It's Wednesday," Hermione replied, corners of her mouth twitching.

"Uncle Ron lets them wear what they damn well please," Ron said casually from the doorway, clutching a marginally cleaner Alice.



The little girl clapped her hands. "Damn!"

He sighed as Nicholas laughed. "It's like she *wants* to make Françoise angry with me," Ron said forlornly.

Grinning, Hermione sat down in a nearby chair, doing her best to look innocent. "Actually, Ron, I don't know if she learned that particular one from you or not."

"Oh, really? Have you been corrupting her as well?" he asked, setting her on her feet.

Alice made a beeline for Nicholas, throwing her chubby arms as far around him as she could manage. "Nic'las!"

Making a face, he pushed her away.

But Alice was nothing if not determined, grabbing on for dear life and laughing as Nicholas shoved even harder.

"Geroff me, Alice," he growled as she yanked on his shirt.

"Are they always like this?" Hermione asked conversationally, watching the siblings either struggle or play — she wasn't entirely sure.

Ron shrugged. "More often than not. Poor Nicholas spends a fair amount of time as Alice's personal punching bag, but he's fairly tolerant about it. Sometimes, though, he'll just... oh, shit," he sighed as Alice began to cry. "Nicholas!" he reprimanded sternly.

Trying his best to look blameless, Nicholas gave his uncle a wide-eyed stare. As if he hadn't just slapped his toddler sister and knocked her to the ground. "She *started* it!" he protested.



"But you're *bigger*," Ron replied in what Hermione thought was a very reasonable tone. "You can't go around hitting her, Nicholas. You could really hurt her without meaning to. No matter *who* started it." This was accompanied by an unsmiling look.

"Sorry, Uncle Ron," he grumbled, glaring at his still-sniffing sister. "But I think she knows exactly what she's doing. She *likes* seeing me in trouble." The glare intensified and Alice's tears waned.

Studying the baby's red-rimmed eyes, Hermione had to concede that there *was* a devious sort of little sparkle in them. They weren't crocodile tears exactly — she *had* been hurt — but the vindictive glee Hermione saw there did not seem to belong to a two-year-old. Almost two-year-old. Whatever.

But Ron was having none of it. "Sorry, mate," he told Nicholas cheerfully. "I'm afraid that's sort of a 'little sister' prerogative. Little brother, too, for that matter. I used to get the twins in trouble all the time when we were young. Come to think of it, though," he said, tone becoming more thoughtful, "the twins usually *deserved* what they got. But turnabout is fair play — Ginny did the same thing to me when I tried to play 'big brother.'"

By this time, Alice seemed to have recovered nicely, toddling over to the television and poking a few buttons with obvious curiosity. "Piggy?" she asked no one in particular.



"Oh, no," Nicholas moaned, putting his head in his hands melodramatically. "Can't you watch *anything* but that stupid talking pig?"

"Piggy," she repeated more stubbornly. "Watch piggy! Alice watch piggy." Her bottom lip was protruding dangerously and she gave the television screen a little smack with the palm of her hand.

"All right, Alice," Ron cried, moving over to put a calming hand on the top of her head. "I'll put it in." He pulled a rectangular little plastic case out of a cabinet that featured a Muggle photograph of a pig, among a few other common barnyard animals.

"Piggy," Alice said again in a decidedly happier voice.

Hermione was amused. "Boy, she's got every male in this household wrapped firmly around her finger, doesn't she?"

"Françoise isn't far behind," Ron said as he worried the plastic box open. "Uh oh," he groaned, glancing back and forth between the television and whatever the box held. "Nicholas, would you...?"

Rolling his eyes and emitting a sigh that clearly showed this to be a reoccurring phenomenon, Nicholas plucked the case out of Ron's hands. "It's not that hard, you know," he said, punching a few buttons on a black box sitting beside the television that Hermione hadn't noticed before. "Just put the disc in and hit the play button. It even says *play* on it."

"That's not a VCR, then," Hermione said dubiously, watch-



ing introductory credits flash up on the television screen as Nicholas turned it on.

"It's a PVC machine," Ron replied.

"DVD player," Nicholas corrected, rolling his eyes again. "Papa... Papa brought it home before Alice was born. We watch movies on it."

She peered at the machine with mild interest. "So films are on CD's now? When did *that* happen?"

Nicholas shrugged and settled down on the sofa, permitting Alice to snuggle into his side. "Dunno. Before I was born, though. What's a VCR?"

"It was what we had before your DVD thing, I guess," she replied, still looking at the contraption, running her fingers over the black plastic with vague curiosity. "It played tapes instead of CD's."

"DVD's," Nicholas amended. "And what are tapes?"

With a short laugh at his confused expression (and Ron's as well), Hermione threw her hands up in the air. "I give up!" she cried playfully. "You'll have to dig out a history book, Nicholas."

"I wonder," he began after a beat of silence. "If —"

"Hush, Nic'las," Alice reprimanded him, her stern little face ludicrously juxtaposed with her bobbing curls and round cheeks. "Piggy."

Ron watched Hermione try to suppress her giggles with something approaching cheerful resignation. "I suppose

if we're to have any conversation, then," he said, "we ought to take it out of the room, so that little Miss Alice here can enjoy her film."

"Piggy, Unca Ron," the little girl in question admonished. "Piggy movie."

He laughed at her look of consternation. "Oh, all right, you little Nazi. Come on, Hermione. Fancy a cuppa?"

Following him into the kitchen, she watched him set a kettle of water on the stove and then hasten back to the doorway to check on Alice and Nicholas. She sat down at the round table and soon, recalling just *what* had happened to that poor table, leapt back to her feet.

Smiling mirthlessly at her, Ron turned the heat up under the kettle and began fiddling in a cabinet. "Hard, isn't it?"

"I understand what Ginny meant," she replied faintly. "I certainly couldn't manage living here after... after... well, just after."

He stuck his head through the archway into the den once again. "You kids need anything?"

There was an indignant high-pitched squeal in response. "Quiet!" Alice practically howled.

After a slight pause, another little voice floated into the kitchen. "Can... can I have some tea?" Nicholas asked softly, hovering in the doorway and looking up at Ron hopefully.

Ron gave the boy's head a pat. "Milk."

"Tea," he countered with a frown.

"Milk," Ron said firmly. "Nicholas, you *know* your mum



doesn't like you having tea at your age. Besides, you're a growing boy and all that. Milk's good for you."

Glowering venomously, Nicholas crossed his arms over his chest. "Papa let me have tea when I wanted it."

Ron matched him glare for glare. "First of all, Nicholas, I know that's not true. And second of all, I'm not your father."

"Then stop acting like you are!" he shouted, running from the room. Hermione heard his feet thudding as he raced up the stairs.

With a rueful smile, Ron shrugged at Hermione's questioning look. "Nicholas and I have always had a rather dysfunctional working relationship," he said, rattling teacups. "It's got to steep a bit."

"Of course," she replied, hoping he would continue if she held her tongue.

"Nicholas..." he began, leaning against the counter and regarding a spoon with apparent interest. After a moment, he snorted. "Petunia calls him a 'sensitive boy.'"

"So I've heard," she said dryly, eliciting a rather emotionless chuckle.

Decisively, firmly, Ron laid the spoon on the counter, running his thumb around its handle, deep in thought. "He's never really liked me, I don't think. You see, for all his dratted *sensitivity*, what Nicholas really wants is to be able to properly assess things. Decide their function, their purpose. He's simply frightfully good at it. That's the *sen-*

sitivity — he *knows* what people are. He takes their measure as soon as he looks twice at them."

"Intuitive," she interjected.

He smiled at the spoon. "Perhaps. But the problem he has with me is that I somehow defy his little scheme. He has this mental image — this ideal form — of what his Uncle Ron should be. And I —" His smile turned self-deprecating. "I am sadly lacking. He resents me for this, I think. For not being enough like..." Finally, Ron tore his gaze from the silver spoon and his eyes bore into hers. "Sorry. I do run on, don't I?"

"Oh, I don't mind," Hermione said with a sly look. "I like learning new and interesting things, you see."

His laugh was closer to genuine and he began pouring out the tea. "Is this a good time, then, for me to attempt to learn some new and interesting things about you?" He handed her a cup.

"Your efforts at subtlety are rather pathetic, Ron," she replied demurely, taking a cautious sip and wincing as the hot liquid scalded her tongue.

"I don't like it," he said, apparently immune to boiling water as he took a long draught from his own cup. "You breeze in after thirteen years without a word and then you won't tell me a damned thing about where you've been. It worries me, Hermione. Especially since I know why you left."

She did not meet his eyes. "You can't," she said.

His tone was bland. "I can guess, though. But I'll leave it



for now, Hermione. Just know that I'll have the truth from you one way or another. Remember — I'm an Auror. I can strap you down to a table and force-feed you Veritaserum. And I'd do it without so much as a second of remorse."

"Speaking of..." she said in a transparent attempt to change the subject. "I was wondering about the investigation... you know..."

Shrugging, Ron drained his cup — Hermione had not even managed a second swallow of hers. "It goes," he replied. "They still won't tell me much. It's so damned infuriating. Kingsley interrogates me about Albus's assignment over and over but won't throw me so much as a scrap of information. I'm on the verge of stealing the case file."

"Assignment?" she echoed delicately. "Ron, what do you...?"

He was silent for several beats, making a pretense of cleaning up the tea things. "I shouldn't tell you," he said as he rinsed out his cup. "Albus made me *swear*." He emptied the kettle out and sat it beside the stove. "But then again... I can't see what it would hurt. There's no reason any longer..." Both his voice and his expression were grave. "Hermione, you've got to promise me that what I tell you won't leave this room. Not a soul. Understand?"

Wordlessly, excitement bubbling in her gut, Hermione nodded.

"You know that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was defeated back during our seventh year," he began. "Well..."



his corporeal bits, at any rate."

She nodded again, a bit impatiently this time.

"What you don't know is that Voldemort didn't really die entirely until Harry himself died," Ron said bluntly.

Hermione blinked, trying to process his statement. "Ron..."

With a wave of his hand, he cut her question off before it could start. "We're not sure exactly how Harry survived that attack when he was a baby."

She *did* have something to say to that. "I thought Dumbledore said it was —"

Ron's voice was gentle. "Albus was trying to comfort an eleven-year-old boy, Hermione," he said. "He said what Harry needed to hear — nothing more. The truth of the matter is — and this is *completely* confidential — is that we have no idea what happened that night. The best guess we have is that either Lily or James Potter cast some sort of protection spell over their son. And not a standard one, either. The details are, fortunately, not incredibly important. The upshot is that Harry and Voldemort were bonded that night. Something in their souls."

Letting out a deep breath, Hermione wrapped her hands around her teacup, wanting to feel something at least vaguely familiar underneath her fingertips. "Bonded," she muttered, more to herself than Ron. "That makes sense. But didn't Harry —?"

"Of course he knew," Ron said impatiently. "How could



he not? Voldemort was practically trawling through his mind nightly for two and a half years at least."

She noticed that he was actually saying the Dark Lord's name. "Then what would Dumbledore need to keep all of this a secret for?" she asked dumbly, not seeing Ron's point.

"Hermione, the link went both ways," he said in a gentle voice. "The concern had always been not that Voldemort would use Harry, but that Harry would use Voldemort. That there were bits of his soul that were, in essence, the Dark Lord's. Apparently the Parseltongue was far more significant to Dumbledore than he let on. It was a sign that Harry could subconsciously draw on Voldemort's will. The only reason Albus let Harry stay on at Hogwarts after his second year was because he managed to defeat the basilisk with Gryffindor's own sword."

"I always wondered why Dumbledore allowed the Chamber of Secrets to remain open," she said, finally taking another sip of tea. "According to Harry's story, he *had* to have at least an idea of what was going on. I never knew why he didn't try to do something."

Ron's expression was carefully blank. "It *was* a test of sorts, apparently," he conceded. "But Harry passed and that's what matters. Well, and that no one was hurt," he continued after a slight pause. "Harry was not watched quite *as* carefully after that, particularly after he became more aware of the link between him and Voldemort. But



then he managed to defeat You-Know-Who and the game changed yet again."

She finished her tea. "I never knew how complicated it was. It all seemed so simple when we were living it — the Dark Lord was evil and needed to be defeated, and we were good and needed to win. Nothing more."

"I didn't know until about three years after," he agreed. "After I finished my training at the Aurory. Albus called me into his office one day. I was surprised — I'd attended plenty of Order meetings, but I'd never met with him alone, you know. As it turned out, he told me about all of this. You can imagine, I was pretty angry with him for a while."

Hermione considered his words. A fresh-faced, twenty-one-year-old Ron Weasley, full of self-righteous Gryffindor indignation and the brashness of youth, being told that his best friend had the potential to become the next Dark Lord. Angry was quite possibly an understatement.

"But I thought about it," he continued. "And at the end of it all, I realized he was right. We all loved Harry, and that made his protection tantamount. It was just sad that he might need to be protected from himself. And with Voldemort dead, we weren't sure how the residual energies he'd transferred to Harry would act. He needed to be watched."

With wide eyes, she anticipated his next words.

Ron smiled sadly. "You're right, Hermione. Dumbledore appointed me to be Harry's watchdog. I was in the perfect



position for it — closer to Harry than any other human being on the face of the Earth. And I was glad to do it, proud to do it. Because deep down, I knew what Dumbledore was too cautious to believe — that Harry *couldn't* be Voldemort. No matter what bits of Voldemort he had bouncing around up in his head. Harry wanted nothing to do with any of it. So because of that, I agreed."

Staring down at the saucer in her hands, Hermione hated to ask her next question but knew there was no way around it. "So you're saying that Harry never..."

"*Never*," Ron said firmly. "Harry wasn't a perfect fellow by any stretch of the imagination, but there's a vast difference between imperfection and evil."

She was quiet, not knowing exactly what to say.

"And that's what Kingsley wanted to ask about," he said. "He didn't know the particulars, of course, but he knew enough to wonder if maybe a motive for Harry's death was buried there. But he's got no worries — I've already told him everything I know. Well," he amended, "everything I think Albus would want him to know."

Shaking her head, Hermione sat her teacup beside the sink. "Webs within webs," she commented. "When did life get so difficult?"

"It's always been difficult, love," he said, mood shifting from dismal to something almost resembling cheerful. "It just takes some of us longer to notice that fact than others."



Chapter Thirteen

No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze.

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



he office was rather quieter than usual today. It always was, after a funeral.

Summerford had been young. Hadn't even had his bootlaces for a year. Ron smiled down at the file he'd been absently perusing. Bit silly that, really.

The final examination for admission to the Aurory was an obstacle course of sorts. A couple of senior Aurors would be 'Dark wizards,' rampaging through some Muggle town (mid-sized, usually, although Ron knew that Kingsley's final had been administered in Islington), and the hapless trainee would have to bring them in. They were not permitted the standard Auror kit — this was a test, after all — and had to rely on their wands and their wits.



According to the story, one poor Auror (nameless, as legends tend to be, although Ron had heard mutterings around office water coolers offering names anywhere from the ruthless old seventeenth century 'witch-hunter' Matthew Hopkins⁷, notorious for his brutal pursuit of Dark wizards, to the slightly more modern — though no less infamous — Alastor Moody) managed to break his wand in the duel with his instructors. But the fellow, whoever he really was, recovered nicely and wound up dragging his instructors back to the Aurory, bloodied and their hands neatly bound with his bootlaces.

Thus, every Auror, upon his graduation, was awarded a pair of bootlaces, charmed to be Unbreakable. *Use every possible resource at hand*, was the lesson to be taken from this slightly ridiculous ritual.

Ron let his eyes flicker down to his own laces, whimsically spelled to a bright red instead of the standard-issue black. "Red hair and red shoes," one of his mates had grumbled. "Could you make yourself any more obvious a target, Weasley?"

Kingsley had given Summerford's bootlaces to his wife, enormously pregnant with their first child, as she stood graveside. A single tear had fallen down her cheek, he remembered, as she cradled the small box in her hand. Ron hoped fervently that she didn't put them in some silly box somewhere, that Summerford's child would wear



those laces as he or she fell out of trees and ran down to the lake at Hogwarts. Good laces for a kid, really. Completely indestructible — not a flame or a blade in the world could make so much as a dent in them.

Blinking as his eyes began suspiciously stinging, Ron jerked his mind away from the image of that tear on William Summerford's wife's face and tried to focus on the file under his nose. An untamed werewolf in Albania.

Only one team needed to take care of it — he wrote the number 'thirty-eight' on the cover of the folder and tapped it once with his wand. Immediately, the file disappeared, ostensibly sent to Higgins and Lee, team number thirty-eight. Byungki *had* been anxious for an opportunity to take a case out of the country, Ron remembered distantly. Well, now he had his chance. And Hera Higgins could probably keep him from *too* much trouble.

Byungki Lee was one of the more impetuous Aurors in the Ministry. At twenty-five, he'd already been brought before the Wizengamot four times for inappropriate conduct and threat of Muggle exposure. That was actually *why* he'd been paired with Hera lately — an older, stern woman, Hera kept Byungki on a fairly tight leash. She was able to use his intensity and creative approach to situations to its maximum effect, efficiently checking his tendency toward leaping without first looking. The number of Oblivate teams sent in after Byungki's missions now was actually less than



half of what it used to be, thanks to Hera.

Another file, another assignment. A Muggle in Cheshire, watching a local wizarding family *far* too closely. This was actually rather misallocated — there was an entire department for Muggle relations that had nothing to do with the Aurory — but the family in question belonged to one Robert Wheeler, whose mother happened to be Cornelius Fudge's sister.

Ah... politics.

With a wry grin, Ron sent the file to team number forty-two. Tonks would probably get a kick out of this one. Not to mention accidentally set the Wheeler home on fire. When no one was there, of course. But all the same...

His mind now more or less focused on his work, he let time slip away, head bent over his desk, scratching notes on parchment and tapping files with his wand.

As it was, then, whoever was standing beside his desk had to clear their throat several times before Ron even knew they were there.

Startled, his head jerked up and he regarded his guest with surprise. "Françoise?" he asked, floored. "What are *you* doing here?"

Françoise smiled at his obvious confusion. "I couldn't stand to stay in that house for another *second*," she said breezily. "So I'm here to take you out for lunch. My treat. Grab your cloak and we'll go."

"Lunch?" he asked, bewilderment deepening signifi-

cantly. "What time is it?"

Laughing, she gave his shoulder a little pat. "It's past noon, Ron. Nearly one, actually. Is work *that* interesting?"

"Not as such," he said, stretching in his chair. "But time-consuming, it seems. So... lunch, you say. And your treat?"

"No lobster, mind," she replied with another laugh. "Now come on — I'm *starving!*" As if to punctuate her point, Françoise tugged at his arm.

Shaking his head at her antics, Ron allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "All right, all right," he grumbled playfully. "So, where to?"

"It's a surprise," she said, holding out a rather dulled Sickle that Ron knew she used for a makeshift Portkey when the occasion called for it.

He took his cloak in one hand and laid a pointer finger on the Sickle with the other. Françoise spoke a single word and Ron felt his stomach flip inside out as the Portkey pulled them forward.



"*This* was your surprise?" Ron cried, laughter evident in his tone. "*Fortescue's?*"

"I thought it would be a surprise," Françoise replied demurely, voice quavering with suppressed mirth. "I can see by your reaction that I was correct."

He placed his hands on his hips and cocked his head at



her. "Merlin's arse, Françoise," he exclaimed unthinkingly. "Are you suggesting that we have ice cream for luncheon? I thought you were a responsible parent or some such thing."

Her nose turned upward and her reply was decidedly snobbish. "If you had ever bothered to *notice*, Mister Weasley, you would see that right beside the huge ice cream parlor is a restaurant. Fionn Fortescue went into business next door to his brother many years before either of us had been born."

"Okay, Miss I-Know-More-Than-You," he said sarcastically. Indeed, now that he came to look more closely, there was a sign clearly advertising, FORTESCUE'S SANDWICHES AND SOUPS — HOMEMADE. "If you're done with your lecture..."

"Should we eat inside or outside?" she asked, not bothering to respond to his derision.

Ron perked up. "We can eat outside?"

"I *thought* you'd like that," she said with a disdainful sniff. "It puts me in mind of those dreadful Muggle cafés you like to patronize. The difference, of course, being that Fionn's sandwiches are absolutely wonderful."

Wrinkling his nose at her, he pulled out a chair at a nearby table. "Boy, one measly little case of food poisoning and it puts you off an entire genre of cuisine. Don't you have *any* sense of adventure, Françoise?"

"I am the mother of two rather rambunctious children," she replied primly, handing him a menu out of what

seemed to be nowhere. "They've sapped it out of me."

With a start, he laid the menu on the table. "Erm... Françoise?"

She hummed, not looking up.

"Where *are* the kids today, then?" he asked carefully, panic beginning to dawn in his mind. "Shouldn't you —?"

Finally catching a glimpse of his expression, she began to giggle. "Oh, Ron," she sighed, oddly reminiscent of Hermione as an exasperated child. *Oh, Ron*, she used to groan on their adolescent escapades, hands on her hips and hair flying every possible direction.

The panic was now nearly in full blossom. "Françoise?"

"What?" she managed between chuckles. "What sort of mother do you think I *am*, Ronald Weasley?"

He did have the sense to blush at that. "I —"

"Don't you remember?" she asked. "Nicholas started back at school today. We talked about it last night, as well as at breakfast. It's only three weeks into the semester, so he should be fine. And I went in to speak with his teacher this morning when I dropped him off — she's aware of the situation. And as for Alice, I left her with Petunia before I came to your office — I thought it would be nice to have a meal with some conversation with polysyllable words."

Blowing out a breath, Ron's expression was growing more chagrined by the second. "I'm sorry, Françoise. I *did* forget about Nicholas. It's just..." He floundered, unable



to articulate his thought.

"I know," she said kindly. "It's been... difficult." After a pause, she shook her head, smiling ruefully. "Consider, Ron, that it took you the better part of a half-hour to notice that the children weren't here."

He couldn't think of anything to say to that.



Their orders were brought to their table by a round little man, red-cheeked and beaming. "Françoise, my dear girl," he said, sitting a plate in front of her nose. "I knew I recognized that order from a mile away — I just *had* to bring it out myself."

Smiling, she stood, wrapping her arms around the fellow, who was barely at her eye level. "Fionn!" she cried. "How *are* you?"

Ron was dumbfounded. "Fionn?" he echoed. "Françoise, is that —?"

"Fionn Fortescue, at your service, my lad," the man — Fionn — said brightly. "And unless I miss my guess, *you* must be Ronald Weasley." He placed Ron's plate on the table.

Still rather taken aback, Ron's only response was a tentative nod.

"I've heard a lot about you, young man," Fionn continued, pulling up a chair of his own. "You come highly recommended, according to Albus and wee Françoise here."



I hope you two don't mind if an old man joins you for a bit. I've been meaning to owl you, Françoise. How are you holding up, child? I saw the article in the Daily Prophet. One of many, it seems."

She shrugged and picked up a chip, chewing on it pensively. "One day at a time, Fionn. That's all I can ask."

Fionn's words finally managed to penetrate the baffled fog that was currently Ron's brain. "Hang on," he began slowly. "You know Albus Dumbledore as well? Who *are* you?" He left his real question — *how do I not know you?* — unspoken.

Chuckling, the man patted Ron's hand with something very like affection. "As I have said — I'm Fionn Fortescue. Albus I know because we went to Hogwarts together, many years ago. He was a year ahead of me, you know, but he tutored me in Transfigurations and I showed him how to sneak into the kitchens."

Ron goggled, trying to picture an adolescent Albus Dumbledore standing in the Hogwarts kitchens, asking house elves for handouts, and utterly failing. "Really?" he managed, picking up a quarter of his sandwich.

"Really," Fionn said. "I suppose, though, that Albus would prefer I not share such things with his young protégés, as our old boyhood escapades go a long way toward dispelling the aura of greatness he seems to work so hard to cultivate."

Françoise snorted and took a sip of her water. "He does a good job of dispelling it himself. Lemon drops, indeed."



"I think you and I ought to have more chats, Mr. Fortescue," Ron said with a straight face, polishing off the bit of sandwich in his hand.

"Oh, call me Fionn, boy," he replied, waving a hand blithely through the air. "Neither my brother nor myself have ever stood on much ceremony. The only 'Mr. Fortescue' we ever knew about was our father. And he was a right stiff sort of fellow."

"So you are Florian Fortescue's brother," he said.

Françoise glowered at Ron. "I already *told* you that."

"Given that you never bothered to inform me that you have more than a passing acquaintance with him, I think I'm in my right to question everything you've said up to this point," he retorted.

Fionn chortled. "Oh, my goodness," he cried. "I miss having young people around. All the Hogwarts crowd tends to gravitate to my brother's little shop, you see. In fact," he said with a decidedly Dumbledorean twinkle in his eye, "many of them don't even know that I'm here."

Ron shot Françoise a victorious look as if to say, *See? I'm not the only one*. But he remained wisely silent on the matter, choosing instead to change the subject. "Given that, then," he said, "how is it that you two seem to know each other so well?"

Twinkling further, Fionn gave Françoise a fond look. "Through my brother and her father, actually," he admitted.



"Florian was introduced to Christophe at some party or another not long after Christophe had come to England. Christophe happened to mention that his little girl was in need of an English tutor — they spoke French at home, you see, but he was determined that his daughter was not going to be lacking in any quality. So Florian mentioned me. I'd been in Paris for a time back during the Twenties and even did a short stint at Beauxbatons in the Fifties — Herbology for a couple semesters while the actual professor was on sabbatical."

Ron looked back and forth between the pair disbelievingly. "So... you were her tutor?"

"For about three years," he replied. "Françoise has always been a quick study, but I suppose you already knew that. But she always came to see me during her summers and we've kept up through owls. I must admit, though, that while she brought her little boy by a few years back, she *still* has not given me the honor of meeting her daughter. Albus assures me that your girl is a right scamp, though, Françoise."

With a wry smile and a short nod, Françoise chuckled. "She is, I admit," she conceded with a faux sigh. "A regular little devil. But she's got all the men in her life effectively twisted 'round her little finger. Especially — and make sure to share this with him — her precious 'Bus.'" Her smile became more genuine as Fionn laughed heartily. "And Harry just dotes..." Trailing off, Françoise's face became a mask of misery and she lowered her gaze to her plate.



Immediately concerned, Fionn put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I am sorry, child," he said quietly.

Uncomfortable, Ron began eating in earnest, filling his mouth with food in an effort to avoid the temptation to speak.

"So am I," she responded automatically. After a pause, her tone was more sincere. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "It's kind of automatic, you know? I know you mean it, Fionn."

His face was kind. "I know, my girl. And you should know that it takes much more to offend me."

"It's just..." Her mouth twisted, the chip in her hand forgotten. "I'm usually fine. Every morning I wake up and I decide that I can do this. I can... continue. But sometimes... sometimes. It's like this wave. Everything comes crashing down and it's just... it's too real. I don't know." She let the chip fall to her plate, untouched. "I have no more tears left, Fionn," she whispered, finally meeting his eyes. "What's wrong with me?"

It took him a few beats of silence to formulate a reply. Ron chewed mightily on the last few mouthfuls of his sandwich, not knowing what to say to such a question. Eventually, however, Fionn seemed to find a response. "Nothing's wrong with you, Françoise," he said thoughtfully. "You're grieving, my dear. And there's no right or wrong way to go about it. But take a tiny bit of wisdom from this old man — while your pain may never pass entirely, it *will* be bearable. You will come through this tragedy and you will be



stronger for it." One last comforting pat and Fionn sat back in his chair, releasing her from his touch.

The three of them sat there, in the bright sunshine, the warmth of the air a testament to the presence of summer and the chill in the breeze evidence of its passing. Ron finished his lunch silently, watching Françoise pick at her food and wondering what he could do for it.

For her.

He met Fionn's eyes suddenly and did not like the question he saw there. Mostly because it was one that he didn't know the answer to himself.



Ron could not help but feel relieved as he Apparated back to his office after lunch. What should have been a more or less pleasant interlude had turned abruptly sour and he was glad to be done with it. As it was, then, he did not quite meet Françoise's eyes as he bade her farewell and avoided Fionn's entirely as he shook his hand. "It was a pleasure meeting you, sir," he'd said nearly truthfully.

"As you say, my boy," Fionn had replied, pumping Ron's hand up and down enthusiastically. "Come back again some time. You can tell me all about your most interesting cases at the Aurory and, in return, I'll tell you about the time Albus and I set a boggart on our Divination professor in my fourth year."



The building was quiet as Ron walked through the front doors. Quite uncharacteristic for the Aurory, really — there was usually *some* disaster in the making somewhere on the premises. But everyone he met on the way to his office seemed to be proceeding from their respective point A's to whatever point B's they were seeking without incident. Even his desk seemed undisturbed as he flung his cloak into a vacant chair and sat down. How unusual — people generally thought nothing of ransacking someone's desktop to find whatever file they thought they were looking for.

But everything was here, and in the order he'd left it in, to boot. As if luncheon had never happened, Ron settled in, picked up his quill, and took up where he'd left off, once again immersing himself completely in his work.

An indeterminate amount of time later, he was startled as something bounced off the top of his head. Glancing down at the floor, he saw a balled-up wad of parchment that seemed to be the culprit.

"Can I trouble you for a moment?" someone asked from the doorway.

Ron looked up. Kingsley. "Come in, Kingsley," he said, waving an inviting hand at the chair holding his cloak.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Chief Auror at the unprecedented young age of fifty-one (the last chief was installed at a fairly spry ninety-seven and retired under duress at a hundred twenty), regarded Ron's cloak with barely-dis-

guised disdain. "You really are a slob, Weasley," he said, hanging the cloak on a rack meant for just this sort of thing located right by the door. "You know that, right?"

"Of course," Ron agreed, making one last notation in a file before tossing it into a haphazard pile on the floor. "I've got at least three women telling me so nearly daily. No... make that four. Alice Potter's just mastered the word 'messy.'"

Almost smiling, Kingsley crossed one leg neatly over the other as he lounged in Ron's chair. "Holding up, then, Weasley?"

With a shrug, he met his superior's eyes forthrightly. "As well as can be expected, Shacklebolt," he replied. "Given the circumstances. What are the circumstances, by the by?"

"Not much has changed," Kingsley said tightly. "We've got a few bites on some lower level Death Eaters that were never brought in for questioning. One in particular was sighted near Potter's residence not two weeks before the death."

Ron kept his expression blank. *Death.*

He realized suddenly that Kingsley was a coward if he couldn't name it for what it really was. Not death.

Murder.

"Any progress on motive?" he asked in a careful sort of voice.

Kingsley's reply held a warning. "Based on the information you've given us, Weasley, I'd say we're still at the same point." He did not actually say, *I shouldn't be telling you this*, but it was written all over his face.

But Ron still pushed, heedless of the older man's expres-



sion. "I still think I should —"

Leaning forward in his seat, Kingsley's sudden fury was nearly a tangible thing. "Damn it, Ron!" he shouted. "Don't you think I'd pull you in on this if I could?" More quietly now. "You're one of the best men I've got, in *and* out of the field."

Ron remained silent, waiting.

His posture was downcast and defeated. "I *can't*, Ron," he said. "And you know that. You're just too close. How do I know you're not going to go vigilante as soon as you've got enough facts to find a name? Besides, Ron, you're not in great shape."

Opening his mouth, he was ready to launch a volley of protests but stayed quiet as Kingsley raised a preemptive hand.

"I'm not talking about your eye, Weasley. Merlin knows if I could find a way to put you in the field even with your blind side, I would. No, Ron. I mean *emotionally*. You're walking a thin wire, boy."

He did not bother to deny it. Both he and Kingsley knew it was the truth.

"Until I think you can handle it, Weasley, you're to stay as far away from the Potter case as I can keep you," he said, a final note in his voice. "And even *if* I decide to let you in on some of the details, it won't be in any official capacity. I stand by what I've always said, Ron — you're too close to this one. Don't bother arguing with me. My mind is made up."

Gritting his teeth, Ron bit back a dozen potential replies,



none of them appropriate for his chief. "Is there anything else you wanted?" he finally settled on asking.

Kingsley's gaze was knowing as he regarded Ron. "You look like shit, Weasley. Go home early today."

Chapter Fourteen

Only in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death-mask an inconceivably brooding, and menacing expression.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



"h, Miss Granger," the receptionist at Perkins cried as Hermione stepped through the front door.

"How are you doing this morning?"

"Fine, thank you," she said with a pleasant smile. "And how are you, Ms...?"

"Oh, everyone just calls me Marcy," she replied. "I'm well, thank you, Miss Granger."

Her smile widened. "Hermione, please," she said. "Is Sn — is Severus seeing visitors today?" Snape's first name still tasted



strange in her mouth — she wondered if it always would.

The receptionist — Marcy — slid the familiar box onto the countertop briskly. “He is,” she told her. “In fact, I believe someone came in earlier to see Severus. That other one. He’s the only one that visits, other than you, of course. Such a nice fellow — there’s something familiar about him. I know I’ve seen him in the Prophet before.”

“Did you attend Hogwarts?” Hermione asked wryly, assuming that the only other person in this world that would actually visit Severus Snape was Albus Dumbledore. Especially given the curious and unexplainable fact that he was, according to Dr. Cuthrell, Snape’s next-of-kin.

“Gracious, no,” Marcy exclaimed. “I’m a Squib. Barely a speck of talent — just enough to *see* the wizarding world. Not nearly enough to get a Hogwarts letter.”

“Oh,” she said softly, putting her wand in the box, afraid she’d just hurt the kind woman’s feelings.

But Marcy’s face was full of compassion. “Don’t worry, my dear,” she said with a sad little smile. “I’ve had my entire life to adjust to it. Now... you go ahead back. I’m sure that nice Mr. Dumbledore is nearly through. And won’t Severus be pleased to have two visitors in one day?”

Stripping off her shoes, Hermione suppressed a laugh. *Pleased* wasn’t the word she was thinking of. “Thank you, Marcy,” she said politely as the receptionist slid the now-full box back under her counter. “See you in a bit.”



“Give Severus my regards, won’t you, Hermione?” she asked as Hermione walked down the hallway.

Again, she had to refrain from giggling. Marcy apparently hadn’t spent much time with Snape. No... probably hadn’t spent *any* time around him, if she still felt warmly enough to send along her regards.

Cuthrell was already hovering beside the door leading into the sitting room she usually saw Snape in. He gave her a triumphant look as she came to stand beside him.

“Dr. Cuthrell,” she said with a cold nod.

His smile lacked its usual charm, taking on a more predatory quality as he spoke. “Ah, Hermione,” he said. “Good morning. And how are you today?”

Raising an eyebrow at his false cheer, she remained silent.

With a short nod of his own, Cuthrell dropped all pretense and frowned at her. “Do you know who is in there, Hermione?”

“Severus Snape, I expect,” she said dryly. “Although you probably have multiple patients under your care.”

“I am not nearly the fool you take me for, Miss Granger,” he replied. “It *is* still *Miss* Granger, isn’t it, Hermione?” She ignored the small jab. “No... no, Albus Dumbledore himself is in there with Severus. To be honest, Hermione, I am quite glad you’ve chosen today to drop by — I’m very interested in what Professor Dumbledore has to say to you. Especially once I make him aware of your conduct.”



"My conduct?" she echoed slowly. "Dr. Cuthrell, you sound as if you think I've done something *wrong*." She offered him her sweetest smile.

Lips thinning, Cuthrell straightened, glaring squarely at her.

Suddenly, the door to the visiting room opened, a metallic clang in the quiet. Albus Dumbledore shuffled out into the hall, head uncharacteristically bent down. She could not see his face but was transfixed by the sight of his milk-white, blue-veined toes, peeking out from under the hem of his rich purple robes. "Ah, Dr. Cuthrell," he said, glancing up to look at the doctor. "Morning."

"Professor Dumbledore," Cuthrell said respectfully, nodding. "How was your visit?"

Dumbledore sighed and Hermione could finally see the despondency in his expression. "As well as usual," he said. "How goes his treatment?"

She wondered if he'd noticed her presence yet as he hadn't given any such indication.

"It progresses," Cuthrell replied evasively. "Although we still have several barriers to break through."

"Of course," he said with a grave nod. Hermione had the suspicion that he took Cuthrell about as seriously as Snape did. Was that a smile playing around his lips? She could not see his entire expression.

"But now that you put me in mind of it..." Cuthrell continued in a thoughtful sort of tone that Hermione did not



believe for a moment. "There *is* something I wanted to talk with you about."

"Yes?"

"She's standing there behind you," he said flatly.

Dumbledore turned halfway around and she saw in his eyes that he'd known she was there the entire time. "Oh, good morning, Hermione. Good to see you."

"You too, Professor," she replied politely, watching his twitching mouth turn into a full-blown smile. "How is Prof — erm, Severus doing?"

"As quiet as ever," he said, smile fading slightly. "Oh, and Hermione? There's no need to stand on such formality. We're among friends here — please, call me Albus."

She wondered how much of this was for Cuthrell's benefit. "Certainly... Albus. I must say," she continued. "I'm rather surprised to run into you today — I would think you'd be up at Hogwarts."

Shrugging, his expression was unreadable. "I visit Severus weekly, Miss Granger. Every Wednesday morning, actually. Minerva is kind enough to tend to my duties in my absence." He turned to Cuthrell. "What did you and Hermione wish to speak with me about?"

"Were you, Professor, aware of Miss Granger's visits with Severus?" he asked brusquely.

Dumbledore looked amused. "I believe it should be clear from our previous conversation that I was not, doctor. But



I see no harm in it. Quite the contrary, in truth. The more human contact Severus has, the better, in my opinion."

"Professor Dumbledore," Cuthrell began, voice tight with fury, "Hermione Granger has been nothing but counterproductive to my progress with Severus since she walked through the front door. It is my belief that she is actually *encouraging* his belligerence."

"It is *my* belief that Severus generally needs no such encouragement," he said, still smiling gently. "But I do confess, I am curious as to how you came by such a conjecture."

"They speak for an hour or more at a time," he said loudly. "And neither will disclose any inkling of the conversation."

Abruptly, Dumbledore's face shifted from bemused to interested. Concerned, almost. "Is this true, Hermione? You've spoken with Severus?"

She shrugged slightly. "Nothing of great import," she replied. "But, yes."

In that moment, Dumbledore underwent a curious transformation, looking as if he wanted simultaneously somehow to both embrace and strangle her. She tried not to think on it as the conversation progressed. "Really..." he said carefully. "And you're saying you've actually spoken with Severus?"

"Yes," she said again. "Yes, I have."

"And he has responded?" he pressed her, taking a rather ominous step in her direction.



Hermione held her ground. "He has. Rather irritably, I grant you, but he has."

There was that indescribable expression again. Truth be told, Hermione found it quite worrisome. "Dr. Cuthrell," Dumbledore said briskly. "I would like a word with Miss Granger."

"Certainly, Professor Dumbledore," Cuthrell replied, shooting her a victorious look. "I myself am very curious to see —"

"No!" he interrupted, in the sternest voice she'd ever heard out of her former headmaster's mouth. "*Alone*, Dr. Cuthrell."

As if Dumbledore had actually physically struck him, Cuthrell recoiled, withering into an obsequious weed, nodding and backing away. "Why... yes... yes, of course, Professor. Erm, good day, then."

"Good day, Jake," he responded, not unkindly. Hermione realized with a start that he'd addressed the doctor by his first name. As soon as Cuthrell had scuttled out of earshot, he turned back to her, an intensity in his eyes that sent her stomach roiling with an unidentifiable fear. "Hermione," he said, quiet and dangerous as a tiger on the hunt.

"Yes?" she asked cautiously.

"You will tell me what you and Severus have spoken of," he stated in a firm, unyielding voice. "You will tell me now."

The unheard of sharpness in his countenance undid her — even in her recollections of Dumbledore's encounters with Voldemort himself, she remembered amusement, stoicism, even anger. But cold anger, useful anger. This tight fury



now seemed to be anything but — if she did not bend to his will, she saw in his eyes that he would force her without so much as a second thought. “I... we...” she hesitated, more out of fright than a desire to keep information from him.

“Hermione,” he warned shortly.

“Mostly he asks me why I’ve come to visit him,” she said miserably.

He cocked his head and his voice gentled. “And why *do* you visit him, Hermione?”

Her hesitation now was more genuine. “I... I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s just something I feel that I need to do.”

“An obligation?” Back to his usual steady calm — his eyes were patient with her unease.

“No,” she said definitively. “Certainly not. More like... well, I can’t explain it.” Her tone was suddenly defiant. “Why *do you* visit him, sir?”

Dumbledore blinked and for a moment she thought he was going to take points away from Gryffindor for her impertinence. Then reality came crashing back down on her — she was no longer his student; she hadn’t been his student for nearly fifteen years. “That is between Severus and myself, Miss Granger,” he said sternly. “If he chooses to tell you why I visit him, it is his concern. I myself find that I do not wish to share such information.”

With a small sigh and a slight nod, she accepted his response. After all, she’d told him nothing as well.



Again, he studied her closely. “I do not think that is all you discuss,” he said. “After all, young Jacob Cuthrell says that you have spent upwards of an hour in his company before. Certainly you do not spend *all* that time evading a single question?”

“He does not speak much. Professor — Severus, I mean,” she told him, Snape’s first name tasting more strangely in her mouth than ever before. “And when he does, it is generally only to say cruel things. He did, though, seem interested in Harry’s... in his...” Trailing off, she found herself unable to say it.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Severus asked after Harry Potter?” he asked, mild disbelief in his voice.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I told him about Harry. It just... slipped out. But he was almost... curious about the whole thing. Asked for details, that sort of thing. Up until that moment, he’d just been... I don’t know... toying with me. Acting complacent for a little while so that when he was nasty, it hurt more.”

“Interesting,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. “Are you aware, Miss Granger, that you are the first person in more than five years that Severus has actually spoken with at any sort of length?”

“Marginally, sir,” she said. “Dr. Cuthrell had alluded to the fact that Sn — Severus was disinclined to speak with *him*.”

Sadness in his voice, his face was wistful as he spoke.



"Hermione, I've visited Severus every week for the past five years. He has not spoken to me once. And to my knowledge, I am his only visitor. Present company excluded, of course." A shadow of humor flickered across his face and was gone nearly as it appeared.

"Oh." She pondered this for a moment. And to her horror, a question started to slip heedlessly off her tongue. "Then why do you —?"

Mercifully, Dumbledore did not wait for her to finish her unthinkable brazen question. "I hope, Miss Granger. Someone must hope for Severus, after all, since he himself has lost all of his."

She did not have anything to say to that and the sadness in his eyes was unbearable.

But after a pause, he straightened and his expression cleared. "Go on in, Hermione," he said, shreds of his usual good humor in his voice. "You've done far more good for Severus in less than two months than any of us have been able to do for five years. Today, I could swear that Severus spent our fifteen minutes glaring at me — he usually has no expression."

"Really," she choked out, torn between laughter and horror.

He chuckled at her confusion. "Farewell, Miss Granger. I hope to see more of you." And with that, he shuffled down the hallway, age apparent in his gait. In his wake, Hermione realized that this was the first moment she'd seen him as the old man he truly was.



"Oh, good," Snape said sarcastically as she poked her head through the entrance of the visiting room. "More visitors."

"Most people would be happy," she said in an equally sarcastic voice as she sat down across from him.

He shrugged and ran a hand through his hair — she noted with mixed relief and bewilderment that his bangs flopped into his eyes. "The people of whom you speak are generally sane, thus can afford the luxury of happiness."

"I don't think you're mad," she said, narrowing her eyes at him. "Angry, perhaps, but quite possibly sane."

"But I growl when I'm pleased and wag my tail when I'm angry," he recited, an evil grin spreading across his face.

Hermione leaned back in her chair, studying him, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of a response. As he continued to wait expectantly, she cocked her head, hoping against hope that she was managing to disconcert him a bit, at least.

Grin falling into a frown, Snape folded his arms across his chest. "I am not in the mood for you today, Miss Granger."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Snape," she said dryly, "but I doubt you are ever in the mood for *anyone*."

He rolled his eyes.

Deciding to proceed with caution, Hermione chose her next words carefully. After all, today was one of the first



days she'd visited Snape out of a genuine feeling of goodwill — her previous visits were all anxiety-induced. Today, she would treat him with dignity. "I spoke with Professor Dumbledore as he was leaving."

He grunted.

"I suppose it is very kind of him to come and see you," she continued, trying to gauge his reaction — a difficult thing given his imperturbable expression. "It appears to me that he is quite busy with Hogwarts and the Ministry and the Order..."

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently, snidely. "Saint Albus and his charitable works. Please refrain from rubbing my nose in it, Miss Granger. I hear enough of that from my therapist."

She hesitated, but only for a moment. "I... I just... he cares a great deal about you," she said, knowing as the words tumbled off her lips that they were token and lame.

His rejoinder was quick and matter-of-fact. "He feels *guilt*, not compassion."

Blinking, Hermione forgot to glare at him. "Pardon?"

"You heard me," he said. "Albus feels guilty about my... condition. After all, we were *so* close..." This last was practically dripping with cynical sweetness.

"I do not follow you."

He looked away. "You were not meant to."

They fell silent, Snape studiously not looking in her direction. Hermione took the opportunity to scrutinize



him as closely as she dared — his hair was indeed longer and hanging limply in his eyes — he made no motion to clear his line of sight. The set of his mouth was firm and willful — she saw shreds of the old Severus Snape in his jaw. Even his posture was reminiscent of the formidable professor she remembered, possibly of the grim warrior that haunted Ron's mind. Shoulders squared, hands fisted on the tabletop. It was a pose that suggested a strength that she hadn't observed in her previous visits. He'd slouched and hung his head, but now he was sitting stiff as a ramrod, jaw clenched in anger.

"Are you *quite* finished?" he asked acidly, catching her out.

Ashamed at being caught staring openly at him, Hermione blushed. "I am sorry," she admitted. "I didn't mean to..."

Snape shrugged. "It does not signify, I suppose. I am always watched — it might as well be you as anyone."

Curious, she regarded him with a quirked eyebrow and silently asked for elaboration.

Unbelievably, he provided it. "The nurses, the doctors, even the other patients. *Someone* is always around, watching, 'keeping us safe,' ostensibly," he said distastefully. "I am never truly alone..."

She was surprised at his candor. "Is that why...?" Catching herself just in time, Hermione switched gears to a far more inane, but far less incendiary, question. "You miss it, then?"

"Miss Granger," he chided, choosing to let her question



remain unanswered. "It is rumored that you possess a great intellect. It would speak well of you to use it on occasion."

The same could be said of you, she thought ruefully but tactfully kept her mouth shut as he continued to speak.

"Of course..." he drawled, reminding her disturbingly of a fifteen-year-old Draco Malfoy. "Your continued presence here is a clear counterexample to my previous statement." He smiled at her and she immediately wished that he would stop.

And so they had come full circle, back to the same old question. Any moment now... yes. Here he went.

"I will ask you again, Miss Granger," he said, losing the smile. "Partially because I would like an answer to my question and partially because it discomforts you so. *Why are you here?*"

She sighed. "Why are *you* here?"

"Insufficient," he snapped. "Answering a question with an echo is childish."

"So is asking the same question again and again," she shot back.

Shifting in his chair, Snape leaned forward slightly. "And what's more, Miss Granger, your question has a stupidly obvious answer, while mine is a valid query."

"What is the obvious answer to my question, then?" she asked with a small smirk. "As you've neglected to actually give it."

"I am mad, Miss Granger," he said. "*Ergo*, I belong in an asylum."

Hermione clasped her hands together on top of the



table. "I contend that you are a sane individual, sir. Thus, your position is called into question just as mine is."

"Very well," he conceded with a jerk of the head. "According to your own definition, even if I *am* a rational creature, I *still* maintain that my presence here is incontrovertible."

"You tried to kill yourself," she supplied.

He frowned and looked for a moment as if he would retreat, but then Professor Snape came back in his expression full force. "Yes."

She attacked. "Why?"

Snape actually recoiled physically. Flung himself out of his chair and retreated half a dozen steps backward. "*What?*"

"Why did you attempt suicide?" she asked as blandly as she could.

With an inelegant shrug, his posture became less defensive. "It was the preferable option."

"Insufficient," she barked in a conscious mimicry of his previous behavior. "I am asking you how you reached the point in your life that suicide appeared to be your only option, sir."

"Not my only option," he corrected mildly. "Just the *best* one."

Shoulders slumped once more, eyes downcast, his ill-fitting scrubs sagging limply on his body, Snape looked utterly defeated. His hands did not seem to know where to rest, clenching and unclenching fistfuls of fabric at his sides. In that moment, she finally was able to bring herself to feel pity for the broken man she was only now able to recognize.



He ruined the moment, however, when his head snapped up, hair flying off his forehead. "Don't *look* at me like that," he spat.

Hermione obeyed, turning her eyes to the tabletop and remaining in her seat as he began to pace.

"I am not a fool, Miss Granger," he continued, clasping his hands behind his back in an academic gesture incongruous with his current situation. "And I do not make decisions lightly. But my reasons are my own and I do not wish to discuss them."

"Will you discuss something else?" she asked cautiously, accepting his obvious desire for a subject change.

He laughed, short and bitter. "More sophistry, Miss Granger?"

"No..." she began, deliberately hedging. "A question, actually. Mere curiosity, more than anything else."

Still pacing, he flapped a hand at her. "Ask your question, Granger, but keep in mind that I reserve the right to deny you the answer, if indeed there is one. And no 'angels dancing on pinheads' nonsense, if you please."

Hermione found herself surprised at that last — Snape was being droll. How inconsistent of him, really. "Well," she said. "Dr. Cuthrell has mentioned several times that Albus Dumbledore is your next-of-kin."

"Is that your question, Miss Granger?" he asked, finally coming to a halt in front of his chair.



"Not exactly," she replied, intent on her right thumbnail. She felt his gaze on her forehead. "I doubt Cuthrell would lie about such a thing and what's more, Professor Dumbledore all but confirmed it. What I want to know is *why* he is your next-of-kin."

Snape was quiet, but it was more contemplative than angry. After a long pause, she finally met his eyes and saw a strange mix of confusion and thoughtfulness. "Not today, Miss Granger," he eventually said. "Ask me again one day."

Accepting his response with a nod, she stood up herself — both bare-footed, Snape bested her in height, but not by many inches. She wondered briefly if he could still loom as menacingly over her as he used to many years ago and doubted it. "Very well, sir," she said politely. "I will leave you in peace, then. Good day."

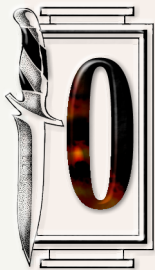
He snorted as she turned to leave, remaining otherwise silent. Hermione felt his eyes on her back until she closed the door, planted firmly on the other side.



Chapter Fifteen

... it had caressed him and — lo! — he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favorite.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



Old Jack was in rare form this afternoon. Apparently not satisfied with simply sitting quietly at luncheon and *looking* menacing, Jack had gone from his usual semblance of near-catatonia to a veritable whirlwind of activity, smashing lunch trays, throwing food, even going so far as to attack a nurse, leaping at her with tooth and nail. One *Petrificus Totalus* later, of course, found Jack completely incapacitated, and the orderlies had quickly removed him. Severus knew, based on experience, that Jack would be confined to his room for the next week at least. His meals would be delivered and if his behavior did not improve, they would actually bind him to the bed with restraints.



Sighing, Severus wiped a glob of some indefinable foodstuff from his brow. At least now that his lunch had been fairly obliterated by Old Jack's furor — he had taken to sitting near the man as of late — he had an excuse to abandon it.

He left the cafeteria.

"Where are you headed, Severus?" one of the male orderlies asked with false cheer as he stepped into the doorway to block Severus' path. "Dinner isn't over." He was quite literally the size of a small bull, barrel-chested and broad-shouldered. Severus did not like the smile on his face.

With another sigh, he indicated his messy clothing, liberally dabbed with remnants of Old Jack's projectiles. "I would like to change," he said pointedly. "Also, if I am permitted, I would like to shower."

The orderly smirked — Severus thought he dimly recognized the face of a Slytherin student he'd taught some twenty years ago in the man's features. "Of course," he said mockingly, stepping aside to allow Severus to pass.

Wordlessly, he proceeded to the showers, dropping his scrubs distastefully into a bin full of dirty clothing in the dressing room.

The air in the shower was sticky, full of humidity from previous patients taking their morning turns. A greasy film of soap coated the tiled room, a row of showerheads lining every wall. There were no curtains, of course; Severus generally tried to bathe only when he knew he



could have the shower to himself and the staff, after some initial protests, allowed him the small luxury.

He turned on the water at one of the spouts and stepped under the cold spray, letting it cool the back of his bare neck.

The whole room stank of sweat and it made Severus feel dirty.

Reaching out blindly, water flooding his vision, his fingers found the automatic dispenser near the water knobs. Soap shot out of the machine and into his hand at his touch; he scrubbed it into his hair viciously. *No shampoo for lunatics*, he reflected as the industrial scent wafted up his nostrils.

After finishing up and shutting off the water, he padded back over to the dressing room, drippy and naked. A bin of clean towels sat on the left-hand side of the doorway and he took one, briskly running it over his skin. Still quite damp and little rivulets of water running down his back from his admittedly soggy hair, Severus turned around to the bins of scrubs. Hundreds of colorless Muggle-style shirts and trousers, shapeless and thin from innumerable washings.

Severus gave his head one last swipe with the towel and tossed it over into the dirty clothes bin sitting across the room. Sorting briefly through the mass of cloth, he plucked out a set of scrubs that looked as if they would fit him as well as any of them might. Water from his hair spotted the shirt as he pulled it over his head.

The outside door to the dressing room suddenly opened.



"Oi!" a male voice shouted. It was that same Slytherin student from earlier. "Severus? You in there?"

He sighed. "Yes?"

"Budge up," it continued in a rough voice. "You've got a visitor waiting for you. A *lady*, Marcy said." He could hear the grin in its voice and longed to be able to do something to remove it.

Unwilling to court trouble, Severus simply continued dressing, making his way toward the orderly as soon as he was clothed. The wet hair in his eyes was only mildly annoying — the fact that it was a testament to his managing to evade the hairdresser last week more than made up for any potential irritation.

The burly orderly frowned at his appearance. "You look like a drowned rat, Severus. When's the last time they cut your hair?"

He did not bother to respond, choosing instead to begin walking down the hallway, toward the visitation rooms. The orderly did not follow.

A *lady*, the former Slytherin had said. And unless he'd garnered far more admiration during his teaching career than he surmised, that only meant that Granger was back.

Severus grimaced. Last week she'd asked about Albus. But she hadn't pushed the issue when he was evasive. This time, he probably would not be so lucky.

As he watched his feet shuffle down the corridor, he



mulled it over. What harm could there be in telling Granger the truth? It couldn't hurt him. It might affect her opinion of Albus, of course — he was unsure exactly what she thought of her old headmaster — but Severus had never cared much about what people thought of Albus before.

Besides, it would be somewhat of a relief to finally be able to tell someone. For more than forty years, he'd not told a soul. Not even Minerva McGonagall knew, and she'd been at Hogwarts and known Albus for Severus' entire life. More than, probably.

It seemed perversely pleasant to be able to break Albus' trust after all this time.

It was decided then, he realized as he laid his hand on the doorknob between himself and Granger.

He would tell her. He would tell her the truth.



She did not pull her punches. "It is another day," she said abruptly as he sat down.

Severus blinked, not immediately understanding her meaning. And then he had it. *Ask me again one day*, he'd said as she left last time. "You wish to ask me once more?"

Nodding, Granger's face was rapt with attention.

For a brief, shining moment, he nearly refused again. Refused and insulted her so badly that she'd go away and never come back.



But then he recalled his earlier resolve and reined his impulse into check. "What do you know about Albus?" he asked, unsure as to whether he was looking for a place to start his narrative or simply evading her yet again.

Granger frowned, concentrating. "He's very old," she said. Apparently she hadn't meant to say this aloud, as she blushed immediately. "Erm... I mean..."

"He is," Severus found himself agreeing in what could almost pass for a civil tone. "He is one-hundred-sixty-seven years of age."

Accepting his gesture, she continued. "And I know he taught at Hogwarts as early as the 1940's. Harry once said that he saw him in Tom Riddle's old diary. He had red hair..." Granger trailed off for a moment, either thinking or dreaming. "He knew Nicholas Flamel well enough to help him with the philosopher's stone Flamel had. And, of course, they were after him for Minister of Magic many years ago — I don't know if they still are. And he battled Grindelwald." She concluded her list briskly. "Oh... and he has a brother. Or, at least, he did. Harry said something about Dumbledore's brother and, what was it? A sheep?"

Severus smirked, recalling *that* particular incident. "A goat, actually. Albus does like to bait his brother about it whenever he gets a chance."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. And then, more firmly — "That's all I know about him. Not much, really, when you



consider everything he's done."

"Well..." he said, tilting back in his chair. "The Dumbledore family is a fairly old one. Not particularly pureblooded, as wizarding families go, but they've had their moments of importance. Albus does indeed have a brother. Aberforth is many years younger than Albus — close to thirty, I think. He was..." Severus permitted himself a grim sort of smile. "...an unexpected child to say the least. Albus' mother was more than fifty when Aberforth and his twin were born."

Her brow furrowed. "Professor Dumbledore has another brother?"

"Not a brother," he corrected. "A sister, actually. Albertina — their mother had a fondness for names beginning with the letter 'A.'" He saw Granger smile broadly. "I suppose most people *wouldn't* know about her, though," he conceded. "She and Albus were fairly close — as close as a brother and sister with thirty years between them can be, at any rate. If I remember correctly, he actually presided over her wedding — he was with the Ministry at that point. But they lost contact for many years. Albertina and her husband inherited his father's estate — he was a Muggleborn, you see — and retreated from the wizarding world. The estate, by all accounts, had fallen into disrepair. But they made a few rather clever investments and — while never truly wealthy — they were able to enjoy some degree of comfort.

"In the interim, Albertina had a single child — a daughter.



But she had not been in touch with her brothers for many years and her parents were long dead. So I expect Albus was quite surprised one year when the girl showed up at Hogwarts. It was 1925, I believe. Or thereabouts. Albertina and John — that was his name, John Darcy — tried to have children for many years without success, so their daughter was born *very* late in their lives. She had grown up quite isolated on their country estate.

"Agrippina Darcy — that's the daughter, Albus' niece — was a curious sort of person," he said slowly, trying to settle on a gentle phrase to satisfy Granger's hungry curiosity. He closed his eyes, trying to remember her face and failing, as usual. "Recall, Miss Granger, that she had spent the first ten years of her life living as a Muggle. A Muggle who, incidentally, came from a formerly noble, wealthy family that was now reduced to living in a crumbling old mansion with only enough money to support a lifestyle that she was beginning to see as bourgeois."

He held her complete attention, now. Severus could see the question in her eyes — *what does this have to do with you?*

"Thus, not only was Albus surprised to learn of the existence of his niece, he was absolutely shocked that the child of his beloved, gentle sister was Sorted into Slytherin without so much as a pause. The Hat barely had to touch her head. Agrippina wanted only one thing in the world at that point in her life — the restoration of honor and wealth



to the Darcy name. And the Hat knew that she would have done *anything* to see it happen.

"Agrippina was at Hogwarts more than a dozen years before Voldemort," he said, hesitating only slightly on the Dark Lord's name. "But the pureblood fanaticism was already permeating the school. It had always been an undercurrent, of course — Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor themselves had a major falling-out over the issue."

Granger's gaze was reproachful and Severus felt the urge to defend Slytherin bubbling up in his gut — weakly, he gave in to it, diverging from his story long enough only to glare at her and say,

"Miss Granger, consider the fact that the Founders lived more than a thousand years ago. Slytherin did not hate Muggles — he saw them as a threat to wizarding society." He felt himself slipping into lecture mode and his hands itched for a piece of chalk. "Muggle society in pre-Norman Britain was a brutal blend of Christianity and Saxon factionalism. Muggle awareness of a wizarding presence would have meant all-out war, Miss Granger. Surely you can see that."

The grudging glint in her eyes confirmed it, but she still protested. "Muggle awareness, certainly. But is that any reason for full discrimination?"

"Gryffindor was the son of two wizards, Miss Granger," he continued. "Raised in a wizarding enclave. He knew noth-

ing of Muggle society and, to be honest, they fascinated him. His desire to include them stemmed more from curiosity than any sense of compassion. But Slytherin's mother was a Muggleborn witch, half-trained in her arts, and worked as a midwife in a Muggle village. She was stabbed and beaten to death in front of him when he was a child — angry villagers that saw her arts as devil-worshipping witchcraft. He knew what sort of mentality ninth-century Muggleborns were likely to have and how they would react to the knowledge of the existence of wizards."

Her expression was still skeptical, but he could tell that his revelation about Slytherin's background had surprised her. He dimly recalled that she was a Muggleborn and felt the need to continue.

"Miss Granger," he said, not unkindly, "I am not attempting to justify pureblood discrimination, and certainly not in this more enlightened time. I simply wanted you to understand the context of Slytherin's belief. It was more fear than hatred — fear that Muggleborn students could not overcome their preconceived notions based on a society that has long since gone to dust. And while his concerns are now baseless, for the most part, during his time, they may have had some merit."

"I know," she replied. "It's just... I hadn't ever considered it from that perspective."

Severus cleared his throat. "Anyway... back to your



initial question. Agrippina, as a half-blood thrown into Slytherin house at a time when these prejudices were rearing their ugly head, found her focus shifting. Instead of wanting to restore the former glory of her father's *Muggle* family, she became obsessed with the purity of blood. She saw herself as tainted and grew to resent both her parents — her father, simply for what he was, and her mother, for besmirching the Dumbledore name with Muggle blood. Of course she knew, by that time, that the Transfigurations teacher was her uncle, but she did not seem to care. Albus did not have a strong relationship with her.

"It should not be surprising to you, then, that Agrippina set her sights on marrying into the oldest, purest wizarding family that would have her. She was pragmatic — her 'dirty' blood would keep her from the most noble — but she was not turned from her task and spent most of her time at Hogwarts, apart from coursework, hunting for a potential husband. Whether or not Albus noticed this — or, if he did, whether he mentioned it to Albertina — I do not know.

"In her seventh year, when she was growing most desperate, Agrippina finally met a worthwhile candidate. Actually, she met his brother. Her future husband's brother was a first-year Ravenclaw that she saw one day being bullied by a pair of sixth-year boys. She ran the boys off — more with hopes of points for Slytherin in mind than any actual concern over the Ravenclaw's well-being, I am sure



— and saw the injured child to the infirmary. In so doing, she learned his name. Tertius Snape."

Granger gasped and Severus snorted with laughter.

"Had you not guessed it yet, Granger? You should be ashamed." Smirking at her reproachful glare, he continued blandly. "Tertius was grateful for the attention and, in turn, then, told her everything she wanted to know. She was his friend, I think, when it suited her purposes.

"The Snape family was indeed old, just as Agrippina wanted. And as pureblooded as they come. Unfortunately, the Snapes were not, as she had hoped, particularly wealthy. Tertius' great-grandfather ran through the last of the fortune in his lifetime, leaving his widow with a useless castle and a stack of gambling debts. The castle had been sold by Tertius' father once they were unable to afford the upkeep and thus the Snapes, much to Agrippina's horror, were very nearly middle-class. Tertius' older brothers — of which there were, predictably, I suppose, two — were both actually employed. Primus, the eldest, had established a fair name for himself at Gringotts,' but he was also, regrettably, married.

"It was the younger brother, Secundus, who Agrippina found herself asking about. Secundus, an apothecary who worked in a shop in Diagon Alley, save his abominable state of near-poverty, had the qualities she sought. He was pureblooded, from a respectable family, and blissfully unmarried. Even the age difference — a mere fifteen



years — was quite acceptable to her.”

Granger shocked him here by interrupting his monologue. “Why didn’t she marry Tertius?”

Severus shrugged. “Who can say? Perhaps she could not see anything in him but a little boy, eager to please his friend. I like to think that maybe she did not want to corrupt him by involving him in her little scheme — that she genuinely liked him. But I must be realistic — the truth is that Agrippina was a rather beautiful young woman and as soon as she walked into Secundus’ shop later that year, he wanted her. She captivated him and he proposed to her before she even finished at Hogwarts. They married not two months after she graduated.

“But they realized an important fact not long after the wedding — they did not like each other. Agrippina hated that Secundus had to work and Secundus resented that Agrippina carried on with her lifestyle as if he did not. The bills piled up and they were deep in debt before they were wed for five years — she bought a lavish home, had it fully furnished, entertained her friends on almost a daily basis, lived as extravagantly as if she had married a prince instead of a poor potions brewer. As a consequence,” he said, pausing partially to breathe but mostly for effect, “I was not born until my parents had been married for nearly twenty-five years.”

“Then...” Granger began haltingly. “Then Albus Dumbledore is your...”

“My great-uncle,” he completed for her. “Yes.”



He relished the look on her face — bewilderment, amazement, and curiosity a delightful blend in her eyes. “But...” she spluttered for a moment. “But you don’t look *anything* like him!”

Taken aback, Severus actually allowed a rather genuine laugh to escape. “I can assure you, Miss Granger, that it is true. In fact, if you can manage to find a photograph of my uncle Aberforth, you will find that we have identical noses. I am also told that my hands are very like my grandmother Albertina’s.”

She was silent, still staring at him with wide eyes.

“I was largely disregarded as a child, Miss Granger,” he said, continuing the tale. After all, she *had* asked not only what relationship Albus had to him, but exactly *why* he was his next-of-kin, on paper as the closest relative he had. “That is to be expected — my parents’ relationship had degenerated terribly and my earliest recollections are of them fighting. I was trotted out when it was prudent to display their son but otherwise left in the hands of a nurse. Until I was four, at least.”

Again, he paused. “I am not entirely sure *why* my mother killed herself that year,” he said, more thoughtful than sad.

Granger’s eyes rounded. “She killed herself?” Her voice went up a note.

“I remember the funeral,” he said, losing himself in the memory and only half-remembering Granger sitting in the chair across the table from him. “My nurse dressed me



in hot, scratchy robes of black velvet, and I had to stand beside my father in the rain as Albus spoke over my mother's grave. I don't know why he was the one to officiate — possibly out of some misguided sense of obligation to my grandmother, who died long before I was born. That was the first time I ever laid eyes on him. But my father did not permit me to speak to anyone at the funeral and took me back home as soon as it was through."

His voice shifted slightly as the tale changed, turning into true memory rather than story, and the urge to scratch out pertinent dates and names on a chalkboard at his back faded. "My father was not a bad fellow, Miss Granger. He was, however, not a wonderful father. After my mother's death, he seemed to realize he had a son. He dismissed my mother's servants and sold her house — we moved into the empty flat over his apothecary shop, just the two of us. I was left to my own devices for the most part, allowed to roam Diagon Alley during the day while my father worked. I spent most of my time in the book shop, reading — the owner knew I could not afford any of her books and so she indulged me. I suppose..." He offered her a self-deprecating smile here. "I suppose the fact that I was probably one of the more homely children she'd ever seen helped."

Granger did not reply.

"Perhaps, then, it was not entirely a bad thing that my father somehow managed to poison himself when I was almost nine.



It was an accident, of course. Something went awry at work one day while he was mixing — the fumes were toxic enough to kill him instantly. I cannot bring myself to be glad of his death, though. He may not have been the best choice for my father, but he was the choice, nevertheless."

Plunging forward, Severus did not give her a chance to comment. "My father's funeral was somewhat more somber and colored by the realization that I was now a homeless orphan. Uncle Primus and his wife did not even bother to attend the funeral, so I knew I did not have a home there. Tertius was in no position to raise a child — an unmarried professional Quidditch player of little repute and thus little salary, penniless and traveling so continuously that he did not even bother to maintain a permanent residence. He told me as much at the funeral, standing beside my father's grave with an apologetic look on his face.

"And so, once the funeral was over and the minister left, I stood there, alone. I had nowhere to go. The shop had been sold and the money put toward the funeral expenses and unpaid bills my father had left. I vaguely knew that someone from an orphanage would probably come and fetch me at some point if I went back to Diagon Alley, so I stayed in the graveyard, an old suitcase by my feet, wondering what to do next. You can imagine, probably, what happened."

With a little shake of her head, Granger indicated for him to continue.



"Albus showed up. The great Albus Dumbledore, long since famous for his battle with Grindelwald, Apparated into the graveyard." Severus was quiet for a moment, remembering.

"Do you remember me, Severus?' I remember him asking. 'No?' he asked again when all I could do was stare at him. 'I'm your uncle Albus. Your grandmother's brother. I've come to fetch you.'

"What choice did I have? I was eight years old, lonely and destitute. I knew that Albus was my only option for evading the orphanage. So I went with him to the old Dumbledore estate, not knowing what to expect.

"Aberforth was there," he said darkly. "Apparently, Albus had read of my father's death in the Daily Prophet and he contacted Aberforth about it. They knew the Snapes would want nothing to do with me, and Albus felt that they had an obligation to help as best they could. Aberforth, you see, did not quite agree. He had his own family — children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, by that point — and wanted nothing to do with an awkward little orphan child. I imagine his mind was made up once he set eyes on me — a shy, ugly little shadow of a boy. He wanted no part of it and was quite... vocal about it."

Granger was frowning. "But you were just a little child..."

"He said that there was not a circumstance in the world that would move him to take in another child. He could not afford it, he said, and neither could any of his kin. They fought

and Aberforth Disapparated, leaving me alone with Albus. I cannot say, though, that I was unhappy when he left.

"So... ' Albus said once it was just the two of us. 'Are you hungry, Severus? I'll have something brought up to you.'

"I could not bear it. 'Are you going to send me to the orphanage?' I asked.

"He laughed and patted my head and I think it was that moment that I wanted nothing more than for him to love me and let me live with him. 'My house is awfully large and empty, Severus,' he said with that awful little twinkle in his eyes that he's always got. 'Plenty of room for one little boy. Would you like to live here with me?'

"I distantly recall bursting into tears at that point," Severus said dryly. "And Miss Granger? Not a word."

Her features softened. "Of course not."

Giving her one last pointed, threatening look, Severus picked up the narrative again. "Living at Albus' estate was like living in a dream world. I had such vague recollections of our home before my mother died, and afterward, our flat had been so shabby and dark that the Dumbledore mansion seemed unspeakably large and beautiful to my eyes. And Albus was generous with his money — everything I wanted I had as soon as I so much as mentioned it to a house elf. Books, toys, clothes, sweets, anything I asked for. It soon became apparent that Albus did not know very much about children — more exotic requests were also indulged.



I set up my own potions lab in one of the rooms near mine and began practicing brewing before I was ten, whatever I could dig out of Albus' library. The Dumbledores have quite an extensive library and Albus personally added a great number of alchemical and potions texts. Plenty for a curious student to spend all his time crawling through. For the first time in my life, I found myself fairly content.

"But as I aged, I noticed that my uncle was rarely on the estate. During the school year, he was required to live at Hogwarts and during the summers, he was often absent on Ministry business or some such thing. Again, I grew lonely. But I was accustomed to it — after all, as I have said, my parents were not particularly affectionate people.

"I started at Hogwarts when I was nearly eleven years old and at first, I was very excited. After all, my uncle was the headmaster. But Albus made it very clear from the first day that he was not going to give me any special treatment. As he took me to King's Cross to ride the train in with all the other students, he told me that I was not to refer to him familiarly, I was to go to my Head of House if I needed anything and not him, and I was, above all, never to tell anyone that I was his ward. It would, he said, put me in an awkward position and he did not want to be accused of any potential favoritism.

"I was Sorted into Slytherin, of course," he said, watching Granger nod shortly. "And I always wondered if Albus



was disappointed with me because of it — I have never been able to bring myself to ask. From the first day of school, the first time I set foot on the train, I realized that, again, I was alone. Always alone. It did not help, either, that I was not particularly... sociable.

"Sirius Black was the first boy I spoke with at Hogwarts. He and James Potter and I were forced to share a boat on the ride in to the castle. There was a cold wind blowing that day, and my cloak was not warm enough. As I shivered in the bottom of the boat, with both cold and fear, Black smirked at me and said, 'Afraid of water, then, scaredy-cat?'

"I am not,' I remember saying. 'I'm just cold, is all.'

"'Bet you aren't,' he continued, still smirking widely. 'Bet you're *scared*. You're just a little fairy 'fraidy boy, aren't you?'

"Stupidly, not knowing anything about boats, I leapt to my feet. 'Take it back!' I cried as the boat started rocking.

"He did not have a chance to reply. The boat overturned then, dumping Black and Potter and me into the lake. Potter couldn't swim and Black hauled him to the water's edge. He left me, of course, splashing around in the lake. Fortunately, Hagrid came back for me and fished me out.

"That was just the beginning," Severus said, eyes flashing as he remembered his Hogwarts years. "You knew Sirius Black after years in Azkaban. After he'd been twisted with hate and drained by the dementors. And you still



loved him. No, you stupid girl," he sighed as she opened her mouth, ostensibly to object. "I don't mean that you were in love with him. I mean that you liked and respected him well enough to go charging blindly after him in the Department of Mysteries all those years ago. And don't give me all that blather about it being Potter's idea — you *followed* him. You saw Black as important enough to die for. Keep that in mind when I tell you that Sirius Black *ruled* Hogwarts while he was a student. He was a little king — the students worshipped him and the teachers would forgive him any offense. And right beside him, perhaps less likeable but not a whit less powerful, was James Potter. If Black was king, then Potter was his crown prince — headstrong and charming. He also usually had more of a sense of self-preservation than Black — Black would try anything at least once, but Potter was generally there to keep him from getting in real trouble. And they absolutely despised me."

Black's grin flashed across Severus' memory and his hands clenched into fists. "Harry once told us," Granger began in what he suspected was a deliberately careful voice. "He said he looked in a Pensieve once that had your memories in it and he saw Sirius and his father and they were..."

Eyes narrowing at the recollection of Harry Potter's damned nosiness, Severus nodded sharply. "As I grew older, I took less and less advantage of Albus' largesse,



perhaps seeing it for what it was. Thus, slowly, more of my books were secondhand, and my robes wore thin as I made do on the little pocket money he gave me and nothing else. I had not asked for anything from him for ages and little by little, his desire to spoil me faded. By my fifth year, it was gone completely. My appearance was further fodder for their amusement. I began practicing hexes and curses outside of classes in addition to my potions dabblings and soon, I could hold my own against them.

"Only once did I try to speak to Albus about Potter and Black. During my sixth year, I happened to hear Black speaking with Potter about a meeting they were to have in the Forbidden Forest that evening. Only later did I realize that Black *meant* for me to overhear what he was saying — he mentioned the Whomping Willow and a large knot at the base that, if pressed, would reveal a secret passage. I did not consider at the time that it was strange that he felt the need to remind Potter of this fact. Or even that Potter himself seemed confused over the conversation. pointing out that they 'already had that taken care of.' Later, of course, I learned exactly what — or should I say *whom*? — Potter was referring to.

"That night I went to the willow tree and pressed every knot I could reach with a long stick. Finally, I stumbled across the correct one and the passage opened, the tree freezing as if Petrified. But before I could enter, James Potter came bar-



reling out of nowhere and knocked me down. I fought him, of course, kicking and punching as he screamed at me. But Potter was bigger than I was and it did not take him long to drag me completely away from the tree.

“‘You *can’t*!’ he shouted as I struggled. ‘Snivellus, you’ve got to go away.’

“‘What are you doing down there?’ I asked.

“He punched me in the face. ‘There’s a *werewolf* behind that door, Snape. Sirius and I can keep him in check, but you *can’t* be here. Sirius thought it would be funny to scare you, but he didn’t realize Remus could *kill* you.’

“Potter let me go and that was the first time I broke Albus’ rule, running straight to his office and shouting at the entrance until he came out. I wasn’t completely stupid — I’d caught Potter’s slip. Remus Lupin was a werewolf and Sirius Black had just tried to kill me. ‘Uncle Albus!’ I cried. ‘Uncle Albus, you’ve got to help me.’

“The whole story spilled out. Somewhere in the middle of it, Albus managed to get me into his office, into a chair. I’m certain I was in tears by the end of it all. His face became more and more stern as I spoke, letting out *years* of anger and hatred. When I was finished, he was as grave and quiet as a tomb. ‘Severus,’ he began, and I could tell by the look on his face that it was not going to be good. ‘Severus, my boy, I am sorry for what you feel has been done to you, but there’s not much I can do. Young Mr.



Black did not harm you in any way and you should be grateful to Mr. Potter for saving your life. I confess, I did know about Remus Lupin — we’re doing our best to give him the best possible education under the circumstances. Maybe a stricter curfew during the full moon is in order. Do you understand what I’m telling you, Severus?’

“It would not have been worse if he’d struck me. ‘You’re not going to do anything?’ I shouted. ‘But Black set a *live werewolf* on me! Uncle Albus...’

“Hardening further, he sat behind his desk, leaving my side. ‘That’s *Professor Dumbledore*, Severus,’ he reminded me. ‘And I will say again, you must learn to fight your own battles. I hear that Sirius Black and James Potter are quite nice boys. And Mr. Lupin is a prefect, for Merlin’s sake. I’m sure that you can straighten everything out.’

“And that was it. Nothing more was ever said on the matter. But that’s when I realized that Albus thought Black was *important*. He had fallen under Black’s spell just like everyone else at the school. If given a choice between Black and his nephew, Albus would choose — had chosen — Sirius Black and James Potter.”

His voice was bleak and Granger’s face was compassionate. “Within the week, I was studying Dark hexes — I knew that if I was going to have to deal with Potter and Black on my own, I would need stronger weapons. When I met Lucius Malfoy at Borgin and Burkes the summer after



I left Hogwarts, he told me about a political organization he was affiliated with. One that was dedicated to the betterment of wizarding society, that desired a return to traditional wizarding ideals. His argument was compelling and I soon found myself attending meetings.

"Voldemort was a brilliant creature," Severus said with a grimace. "Mad as a hatter, of course, but brilliant. He knew that not many would come flocking to his banner if he spoke about world domination and the purging of the races. So he employed a more subtle approach, telling his inner circle to recruit members as they saw fit, offering each exactly what they wanted. Once in the system, he could 're-educate' us."

Granger looked horrified. "That's... that's awful!"

"Of course it is," he agreed. "What did you expect, Miss Granger? No... Voldemort used Lucius Malfoy to pull me into his organization, showing me only the best points, offering me funds for research, and a ready-made group of companions. He reeled me in within a year. By May, I was branded with the Dark Mark."

"But..." Granger began. "But you went back to Dumbledore."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "I rose quickly within the ranks. I was eager to please my new masters and they rewarded me with such praise for my efforts that it was only a matter of time until I was invited into the inner circle. Six months after I took the Mark, Lucius brought me to an inner

circle meeting. Wearing a silver cloak and a dark mask, I took my place within the circle. And I was terrified.

"The Lucius Malfoy that treated me with kindness and patience was gone. As was the gently charismatic Lord Voldemort. In their places were fanatics, preaching a new world order, in which wizards ruled and Muggles lived only by our leave. I realized that they were fighting a war, a war with the Ministry and a war with my uncle. Voldemort openly called Albus an 'old fool,' and spoke freely about what he would do to him, and his Order of the Phoenix, once he was in power. He ordered Lucius to 'eliminate' an Auror and his family — he was getting too close to the truth, you see. When I protested to Lucius, I was placed under the Cruciatus curse for the first time in my life.

"I went to Albus that very night. I threw myself at his feet, begging for forgiveness and offering him every piece of information I had on the Death Eaters. And while I had eliminated any chance I ever had of joining Voldemort's inner circle, I still offered to go crawling back to Lucius, to continue collecting evidence against the Death Eater organization. Albus took me at my word and I became a spy until my usefulness had run out." Bowing his head, he focused his gaze on a small, unidentifiable stain on his trousers. "That, Miss Granger, is why Albus Dumbledore is my next-of-kin. It is also, in some small part, not only why I am here, but why he feels the need to visit me as well.



Think of me what you will.”

Granger was quiet for a moment. Finally, she said, “I think you are a good person, Professor Snape. You have not been handed an easy path in life, but you have walked it nonetheless. I think I understand a little more now.”

“Good.”

Still contemplative, she stood up, giving him a look he could not immediately identify. “I will see you next week, sir.”

He watched her leave as he always did, overwhelmed and exhausted. After all, he had just said more in the span of two hours than he had in the last five years. To Hermione Granger, of all people. It rather boggled the mind.



Chapter Sixteen

The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible — it was not good for one either — trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land — I mean literally.

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



“Actually,” Ron admitted as he regarded his damp dish-towel, “no one has kept in touch like they’d promised. You’re not the only one out of our year that dropped off the face of the Earth. And, what with work and all, I imagine I know more people’s whereabouts than most.”

Hermione passed him another drippy dish. “Any unexpected ones?”

Wiping the plate off, he carefully placed it on the shelf in the helpfully opened cabinet. Hermione had rearranged his pitiful collection of crockery, nearly immediately after her arrival — a few plates nicked from the Burrow, a set



of glasses Harry had given him one day upon learning that Ron, up until then, simply drank from either the tap or the bottle in lieu of a cup, she'd learned one day at breakfast. He also had three cracked teacups and a mismatched pot of unknown origins, and a forlorn looking serving dish bearing the Hogwarts coat-of-arms. She had not asked how he came across it, attributing its presence to either an honorable present from Albus Dumbledore or a rather unethical one from the Weasley twins. Due to its being shoved into a cabinet behind an unopened box containing what appeared to be a martini kit, decorated impersonally with dusty cobwebs, she suspected the former — Ron would have awarded such a successful Weasley prank with a position of honor above his mantle if that had been the case, which therefore suggested he had acquired it for services he did not care to think on — hence the cobwebs.

"Um..." Ron began, starting on another dish. "Well, you already know that Draco Malfoy's location these days is on rather a need-to-know basis — he pops up every now and again, just to annoy the hell out of people — but that's hardly unexpected. And Lavender Brown went off on some American exchange something-or-other about seven years ago and never came back. And just the other day — when was it? — last Thursday, I think, a file with Colin Creevey's name in it crossed my desk. He's apparently gone Muggle,



if you'd believe it, and works at some London newspaper as one of the *most* junior of reporters."

She scrubbed viciously at a bit of something on a fork. "What's Neville up to these days, then? He was at the Burrow for supper after Harry's... all those months ago, but I never got a chance to talk with him."

With an increasingly deep frown, he pulled out several drawers in rapid succession. "Bloody hell, Hermione..." he grumbled, waving a spoon at her.

"Beneath the shelf with the plates on," she replied absently, still working on the fork and beginning to suspect she was trying to take off rust, not food.

"Tell me again why you felt the urge to move *everything* in my kitchen," he sighed, finding the drawer, indeed, to be full of gently bent, mismatched cutlery.

She conceded defeat as far as the fork was concerned, making a mental note to check all the silverware for similar corrosion and beginning to miss the chopsticks she'd washed on occasion at the monastery — blissfully rust-free lacquered wood, wonderfully easy to clean. "Because it needed it," she said. "It was... illogical. You had the pots and turners and things in the pantry. Not to mention the cups and spoons in the *icebox*."

As he wiped off a frying pan, Ron contrived to look put out. "It makes *perfect* sense — everything that I'd put in a glass, apart from tap water or scotch, I keep in the refrigerator."



"And the spoons...?"

"Well, I tried keeping them in the freezer," he continued innocently, "*right* next to the ice cream, but they kept sticking to my tongue as I tried to eat, so I did the next best thing." He scowled as he sat the dry pan down on his stove, a now-neatly scrubbed cook-top that he'd admitted on the first day she moved in he didn't even know how to turn on — a Warming Charm had usually sufficed for his single cup of morning tea before work. "Anyway... *you're* one to talk about all things illogical. How's your friend the evil-professor-cum-mental-patient these days?" This last was deliberately light, with a teasing edge to it — Hermione had come to suspect that Ron's current opinion of Severus Snape did not differ vastly from her own and was even quite possibly less confused.

She did not rise to the bait, keeping her voice *and* her expression serene. "Tell me about Neville, Ron. Somehow, we managed to get off track, but I really am curious about him."

"You're not getting off quite as easily as that, little girl," he warned playfully, wagging a handful of butter knives in an admonishing manner. "But I can bide my time. If you're this evasive, there must be something particularly interesting in it."

"Ron!" This time she *did* react, lobbing her sopping dishcloth at his face.

Dodging it neatly, Ron laughed as the rag fell to the



ground with a wet smack. "All right, all right... let me see... Neville..." He leaned over and picked up the cloth, offering it to her with a mocking smirk. "As far as I can tell, he's bounced around a bit. Did some curse work at the DoM." He pronounced this as a single word, *dom*, and it took Hermione a disconcerting moment to cipher his meaning. "'Course, that was *years* ago; right about when Harry and I first applied to the Aurory. Everyone remembered how he made out with the Lestranges, you know, so it wasn't as if work was hard to find. In fact..." Here, Ron snickered. "He's been offered quite a few endorsement deals over the years. Remember when the Firebolt people were after Harry?"

Surprised at herself, Hermione joined in his laughter. "I *do* remember that!" she cried with a wide grin. "It was right after we got out of Hogwarts. They'd gotten footage from the Triwizard tournament all those years ago, when Harry Summoned his broom to get past the dragon and wanted to run it. He wouldn't answer the door for *six* months — had his Floo disconnected and everything."

They continued to laugh. It felt *good* to laugh again. To laugh about *Harry* again. She hadn't realized, up until that moment, how much she'd needed to laugh about Harry. Not all of her memories were bittersweet and intense, colored by the destiny so casually saddled on Harry's frail, adolescent shoulders. There were good recollections — times when Harry had been unaffectedly happy, when he'd been



unintentionally amusing, endearingly dim. Even as she missed his old lopsided grin and wanted it beside her as she berated Ron for his sloppy living habits, she treasured her memories of it. "I imagine you've gotten owls as well," she said once the laughter died down. "After all, you're in quite an enviable position — one of *very* few wizards who's gotten to hex Lucius Malfoy and lived to tell the tale. 'Course, I always thought you'd come closer to doing advert spots than Harry ever would."

Ron sobered and picked at a hangnail absently. "Nah... although I will say there have been times I would have appreciated the extra money."

He evaded her eyes as she searched for a response.

But he soon looked up and his blue gaze was cheerful and his smile genuine. "I'm not *nearly* pretty enough for all that, love. But Neville... he's gotten to be quite good-looking through the years. I'm sure you noticed, when you saw him coupla months ago. Even did a couple of interviews with Witch Weekly, according to Ginny. Gladrags approached him. So did — can you believe it? — Ollivander. As if *he's* ever needed adverts to drum up business. No... Neville turned it all down — too shy for all that fame stuff. I think he works at one of those private nursery places popping up all over now. Works with exotic plants. I don't keep up with him like I should, but Ginny keeps me apprised."



"Ginny..." she mused aloud. "Are Ginny and Neville...?"

Ron shrugged expressively. "Who knows? I'm sure Mum, probably, would like to, but Ginny hasn't been forthcoming with *anyone* on that particular account. She and Neville have been good friends since Hogwarts, though. He patched her up after that awful Malcolm Baddock left her in the lurch the year after you left, and she kept him from eating a bullet when Luna Lovegood broke their engagement two weeks before the wedding."

Hermione's eyebrow quirked with interest, but she remained silent, tacitly asking him to continue.

"But, according to Fred, Neville's been around the Burrow more often these six months past. They've been more... ambiguous than usual."

"Hrm..." she finally said. "I'd never actually given them much thought before. With Ginny's... enthusiasm and Neville's... well, his..."

"He's not nearly as mousy as he was when we were kids, you know," he told her reproachfully. "As for my part, I'm willing to reserve judgment until I know more about the situation. Now... where does this blasted thing go?" He held aloft a metal bowl with holes poked in at regular intervals. "For that matter, where did it come from? I didn't know I owned one of these spaghetti-stays-in-water-goes-out bowls?"

"Educated folk call it a *colander*, Ron," she retorted, unable



to resist throwing him a superior smirk. "Just put it by the stove. And, for your information, you *don't* own one. When I needed one, I transfigured it from one of your more mangled salad forks — I was afraid the tines would break off if I tried to bend them back into place, so I put it to better use."

"Don't you ever get tired of being perfect?" he asked nastily as he tossed the colander toward the stove with little ceremony or care. It clattered as it skidded across the metal surface. "And don't forget about my question. Snape...?"

With a huff, she began wringing out her dishrag. "You're as bad as a dog with a ratty old bone, Ron. Or... Dobby with a particularly hideous sock."

He did not laugh.

"Oh, all right." She spread the cloth across the sideboard to dry. "Did... do you know why he's up in Yorkshire?"

Shrugging, Ron sat down at the battered kitchen table — one of its legs had several nails dangerously protruding from its side as a result of a shoddy repair job; Ron had informed her every Repairing and/or Binding Charm he knew had failed to keep the leg on, so he'd simply put about a dozen nails into it one frustrated day. It wobbled ominously as he rested his elbows on the surface. "Not as such," he said thoughtfully. "But I can speculate — Snape always was a dour fellow. Would I be off the mark?"

"Not much," Hermione said. "As far as I can gather, he tried to kill himself, Dumbledore had him committed, and



he's spent five years resenting it awfully."

"I wonder..." Ron began. "I wonder if he resents being sent to Perkins or if he resents Albus thwarting his, erm, *efforts*."

She laughed bitterly. "Six of one, half-dozen of the other, Ron. Although, I suppose he *might* simply be angry about the loss of his physical freedom. He absolutely *hates* his therapist. To be honest, I don't see why Dumbledore allows Dr. Cuthrell to continue on working with him. It's not as if he's actually helping Snape."

His answering chuckle was more genuine. "I expect you're not giving Albus the credit he deserves. I'd wager Snape's the sort of fellow who's not going to be helped by anyone — it's got to strictly come from him. So it might be better for him to have an adversary, all things considered. Might come closer to... jump-starting his psyche, like."

"I am astounded by your eloquence, Auror Weasley," she said in a dry voice, trying to mask her surprise at his insight.

"Oh, don't get all high and mighty just because I had an idea you didn't, missy," he said loftily. "And don't attribute it to undiscovered genius on my part, either."

"No worry of that."

He grimaced and proceeded to ignore her. "*Anyway*. I was going to say only that I've worked fairly closely with Albus Dumbledore for ten years now and I'm in a decent position to guess at his motives, is all."

"Hark at the brilliant Auror, intellect only outshined



by his dazzling charm," she said, dripping sarcasm in a deliberate attempt to annoy him as she shoved her robe sleeves up her arms.

Ron's facial expression remained impassive as he watched her fumble about in the sink, under the soapy water, searching for the stopper. "I can believe *you've* been spending a fair amount of time around Snape, what with your newly-found sunny disposition and all. What do you two talk about, anyway? You know..." he continued after a brief pause. "It would probably be easier to do that with a Summoning Charm."

"The word *easy* is most often in disharmony with the word *effortless*," she muttered absently through grit teeth, grunting as her fingers tugged.

"Huh?"

The stopper finally pulled free with an audible popping noise and Hermione regarded it with satisfaction, barely noticing Ron's bewilderment initially. Finally, as she saw his confusion, she attempted to explain. "Well..." she hedged. "My master says that some times, when he can see my eyes complaining. I think it means that while the simplest way is always best, simple doesn't necessarily mean *easy*."

"How is *that* better than what your master says?" he asked faintly. "Hang on... *master*?"

Hermione chuckled, giving the sink one last rinse. "I can see that Françoise has not told you." She found her thoughts



disturbingly echoing a sentiment Snape had expressed and thus spoke them out loud. "Ask me again one day."

Perhaps Ron caught a glimpse of her thought in her strange smile. "Hermione?" he asked gently. "Hermione, you're avoiding talking about Snape again, aren't you? What is it that you don't want to tell me?"

It flickered briefly through her mind that he might be using some interrogation trick from the Aurory on her. She was surprised to realize that she did not care, that she would possibly tell him everything on her mind, not *in spite of*, but rather *because of* that fact. "I don't know what we talk about," she admitted. "There are just these days that I need to go see him. Some days are worse than others." Her smile turned grim as she joined him at the table. "Did you know that Dumbledore is his uncle?"

Clearly flabbergasted, he blinked. "Really? Albus never said..."

"I get the impression neither of them talks about it," she replied. "But Dumbledore's the one who had him put up in Perkins, like I said. And he's keeping him there. Apparently, Dr. Cuthrell defers all decisions to him. He actually told Dumbledore that I was visiting Snape, to see if he disapproved."

"I'm still stuck back on the fact that there's blood between them," Ron said vaguely. "And Snape actually *told* you this?"

"In grandstanding, epic storytelling fashion, even," she answered, mood uplifting slightly. "It seems that



Dumbledore raised Snape, for the most part, but he didn't publicly acknowledge it, for whatever reason. So I think he was *glad* to volunteer his background. To defy Dumbledore, maybe."

"Or maybe he realized he has absolutely nothing to either lose or gain by telling people now," he said thoughtfully. "After all, I can see how many years ago, Albus would have preferred to keep it quiet. Protection and all."

Curious, she arranged her hands in her lap neatly, willing herself not to fidget. Her fingertips were shriveled from the dishwater. "How so?" she prompted.

His thoughtful expression intensified into a probing one. "Two points, one far worse than the other. The first one is natural — imagine how Snape would have been treated as a kid, not only at Hogwarts, either, if everyone knew he was the ward of one of the most powerful wizards in the world. He either would have been more insufferable than the imaginary love child of Draco Malfoy and Dudley Dursley, or he wouldn't have even managed to survive childhood, for all of the people in the world thinking he needed to be 'taken down a peg.'"

"I never thought of that," Hermione replied, brow furrowed. "And I'd forgotten that Dumbledore was the one to leave Harry with those wretched relatives when *he* was a baby." Her expression darkened. "Seems drastic, though, to deny someone who is, for all intents and purposes, practically your son,



just on the off-chance of something going wrong."

"Well..." Ron drawled, folding his hands behind his head, elbows flapping in the air as he continued. "We've come to my second point..."

She sighed, annoyed as he allowed the sentence to dangle in one of his more obnoxious habits she recalled from childhood. Ron absolutely *delighted* in holding bits of information over people's heads. Even responses to *simple* questions, like, *Ron, will you hand me that quill over there?* turned into gigantic productions. As it was, then, her voice grated with impatience and suppressed anger. "Ron..."

Unperturbed, he continued to grin, enjoying his moment. "I wonder..."

"Ron!" she snapped.

"Did He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named know about Snape and our Albus?" he asked flippantly, finally reaching his punch line.

Hermione was silent as she processed his question. After many moments of turning it over and over in her mind, she glanced up to see Ron watching her expectantly. "I'm sure he didn't, actually," she said. "Because if he had intended to eliminate Snape for that reason, he had ample opportunity. And if he'd wanted to torment Dumbledore with the knowledge that his heir was part of the Death Eater organization, Snape would have been in a higher position of authority than he was. He wasn't even in the inner circle."



"True," Ron conceded. "Lackey of a lackey isn't the best thing to be able to throw into your enemy's face. *First lieutenant* or *right-hand man* would be far better, and Wormtail's rise to power should have shown us that something as paltry as incompetence wouldn't have kept You-Know-Who from promoting Snape. Although, I would suspect that Snape was nothing if not competent as a Death Eater."

"He struck me as rather... squeamish as he spoke about it, actually," she said. "To be honest, I was a bit surprised. I mean... I knew Snape couldn't be *terribly* evil — Dumbledore wouldn't have let him around little children if that were the case. But I always figured he would be able to... well, if he needed to..."

Snorting at her inability to produce a coherent sentence, he attempted to complete her thought. "He *can* kill if the situation calls for it," he said to her fumbling efforts. "I've seen him do it. Of course, for that matter..." He gave her a pointed look. "So can I."

She tried to hold his gaze. "How many have you...?"

Ron sighed. "Enough. But actually, I don't think Snape would have been valuable to Voldemort because he can manage to kill someone if they're shooting Killing Curses at his nose. Everyone forgets. The Death Eater organization was not just a loosely collected consortium of murderers, getting their jollies off tormenting Muggles. They were a tight syndicate, *completely* dedicated to obtaining power



and bringing about... Oh, what was it that Avery said while we were questioning him all those years back? Oh, yes. 'The dawn of the new order. When wizards truly become the Masters of the World that we have always been destined to be.'" Rolling his eyes, he made a noise of disgust. "No, Hermione. Snape would have been valuable for other reasons. Quite possibly, many of the same reasons that made him so valuable to the Order of the Phoenix. Loyalty, bravery, and that damned ability of his to carry out whatever task Albus gave him, no matter whether or not it seemed to be impossible. Not to mention that he has more lives than that horrible cat you had when we were kids."

She regarded Ron curiously. "Who would have thought that you, of all people, would sing his praises if given an opportunity?"

"Oh, I'm not," he said. "Severus Snape has all the personality of a coffee table, make no mistake. And was about as good a teacher as a rabid hippogriff would have been. But he was a damned brilliant soldier. I'm willing to admit that. All things considered, we're lucky he chose our side, else we might be kowtowing to the Dark Lord as we speak."

"You're just being nice because he saved your life," she said, only half-teasing.

Thoughtfully, he ran his fingers through his hair. "Maybe." His rejoinder was sly and swift. "But I'm not the one who goes to visit him."



Hermione found herself doing something she had not done in more than a decade — she stuck her tongue out at Ron Weasley.

He looked momentarily taken aback at her audacity but ruined it by throwing his head back and practically howling with laughter. "Oh, sweet Merlin!" he cried as he roared, wiping tears out of his eyes. "I missed you so much, Hermione!"

"You idiot," she said affectionately, laughing at his antics.

"You know," he told her as he began breathing more normally once more. "You still look about twelve when you do that."

"Eurgh," she groaned. "Don't say awful things like that. I was a pitiful looking child."

His smile was charming and Hermione wondered briefly why he seemed to think himself unattractive. "You were," he agreed, ducking her playful swat at his head. "But I will say that you've matured quite well. I, however, *always* knew that you would. You always were cute as a fluffy little bunny."

"I will ignore the jab you just made about my old teeth, Weasley," she announced imperiously. "But I'm afraid I've got to agree with you about my hair. It's *still* unmanageable."

"I like it," he said firmly. "It suits you now. I guess..." His expression was crafty. "You've finally managed to grow into it. Anyway," he continued in a brighter voice as she tried to work out whether or not he'd just insulted her



again, "at least it's a normal color."

"Too normal," she said with a gesture of distaste. "I always envied Ginny for her hair. And it's still that lovely coppery sort of red. Just like when we were young."

Ron grinned. "She lucked out with her particular version of the Weasley curse. Although you should know that she sunburns *terribly* with that matching porcelain complexion." He sounded satisfied as he presumably imagined his sister's distress at such a predicament. "Given that, I almost don't mind my own." He gave his own red locks — still much closer to scarlet than copper — a lack-luster tug. "And the freckles faded, the older I got."

"Ron...?" she asked solemnly, breaking the air of amusement they'd been sharing.

He hummed, lowering his gaze to the table, a lone fingernail tracing a single grain in the wood.

"Did Harry... I haven't seen any pictures..."

Wordlessly, stoically, he stood, walking toward the other end of the flat, toward the bedroom that Hermione had left mostly untouched, only changing the sheets and clearing out a couple of drawers for the contents of her suitcase. She heard a few rummaging noises, one loud bang, and then he was back, holding a fistful of photographs. "I put them away," he said, sitting down again. "I couldn't bear..."

Hermione touched his hand in understanding and his fingers opened, spilling the photos out onto the table. She



picked up the one that was closest to their joined hands in her free one, trying to ignore the impending tears. Ron, she could see, had already conceded defeat as a single tear made its way down his cheek.

There was Ron, gangly as ever, smiling sadly up at the two of them, his red hair flashing every now and again as the photographed sun picked up hidden glints. His arm was casually looped over the shoulder of a man with black hair and familiar, round spectacles. A dog rolled around in the dust at their feet, every now and again taking a mouthful of the black-haired man's robes in its teeth and tugging lightly.

Harry Potter's photograph smiled up at Hermione and he gave a little wave. Her breath caught on a sob as she ran her thumb over his face, wishing the smooth paper under her touch was Harry's skin.

She could tell, standing beside tall, angular Ron Weasley that the adult version of Harry Potter was a neat fellow of average height, dwarfed by his friend's stature. While Ron still looked to be all hands and feet, gawky and adolescent even as a grown man, Harry was well-proportioned, his hands appearing graceful and agile as he moved about in the picture, waving at Hermione and making playful jabs at the photo-Ron. He looked happy, a sparkle in his always intense green eyes that had not been there when they were children. Even his scar, an angry slash across



his forehead throughout their childhoods, had apparently faded, barely visible in the picture.

"Oh, Ron..." she cried softly, tracing the photo's edge with her finger.

"That was the spring before he and Françoise were married," Ron told her in a quiet voice. "We were up at Hogwarts, horsing around after an Order meeting. Harry was living in Hogsmeade, then. I'd already moved to London for work, but I came up to see him pretty often. That dog there is a stray he took in when he moved up there — it just kept following him around, so he eventually just gave up and bought him a collar. He passed away when Nicholas was a couple of years old — he was already old when he took up with Harry."

She looked more closely at the dog flopping around in the picture. Had a fair amount of sheepdog in him, unless she missed her guess. Apparently taking notice of her scrutiny, the dog cocked an ear at her, dropping to its haunches as its tongue lolled. His fur looked silky as the sunlight played with the color. "What was his name?"

Ron laughed. "Harry *tried* to name him Snuffles, after... well, you know. But the damned dog wouldn't respond to it, no matter how often Harry shouted at him. So he'd usually just throw his hands up in the air and glare down at him and say, 'you *stupid* dog!' Then, of course, it went crazy, barking and licking him and all such nonsense. So at the



end of it all, Harry wound up just calling him Stupid. He was a good dog, though, for all his, erm, stubbornness."

Smiling, Hermione watched Stupid bound off into the picture. "He looks like one."

"Speaking of quirky pets..." he said, not taking his eyes from the photo. "Whatever became of your cat?"

"For all I know, Crookshanks is alive and well," she replied. "He never showed any signs of slowing down with age, even though I *know* he had to be getting on in years. I took him with me when..."

"When you went away," he supplied flatly.

"Yes," she agreed. "But I realized that it would be rather unkind of me to continue lugging him about like a second suitcase. There was this little girl..." She trailed off, a fond note in her voice as she lost herself in the memory. "I stayed with her family for a few weeks in Mexico. And she just... fell in love with Crookshanks. She was an only child and her village was small — she was rather lonely, I think, and grateful for the company. And Crookshanks seemed to enjoy her as well. So when I moved on, I just... left him with her."

Shaking his head, Ron sighed. "First Tibet and now Mexico... Hermione..."

But his question went unasked and equally unanswered as a chime sounded in the den, alerting them to an incoming Floo message. Exchanging a curious look with her, Ron stood and walked over to the fireplace, crouching down



and lighting a small fire with his wand. Hermione followed slowly, hanging in the doorway.

A head that was dimly familiar to her popped into the flames. "Ah, Weasley," it — a man — said. "Glad I caught you here."

Ron looked rather disgruntled. "It's Saturday, Shacklebolt. Are you at *work*?"

Shacklebolt was not to be dissuaded, apparently. "This is big, Weasley. I mean 'Death Eater conspiracy to overthrow the world powers' big. Not just 'Fudge's stupid nephew's dog in a tree' stuff. I need to talk to you." His eyes flickered over to Hermione, hovering near the sofa by this point. "*Alone*."

Folding his arms, Ron glared down his nose at the head. "This is Hermione Granger, Kingsley. She's not leaving. My clearance isn't high enough for you to be telling me anything that she can't hear."

"Hermione... Granger?" the head asked, recognition flickering in his eyes.

She nodded hesitantly.

It smiled. "I can see that you don't remember me. I'm Kingsley Shacklebolt, Miss Granger. We spent some time at the Order headquarters together many summers ago."

"Oh..." she said, thinking hard and finally coming up with the memory. "Well, erm..."

The head turned back to Ron, unwilling to undergo any sort of pleasantries. "Ron, how much of the Potter file have you read?"

"Kingsley..." he began, Hermione recognizing evasion



in his voice. "I haven't..."

"Don't give me shit, Weasley," Shacklebolt warned. "I'm not in the mood. I *know* I told you to stay the hell away from Potter's file, but I also know that the odds of you following that order are roughly on par with Cornelius Fudge winning Witch Weekly's 'Sexiest Wizard Alive' award. So... *how much?*"

His eyes were firmly on his bare feet. "Most of it," he admitted. "Three of your top suspects are dead, by the way."

"I'm bringing you in, Ron," he said sharply. "It's not just the Potter case any more. And we need your expertise. We're all running around like Nifflers with our heads cut off over here."

Both Ron and Hermione's heads jerked up, staring at Shacklebolt with wide eyes. "*What?*" Ron whispered.

"You heard me. There's been another one. Circumstances are nearly identical to Harry Potter's death. Amelia Bones went to visit her son and his family and found him laid open on the dining room table and Flooed the Minister. She's at St. Mungo's, now, heavily sedated. Get over here *now*, Weasley. We've got one hell of a puzzler on our hands."

Hermione felt the blood drain out of her face as she stared at Ron. His manner shifted completely — Harry Potter's mourning friend buried under the purposeful Auror ready to battle demons — as he strode to the fireplace. "I've got to go, Hermione," he said briefly, taking a handful of Floo powder. "Will you owl Françoise and let her know I won't be home for supper?"



"Of... of course," she stuttered, watching as he flung himself into the fire, trying to understand what it was that she'd just witnessed.

Chapter Seventeen

If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth. I almost envied him the possession of this modest and clear flame. It seemed to have consumed all thought of self so completely...

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



Someone was knocking on her door. Ron's door. Well... it was her door for the moment. Even though Ron hadn't let her pay... a gift door. Wondering briefly what part of a gift door one should not examine, Hermione moved toward the noise, shaking her head at her own inanity.

"Erm..." Albus Dumbledore said from the other side of the door, clearly perplexed to see her standing there. "Miss Granger?"

"Professor," she replied, nodding shortly. "Ron's not



here. I presume that's why you're here."

His shrug was oddly eloquent, telling her simultaneously that, indeed, he had been searching for Ron, but she would be sufficient to speak with in any case. "As I've said, Hermione, please call me Albus."

She tried to remember if she'd ever given him permission to address her informally but soon decided that it did not matter anyhow. "He *was* here," she said in an attempt to be helpful. "But that Auror, Shackelford —"

"That would be Kingsley Shacklebolt," he supplied.

"Right," she confirmed, not skipping a beat. "That one. He Flooed this afternoon right after we'd finished up luncheon. We *were* planning on a ride or something into the country for a few hours — Françoise was taking the kids somewhere and Ron didn't want to be bouncing around alone. But that Shackle — Shacklebolt called him in to work. There's been another murder, you see."

Dumbledore — Albus — finally allowed a look of curiosity to cross his face, as if he'd known about all of the previous events she'd mentioned. "*Another* murder?"

Her voice hitched in her throat for a moment. "Like — like Harry's. Same circumstances, I guess. They didn't talk about it, but Shacklebolt was pretty insistent about Ron's going in."

"Hrm..." He was quiet for a little while, hovering in Ron's — her — doorway.

"Um..." she found herself saying anxiously. "Would

you... like to come in, sir?"

The solemnity melted from his expression as his eyes met her own. "I would be delighted to, Miss Granger. Truth be told, I would like a word with you, although your guess was correct. I *was* here looking for young Weasley. When I went over to the house, Françoise said she hadn't seen him since breakfast, and I thought he might have come over here to pick up a few things. I didn't expect to find you, though."

She moved away from the jamb, allowing him to step past her and into the living area. "Ron's letting me stay here while I'm in the country. He said it was ludicrous, me spending money on a hotel room. And it made sense, really, what with him all but living with —" Catching herself, her cheeks spread with a blush. "I... that is to say..." she stuttered.

With a dry chuckle that reminded her suddenly of Severus Snape, Albus made himself comfortable in the lone armchair occupying the room, stuffing escaping one of its arms and a hasty mismatched patch fixed onto the seat cushion with a Binding Charm. "I know of some of the circumstances surrounding Ron and Françoise," he said. "At least, I know as much about it as they do. As for the rest... well, I have my suspicions, but I feel as if I ought to keep them to myself."

Settling on the only other piece of furniture in the room — a moth-eaten old sofa that she dimly remembered from Ron's mother's parlor many years ago — Hermione grimaced, wondering how many of his suspicions Ginny Weasley shared.



"What did you need Ron for?" she asked awkwardly in a desperate attempt to direct the conversation elsewhere.

"Just a few minor points," he said, putting on his best 'twinkly old man' manner. She rather believed Françoise was correct about Albus Dumbledore — he played the benign elderly fellow only when he knew it would be most unsettling. "Nothing that can't wait. Although you've given me more purpose, my dear, now that you've brought his new assignment to light. I confess, I'm surprised that Kingsley would bring Ron in. He's been adamant about keeping him off Harry's case."

"Ron has given me the impression that he's one of the more knowledgeable Aurors in the area of recent Death Eater activity," she said. "I expect that your Mr. Shacklebolt needs as much help as he can get."

Albus shook his head and Hermione caught a glimpse of a sad cast to his eyes before the twinkle was firmly back in place. "There's a reason that Kingsley Shacklebolt is the youngest person ever to head up the Aurory, Hermione. He's no fool — for the past couple of months, Ron Weasley hasn't even been able to help himself. He would be of no use in such an investigation — a liability, really, once he found a target for his anger. My question is, why now? What has changed that Kingsley wants Ron?"

She shrugged.

Slowly, his posture shifted, straightening from that



careful slouch to something far more purposeful. "It is fruitless for us to discuss it further," he concluded decisively. "Since neither of us knows enough about the situation to make proper conjectures."

Hermione was rather gratified at the *us* but remained silent, knowing he had more to say.

Indeed, Albus continued to speak. "I will then ask you a fairly pointed question, Miss Granger. How is Severus doing?"

Blinking, she found herself pondering what the nature of her response should be. "I have not been to see him this week," she said carefully. "But last week, he seemed to be in high spirits. Well, at least as high as he ever gets, I think."

His smile was grim.

"He told me... about his childhood," she continued in that same cautious tone, trying to gauge his response.

To his credit, Albus did not appear to be overly taken aback. "He did?" he asked. "Well, then. So you know..."

She wanted to hear confirmation from his own lips. "Know what?"

"You know about my connection to Severus," he said blandly. "And you must have some inkling as to why he is the way he is, if you're as intelligent as Minerva used to claim."

Her eyes widened — that almost sounded like *sarcasm*. From Albus Dumbledore himself. "I know he's depressed," she said. "But I doubt that's what you mean, except in the most roundabout of ways. I expect you're referring to the



allusion he made to your guilt."

Albus let out a bark of laughter. "Guilt? Is that what Severus said? I would have thought his phrasing would have been more along the lines of 'taking responsibility.' *Guilt* somehow implies innocence in my mind and I do not doubt that he blames me nearly as much as I blame myself."

She remained silent, hoping he would elaborate.

"I am not surprised that Severus told you," he said, folding his fingers together in some intricate fashion that allowed him to twiddle many of them at once. "After all, I forbade him to tell anyone when he was young. I'm sure he took great delight in finally defying my order after all these years."

Hermione tore her gaze away from his hands — they were making her dizzy — and met his blue eyes, free of any sort of sparkle for once.

"I am not a man who generally makes mistakes, Miss Granger," he said candidly, an arrogance in his features that she hadn't noticed before. "But when I do, I most often wind up hurting that boy. The first time I ever laid eyes on him was at his mother's funeral." His voice became introspective, losing its sharp edge. "The skinniest little drowned rat of a boy you've ever seen, with robes at least two sizes too large and big black eyes. I swore to myself as I watched him standing beside his mother's grave with nary a tear to shed for her that I would never let any harm come to him. And you see, Miss Granger — you see how I've failed him?"



"But you took him in," she argued — but it was weak. "You took him in to raise when no one else would."

"I didn't have the heart to take him to an orphanage," he replied. "But I might have, if Aberforth hadn't been so adamant about not taking him. Severus will tell you, Hermione," and here his eyes regained a bit of their usual mischievous guise, "my brother and I generally do not see eye-to-eye."

"He hinted toward that," she said dryly.

Chuckling, Albus finally allowed his posture to relax once again, leaning back in the chair and hands going to the arms. "I can imagine. In many ways, Severus reminds me a great deal of my recalcitrant brother. Most of those ways, though, are ones in which my brother reminds me of myself."

Hermione's expression must have betrayed her confusion and disbelief — he laughed merrily at her.

"Oh, Miss Granger!" he cried. "I can tell by your face that you thought Severus to be all Snape. No, my dear," he said, still smiling broadly, "the Snapes are a rather dour bunch, to be sure, but, as a rule, Snapes are dreadfully dull. Between Severus' two Snape uncles, I'd say there's not an ounce of wit. Oh, Tertius is a decent enough fellow, but I can promise you that Severus is the first non-traditional Snape in *generations*. He's a Dumbledore, through and through."

"He looks nothing like you," she said in a small voice, though she was not sure why.

"He's got the Snape coloring, I'll grant you," he agreed,



"but a temper to rival Aberforth's on the worst of days. I like to think that he inherited my sense of humor," he said airily, smiling at her frown, "but Severus' wit is truly rapier-sharp. I'm afraid mine is but a broadsword's edge."

Hermione was absolutely flabbergasted. She'd never heard Albus speak so. "Françoise is right, then," she said, having no better response.

"Of course she is, my dear," he said. "She's quite a perceptive girl, when she puts her mind to it. Shame her father sent her Beauxbatons instead of Hogwarts — it would have been interesting to see her Sorted. A wonderful match for young Harry."

"I'm glad," she said, meaning it. "Harry always deserved to be happy."

"He did," Albus agreed. "Although I'm afraid I didn't particularly assist him there. Another victim of one of my mistakes. Possibly more than one, but I do not care to think on it."

"I doubt he saw it that way," she said staunchly.

Albus sighed, and it was unhappy. "I know he did," he said. "At least once, that is. But I think, at the end of it all, he understood. He understood what needed to be done and why I needed him to do it. I only wish..." His voice was wistful and had a disturbingly despondent note in it. "I only wish I could somehow make Severus understand as well."

She regarded him with furrowed brow. "Understand what?"

His laugh was bitter. "You saw less than I'd suspected,



Miss Granger. Tell me — why do you think that Severus hated — *hates* — Harry Potter like he does?"

Silent as she mulled his question over in her mind, Hermione chose her response carefully. "There was bad blood between Professor Snape and Harry's father. I know that. And he always said that Harry reminded him..."

"Even Severus Snape is not so churlish as to condemn a *child* for actions his parent committed before his own conception," Albus retorted sharply. "No, Hermione, Harry earned Severus' bad blood on his own account."

She was lost in thought for a while but eventually came up empty-handed. "I don't know," she admitted, exasperated with both the topic and with Dumbledore himself.

"Miss Granger," he began in a thoughtful sort of voice. "From the moment Sirius Black and James Potter set foot on Hogwarts grounds, they were beloved. Teachers, students, even the headmaster himself turned a blind eye to most of their rambunctious behavior. I even had James made Head Boy his final year in a hope that he would calm down. And so, when Severus came to me one night during his sixth year spouting some nonsense about Sirius sending him to his death at the hands of a mad werewolf, I couldn't bring myself to believe it. I *loved* Sirius Black and James Potter so completely that I could not think them capable of such a thing. And so, I turned Severus away.

"He went to Voldemort, eventually," he said. "Severus



sees many things in terms of black-and-white only — a surprising number, really, for a Slytherin — and so he managed to interpret my behavior through the years as the actions of a man who did not love him instead of what was closer to the truth — the actions of a man who did not know what to do with the love he had. Sirius and James, you see, were very easy to love. Severus is not.”

She remained tactfully silent, trying to imagine exactly how one would go about loving Snape.

“But I did not learn my lesson, Miss Granger. When I learned that the Potter family was one of Voldemort’s targets, I protected them with every resource at my command. To be honest, I protected baby *Harry*. I knew the prophecy, you see, and I would have done anything to prevent that sweet little boy from being saddled with such a thing. And then, when they were... when they died, I committed another fatal error. I left Severus to see to Harry. And that, Miss Granger, was when the Aurors descended upon the Order headquarters and threw him into Azkaban.”

Her face went white with shock.

“I can see that he didn’t tell you,” he said, acknowledging her surprise with a short jerk of the head. “Yes... Severus spent nearly three days in the hands of the dementors before I could get him out. And he suspects — as I actually know — that it would never have happened if I hadn’t left him alone. Or at least taken him with me.”



“So he thinks that you chose Harry Potter’s well-being over his own,” she said, puzzle pieces finally fitting together.

His voice was mild. “Oh, I *did* choose Harry’s well-being over Severus’. At the time, I justified it to myself — Harry was just a baby, after all, and recently orphaned. It never occurred to me that Severus would see it as yet more proof of my disregard for him. And through the years, it happened again and again. As Harry proved increasingly difficult to keep out of trouble, I had to intervene more and more often. Like rubbing salt into an open wound. Thus, Miss Granger, while Harry was hated through no fault of his own, it certainly was on his own account. And so I say again, I wish I could make Severus understand. I wish I could take away even some small part of the hurt that I’ve inflicted on him again and again.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said gently.

“It’s no more his,” he replied. “And therein lies the impasse.”

“I am sorry,” Hermione told him in a low voice. “I am sorry for what everyone has been through. You, and Harry, and perhaps Severus most of all.”

Severus? she thought to herself. *What made me say that?*

The only sound in the flat was the ticking of Ron’s lone clock, attached to the wall over Albus’ head. She watched the second hand circle the clock’s face over and over, losing count of the minutes.

Suddenly, he coughed. “Well, Hermione, I’m afraid I’ve



stayed far longer than I'd intended. Really, I must get back to Hogwarts. Would you tell Ron that I dropped by?"

"Of course." And she was on her feet, moving to the door to escort him out. "It was... enlightening to speak with you, Professor. Albus, I mean."

"A pleasure, Miss Granger," he said politely, slipping out the open door and nodding at her. "As always. Until we meet again."

"Yes," she replied, watching him walk away. "Until then."



It was late. As she struggled through the miasma of sleep, that was the only concrete thing Hermione could lock her mind on.

It was late and someone was knocking on the door.

Loudly, unless she missed her guess.

Now alert enough to actually attempt to struggle to her feet, Hermione realized with a start that she was lying on the couch out in the sitting room. She must have fallen asleep while reading. Indeed, a dog-eared book whose title she could not recall that she'd snagged from Ron's bookshelves was sitting on the floor.

The knocking continued as she shuffled her way to the door. "Hey, Hermione," Ron said cheerfully as she opened it. "I was wondering if I could crash here tonight. I didn't want to disturb the kids by barging in at this hour."

Bleary and unable to formulate a reply, she just blinked at him.



"I can see, though, that I managed to disturb *you*," he continued. "Too much sleep is bad for you, you know."

She rolled her eyes. "What time *is* it, anyway?"

"'Bout two in the morning. So... can I come in?"

"It *is* your flat, after all," she said, letting him past her with an indifferent shrug. "Although I'm going to consign you to the sofa for your cheek."

Ron did not look perturbed in the slightest. "It's a comfortable sofa. But I confess, I'm far too wired to sleep for a bit. Fancy a cuppa?"

"I thought you said it was two in the morning," she replied with a stifled yawn. "You want *tea*?" Her tone bordered on horrified.

"I can never sleep properly when I'm working on a case," he said, striding toward the kitchen. "You can go to bed if you'd like. I won't be offended."

Well aware of the fact that Ron knew he was feeding her curiosity, Hermione conceded defeat and followed him. "So you're on the case, then?"

"We haven't got much to go off of," he replied, shuffling around in the cabinets. "Do I own a teakettle?"

"Beside the stove," she said. "So, what do you think about everything so far?"

He shrugged, pulling out the kettle and walking over to the sink to fill it with water. "I can't decide whether or not it's nothing more than a curious coincidence. We never pub-



lished any details on Harry's death, so I'm just not sure..." Turning on the burner, he shot her an indefinable sort of look. "I keep hoping that if I can do this — if I can find out what happened to Harry — that the nightmares will stop. It's like his ghost has taken up residence in my brain."

"I can state beyond any doubt that's medically impossible, Ron," she said in an attempt to cheer him up.

His expression remained glum. "Bones — that's the other victim, Alistair Bones — had a son. Kid just turned ten, according to his mother, who I spent the afternoon interviewing. I hope he didn't..."

"I'm sure he didn't," she replied swiftly.

"Nicholas did." Ron's tone was dark.

She had nothing to say to that and so did not speak as Ron fiddled with a teapot and cups. The water was soon boiling and he went about preparing the tea, using a potholder to carry it over to the table. "Best let it steep for at least ten minutes," he said.

"You always did prefer your tea bitter," she said. "I always thought your tea tasted like what I suspected boiled bark would."

"You never said anything," he accused.

Grinning at him, she poked at the sugar bowl. "Did you ever notice that I took nearly five sugars whenever *you* made tea and only one when anyone else did?"

"It's been a very long time since I made you tea," Ron said.



With a suppressed sigh, she kept her gaze firmly fixed on the table.

"Hermione..."

"Ron, it's two in the morning," she said, frustrated. "It's not the time..."

He exploded. "It's never bloody time, is it, Hermione? What, d'you expect to show up after being gone for thirteen damned years without so much as a 'how've you been?' You left without saying a word!"

"I left a note," she protested weakly.

His laugh was reproachful. "Yes, you left a note," he said. "I carried that goddamn note in my pocket for years — until it fell apart, as a matter of fact. *'Dear Ron, I have to go away for a bit. I can't tell you why, but I didn't want you or Harry to worry about me. Don't write to me, Ron — I won't reply if you do. Take care of yourself, and Harry too, although he doesn't think he needs it. Love, Hermione.'* Do you know *how many* times I read that letter?"

Many, obviously, she thought to herself, not speaking.

"I wrote you so many letters, Hermione," he continued, anger radiating from every pore in his body. "*Please come home. What did we do wrong?* Tore every single one of them up. Do you know we even went to *Albus* looking for you?"

"I didn't want —"

"It doesn't matter, Hermione, what you didn't want. Did you honestly think we wouldn't worry about you? That we



wouldn't go looking for you?"

"I —"

"So when I ask you where you've been," he said slowly, "I'm not asking out of curiosity or even genuine interest. I'm asking out of *need*. I'm asking because of all of our sleepless nights, all of our tears, all of our anger. Hermione, *tell me!*"

"When I left," she began hesitantly. "I didn't know where I wanted to go. All I had was a suitcase, a rather aggravated cat, and eighty Galleons. My first Portkey took me to France. Spain after that. I was so disoriented — the only thing I knew was I didn't want to be anywhere I'd been before. My next Portkey, then, took me to America.

"But America was too loud — too busy. Even in the quiet places. So I went down to Mexico, as I've said. I was there for the better part of three years, traveling around, not settling anywhere. My eighty Galleons were long gone, so I took odd jobs here and there, staying around just long enough to save enough money to travel somewhere else."

His gaze was still stony. "How did you wind up in Tibet?"

"By mistake, actually," she said, emitting a laugh that went unreturned. "I was trying to get to Peru but took a Portkey to Hong Kong by accident. I'd always wanted to see China, you know, so I just stayed, working my way further and further west. It took me many months, but I finally got to the Himalayas. I had no more money, no more food, nothing but the clothes in my pack, and I



didn't know where to go next. I was even beginning to debate going home. But one day, stumbling around in the cold without so much as a cloak, I found it."

"The monastery," he supplied flatly.

"The monastery," she agreed. "The monks were kind and took me in without question. I later learned that they do that sort of thing a lot — taking in weary travelers with nowhere else to go. The difference is, most of their visitors usually take refreshment and leave. I just sort of... well, stayed. For ten years."

His face was disbelieving. "And what did you do in those ten years?"

"I helped Master Xi with the garden," she said, straight-faced. "And, in return, he taught me."

"About...?"

"A little about everything. Nature, philosophy, some martial arts. Specifically, usually about the Way. The path to enlightenment. I'm afraid I am not his most attentive of pupils."

"I find that hard to believe," Ron replied, finally softening a bit.

Hermione laughed and, this time, he smiled faintly. "Do you know what the monks called me? They called me *Butterfly* because my attention wavered so quickly."

"You're the only person I know who read *Hogwarts, A History* in its entirety," he said dryly. "And that's more than two thousand pages. Your attention doesn't waver, Hermione."



"You're vastly overestimating my abilities," she said. "And possibly underestimating the monks' teachings. Possibly, I ought to say simply that my meditation skills are pitiable at best and Master Xi was appalled when I was unable to spend more than an hour in the rock garden. He himself can spend upwards of four days there without moving. And before you start your disparaging remarks, let me say that I've actually seen him do it."

Wisely, Ron returned to an earlier subject. "*Butterfly*," he mused. "You know... I rather like that. The caterpillar emerging from its cocoon and all that. And what's more, butterflies flit in and out of your life without so much as a pause, but you're always glad to see one. I approve of your monks, Hermione. Or should I say *Butterfly*?"

"You will whether I give you leave or not," she said with only a small sigh.

"So that's all?" he asked. "You spent the last ten years camping out with secret monks, learning kung fu?"

"Not exactly," she replied. "Not kung fu. Although I am very glad of the blocking moves Master Shen taught me before I was introduced to Master Xi. You might say... well, you might say that I've been learning how to be *still*."

Shaking his head, Ron drummed his fingers on the table. "It's just difficult to picture. You sitting still." His face returned to its earlier somber cast. "Hermione..."

She hummed questioningly and poured herself a cup of



tea, hoping against hope that it wasn't bitter beyond repair.

"*Why*?"

Taking a sip, she made a face and reached for the sugar bowl. "Truthfully?"

"Truthfully," he echoed firmly, hands splayed out on the tabletop.

"When I walked out that door, I thought I'd only be gone for a week," she admitted with a rueful smile, stirring the contents of her cup. "I went to work that morning as usual — in one of the Research departments over at the Ministry — but my boss called me into her office. I can't even remember her name — isn't that awful? Anyway, she called me in and fired me."

His mouth fell open. "Fired you? Fired Hermione Granger?"

She laughed at the look on his face. "Yes, Ron. Apparently their department needed to make some cutbacks and as the most junior staff member, I was cutback number one. I stood there — it wasn't even nine in the morning yet — with my last paycheck in my hand, not knowing what to do. So I went back to the flat, packed my bag, and decided I was going to take a vacation, figure out where to go from there."

"Helluva vacation, Hermione," he said with a sarcastic snort.

"I went to France, as I said. I was sitting at one of those nameless little cafes in the middle of Paris, having a coffee, and wondering how on Earth I could face my family with



this news. Fired — their perfect little daughter — actually fired. And that was how I wound up in Spain.”

“But I always thought your parents were quite —”

Flapping a hand, she cut him off expertly. “My parents *are* nice people, Ron. And they loved me very much, I’m sure. At least, they loved me when I was helping them fulfill their perfect dreams. It was all right, you see, when I had such problems in school when I was younger, because my grades were astronomical. As long as they had something to brag to their bridge group about, they could ignore the fact that I came home every day in tears or with a note because I’d accidentally set something on fire again.”

“Why didn’t you ever —?”

“Oh, I did,” she said, anticipating his question. “I was eight or so. I deliberately flunked two-thirds of my subjects. Mum and Daddy slapped me into therapy before I could blink. I was so happy to go to Hogwarts — not just because of the magic, but because it meant I had days where I didn’t have to constantly worry about *them*. Do you know that when I left, Mum sent me exactly *one* letter asking me to come home? And I don’t even think she wrote it. I think she had one of her receptionists draft it and just put her signature to it. I had to...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I had to hear from one of my parents’ old friends that I ran into in Hong Kong that my father had died.”

He sighed. “You always seemed to get along so well...”



“I saw them no more than twice a year,” she said. “And if you recall, I never gave them a reason to be unhappy with me. Dumbledore never notified them about my injuries during the years, so they never realized what was really happening. Oh, they knew a bit about Voldemort, and enough of our escapades to know that I had friends for the first time in my life, but they never saw that I was in any sort of danger. Thankfully.”

“So you left because of your parents?” His tone was doubtful.

“In part,” Hermione told him. “But mostly because when I thought much about it, I realized I’d become the daughter my parents wanted — dutiful, respectful, sensible. And I *hated* it. ‘Good old Hermione, she’ll know the answer,’ everyone said. I just... I wanted to go somewhere where they didn’t want me to be perfect. Somewhere where I could just be... well, just be, really.”

Ron looked vaguely apologetic. “I didn’t know we put so much pressure on you.”

“You didn’t, truly,” she explained. “But I always had a function in everyone’s mind. You and Harry, well, you two were just friends, no strings attached. But I — I was your friend *because* of what we’d been through at Hogwarts. Admit it, Ron — you never would have so much as sneered at me if we hadn’t gotten into trouble together our first year.”

He was uncharacteristically silent, not denying her



assertion. After a long, sickening pause, he finally spoke. "It was Harry," he rasped. "Harry was afraid you'd be hurt. I didn't want to —"

"I know, Ron." Her voice was kind. "And that's fine. I understand. But do you see, then, what I mean? I felt that — I felt that I had to *make* my friends like me. We weren't just friends for the sake of friendship. And it was so much work..." Her tone sharpened slightly. "By the end of it all, I was just tired. And I knew, then, that if I continued along the same vein that I would wind up hateful, resenting all of you for making me work so hard. It was a slow poison, but poison nonetheless. So I stayed away. I stayed away, hoping that one day I could be happy enough with who I was that I could come back. But then... then I couldn't stay away any more."

"Harry again," Ron sighed. "It was Harry who drove us together — twice, now. I just wish that didn't mean..."

Hermione laid a hand over his, fingernails rasping against the skin of his wrist. "I know, Ron. Me, too."

Chapter Eighteen

These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing... They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house.

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



It's so nice to finally speak with you, Severus," Dr. Cuthrell said silkily. "I was so disappointed when you missed our last appointment."

He did not speak. It was not necessary.

"I did get a chance to speak with Professor Dumbledore again, though," he continued. "I expressed my concern at your lack of progress."

His eyes flashed.

"He seems to think that you *have* made a few forward steps since we last spoke." Cuthrell's voice expressed his disbelief at such an idea. "Which brings me to what I hoped we could discuss in our session today..."

With a lazy wave of his wand, Cuthrell released the

Petrificus Totalus charm the orderlies had placed on Severus to bring him up to the office. Severus stayed on the floor — the door, of course, was locked.

Cuthrell leaned over his desk, steeping his fingers under his chin. "The inestimable Hermione Granger. She's come to visit you no less than six times in the past two months. By all accounts, you two have spoken freely."

Severus blinked once, slowly. *And your point is...?*

"I do not care what it is that you speak about, Severus."

Liar. He smirked. A small quirk of the lips that communicated volumes.

"But I am curious about how you *feel*. Tell me, Severus — what does Hermione Granger make you feel?" His bright, earnest tone was belied by the warning of an attack in his gaze. Large and round and mesmerizing, Cuthrell's eyes reminded Severus rather of a cat his father kept in the shop to kill mice — the cat would patiently wait, stalking its prey, begging it with its eyes to approach before leaping in for the kill.

He smiled inwardly, deciding it might be entertaining to play Cuthrell's game for a bit. "Like basking in the sunshine of her love," he said dryly.

Of course, the irony of such a ludicrous statement eluded the therapist completely, and he began scribbling excitedly on the parchment beneath his quill. "You're in love with her?" he asked swiftly.

The mental grin widened, approaching a Cheshire cat's



in extent. Severus finally stood and seated himself in one of Cuthrell's chairs. "Oh, yes," he said, flat and deadpan. "Ever since I first laid eyes on her all those years ago." If he'd been able to bring himself to it, he would have fluttered his eyelashes, just to see what sort of response he could provoke.

The quill slowed and Cuthrell's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "She couldn't have been more than eleven when you first saw her," he said.

"All the same..." he trailed off, stifling a laugh as the psychologist's eyes widened to epic proportions.

Cuthrell cleared his throat self-importantly, laying his quill on the blotter. "Now, Severus..." he began in what Severus was certain was meant to be a placating tone. "Severus, I can't help you if you won't let me."

Thank bloody Jesus and Merlin and Buddha you'll never help me, he thought to himself as the young man's face split into a horrifyingly charming smile.

"I spoke to a few people about Hermione Granger," Cuthrell continued into the silence, apparently deciding that a change in tactics was necessary. "She's proven rather difficult to gather information on. But I have managed to discern that she was, indeed, one of your students."

Severus' eyebrow lifted. *How particularly difficult for you...*

"More importantly, it seems, according to several of my sources, that she was a Gryffindor at the same time as the famous Harry Potter." He paused here, ostensibly to gauge



Severus' reaction.

Severus tried not to move, but Cuthrell settled back in his chair, seemingly pleased at what he'd been able to gather.

"I also have it on good authority that you and Harry Potter notoriously did *not* get along."

Exhaling sharply, he glared at Cuthrell as if to say, *Is that all, then?*

"Did you know that Harry Potter is dead?" Cuthrell pounced, something like delight in his voice.

"I was made aware of that fact," he replied carefully, deciding then and there that he would not say another word to this man today.

With a frown, he shuffled a few papers around on his desk. Severus rather suspected he'd wanted to shock him with that news. Possibly make what he called a *breakthrough* with it. "There's a connection there, Severus. You, Hermione Granger, Harry Potter, and his death. I want to know what it is."

He was quiet. He would not speak.

Seconds ticked into long minutes as they stared at each other. It seemed as if Cuthrell was not going to break the silence either.

A cuckoo sounded the hour. Ten in the morning. Severus wondered why Cuthrell would put something as incongruous as a cuckoo clock in his otherwise modern, clinical office. He blinked at the sound.

Cuthrell heaved a long-suffering sigh and Severus



wrinkled his nose at him. "It seems as if our hour is up, Severus. I hope you have a nice day." He flapped his wrist at the door and the lock clicked. "By the by, Severus..."

He jerked his attention away from the doorknob long enough to regard him questioningly.

"The clock was a graduation gift from my grandmother. I know you were wondering..." He laughed merrily as Severus' scowl deepened.



It was raining again. Some time in between being Petrified leaving breakfast and being interrogated — offered therapy, that is — by Cuthrell, the rain had started.

Severus laid his hand on the window, feeling the cold seep through to his fingertips. Summer was passing. If he squinted, he could imagine that the leaves hanging limply off the nearby trees might be changing color.

He did not have his common room to himself today — Old Jack had flung himself into a chair across the room and was currently staring at a space on the floor as if it was about to open up and allow escape. But he did not, of course, speak, and so Severus did not pay him any attention, choosing instead to continue looking out his customary window.

A thought struck him.

Unless he missed his count, today was Thursday.



Granger would come today.

She usually came on Thursdays.

He wondered what he could possibly have to say to her. Or what she would have to say to him. Inwardly, Severus sighed.

"You over there," an ancient sounding voice croaked. "You — boy!"

With a start, Severus whirled around to see Old Jack watching him. Perhaps his sigh hadn't been as inward as he'd thought. He was, in fact, so stunned that he found himself actually replying. "Beg pardon?"

Old Jack grinned, revealing a handful of missing teeth. Severus immediately wished he would stop. "You sound like your world's about to come to an end, there, lad."

"I thought you didn't talk." His voice was reproachful, but the curiosity behind the implicit question was genuine.

"I thought you didn't either," Old Jack said with a small snort, finally (thankfully) putting his cracked old teeth away behind his lips. "I should be honored you're gracing me with your words."

"Likewise," Severus said, cocking his head in a sarcastic nod.

Old Jack laughed. "Oh, I speak well enough, my boy. Just not to many. I find that silence adds to my mystique."

"Mystique?" he echoed carefully.

There went that positively awful smile again. Severus made a mental vow to floss as often as they'd let him. "I'm particularly fond of the rumor circulating that I'm an old

Death Eater," he said with a conspiratorial wink. "One so crazy that You-Know-Who himself had me committed."

Severus let out a bark of laughter. "You're no Death Eater."

"What makes you say that?" Old Jack asked, contriving to look hurt.

Here, he gave him a shark's grin of his own. "Because I *was*," he said confidently. "And I'd remember *you*."

To his credit, Old Jack only blinked about twice. "You were a Death Eater?"

"I was."

Jack tucked his hands behind his head and jerked his head in a cocky nod. "I'll have to watch out for you, then."

"See that you do." But there was no bite to his words.

Watching him carefully for a good while, Old Jack suddenly leaned forward in his chair and put his elbows on his knees. "Well... aren't you going to ask me why I'm *really* here?"

"Did you want me to?" Severus asked politely.

"Our conversation had gotten off to a rather promising start."

"Well, then." He waved his hand in what he hoped was a prompting manner. "Go on, then. I imagine you're going to tell me that you're some harmless old crank whose son had him slapped in the loony bin without cause to get at his fortune. Please tell me you double-crossed him and left it all to your half-blind, lame cat."

"Oh, no," Old Jack said. "Not that. Have you ever read that old Muggle book where they talk about how you



know whether or not you're crazy?"¹⁰ I can't remember the title off the top of my head."

"I'm certain you're about to tell me what I need to know about it."

Jack laughed again and slapped one of his knees. "Why didn't I talk to you before, boy?"

"The book?" Severus asked, trying to mask his impatience with an air of boredom.

"Oh yes." He cleared his throat and crossed a leg neatly over his knee. "Well, the book said that if you think you're crazy, there's no way that you actually can be, because only a truly sane person would ever wonder whether or not he wasn't. So you can never actually truthfully claim to be insane."

He rolled his eyes. "Are you reaching a pertinent point?"

"I only wonder if I'm not sane sometimes," Jack admitted. "And when they've got me locked up in my little room, or when my damned therapist is patiently explaining something to me with as many big words as he can think of, I'm certain I'm the most rational person in this god-forsaken building. But then... then things get fuzzy."

"Fuzzy?"

"You know..." he said with a sideways glance. "The lights get all bendy and I can hear the birds. And that's when I know they're coming."

"They?" Severus echoed, beginning to feel uncomfortable. "Who?"



"Them. They whisper in my mind and they tell me they can make the birds go away, but I can't believe them. Dr. Penderghast says I mustn't, or he'll put needles in my arms again. So when it gets fuzzy, I try very hard not to move. But sometimes I do. And I don't mean to, you see."

Severus resisted the urge to move away from Old Jack as well as he could, only shifting slightly in his chair.

The glint in his eyes slowly faded. "So... tell me. Am I crazy?"

Most assuredly, Severus thought to himself. "We probably all are," he grumbled.

"That's the spirit!" Old Jack cried. "Tell me, do you play chess?"



The chess sets were warded so that the pieces did not speak and were permanently attached to the boards, which were in turn attached to the floor. You had to actually touch each piece and then tap the space you wanted it to move to. To be honest, Severus actually preferred this version of the game — the chess set he'd had as a child chattered something awful and he usually played with a Silencing Charm enabled anyway.

This meant, though, that he and Old Jack played in relative silence, heads bent over the board in concentration.

One of Jack's knights was currently wriggling its way through Severus' pieces, and his mind was racing as he



stared at the board, his former strategy now unraveled as he bent his thought on destroying the annoying knight.

Both their heads snapped to attention as the door to the common room swung open. One of the orderlies stepped into the room and smiled at them. "Getting along, are we?"

Neither of them spoke.

She frowned. "Well... Severus, you have a visitor waiting for you. Just thought you'd like to know."

Old Jack waggled his eyebrows at him in a rather disturbing gesture. In reply, Severus scowled, tipping his king over and admitting defeat. Perhaps some other day, then.

Granger must be here.

He walked down the hallway briskly, bare feet slapping against the tiles as he moved. The doorknob was absolutely frigid under his fingers — he twisted it to open the door.

Albus smiled up at him from his position at the table. "Ah..." he said warmly. "Good morning, Severus."

He almost turned around and walked back out. The only thing that kept him from doing so was Cuthrell — he didn't want to be confined to his room again. As it was, then, he slouched into the room and slumped into the other chair, waiting for Albus to begin his usual prattle.

It did not take long. "I'm glad to see you are well, Severus," he said. "I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday, but I had a meeting I couldn't get out of. And Minerva sends her regards, as always."



Snorting, Severus gave him a stony stare. *I bet she does.* Albus' eyes narrowed. "Of course she does. She cares about you, Severus."

His nostrils flared. *Was he actually using Legilimency?*

"I'm not poking in your mind, Severus," he said with a deep sigh. "It's written all over your face. But I would have thought that such an accomplished Occlumens as yourself would be able to tell immediately that I wasn't in your mind."

He did not speak and his lips thinned to a nearly imperceptible line. Albus knew as well as he did how that stung.

Albus recoiled instantly. "I'm sorry, my boy," he said. "I didn't mean to —" He caught himself and offered Severus an apologetic smile. "I spend more time apologizing to you than anyone else, you know that?"

A corner of his mouth twitched.

"As I was saying, then," he said in an attempt at joviality. "You'd be proud of me, Severus. At my last meeting with our esteemed Minister, I lost my temper, called him an 'old goat,' and stormed out. Minerva is of the opinion that I should apologize, but I cannot see why I ought to. He's still trying to bring the Order under his control — he doesn't like a private entity with the sort of reach that we have existing without some sort of governmental regulations. If he wasn't so insistent that *he* be the official liaison, I might be more willing to listen. Kingsley Shacklebolt, for example, or even young Ronald Weasley would be excellent choices."



Severus quirked an eyebrow.

"You're correct, of course, Severus. It doesn't hurt matters that both Shacklebolt and Weasley are already informally affiliated with the Order," Albus admitted. "But you cannot fault an old man for wanting to make his bed as comfortably as possible."

I certainly can, he thought darkly.

He chuckled at Severus' belligerent expression. "I cannot deceive *you*, can I, boy? It appears as if your Miss Granger has caught on to me as well."

His eyes widened at the 'your.'

"Come, now, Severus. You can't treat Hermione as you do and then *not* expect me to remark on it. Why, even your doctor, that wonderful Jake Cuthrell, who's made so much progress with you, has commented."

He snorted.

"I daresay that Hermione's as baffled by you as the rest of us," Albus said with a small smile. "I spoke with her a few nights ago, incidentally. She's staying at young Weasley's flat for a while, I think. They always *were* such close friends..."

Severus willed his expression not to change as Albus leaned forward, obviously trying to see how his words affected him.

"Anyway... she seems to be the same sweet child I remember from her time at Hogwarts in so many ways."

Not enough of them, Severus thought, remembering



her almost calculating gaze as she watched him.

"It's such a shame that she was gone for so long," he continued thoughtfully. "But she did make it back for the funeral. Harry's funeral. I know she told you about Harry, Severus."

He bowed his head, neither confirming nor denying Albus' words, knowing it was not necessary.

"I confess, I rather wondered about your reaction to the news," he admitted. "Harry's death came as such a shock to us all, but I am well aware of the... emotions... between the two of you."

Closing his eyes, Potter's face, soured with a glare, flashed in his mind.

"It was a senseless tragedy. And it preys on me, Severus. I think it preys on all of us. No one should have to die like that."

Split open and bled to death, he remembered Granger saying. *Like an animal*.

Probably not, though. Most animals did not die, as he suspected Potter did — as he knew most people under such circumstances would have — most animals did not die weeping.

Only man.

Potter's glare resonated through his brain again — a glare through a bloodstained and tear-streaked face.

Albus gave him a shrewd look. "I wonder, Severus... does it prey on you?"

Of course not! he wanted to cry. Shout it to the heavens.



Why would he care what happened to Potter, a stupid, willful boy who hadn't known what to do with the life he'd been handed? *Of course not.*

Like an animal.

He could not meet Albus' eyes.

"I think, Severus, that I ought to take my leave," Albus said carefully, chair scraping as he stood. "Oh, and I almost forgot. I brought you something — Jake Cuthrell said he had no objections." Seemingly carelessly, he tossed something on the table — it hit with a loud thud.

Severus glanced down. The DAILY PROPHET. Albus had brought him a newspaper. He felt tears prickle shamefully in his eyes.

"Good day, Severus."

Watching him shuffle away, Severus let Albus get nearly out the door before he spoke.

"Thank you, Uncle Albus," he whispered.

Albus did not reply, but his shoulders straightened as he walked off.



Severus did not want to read the entire paper at once. His first newspaper in five years.

The experience needed to be savored.

And so he allowed himself to read the first page as he walked back to his room, bypassing the common room.



Hiding it under his mattress, he promised himself a second page after luncheon.

His willpower flagged, however, and he actually read *two* pages right after lunch. Even the stupid society column caught his eye — he scanned it eagerly, drinking in the details of Draco Malfoy's last dinner party as if they were written in elegant verse.

The world had indeed moved on, then. Children had been born, people had been married, and people had died. It was only within the sterile institution walls that time seemed to be stopped.

Severus could not resist and after forcing himself to sit in a common room for an hour, he all but ran back to his room, tore the paper out from under his mattress, and began reading it as if his life depended on it, tracing over each word lovingly with his eyes.

It was with great sadness, then, that he reached the back page. The obituaries. A section of the paper he remembered skipping in his other lifetime — he dealt with death enough that he did not want to read about it.

But now he wanted to imprint every single word on his memory, so he devoured the obituary page as he had every other one in the newspaper.

Mrs. Agnes Rascoe, aged one hundred ninety-eight. Died at St. Mungo's. Survived by numerous children, grandchildren, all the way through great-great-grandchildren.



Mr. Flavius Hamilton, forty-eight. Freak mantichore incident. Wife, two boys, and a girl.

Mr. Alistair Bones, thirty-nine. Died at home. A wife and a son.

Died at home.

Severus wondered what that meant.

He realized with a start that Hermione Granger had not come to see him today.

Chapter Nineteen

Kurtz — Kurtz — that means short in German, don't it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life — and death. He looked at least seven feet long. His covering had fallen off, and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



I thought I'd come and rescue you," Ginny said as she came breezing through the front door. "And you know, it's really dangerous to just shout 'Come in.' You-Know-Who could be lurking in your front bushes."

Hermione did not open her eyes. "I knew it was you,"



she said lightly. "What do you mean — *rescue*?"

"Got a crystal ball under your robes, then?" Ginny retorted tartly.

"You have a very distinctive knock," she said, eyelids quivering but otherwise staying shut. "Shave-And-A-Haircut. Always. I've never met anyone else who does it with such frequency, either."

Clearing her throat, Ginny's voice was bright and Hermione could hear the smile in it. "Back to the matter at hand. I have come to save you from yourself."

"From myself?" she echoed.

"Yes," she confirmed. "If I still know you as well as I once did, I'm nearly certain that you're going to spend the entire day with your nose buried in some book you've already read a million times, as my worthless brother has heartlessly abandoned you for work."

She raised her eyebrows. "I *was* planning on spending the day meditating, actually."

A hand suddenly grabbed a lock of her hair and tugged. "Not today you're not, missy."

"Ouch!" Hermione cried, eyes finally flying open.

Unrepentant grin firmly in place, Ginny just laughed. "I'm taking you shopping. I bet it's been just *ages* since you've done anything absolutely mindless and purposeless. I know I'm due."

"Shopping?" she repeated. "What on Earth for?"



Giving her an appraising look, she put her hands on her hips. "Well... you *could* use a new set of robes."

"My robes are just fine, thank you," she retorted firmly.

"Hermione," she sighed. "You're wearing more patch than robe and the hem is unraveling besides."

"Well..." Hermione conceded grudgingly. "It would be nice. But I can't afford new robes right now, Ginny."

"Do I or do I not owe you thirteen years of Christmas *and* birthday gifts?" Ginny asked, a teasing glint in her eye. "I suppose I could be convinced —"

"Ginny..." she warned.

"For Merlin's sake, Hermione," she exclaimed. "Don't buy anything, then. It's a *beautiful* autumn Saturday. Can't you contemplate the inner workings of the universe when it's *raining*? I want to go out, and I don't want to go alone."

Blowing out an exasperated sigh, Hermione unfolded her legs and made as if to stand. "All right, all right! You didn't have to give me all that blather about buying me clothes if all you wanted was someone to tag along."

"Brilliant!" Ginny cried, eagerly reaching out a hand to help tug her to her feet. "Fetch your cloak, then, and we'll be off."

With a great show of reluctance, she began collecting her cloak and shoes and wand. By the time she was locking up the flat, she was genuinely pleased that Ginny had prodded her into leaving.

Indeed, the day was absolutely lovely — the sunshine just



warm enough to render the chill in the air to a mere crispness. The leaves had not yet begun to turn, but they crackled nicely as the wind occasionally rustled through them.

"You see?" Ginny asked as they walked outside.

Hermione grimaced playfully at her.

They found themselves in Hogsmeade by lunchtime, nostalgia washing over both of them as they saw robes with Hogwarts crests careening around nearly every corner. Hermione was glad Ginny appeared to have no interest in Honeydukes either — the line was literally out the door. "How on Earth did you manage to pick the one weekend in term when we would be overrun with children?" Hermione muttered to Ginny as she shook her head at the mob of students standing in front of Zonko's.

"They look so *young*!" Ginny cried, watching a pair of boys chase each other around the street, waving bags proudly bearing Weasley's Wizard Wheezes logos. "Did we look like babies when we were at Hogwarts?"

"Probably," Hermione replied, mind moving on to more practical concerns. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm trying very hard not to be. I shudder to think of the crowd at the Three Broomsticks. Unfortunately, a butterbeer *does* sound lovely." Her face was wistful. "I'm sure that's why grown-ups drink it, you know. It makes you remember your first Hogsmeade weekend when you were a kid, when the Shrieking Shack was actually scary, when... oh, I don't



know. When everything tasted better."

"Butterbeer," she mused, more to herself than Ginny. "I daresay I haven't had one of those since I left Hogwarts."

"Merlin's ear, Hermione," Ginny cried. "We can't have *that*. Come on, my dear — let us brave the masses."

Before she could so much as squeak, Ginny clamped a surprisingly strong hand around her upper arm and pulled her into the Three Broomsticks.

Every table was full, either of boisterous children or harried adults. Laughter echoed across the dark room and Hermione found herself suddenly swept back fifteen years as Ginny left her standing in the middle of the room.

She and Harry and Ron used to like to sit at that one table near the back, toward a potted fern. Blinking, she noticed that the fern was still there. A bit more wilted than she remembered, and quite possibly a different species altogether, but the same old corner, with the same old table, currently occupied by a group of students sporting various House crests, swapping various bits of sweets out of white Honeydukes sacks.

"Are there any places to sit?" Ginny asked abruptly into her ear as she came elbowing back to stand beside her once again, a mug of frothy butterbeer in each hand. "Although I suppose we can just have these standing —"

"Good gracious!" a small voice exclaimed somewhere from the vicinity of Hermione's wrist. "Is that little Ginny Weasley?"



Startled by the sound, Ginny jumped and a bit of butterbeer sloshed over her right wrist. "Excuse — oh, Professor Flitwick!" she cried, glancing down. "How *are* you?"

He looked as if he hadn't aged a day, a pleased smile on his face. "Oh, I'm wonderful, my dear. But it's been so *long* since I've seen you. Oh, you must come and sit with us over by the bar — I'm sure everyone would love to hear from you." Apparently not willing to take no for an answer, he moved off into the crowd. Exchanging amused glances, Hermione and Ginny followed him as he continued to chatter. "We do see your brother Ron every now and again," he chirped. "He and Albus do a fair bit of work together, I'm led to believe. But I haven't seen you for..."

Either he trailed off or Hermione simply lost the thread of his squeaky voice as she tailed him. It did not matter much, however, as they soon approached a table occupied by two very familiar faces.

"Look who I've found!" Flitwick cried as soon as they were in earshot of the other professors. "It's Ginny Weasley!"

Blushing, Ginny shoved the butterbeers into Hermione's hands and allowed herself to be embraced by about both of the table's occupants.

"My dear girl!" Professor McGonagall said as she gave her shoulders a round squeeze. "It's so good to see you."

"Yes," Professor Sprout agreed with a wide grin. "It's been many years. Although Albus is not terrible at keeping us up



to date. Are you still working for Manchester's team?"

"It's Wimbourne now, actually," she replied.

"Oh, do sit down," Flitwick said, ushering her toward an empty chair. "And your friend as well." He gave Hermione a congenial nod and she realized with a start that none of them had recognized her. "You seem vaguely familiar to me, my dear. Did you attend Hogwarts as well? What House were you in?"

She smiled broadly, wondering how long it would take them to guess. "Oh, I was a Gryffindor," she replied. "But that was many years ago."

McGonagall gave her a calculating look. "Couldn't be that many — you don't look a day over twenty-five. What is your name, child?"

Biting back a laugh, Hermione's grin widened. "Hallo, Professor McGonagall. Maybe you remember me — Hermione Granger?"

There was a crash as Professor Sprout actually knocked her drink off the table. Flitwick was staring at her with round eyes and McGonagall's face was literally white, polite smile frozen with surprise. "Hermione... Granger?" she asked slowly. "But you're... Weasley and Potter said that you'd..."

"I'm back in the country after a prolonged absence," she explained, beginning to feel slightly uncomfortable as their stares continued.

"Well..." McGonagall said with a nervous laugh. "I never

expected to see *you* again, Miss Granger." Apparently unable to bring herself to embrace Hermione, she settled for a congenial pat on the arm. "How've you been?"

"Quite well, thank you," she said. "How're things at Hogwarts?"

"Much the same as when you were a student," McGonagall replied, smile warming slightly. "Although somewhat lacking the... adventure of your years. I'm afraid the biggest disaster we had last year was when a Ravenclaw set the entire potions classroom on fire and the castle had to be evacuated for a night."

"I would think a few mundane years would be a welcome relief," Hermione said. "For most, that is."

"There will always be a few who seek trouble out," she said with a nod of agreement. "But fortunately, the largest part of the students are content with the small concerns of the peaceful. For others, there are dungbombs and detentions enough to content even the most restless of troublemakers. Although, Miss Weasley, I will say that we've yet to meet any of your brothers' ilk in recent years."

Ginny laughed. "Fred and George would be more gratified than you'll ever know to hear of it," she said. "Although I feel as if I ought to warn you that they're attempting to school their erstwhile nieces and nephews in their particular brand of mischief."

"Really?" McGonagall asked. "Young Andrew shows no such inclinations. He's actually been very quiet and studi-



ous — especially for a Weasley.”

“Charlie probably read him the riot act preemptively,” she said. “After all, Andy’s got three Head Boys and two Quidditch Captains to emulate in addition to his prankster genius uncles. Well... we’d rather he not take after Percy,” she said after a moment’s pause. “He always *was* such a prig. And we don’t see him much any more. I did hear that he got married, though.”

An awkward silence followed. Flitwick coughed.

“So... Miss Granger,” Sprout said, voice bright with false cheer, “you said you’d been out of the country...?”

“Yes,” she agreed cautiously, willing to speak more freely for once in order to change the subject. “I’ve been in Tibet mostly, living with a group of monks.”

“Monks?” Flitwick asked, clearly curious. “What order?”

She paused, considering his question, and then laughed. “They would tell you that they are simply students of nature and that such labels are not significant to them, but I’ll go ahead and tell you that I’m fairly certain they’re Taoist.”

Hermione waited expectantly for the inevitable ‘ninja’ joke but found herself oddly disappointed when Flitwick’s face simply creased with confusion. “Oh,” he said doubtfully.

“But I’m back now,” she said, feeling as if she ought to continue somehow, to fill in a gap she was certain she was only imagining. “I came back home.” She raised her butterbeer to her lips finally, feeling the warmth slide down her throat



and into her belly — it was not nearly as comforting as it used to be. Somehow, it did not taste the same — there was a bitter undercurrent she’d not noticed as a child.

In unison, the professors presented a solemn set of faces. “We were so sorry to hear, Miss Granger,” Sprout said, somehow managing to literally *wilt* under the force of her grief. “That poor boy...”

“His family stayed with us for a week or so,” McGonagall said soberly, picking up the thread as Sprout trailed off. “This summer. Albus brought them to Hogwarts. He and young Ron Weasley stayed with them.”

“It has been very hard,” Flitwick agreed, nodding at the stern old witch. “The entire community has been affected, but I can’t imagine how it’s been for you — for Potter’s closest friends...”

Ginny and Hermione both sighed. “I think everyone’s been managing as best as they can,” Ginny said. “We may weather this storm yet.”

“Nicholas — that’s his son,” Hermione said tentatively. “Nicholas has gone back to school. And Ron is...”

“He’s barely left Françoise’s side,” Ginny completed with an articulate wave of the hand.

“Professor Dumbledore’s been around a fair amount himself,” she said thoughtlessly. “I spoke with him just last week.”

McGonagall’s head jerked up and she narrowed her eyes at Hermione. “You’ve seen Albus?” she asked sharply.



Wondering what had just happened, she nodded *very* hesitantly. "Just a handful of times, really."

"A handful of..." Voice fading, McGonagall snorted and Hermione started — she hadn't ever been entirely sure that her severe old Head of House was actually capable of laughter. "You mean that Albus has known you were back in the country?"

"For a couple of months, now."

She shook her head, smiling grimly. "That old codger. I'll have to tell him that his little joke's played out. Thank Merlin he wasn't here to gloat over us."

"Gloat?" Ginny asked, clearly trying to pretend that she was confused. Hermione rather suspected she was just as aware of Albus Dumbledore's more devious side as anyone.

"Oh, not gloat *per se*," Flitwick replied. "Just sits back in his chair and *chuckles* — that little 'I knew all along and you didn't' laugh. He's gotten very good at it through the years. And I admit, I'm always delighted when something surprises him — he's so used to knowing about everything before it happens that his reaction to something completely unexpected is rather priceless."

Sprout laughed. "Do you remember when his brother sent him that Howler all those years ago? At breakfast, in front of all the students?"

"Oh, I do," McGonagall said with a thin smile. "I never could figure out what Aberforth Dumbledore was doing

all of that damned screaming about — all I made out at the time was 'goat,' 'Mother,' and 'a hundred thousand Galleons.' Albus' face was absolutely *purple*."

The professors shared a laugh as Hermione grappled with the idea of Minerva McGonagall knowing swear words stronger than, 'For the love of Merlin.'

The laughter died down and Sprout wiped a single tear from her eye. "That was so long ago. Severus Snape hadn't even joined the staff yet."

"He was a student, then, if I recall," McGonagall agreed. "And there's another one..."

They were silent, then, each giving Hermione and Ginny calculating looks, as if to determine exactly how much they knew.

Ginny coughed. "I know about Professor Snape," she said quietly. "Dad told us what Professor Dumbledore said about him... er, going away. And Ron said that Hermione — hey!" she cried as Hermione administered a swift kick to her ankle under the table.

Not wanting to share her odd relationship with Severus Snape with any part of the Hogwarts staff, she spoke quickly. "Ron told me about Professor Snape," she said.

"It was such a pity..." McGonagall said thoughtfully. "After all that boy had been through. And Albus still goes every week to see him, even after all these years."

"So *that's* where he gets to," Sprout said thoughtfully. "I'd wondered, especially after that business with the Weaver family."



A dim bell rang in Hermione's mind at the sound of that name. "The who?"

Sprout shrugged. "I don't see any harm in telling either of you. One of my students lost his father in a rather bizarre accident at the start of term. The first *day*, actually. Poor Weaver. Gwion Weaver — that's the boy's name — a fourth year in my House."

"Bizarre accident?" Ginny asked. "What on Earth...?"

"I asked a nurse at St. Mungo's, actually," Sprout replied. "The boy wanted to know and his mother wouldn't say. After what the nurse told me, I wouldn't tell him either. No child should have to think of something like *that* happening to his father. It was so strange, though. They couldn't determine how Mr. Weaver had been cut like that. Nearly straight through." Her face was tinged with green at the thought and both of the other professors looked vaguely horrified.

The wheels were racing in Hermione's mind. "Erm... Professor? Do you happen to know Mr. Weaver's first name?"

Sprout blinked rapidly, apparently deep in thought. "Alex — no, Alisander. Alisander Weaver. I believe that Thomas — Thomas Arfken's our current potions professor, you know — went to school with him."

It clicked and Hermione bolted out of her chair. "Excuse me, please, professors. It was very nice to see you again. Ginny, I've got to go."

Before Ginny could so much as protest, Hermione was

out the door, running down the street, ignoring all of the strange looks the students gave her as she passed by.



"So *there* you are," Ginny said as she opened the door to Ron's flat.

"Come on in, Ginny," Hermione replied absently, not looking up from the papers spread across the floor.

She sighed and closed the door neatly behind her. "You know, one of these days, you're going to let someone really dangerous in here like that."

"I'll take my chances," she said in a light voice.

Feeling Ginny's eyes on the back of her neck, Hermione continued to squint at the copy of the DAILY PROPHET she was holding in her hands.

"Are you going to tell me why you hared out and ran off?" she asked crossly. "I *did* just spend the last three hours looking for you."

"I had to check," she mumbled. "I'm just glad I saved it..."

"Saved what? What on Earth are you talking about, Hermione?"

Hermione finally looked up to see Ginny standing there, arms crossed over her chest, irritation clearly written across her features. "Alisander Weaver. Forty years old. Died 1 September. A potions manufacturer who lived in Edinburgh. Died at *home*." She shook the paper in her hand and it rus-



tled forlornly. "Don't you see? I read his obituary."

Letting out an impatient huff, Ginny allowed her hands to drop to her hips. "So what? You read his obituary."

"Of course his wife wouldn't have called the Ministry," Hermione said, more to herself than to Ginny. "Why would she have? No... she called St. Mungo's. And they would have never made the connection because it's simply not there. Ginny, this is ridiculous..."

"What is?" she nearly shouted, startling her out of her babbling. "Hermione, you're not making a damn bit of sense."

Breathing in and out of her nose, Hermione tried to speak slowly. "I think, Ginny, I think that Alisander Weaver's death is connected. If Professor Sprout is right about what St. Mungo's said, he died the same way. But it was no accident."

"Connected to what?" Ginny asked. "Hermione... I swear, you're as bad as Ron."

"Connected to Harry's," she said flatly. "I don't think Alisander Weaver died an accidental death. I think that the person who killed Alistair Bones and Harry Potter is the same person who killed Weaver."



Chapter Twenty

And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul.

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



"H^{ello, Hermione,"} Nicholas said shyly as he opened the door. "Mum said you were coming over for supper. She and Uncle Ron are in the kitchen. He's trying to add peppers to her spaghetti sauce."

"Is he?" Hermione asked as she stepped into the foyer. "Well, he always *did* like spicy food. I hope your mum yells at him."

As if on cue, a loud crash emanated from the kitchen and Nicholas giggled at Hermione's grin.

"Perhaps I ought to stay out here until supper is ready..." she told him thoughtfully.

"We could play Soulblade," he said, excited.

She tried very hard not to grimace. "Erm... that is... maybe



we could just... I don't know. How's school, Nicholas?"

"Okay," he said, glancing down at his bare feet. "My teacher's really nice this year, even if she *does* give us too many problems in math class."

"Math problems..." she said, delighting in the memory. "I haven't done any math problems for a long time."

He brightened and grabbed her hand, pulling her into the den. "Really? Mrs. Daniels says that we'll *always* have to do sums."

"Well..." she began, wondering how to put it. "Wizards don't use as much math as Muggles."

Grinning, she could see he was trying very hard not to jump up and down in delight. "*Really?*"

"But we do have to use *some*," she said. "After all, we have money and banks and Quidditch scores and things."

His face fell comically. "Oh."

She attempted not to laugh at him and mostly succeeded. "Other than eternal math problems, how do you like school?"

"There's this girl..." he said in a stage whisper.

Hermione blinked, surprised. Wasn't he only seven or eight? "A girl, eh?" she prompted. "What's her name?"

"Lydia," he said dully. "She chases me around at recess and tries to kiss me." He made a face of disgust. "And she tells *everyone* that she's going to marry me."

Unable to hold it back, a snort escaped her. "Oh, really?"



Well... I think you're a bit young yet for marriage."

"I don't *want* to marry old Lydia," he said with a frown. "She smells like flowers all the time, and her lips are really, really slimy."

If she wasn't able to laugh soon, Hermione was certain something internal would explode. "Give it a few years, Nicholas."

"Maybe," he replied, but there was doubt in his voice. "*You* never got married, though."

"No..." she said, mood sobering. "No, I didn't."

"Was there ever a boy you wanted to marry?" he asked. "Like Uncle Ron?"

She finally managed a laugh, but it sounded fake even to her own ears. "I already told you about *him*," she reminded him. "But no. I never found anyone I wanted to marry. Or anyone who wanted to marry *me*, for that matter."

"I would," he said stoutly. "You're nice and you play video games with me."

Her laugh was more genuine this time — startled, but genuine. "I finally meet a man who's got his priorities in order. Thanks, Nicholas."

"So..." he said slyly. "Want to play?"

"You little prat!" she cried, giving his hair a teasing tousle. "You think you can *charm* me into playing video games? You're a handsome little devil, I'll grant you, but not quite that handsome."



He pouted mockingly.

"Hey... Nicholas?" she asked after a long pause.

Looking up at her inquisitively, he swiped his bangs out of his eyes. "What?"

"Do you... do you know where your name came from?" Hermione found herself surprised at her own question, not knowing where it came from.

Nicholas frowned, sensing her puzzlement. "My name? I think Mum just liked it. My middle name's Christophe, after her father."

With a sigh of relief that she wasn't aware she was holding in, Hermione glanced away from the question in his eyes. "I just... I once knew someone named Nicholas. And I wondered if your father ever..."

"Oh, Papa told me about him," Nicholas said dismissively. "That ghost. Nearly Headless Nick. Did you really go to a party celebrating the day he *died*?"

"We did," she said with a nostalgic smile. "One Halloween, actually. It was... interesting."

"When Papa... right after he... sometimes I wish he'd become a ghost," he admitted in a near-whisper, sounding very young. "That way he wouldn't be gone forever."

Something tugged in Hermione's chest. "Oh, Nicholas..."

But he shrugged. "I know it's better the other way, though. If he was a ghost, that would mean he... regretted something. That maybe we hadn't loved him enough."



If she didn't find some way to change the subject soon, she was going to start crying.

"He called me 'Nick' sometimes. Not a lot, but sometimes. I don't like it when anyone else does."

A breath hitched in her throat.

"I got in trouble for it at school," he continued, not meeting her gaze. "Tommy, in my class, called me that when we were playing football, and I hit him. Mrs. Daniels kept me in at recess the next day, but she didn't tell Mum. She said I couldn't hit people for giving me a nickname, but when I told her that I only let my papa call me that, she got all quiet."

I would, too, Hermione thought, wanting nothing more than to take Nicholas in her arms and hug him forever.

"It's all right, though," he concluded evenly, oblivious to her internal struggle. "And I didn't get into *too* much trouble."

"Well, that's good," she replied, grateful to find her voice again.

Nicholas was still for a moment, seeming to study his hands with great intensity. "I'm thirsty," he told her abruptly. "I'm going to get a drink. You want one?"

Blinking at the non sequitur, her reply was automatic. "No... I'm good, thanks." As soon as the words were floating through the air, she became suddenly aware of the dryness in her mouth, but Nicholas was already gone — jumping off the sofa and running into the kitchen, allowing the door to swing wildly in his wake.



"Nicholas!" she heard Françoise scold.

"Sorry, Mum," he replied less than contritely, and Hermione watched the door still as if of its own accord.

Left momentarily alone, she found herself looking more closely at her surroundings. Two months ago, she'd asked Ron teasingly about finding sconces in the Potter home, and he'd replied that Harry and Françoise had been far too modern for such things.

But taking a second look, she realized that Ron was wrong. Sconces would be quite at home in the subtle blend of antique and new that greeted her eyes. All of what she assumed had been Harry's technological Muggle toys were neatly arranged in a clearly Victorian wardrobe cleverly modified to hold them all and somehow tuck the cords mysteriously out of view. The furniture was obviously of a more modern age, but Hermione dimly ascribed that to the presence of two small children — she recalled an incident from her own childhood involving an antique ottoman in her grandmother's home and suppressed a slight shudder. It was clear, she decided as she contemplated the delicate ivy pattern actually *carved* into the chair rail circling the entire sitting room, that Françoise and Harry both had put a lot of effort and love into making their house a home.

"If I recall, Albus actually chose that particular shade of green paint under the rail there that you're staring so hard

at," Ron's voice said dryly from out of nowhere.

She jumped in her seat. "Jesus, Ron!"

His expression was bland, but she could see the bemusement dancing in his eyes. "Françoise wanted this butter yellow stuff and Harry wanted some ludicrously dark burgundy sort of thing. To compromise, they asked Albus to choose, but he decided on a completely different color. Fancy a drink?"

"I told Nicholas..."

He held out a wineglass. "I doubt you thought Nicholas was offering a particularly nice Riesling. He's currently got his nose buried obediently in a mug of milk, by the way, probably wondering how his cleverly wrought plan to obtain a soda failed. Sometimes I forget to give Françoise her due, you know."

Laughing, she took the glass and cradled it in her left hand. "Does spaghetti go with Riesling? I can never remember."

With a shrug, he slumped into the chair nearest the kitchen door. "Who cares? I've always thought they tasted just fine together. 'Course..." he trailed off thoughtfully. "I can't *stand* red wine. So maybe I've been doing it wrong all along."

She toasted him mockingly. "To wrong wines, then."

"Here, here!" he cried, saluting her in kind. "May we all only drink the wines we like."

They sipped from their respective glasses quietly, Hermione periodically giving hers a contemplative swirl,



watching the amber liquid twirl around the rim.

"You're going to spill that in a minute," Ron warned.

"Thanks, *Dad*," she retorted with a sarcastic glare.

His smile was only slightly apologetic. "I spend the better part of my evenings with a seven-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl. It's becoming a habit. Go on, then. Spill wine all down your front and see if I so much as fetch a towel." Leaning back in his chair, he affected nonchalance.

Wrinkling her nose at his antics, she tapped the base of her wineglass with a single pointer finger. "Hey, Ron?"

He rolled his eyes. "Merlin's arse, you're going to get all serious, aren't you? I get enough gravity at work, Hermione."

"Just one question," she pleaded.

"It's never just one," he said good-naturedly. "But I fall for it every time. What?"

"Did you tell Kingsley Shacklebolt what I told you?" she asked hurriedly. "About Weaver and everything?"

With a sigh, Ron started to swirl his own wine as he began to consider his words with greater care. "I did," he admitted. "And he's... dubious."

"Dubious?" she echoed, doubt creeping into her voice.

"Actually..." He looked directly at her and grinned cheerfully. "He said it was the biggest load of bollocks he's heard in *ages*. But I thought I'd gloss over that bit."

"Thanks," she said sarcastically. "Did he happen to say why?"

With a laugh, Ron crossed an ankle over a knee, grin



broadening. "Didn't I *say* that it would be more than one question? Well... as it so happens, my radiant Butterfly, he *did* say why."

She watched his grin stretch even further as her impatience became increasingly visible. "Ron..."

"What?" he asked, feigning innocence.

"What reasons did he give, then?" she asked through gritted teeth, grounding the words out painfully.

"Well, the complete and total lack of a connection between Weaver and the other victims, for one," he pointed out.

Hermione sighed. "Please explain the connection between Harry and that other one, Bones, then."

Shifting in his chair, she could tell he was not thrilled with what he was about to say. "It's not exactly a connection, *per se*. But they were both in fairly prominent social positions. After all, Bones' mother is on the Wizengamot. So they're natural targets."

"For the same group?" she asked incredulously.

His fidgeting increased. "We're still working out the connection, okay? It's not rock solid yet. But there has to be one."

She pounced. "Why?"

"Huh?" he grunted, clearly taken aback.

"A connection," she enunciated. "Why does there *have* to be one?"

"Well, they were victims of the same group, weren't they? Same M.O. and all that. It's peculiar enough that



there's got to be a connection of some sort that we're just not seeing at the moment." Ron relaxed visibly, apparently in more comfortable territory.

"Alisander Weaver was killed in the same way as the two you're claiming are connected, Ron," she said, exasperated.

He stiffened. "You can't prove it, Hermione. Weaver's dead and buried and St. Mungo's didn't do any paperwork beyond 'Could not resuscitate, cause of death unknown.' They didn't even bother to call us. The only thing you've got is half a rumor from the Herbology professor at Hogwarts, who is *not*, by the by, an expert in exotic murder cases."

"Still..."

"And what's more," he interrupted her, voice gaining volume. "At least poor Harry and that other fellow, Bones, were potential Death Eater targets by *some* stretch of the imagination. Alisander Weaver was a potions maker up in Scotland with no affiliation to either the Death Eaters or to the Order. It makes *no* sense!"

"Death Eaters," she repeated scoffingly. "Not every Dark wizard is a Death Eater, you know."

He stared at her, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed. "What do you mean, Hermione?"

She spoke slowly, carefully, keeping her voice even and unemotional in hopes that he would listen. "You've insisted all along that a Death Eater is responsible for this... for these mur — deaths. But when I told Snape about it, he

said there wasn't a Death Eater alive in a position to do such a thing. Ron, what if it's *not* a Death Eater?"

"Snape?" he echoed. "You talked to Snape about..."

"About Harry," she confirmed steadily. "And don't get that awful look on your face, Ron. I know you don't mind Snape as much as you used to."

"It's not that," he said calmly enough. "It's just... Hermione, Snape's not the most stable fellow in the world any more. And he's never been rational where Harry was concerned. I don't know if I'd take his word to be... ironclad, if you catch my meaning."

"Ron." She gave him a pointed look. "He didn't get angry or anything when I told him. Just treated it like some sort of puzzle to solve. He was... *interested*. And he said that there wasn't any way for a Death Eater to be responsible."

He was clearly unconvinced. "I don't know..."

"Okay, then, Ron Weasley," she said, finally beginning to get angry with him. "You answer me this one thing. What possible reason could a Death Eater — a member of a defunct organization who's most likely in some sort of exile, mind — have for killing not only the son of a prominent political official, but one of the most famous wizards in all Britain? If he's caught, he'll be publicly flayed alive at the least and for what? Martyrdom to a cause that's been dead for at least a decade?"

"Death Eaters are —"



"The ones that are still alive who could hope to pull off a deed of this magnitude are far too intelligent to risk it, I should think," she said, cutting him off.

He glared at her, but behind it, his eyes were simply tired. "That leaves us with nothing, then, if you're right, Hermione."

"Not nothing," she corrected. "Someone killed three men who had no other reason to die. And didn't use a spell to do it. I asked Snape about that as well — he can't think of one that would do such a thing, either."

"Your theory has a hole, then, Miss I-Know-Better-Than-The-Entire-Aurory," he retorted nastily, a bitter glint in his expression. "Wandless magic. What you're proposing is just impossible."

She shrugged. "You've got no connection, I've got no method. No theory is perfect."

Horror blossomed on Ron's face, his lips curling up in a grimace. "You also realize that if you're correct, there could be any number of other victims that St. Mungo's hasn't reported. The only ones they would bring to our attention would be for political reasons. Merlin, this could have been going on for..." He controlled himself with visible effort. "No," he said decisively, more to himself than to her. "That can't be true. If it had been going on for a long time, *someone* would have noticed. Right?"

"Hopefully," she replied with a shrug. "One would think



so, at any rate."

"I don't know whether you're right or not, Hermione," he said after a long pause. "I'd hate to think you are, actually. But we can't afford to ignore any of this. The problem is, I don't know how to go about looking into it."

Chewing on her lip, she frowned. "I don't either."

With one last sigh, Ron drained his wineglass and offered her a faded version of his usually cheerful smile. "Well, there's not much we can do tonight, in any case. I'll talk to Kingsley in the morning and see if he's got any ideas. Best to just relax and go about our business. I'm sure Françoise is nearly done with supper back there. We should go see if she needs any help."

Hermione found herself standing along with him, her feet automatically carrying her toward the kitchen door. "Ron?"

"What?" His expression gentled at the obvious confusion in her stance.

"How do you *deal* with this?"

Even more gentle. "Deal with what?"

"This... this knowing that the world could unravel about your ears," she said, not knowing how to put it. "That there really *are* monsters in the shadows."

He focused his eyes on the oak door. "Mostly, I don't think about it. I look at Charlie's kids and Harry's kids and at people like Fred and George and Ginny who live in the sunshine, and I know that it's important that *someone*



knows what's in the shadows, to keep them at bay. It's just a part of it. Not being alone helps. If I was alone..."

Hermione waited through his pause patiently, wondering if he would complete his thought or simply walk into the kitchen and become good ol' Ron, charming friend and bumbling uncle.

His hand on the door, Ron's eyes suddenly swiveled to meet her own. "If I was alone," he repeated thoughtfully. "I think I'd wind up in the darkness where your buddy Snape is right now, Butterfly."

The moment shifted as he flung the door wide — the cacophony of bubbling pots and laughing children overrode it. And Hermione was drawn into it, taking the forks and plates Françoise handed her with a smile, grinning as Nicholas tugged on her robe sleeve, trying to garner her attention for some reason or another. She set the table as Ron poured more drinks and Françoise stirred a very large pot.

And the shadows ebbed back into the corners of the room, where they belonged.



Chapter Twenty-One

What made this emotion so overpowering was — how shall I define it? — the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



Snape was being recalcitrant today. Well... more recalcitrant than usual.

Today, Hermione had approached the visitation room far more purposefully than ever before, knowing exactly why she was here and exactly what she wanted to speak with him about. So when she walked in, sat down, offered him her best smile, and said, "Good morning, sir," as warmly as she could, she was chagrined when he did not so much as flutter an eyelid.

And now he was fairly glowering at her. She was, of course, far from unfamiliar with that particular expression of his, but she usually knew the reason for it.

They sat in silence for a short while, but Hermione was unwill-



ing to revisit the staring matches they'd had when she first began visiting him. So it was not long after she entered the room that she finally attempted to provoke his response. "May I ask, sir, what I have done to offend you?" she asked icily.

"You may," he said curtly, sitting as rigidly as if he'd been carved from stone. An errant lock of hair fell into his eyes and he made no motion to remove it.

She waited for him to continue and inwardly sighed when he did not. "I am not as skilled a Legilimens as you are, sir, and moreover, I do not have my wand."

An indefinable expression flitted across his face as she spoke. "We are nearly equals, then."

"Prof — Snape, sir," she said. "*Please*. If my presence here is unwanted, I will not linger."

Snape snorted. "That's never stopped you *before*, Granger. Six Thursdays in a row, whether I wanted you here or not," he grumbled. "And then you just..."

Eyes widening, her voice was incredulous. "*Is that* it?" she breathed. "Are you angry because I didn't come in last week?"

His cheeks reddened faintly but the sour look on his face did not waver. A hand fiddled with the sleeve of his shirt. "And today is Friday. If you are to bother me incessantly, I would trouble you to adhere to a schedule at least."

"Oh, sir, I missed you, too," she said sweetly, unable to resist herself. As it *was* Snape, after all, she did manage to keep from actually fluttering her eyelashes up at him.



"I... you..." he spluttered, clearly enraged beyond words. The blush deepened to a definite flush. "Granger, you —" His chair clattered as he stood.

Not willing to allow him to loom over her, Hermione also rose to her feet, placing her palms flat on the tabletop. "I had a couple of questions for you today, if you don't mind," she said mildly.

His face twisted. "You stupid, arrogant, little —" Clenching into fists, his hands did not seem to know what to do with themselves as they moved from his sides, up into the air, and back down to his hips repeatedly. Snape broke off his own tirade with a frustrated noise. "Granger!" he growled.

"Yes?"

"Do not assume that I take myself so seriously that I cannot easily discern your sarcasm, Granger, but do not suppose that your pitiful attempt at levity has been successful, either," he bit out, hands finally relaxing.

"Of course not," she demurred, highly amused by the level of his distress. She wondered when had been the last time someone else had tried to tease him.

His stance became less defensive, but he remained on his feet.

"I was wondering," she began, timidity somehow creeping into her voice. "I was wondering about something we discussed some weeks ago. When I told you about... Harry's..."

"Yes, yes," he interrupted impatiently, shifting his weight



from one foot to the other. "Potter's untimely demise at the hands of parties unknown. What of it?"

Frowning, she folded her arms around her middle, dimly wishing that Snape would sit down so she could as well. "Well, Ron — Ron Weasley, you know —"

He rolled his eyes. "Of course I know Weasley," he spat. "How many 'Rons' do *you* know?"

"Ron," she repeated emphatically, glaring minutely up at him, "finally got put on the case down at the Aurory. And there's been another death that they suspect is linked somehow to Harry's."

An eyebrow rose questioningly. "Another?"

"His name was Alistair Bones. His mother was —"

"Amelia Bones," he said, cutting her off. "She *was* on the Wizengamot council. I'd imagine she still is, unless something has gone terribly amiss. I believe I actually taught her son."

"Anyway..." Would he *ever* sit down? "They've been having a difficult time determining a motive that would fit both of them. And you told me that the Death Eaters are —"

He interrupted her for a third time, and Hermione was sure that her internal struggle with her anger was becoming increasingly visible. "I told you that there is not a Death Eater alive who is capable of such a thing, did I not?"

"You did," she agreed. "But they're reluctant to dismiss such an obvious set of suspects. Ron said that there could be a fringe group..."



"There could," he said idly, tapping a fingernail against the table. "But there probably isn't. Not one that would go after both Potter and Amelia Bones' son, unless, of course, Mr. Bones led a double life that no one knows about and offended the wrong sort of enemy. Certainly," he drawled, "the wonderful Harry Potter wouldn't be capable of such deception."

Hermione grit her teeth. "Leave Harry out of it, Snape."

"Oh, I am," he replied in a mild voice. "Albus Dumbledore decided many years ago that Potter had a clean bill of mental health. Far be it from me to interfere."

Blinking away her ire, she considered his meaning. "You mean..." she began slowly. "You *knew* about Harry and You-Know-Who?"

"Albus couldn't watch the boy twenty-four hours a day," he said chidingly. "There were a select few of us who knew why the Potter boy needed to be watched so closely. But then that fiasco with the Chamber of Secrets happened and Albus let his guard down."

With a slight widening of the eyes, Hermione wondered why a man so reportedly brilliant as Albus Dumbledore would share Harry Potter's darkest secret with a man who hated him as completely as Snape did. It either said something about Dumbledore's trust in Severus Snape or something about Dumbledore himself — she fervently hoped it was the former. "How many?"

"No more than three at the very outside," he said. "Myself



and Minerva McGonagall, of course. As his Head of House, she was in the best position of all of us to keep an eye out. And I suspect that Remus Lupin knew *something*, but I doubt Albus told him outright. He probably guessed and confronted Albus with enough of the facts that it wouldn't hurt to give him the complete truth. He was just... *careful* enough around Potter that it fits. How did *you* know?"

She smiled ruefully. "Ron told me a couple of weeks ago. Apparently Professor Dumbledore thought he needed to be made aware of the situation right after he joined the Aurory."

"It is irrelevant, in any case," Snape said with a wave of his hand. Finally — *Finally!* Hermione mentally shouted — he sat back down, scratching behind his ear almost absently. "Clearly, Potter's death had nothing to do with that information. Especially if there was a second victim."

"And a third," she said before she could help herself.

He cocked his head at her. "A third?" he echoed.

Shaking her head, she collapsed into her own chair. "At least, I think so. I ran into Professor Sprout in Hogsmeade last week and she mentioned that one of her students had lost his father due to a similar set of circumstances. The Ministry, of course, doesn't want to hear it."

"The Ministry," he scoffed.

Hermione resisted the urge to agree with him. "Ron's right, of course. I don't have any proof — St. Mungo's didn't document the incident very thoroughly."



"They wouldn't," Snape said sagely. "There are generally only four potential causes of death for any wizard — illness, old age, murder, or accidental. Murder is clearly distinguishable either by use of the Killing Curse or a discernible poison. Any irregularities, then, are just lumped under 'accidental' and not thought much of. I'd imagine that the Aurory wouldn't have been notified of either Bones' or Potter's deaths if they hadn't been well-connected enough for the appropriate calls to be made."

"It just doesn't make sense..."

He smirked at her. "Only if you persist in thinking like a Muggle, Miss Granger. Wizards are difficult enough to kill, as a rule, that there is only a small number of ways in which to go about it. Why do you think it took so much effort to deal with You-Know-Who? It's not as if Albus Dumbledore is somehow *above* sending someone in to knife the Dark Lord in his sleep — it simply would not have worked."

Fiddling with the sleeve of her robes, toying with a string that had worked itself loose from her cuff, Hermione blew out a deep breath, exasperated. "It's so senseless. Death Eaters couldn't have killed Harry because whoever killed Harry killed at least one other person. And whoever it was has an obscure enough agenda to fit Harry Potter, the son of a political official, and a Scottish potions brewer together in some fashion that not even the Aurors can figure out. Oh, and they also managed to kill them in a way that should



never have worked in a million years because wizards have natural guards against such things."

"That does seem to be the sum of things," Snape said with a slight nod.

"Either there's no answer or there's an answer that's so absolutely ludicrous that no one can see it," she exclaimed.

He contemplated a fingernail. "Are you reaching some brilliant conclusion, Granger, or just rambling without end?"

Shooting him a nasty glare, she gave the string on her robe a vicious tug. "You know..." she drawled in a fair imitation of his usual snide manner. "If I were to give this matter great thought, I might simply say that the connection is that there *is* no connection." She paused to gauge his reaction.

Disappointed when he did not seem to have one, she continued. "I mean, of course, that the Aurors are pulling their hair out looking for some political tie, some group to link to all of this, but perhaps there simply isn't one."

"You seem to have developed a great propensity for stating the numbingly obvious, Miss Granger," he said dryly. "I *told* you that there aren't any —"

"No," she interrupted triumphantly. "You said there weren't any *Death Eaters* capable of this. Which then begs the question of who is. What group, what individual, could have sufficient motivation for all three of these crimes?"

"Or two," he suggested meanly.

"Or two," she repeated without pause. "But I wonder...



they've been operating under the assumption that whoever it was killed Harry because he was Harry Potter and no one else. That there was some external need. What if the killer killed Harry simply because he needed to be killed — not for any other reason?"

Snape looked rather puzzled. "I don't follow."

Gaining momentum, she spoke more quickly. "Are you familiar with the term '*serial killer*'?"

His mouth fell open, reminding her unattractively of a fish. "That's... that's *ridiculous*, Granger! Serial killers are a Muggle phenomenon."

"Why?" she asked. "What's so ridiculous about it?"

"Have you not been listening?" he snapped. "Wizards cannot be killed in just any fashion. And serial killers... well, they could never exist in our world. A serial killer would be caught before you could blink — there's nothing the Aurors can't trace."

Her face was grim. "It seems as if there's at least *one* way to kill a wizard that they can't figure out."

"Then why hasn't this happened before?"

"Who's to say that it hasn't?" she asked in reply. "You yourself admitted that St. Mungo's wouldn't have documented such deaths properly. And they would never have been brought to the attention of the proper authorities. The only reason we have what we do is because the killer happened to choose two fairly important people as victims."



But... but I don't think that the killer selected them *because* of their importance — I think there's something else."

"What then?" he asked sarcastically, voice grating in her ears.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I don't even know *how* the killer did it, much less why."

Snape sighed and rubbed at his face with a single hand. "Granger, you make me tired. Impossible murders and serial killers..."

"I've got to go!" she cried, leaping out of her chair.

He looked startled. "What?"

Spinning around, she walked briskly toward the door. "I've got to let Ron know!"



"*A what?*" Ron asked incredulously.

She scowled at him and picked a chip off his plate. "A serial killer," she sighed, impatient with his antics. "It's someone who —"

"I *know* what the term means," he snapped. "I'm not completely ignorant — they won't let people in the Aurory without a basic background in Muggle culture."

"Then you must see what I —"

He interrupted her with a wave of his hand, a piece of lettuce off his sandwich flying halfway across the table. "Hermione..." he began exasperatedly. "You've got to get your mind off this. Trust me — we're doing all we can.



We'll find them."

"But, Ron," she protested. "This is too... you're not even going to consider it?"

"Even if we were." Giving her a pointed look, he took a large bite of his sandwich and chewed. "It doesn't change much," he said through a mouthful of food.

"It *does*," she said, stealing another chip. "It means you should be looking for an *individual*, not a group."

Ron finished off his sandwich. "But we still don't know the motive. Even if you're right and it's a serial killer — which is ludicrous, by the way, as we've never had a wizarding serial killer on record — there's no visible connection between Harry and Alistair Bones."

"And Weaver," she inserted firmly.

He glared. "Actually, that shoots your little theory right in the foot. If I recollect the file Kingsley got from St. Mungo's, Weaver was a black fellow. Harry and Bones were both white. Don't serial killers usually stick to a certain racial group?"

"They don't have to," she said. "At least... I don't think they do."

With a sigh, he ate his last chip. "Hermione, you've got no experience with this, all right? You're not an expert in this sort of thing, either wizarding *or* Muggle. If I promise to mention this serial killer thing to Kingsley, do you *promise* you'll back off?"

"I promise nothing," she retorted. "But I know you'll tell Shackbolt — you want this solved as much as I do."



Ron rolled his eyes and tried to glare at her again. "You know something, Hermione? You're just as insufferably correct all these years later as you were when we were kids."

She grinned at him. "I'll take that as the compliment I know you intended it to be, Ron."

Snorting, he stood up, pulling a couple of Muggle bills out of his pocket. "Sure. Anyway... I've got to get back to work. Are you coming over to the house for supper?"

"I doubt it," she replied, shaking her head. "I've got some reading to catch up on."

He narrowed his eyes at her expression. "Hermione, you really should leave it alone. I know you won't, but I wish you would."

"Ron..."

"I know, I know," he said, flapping a hand at her. "I'll stop, Butterfly. Merlin knows I've never managed to keep you from doing anything you really wanted to before. Just..."

Her voice was firm. "I won't, Ron. But I need to keep looking into this."

She watched him walk down the street, back to the Ministry, with understanding in her eyes. Certainly Ron only had what he thought were her best interests at heart, but he had forgotten. It had never been anything but a matter of necessity.

Snape had once spoken to her about the nature of need. About the word's overuse, how most people used it in contexts that barely made sense.



But Hermione knew about need. She had spent large parts of her adult life finding just what it was that she needed and what she didn't. And so she *knew*, just as she knew that one and one made two and that the sky was blue, that she *needed* to know what had happened to Harry Potter.

And what had happened to Alistair Bones.

And what had happened to Alisander Weaver.

She sat at the table in front of the café an indeterminate period of time, ignoring the chill in the air that made her wish for her cloak — October had firmly arrived. The busboy asked her three times if he could clean the table, and the fourth time he came over with a questioning look on his face, she actually left, walking down the street slowly.

Diagon Alley was not far, and she stepped behind the Leaky Cauldron and began tapping flagstones without much thought, automatically re-entering the wizarding world and moving through the crowd, among the indistinguishable faces. But Hermione's mind was far too busy to pay attention to her surroundings — she was puzzling over everything that she currently knew about Harry's death.

Firstly, she had to do some research on serial killers. She couldn't convince the Ministry based on a mere hunch — especially without any credibility of any kind. And unfortunately, Ron was correct — she was not an expert; she wasn't even a professional.

And she had to somehow get access to the Aurors' files



— Ron did not appear as if he would be particularly forthcoming any more.

There was an Apparition point a few yards away. For a brief moment, Hermione considered ducking into the Leaky Cauldron and using their Floo connection — she was distracted enough to splinch — but in the end, she just jerked her mind back to the matter at hand and Apparated. Apparently she hadn't done a good enough job, however, and her head spun as she momentarily staggered in front of the flat's door.

Her copy of the PROPHECY was sitting neatly on the front doorstep. She must not have picked it up before she went to see Snape that morning. Scooping it up, she fumbled a bit for her key, opening the door and stepping inside.

She immediately went into the bedroom, quickly changing out of her robes and putting on trousers and a Muggle jumper. Even after all these years in the wizarding world, she still preferred lounging around in Muggle clothing. She briefly wondered if Snape had ever worn Muggle clothes of his own accord — he looked so... *unnatural* in the scrubs that the hospital provided for him.

The paper fell off the bed when she sat down, and she picked it up off the floor, giving it her full attention.

Hermione still tried to read the DAILY PROPHECY every day, from back to front, taking an odd sort of comfort from the mundane headlines even as she tried to read between the

obituary lines in the back of the paper.

Opening it, she began skimming the death notices. There were not many today, and of all the faces smiling gently up at her from the page, there was only one that caught her eye.

Romulus Cooke, thirty-four. According to the obituary, he had distinguished himself as a student at Durmstrang and still maintained rather close ties with the school. He was the father of three, and it did not appear as if he had a particular occupation. Hermione inferred, then, that he must have been independently wealthy. And he died... *at home* two days ago.

Blinking, she read the article at least four times, wondering.

What if Romulus Cooke had been someone with Ministry ties? What would the Aurors have found if they'd been called in?

Would he have been split open? Was his kitchen covered with blood?

What did his wife see?

She stared at his picture — a fairly handsome fellow with an arrogance in his features that reminded her oddly of Draco Malfoy. His photo gave her a debonair smile, telling her that he was just as aware of his good looks as she was.

If Romulus Cooke had been at Hogwarts, he would have been two years ahead of her. And he probably would have pulled on girls' braids and scrubbed toilets under Filch's watchful glare — the glint she saw in his picture's eye told her this. She probably would have laughed at his antics,



just as she had laughed at the Weasley twins. He might even have turned the Terrible Twins into a Trio.

And now he was dead.

She should tell Ron. She should Floo him at work and let him know.

But instead, she just held the paper in her hands, watching Romulus Cooke's shade wink up at her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear — concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear; ... But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



I can't believe I'm actually listening to this," Kingsley sighed.

Ron tried to smile and propped his feet casually on the top of his desk, leaning back in his chair. "That'll teach you to try to filch paper clips from my desk."



"Not helpful, Weasley," he snapped. "And as for *you*..."

She accepted the mild rebuke with a nod. "With all due respect, Auror Shacklebolt," Hermione said meekly — Ron didn't believe her act for so much as a second. Ah... here it came. Her face hardened. "I think there are factors in this case that have not been properly —"

Kingsley was mad. Angrier than Ron had ever seen him before, and he'd attended the meeting when Byungki Lee had actually admitted to dragging a vampire out into daylight and staking him on the sidewalk outside Harrod's in front of no less than five hundred Muggles. His hands were making disturbing, writhing motions, and Ron rather thought he might be envisioning Hermione's neck between them. A vein was pulsing in his temple.

"Granger," Kingsley said quietly, evenly, clenching his jaw. "Do *not* tell me how to do my job."

She flinched as he spat at her but managed to hold her ground, proving to Ron that the Gryffindor line between bravery and stupidity was thin, indeed. "I don't mean to —"

"Bullshit!" he exploded, finally losing his careful composure. "You're suggesting that you, Hermione Granger, whose credentials, incidentally, come to a screeching halt at the unimpressive age of *seventeen*, know better than no less than thirty *professionally trained* investigators. I should have you locked up!"

"Just think about it, Hermione," Ron said cheerfully,



able to bear Kingsley's wrath as long as it remained safely directed at someone else. "You and Snape could have matching straitjackets."

Sourly, he glowered at Ron. "Weasley!" Kingsley barked. "Kill the peanut gallery."

He stiffened in his chair, removing his feet from the desk as if burnt. "Dead and buried, sir!" he said, resisting the urge to salute Kingsley in a remarkable show of self-preservation. He wasn't really in the mood to be hexed today.

And Hermione leapt back into the fray — Ron wondered if maybe she really *did* have a bit of a death wish. "I never meant to imply such a thing, Auror Shacklebolt," she said primly. Ron had a dizzying flashback to an adolescent Hermione, hands neatly arranged on the tabletop in front of her, as she recited the correct answer to whatever question their professor had posed with that self-satisfied look in her eyes. "But even you must admit that —"

"I *must* admit *nothing!*" he shouted. "There's not a single shred of evidence to support what you're telling me. It makes about as much sense as trying to tell me that You-Know-Who has managed to come back from the dead somehow and killed those two poor —"

She cleared her throat.

His glare deepened. "And we come back to the main point, then, don't we?"

"Look," she began sternly. "I'm willing to admit that I



don't know for certain whether or not either Weaver or Cooke were also victims of the same killer, although the circumstantial evidence is rather —"

"Granger!"

She frowned at Kingsley, who was, by this time, almost literally quivering with rage. Ron decided in that moment that he wouldn't speak again until this matter was settled one way or another unless he had no choice. "My *point*, Auror Shacklebolt," Hermione said, switching gears fluidly, "is that you have no way of knowing how many victims there have actually been since St. Mungo's does not notify you of potential incidents. If the Aurory is not contacted, how are you to account for this?"

Eyebrows lifting as if of their own accord, Kingsley appeared to genuinely give it some thought before he answered. "We are always notified about deaths involving prominent —"

Ron couldn't help it — after all, he'd been a Gryffindor himself all those years ago. "Oh, come off it, Kingsley. St. Mungo's never called us about Bones — the Minister's secretary is the one who sent the owl on that one, after his mother herself contacted Fudge."

"You see!" Hermione cried triumphantly — Kingsley's glare was pure poison.

After a long pause, however, he sighed and threw his hands up in the air. "All right," he said. "So... big surprise



— the system's not foolproof. That *doesn't* mean your serial killer idea isn't anything but damned nonsense."

"But it's *possible*," she pressed.

"So's a Galleon landing face-up a thousand tosses in a row," Kingsley retorted, calming visibly now that he was regaining the upper hand. "But you don't see me taking bets, do you?"

Her brow furrowed.

"It's far more likely that Potter and Bones were targeted by some fledgling movement — maybe even a Death Eater offshoot. Oh, don't give me that look, Granger," he said witheringly, passing a hand tiredly over his bald head. "I know it couldn't have been a Death Eater — I've known that for a good while. It's young Ronald over there that's needed so much convincing."

Ron found himself blushing hotly as Hermione gave him a querying sort of look. "Really?" she asked dryly.

Anger now nearly completely dissipated, Kingsley chuckled lightly. "*But*," he began, stressing the single syllable. "We've been getting reports over the past — oh, I don't know — five years or so. Mostly kid stuff — pureblood propaganda in Hogwarts common rooms, graffiti on Ministry buildings, that sort of thing. We haven't ever made any formal arrests, but I highly suspect we've been dealing with a series of small-time organizations, put together by mostly youths. Maybe even the children of some of the old

Death Eaters. Some of them were stripped of their fortunes, you know, and *all* of them that we could lay our hands on went to Azkaban. At least a few of their kids have got to resent that. I personally think that one of these groups got off its feet well enough to go for our victims."

Keeping his expression carefully neutral, Ron tried to gauge Hermione's reaction. He'd heard this all before, of course. It was the best thing they'd managed to come up with. He also thought it rather bright of Kingsley to present it to her as a personal theory rather than the official hypothesis — it was far more likely that Hermione could consider it objectively if it came from Kingsley himself. While Ron knew all about psychological tactics, he was generally too distracted to bother with applying them. He had caused more than one suspect to clam up in the interrogation room by inadvertently blurting out some of the cards that the more skilled interviewers generally preferred to keep close to the chest.

And indeed, Hermione was quiet, studious looking. After a few moments, a question dawned in her eyes. "Why haven't they come forward?"

Kingsley blinked. "Pardon?"

"It's been more than two months," she said thoughtfully. "Wouldn't you think that if Harry's death had been politically motivated, someone would have tried to use it as a rallying point? So... why hasn't your mystery organization



stepped up and taken the credit?"

"Public sentiment," Ron said in a bland voice. "Think of the cry of outrage that would rise up if a group announced that they'd had a hand in eliminating the savior of the wizarding world."

"And that's another thing," she said, turning to him. "If you're both right and it's some little group that I've never heard of jockeying for power, then the order doesn't make sense."

It was Ron's turn to be confused, but Kingsley's to answer. "I don't follow, Granger."

"Harry first and *then* Alistair Bones?" She shook her head minutely. "Bones seems to be a sort of secondary target in your scenario, possibly even a simple personal vendetta. So why not take care of him first? Harry's death will raise eyebrows no matter what, so why risk the authorities seeing the connection? I seriously doubt, if Bones had died first and Harry second, that you'd be treating the cases as one. No one would have noticed the similarities in the deaths."

"She's right," Ron grudgingly conceded. "The cases would have been given completely different priorities and assigned to different Aurors. We probably never would have found a link between them."

Kingsley scratched at the back of his neck. "I don't like it," he said. "I just don't."

"Please, Auror Shacklebolt," Hermione said. "I'm not asking you to drop everything else — just to consider this as a possibility."



He scowled. "I'll think about it."

She smiled up at him gratefully. "That's all I can ask, sir. Good morning. And I guess I'll see you later, Ron."

"Bye, Butterfly!" he called as she walked out of his office and down the hall.

He and Kingsley studied each other for a moment. "Well..." Kingsley eventually said. "What do *you* think?"

With a sigh, Ron shrugged. "Hermione's always had this uncanny, obnoxious way of mostly being right. When she's wrong, it's usually only because there was some extra factor that she had no way of knowing about. I don't know if I agree with her or not, but I'd keep an eye out all the same."

Kingsley looked utterly defeated. Covering his face with a hand, his voice was muffled as he spoke. "Weasley, go away."

"But, sir," Ron protested good-naturedly. "This is *my* office."



"Come on!" Ron called down the hallway. "Bedtime for sleepy little girls!"

A little voice floated to his ears. "Not tired."

"Oh, I bet you are," he replied cheerfully. "And I intend to put you to bed whether you want it or not."

The voice was plaintive. "Five more minutes, Unca Ron?"

He laughed at the attempt. "Not even five more *seconds*, Alice my dear." Creeping through the hall, he saw her long



before she saw him, sitting in the doorway of Nicholas' bedroom and failing miserably at stifling a yawn.

Shrieking as she found herself swept into his embrace, Alice pounded at his shoulder with her little fists. "No fair, Unca Ron! No fair!"

"I hate to tell you this, little girl," he said with a grin, "but *nothing* in this life is fair. Not even the things you think *ought* to be. Actually, I'd say that those things are usually the most unfair of all."

Through his speech, he was walking back to Alice's room. Alice was apparently too confused by his uncharacteristically adult discourse on the nature of justice to protest the journey much. Upon reaching her door, however, she did put up a few token struggles, prodding again at his arms with something like hope in her eyes. "Brush teeth, Unca Ron."

He smirked down at her. "We already did that. Remember? Nicholas squirted toothpaste on your shirt."

"Oh..." She was quiet for a moment, thoughtful as she allowed Ron to place her in her crib. Actually, Alice was almost too big for a crib, but Ron rather suspected that Françoise would prefer to prolong the inevitable and keep her little girl a baby as long as she could. "Story, Unca Ron?"

"I shouldn't," he told her teasingly. "You've got to be exhausted. Your mum said you two spent the whole afternoon at the park, running around."



"Not tired," she pouted. "Story!"

Sighing exaggeratedly, Ron pretended to concede the point as if he hadn't intended to tell her a story all along. "Well, all right. But you've got to be a good, quiet little girl and promise not to interrupt me. Okay?"

With a grin and a nod, Alice plopped down and pulled her little blanket obediently up to her chin, blue eyes sparkling up at him. "Okay."

Ron seated himself in a large rocking chair near her crib and put his hands behind his head, lacing his fingers together as he thought. "Well then... a story for Alice. What sort of story would you like to hear? A funny story, or a scary story, or maybe a good, old-fashioned adventure tale..."

"Story," she agreed.

He laughed again. "All right, then, I'll pick. Maybe... a fairy tale of sorts? I remember your papa used to tell Nicholas stories about us when we were kids, but I doubt you'd be interested in the sorts of stories that Nicholas likes. How's this, then? Once upon a time, there was a castle. And in this castle, there lived a prince. He wasn't your typical prince, you know — he wore glasses and he wasn't particularly dashing, but who is when they're eleven anyway? And he wasn't the only prince living in the castle, but he was the most loved. How'm I doing so far, little girl?"

Yawning, she gave him a sweet smile.



"I'll take that as a good sign. Anyway... the prince had many friends, since he was so beloved, but his closest companion was his squire. The prince and the squire had many adventures together in the castle, especially given that they were so young. And one day I'll tell you about all of them, but tonight I'd like to tell you about one in particular.

"There was a very dangerous man living at the castle with the prince and his squire — he used to be a king, you see — a very cruel one at that. But one day many, many years ago, when the prince was just a baby, he worked a magic spell and took away the evil king's crown." Ron studied Alice closely — he didn't want to scare her, after all — and tried to keep his voice as quiet and soothing as possible. "And so the cruel king was very angry — he went into exile for many years — and when he found his way back to the castle, he decided that he needed to hurt the prince, to pay him back for what he'd done as a small child.

"So he convinced his servant to do something very bad. He let a troll into the castle. Do you know what a troll is, Alice?"

Alice shook her head and stuck her thumb in her mouth. "No, Unca Ron. What that?" she asked around her thumb.

Gently, Ron reached in between the bars and pulled her hand away. "Don't do that, Alice — it's a bad habit." She blew a soft raspberry up at him and he grinned. "Anyway. A troll is a creature that lives in the woods, mostly. They're very tall and not very bright, so they're very good at hurt-



ing people without meaning to. So when the servant put the troll in the castle, it became very angry and confused, which meant that it did not care who it hurt.

"Even though the prince and his squire were still young boys, they knew they couldn't just sit idly by and watch the troll wreak havoc in the castle. So as soon as their nurse's attention wavered, they slipped away, through the halls, to find the troll. The squire was armed only with a stout staff, and the prince only had his little dagger.

"And sure enough, they found the troll. It did not take long — trolls are very loud creatures, and it was very put out, indeed. The servant had confined it to a small room, and so it made a lot of noise as it tried to escape. I know for a fact that the little squire was terrified as he approached the little room. But the prince tried to reassure him. 'Don't be afraid, my squire,' the prince said. 'Surely, the just will prevail.'

"So the squire steeled his heart and walked into the little room ahead of his prince, holding his staff very tightly out in front of him, wishing that he had a better weapon."

Alice's eyelids fluttered, signaling that she was very near sleep indeed, but Ron was interested enough in his own tale that he continued anyway.

"The troll had made a great mess of things. There was water spilt all over the room and chunks of rock from where he had taken his gigantic club to the walls in his frustration. The squire actually found himself feeling pity



for the poor beast. But the prince had none of it — he just clenched his dagger all the more tightly and said, 'There — look! A girl!'

"For undeniably, there was a wet figure, hunched at the troll's feet, obviously as terrified as anyone else. Her long hair, ragged and unkempt, told her to be a girl. 'Please!' she begged the troll. 'Please, don't hurt me!'

"'We'll help you,' the prince cried, brandishing his knife. The squire held his pole up in the air and gave a loud shout, charging at the troll with all his might. And then —"

But Ron's tale was interrupted as another voice floated into the room. "She's dead asleep, Ron," Françoise whispered.

"I like the sound of my own voice," he replied with a smile. "But I'd hate to talk her awake again." As he stood, he brushed a gentle hand over Alice's forehead, smoothing back her blonde curls. "Sleep well, little Looking-Glass girl."

Françoise closed the door carefully as he exited. "I overheard parts of your bedtime story," she said.

He tried not to blush. "I was speaking off the cuff..."

"I wonder, Ron," she said, giving him a calculating sort of look, "why on Earth did you cast yourself as a squire?"

"It seemed to fit," he said uncomfortably.

"It would have worked just as well to tell a story about two princes, you know," she replied quietly.

Shrugging, he walked down the hallway, toward the stairs. "Stories work better when there's only one hero."



He felt Françoise's eyes on the back of his head as he descended the staircase but did not turn around, not wanting to see the pity he knew he would read in her gaze.



"You should have seen them," Ron said with a small chuckle, "glowering at each other. I don't know many people that have the guts to shout at Kingsley Shacklebolt."

She returned his laugh. "You do."

"Not when there's any danger of him yelling back," he replied ruefully.

The moment had passed and they were now seated comfortably in the den — Françoise in one of her wing chairs with a glass of something primly on her knee, and Ron splayed comfortably on the sofa, one foot hanging over the opposite arm and the other propped lazily on the coffee table. She'd frowned at his socked foot sitting on her neatly polished table but said nothing in the end, probably correctly deciding that it would only egg him on if she did.

"So what was the outcome, then?" she asked, taking a sip of her drink.

He shrugged. "Inconclusive, really. I'd say that Kingsley's beginning to come 'round to Hermione's way of thinking, but wild hippogriffs couldn't drag it out of him." He folded his hands under his head as he spoke. "I don't know. I hope to Merlin that Hermione is very wrong. It's



just that she's not wrong often."

"That was a long time ago, Ron," Françoise told him in a calm voice. "I imagine Hermione has changed a lot."

"Not as much as you'd think," he replied. "At least, I don't see it. I look at her and I see the same fresh-faced girl from school. All curiosity and innocence. She makes me wish for things, you see."

Françoise's face split into a wide grin. "Why, Ronald Weasley, I do believe that was the closest thing to a profession of love I've ever heard come out of your mouth."

Grimacing, he stared up at the ceiling, the featureless white plaster a perfect mirror for his thoughts. "Nah," he said dismissively. "Once, when we were kids, I fancied myself in love with Hermione, but only for a moment, when I thought I had to either be in love with her or lose her entirely. I don't think I've ever really been in love with anyone."

There was a rustle as she apparently shifted in her seat. "Oh, Ron," she sighed. "That might be the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"You poor, sheltered little thing," Ron said playfully. "What? When would I have fallen passionately in love, Françoise?"

"Well, you should, then," she said decisively, ice rattling in her glass. "At your earliest opportunity."

He laughed. "I'll take your opinion into consideration."

And they fell silent, each lost in their own thoughts. Ron



was beginning to debate whether or not he should go on ahead up to his room for the night when the fire flared up, signaling an incoming Floo.

"What the...?" Françoise trailed off. "It's past midnight. Who would be calling at *this* hour?"

"I don't know," he began. "It could be... oh..." he sighed as a head appeared in the fireplace. "Good evening, Kingsley. Couldn't sleep, could you?"

"Very funny, Ron," Kingsley's head said expressionlessly. "I'm laughing on the inside, I assure you."

Françoise looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Erm... should I...?"

"Don't bother," Kingsley sighed. "I'm just calling to tell Weasley there to get his skinny arse over here pronto."

"There are small children running around here somewhere who don't need to be subjected to such vulgarity, Shackbolt," Ron said testily.

Reaching over to slap his arm lightly, Françoise smiled up at him. "Don't be such a hypocrite, Ron."

"I can tell when I'm not wanted," he groused, struggling to rise from the sofa and only managing to bang his knee against the coffee table twice as he stood. "All right, Shackbolt. Get your head out of Françoise's fireplace and I'll come through."

As soon as Kingsley's head disappeared, Ron gathered up a handful of Floo powder and turned to Françoise with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Françoise, but you've got to —"

"I know," she said briskly. "Secret Auror codes and



whatnot. I'll just go check on the kids one last time before I turn in, then, shall I?"

His smile was sad. "Good night, Françoise."

"Night, Ron."



The first person Ron ran into as he stepped out of his office, still slightly dizzy from the Floo, came as a complete surprise. "Dad?" he said incredulously. "What are you doing all the way over here?"

Arthur Weasley gave his son a somber smile. "Kingsley needed to see me. Actually, I was just on my way out, but I'm glad I ran into you. It's been a good while since I've seen you, you know."

"I've been meaning to drop by," he said, feeling only slightly guilty, "but with everything..."

"I know, son," Arthur said with a small shrug. "But your mother and I would like to see you every now and again. Not too often, mind. But I swear, I've spent more time around Nicholas and Alice Potter lately than you."

"I'll come by soon, Dad," Ron told him. "I promise."

Smiling again, Arthur continued down the hall. "I might just hold you to that."

"Weasley!" came an errant shout from the opposite direction as Ron watched his father leave the Aurory.

Sighing, he followed the sound into Kingsley's office.



"And how are you this fine evening, Shackbolt?"

With only a slight roll of the eyes, Kingsley motioned for him to sit. "Shut up, Weasley."

Ron sat down, then, obediently holding his tongue and waiting for his boss to speak.

It did not take long. "There's been another one," he said without preamble. "Marcus Desmond, aged twenty-four. Happily married father — single daughter, two years old. St. Mungo's sent us an owl not twelve hours ago."

Trying to connect the name to someone important in his mind, Ron failed miserably. "The name doesn't ring any bells."

"That's because it shouldn't," Kingsley replied, impatience only a slight edge in his voice. "Desmond worked at Gringotts, strictly entry-level stuff. He doesn't appear to be related to anyone in any particular position of authority."

"Then why —" he began, confused.

Kingsley's face shuttered. "I thought about what Hermione Granger said this morning. And while most of it's utter shit, she *did* have a point about St. Mungo's. So I sent them an owl, asking them to notify us concerning any untoward cases, with a specific notation about the M.O. we're looking for. Imagine my surprise to get a case file by return owl..." he said dryly.

"So what do we do —?"

Again, he interrupted him. "I called Arthur in to ask him a favor. He knows a few people in the Muggle government



and I was hoping he could arrange for an autopsy to be performed."

"An autopsy?" he asked with raised eyebrows.

"Damn it, Weasley," Kingsley growled. "You and I both know that these deaths are not through any traceable magical means, so we need some other way of gathering evidence. And unless you'd like to train a team of Aurors in the finer points of Muggle crime scene analysis, I suggest we simply find a few trustworthy Muggles and leave it to them. Hopefully, an autopsy will be sufficient. I doubt the crime scene is still uncontaminated by this point."

Ron laughed bitterly.

"What?" he asked icily.

"A while back, Hermione asked me if Aurors used any Muggle methods in their investigations," Ron admitted. "And I told her that it wasn't necessary for us. I'm going to hate telling her that she was right after all."

Kingsley studied him for a moment. "Hey... Weasley?"

"Yeah?" he grunted.

"You know..." he began slowly. "There's no way I can bring Granger in in any sort of official capacity, and I still don't think she's entirely right about the killer, but I don't see any harm in giving her access to the files. Limited, of course. You can just let slip what you see fit. But it might be just as easy to let her pursue her ridiculous serial killer theory without us having to waste our resources on it."



With a snort, Ron gave Kingsley a dubious look. "So you want me to bring Hermione up to speed, then?"

"It couldn't hurt," he said painfully. "And especially if what you told me is true and she's passing information on to Severus Snape. Hell, if I thought there was any way the man would talk to me, I'd try to bring *him* in officially."

Shaking his head, he stood to leave. "You do realize that there'll be no living with her after this?"

"That, Weasley," Kingsley said in a decidedly more cheerful tone, "is, thankfully, none of my concern."



Chapter Twenty-Three

Kurtz discoursed. A voice! A voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. Oh, he struggled! he struggled!

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



"Conium maculatum," Hermione said as she walked into the visitation room and seated herself at their usual table.

Snape blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," she said. "*Conium maculatum*, otherwise known as garden-variety poison hemlock." That's how he did it."

Rolling his eyes, Snape picked a piece of invisible lint off his shirtsleeve. "Narratives are generally most intelligible when presented in a linear fashion, Granger."

With a little huff, Hermione scooted her chair back from the table, rose, and began to pace. "Where *is* he, anyway? It



should only have taken a few minutes for him to realize..."

"Granger..."

"And if he's Flooed Shacklebolt already, I'm certain he got..."

Snape cleared his throat. "Erm... Granger...?"

Spinning on her heel, she ignored him again. "But he could have sent for Albus and that might've —"

"Granger!" he actually shouted, trying to attract her attention.

Frowning, she paused just long enough to regard him with obvious confusion — in truth, she'd been so consumed with her thoughts that she'd quite forgotten his presence. "Yes?"

"Would you care to explain yourself or should I simply save myself the agony and leave?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

"Won't your Cuthrell do something particularly awful to you for that?" she countered.

Shoulders stiffening, something in his eyes flashed at her. "I find myself perilously close to not caring about the consequences, Miss Granger."

"Oh, well..." Hermione said grudgingly. "It's quite simple, really. There's been another murder that's definitely been connected to Harry's death." She paused for effect.

Of course there was not one. "And...?" he asked with a quirked eyebrow, seemingly unimpressed.

"Well, it seems that the Aurors finally conceded defeat and allowed a Muggle doctor to come in and do an official autopsy."

"Autopsy?" he echoed, uncertainty clear in his voice.



Internally, she delighted in the fact that for once, she knew about something Snape didn't, but she kept her external composure. "They analyze bodies after death in an effort to determine just what happened. Without magic, of course."

He smiled thinly. "Of course."

"And I read through the file, and I just *knew* that you should see it..." she said, trailing off in her excitement.

"*You* read the file?" he asked. "By what means? Peeking in Ministry windows?"

Hermione couldn't resist herself this time and broke into a wide smile. "Of course not. Ron said that he thought I should take a look at it, just to see what I thought. And when I asked if I could bring it in to you, Ron asked Kingsley Shacklebolt and he said it would be fine. Actually, they seemed quite pleased about my idea. But the hospital wouldn't let me bring it in directly, of course — Cuthrell has to approve it."

Snape snorted.

"But there's a note on top of the file — he's got to contact Shacklebolt before he can turn my request down, so that Kingsley can explain the circumstances."

"I'm sure Cuthrell will find a way to protect my frail sensibilities," he said dryly.

Biting down on a giggle, Hermione sat back down at the table. "Well, the good thing is that our conversations aren't monitored, so I can tell you a fair amount about it."

He looked at her expectantly, silently.



"As I said, it appears as if the victim — his name was Desmond, by the by... Marcus Desmond, aged twenty-four — had ingested a near fatal dose of hemlock not an hour prior to death."

"Hemlock..." Snape mused aloud. "That hardly seems accidental. Not such a volatile herb."

She shrugged. "I thought so, too, what with the notoriety associated with hemlock — Socrates and all that. So I did a bit of research, and it turns out, actually, that a fair number of people eat hemlock quite by accident. It bears more than a passing resemblance to parsley leaves, and its seeds rather look like anise seeds. But the time span isn't right for an accident. Time of death was put around four o'clock in the afternoon, and if he'd eaten it by mistake, one would think it would have been at a meal."

"So he was poisoned?"

"Oh, no," she said, turning a bit green 'round the gills. "Official cause of death, according to the report, was shock brought on by rapid blood loss. He was more than alive when the killer began cutting. But I have a theory about the hemlock..."

He threw his hands up and gave her a mocking scowl. "Of course you do," he sighed. "I wager, Granger, that you spend large parts of the day coming up with various theories."

Hermione wondered at her sudden urge to stick her tongue out at him, as if it was Ron Weasley baiting her rather than Snape. "Anyway..." she said sternly. "In my reading, I



noticed that the onset of symptoms is rather swift — nausea and irritation of the mouth and throat and salivation are the first observed, but all of these are so innocuous that they probably wouldn't be associated with anything *too* out of the norm. After a while, though, respiratory functions become impaired, and the victim experiences total paralysis, complete with loss of speech."

When she paused to breathe, Snape shot her a nasty look. "Has anyone ever pointed out that listening to you is exactly like listening to someone read a textbook?" But she could see the interested glint in his eyes that belied his words and so continued.

"*Total* paralysis," she repeated, dropping her 'lecture voice.' "Wouldn't it be possible that meant magical paralysis as well? After all, the disorientation associated with hemlock would certainly slow anyone's reaction time, magical or Muggle."

Realization dawned on Snape's face, and Hermione struggled to contain her delight. "You're saying that you've found a way around wandless protective magic."

"Possibly," she said calmly. "It's just a theory, of course."

"And no one would have noticed it before because their intent would usually have been to simply poison their target. Besides, we've gotten so used to dealing with wandless magic that no one's bothered to make an attempt on someone's life using Muggle means for *centu-*

ries. Not since the Killing Curse was perfected." His words came more rapidly and his face slowly lost its usual grim cast. "Granger, do you —?"

She nodded. "I think that the killer somehow slipped in, administered the poison, waited for the onset of paralysis, and *then* killed each victim."

"Does the Aurory know about this?" he asked, unheard of excitement shining in his eyes.

Shrugging, Hermione allowed some of her own excitement to show. "They have the same file I do, of course, but..."

His reply was cut off as the door slammed open and Cuthrell stood in the doorway, radiating fury. "This is the last straw, Granger!" he cried.

Snape's face hardened into his customary scowl, but Hermione kept her expression carefully neutral. "Dr. Cuthrell," she said pleasantly, standing to greet him. "I confess, I was expecting you."

"I *demand* to know the contents of this file!" he shouted, waving the manila folder in the air.

"I'm sorry," she replied in that same pleasant tone. "That information is restricted — only Kingsley Shacklebolt, Ron Weasley, myself, and Severus Snape have access to that particular folder. If you contact Auror Shacklebolt, I'm sure he'll be able —"

Snarling, Cuthrell took a couple of instinctual steps into the room, toward Hermione, and she barely noticed Snape



rising to his feet and advancing toward her himself. "Miss Granger," Cuthrell said venomously, "I indeed contacted your Kingsley Shacklebolt, and he patiently fed me a line of bullshit about Severus and murders and Harry bloody Potter. How you got him to spout such ridiculous nonsense, I don't want to know, but, Granger, you are undermining my patient's therapy and I will not have it any longer!"

Hermione found herself absolutely gobsmacked when Snape spoke up. "Three weeks ago, you allowed Albus to bring me a newspaper," he said in a bland, complacent voice that she never in a million years would have believed him capable of.

"That is completely beside the point," Cuthrell snapped, not bothering to put on his usual condescending manner to address his patient. "I will *not* be cut out of the loop like this. And what's more, how am I to know that Miss Granger here hasn't slipped something forbidden into this folder?"

"That is doubtful, Jake," said a congenial voice from the doorway.

Cuthrell spun around to face a mildly bemused Albus Dumbledore. "Er... um... Professor Dumbledore," he stutted. "I didn't expect to —"

"Young Auror Shacklebolt notified me of your reticence to allow Hermione here to show her file to Severus," he replied agreeably enough. "And so I thought it might be prudent for me to make an appearance, only as Severus'

legal guardian, of course."

Cuthrell paled. "Of course," he echoed.

Dumbledore gave him a little smile and Hermione noticed absently that his eyes were sparkling with more than his usual amount of mischievousness. "May I?" He held out a hand.

Cuthrell's pallor took on a decidedly green cast. "Certainly, Professor." And he placed the file grudgingly into Dumbledore's outstretched hand.

With a start, Hermione's jaw dropped as Dumbledore casually opened the file and began leafing through the pages, expressionless. "But..." she stammered. "But... you... I mean..."

"Yes, my dear?" he asked, taking his attention away from the file long enough to raise an eyebrow at her.

Unwilling to ask in front of a still-sickly looking Cuthrell, Hermione remained silent.

After a few eternal moments, Dumbledore snapped the folder shut and held it out to Hermione. "I see no reason Severus can't look it over, Jake," he said, still keeping his voice light and amiable, but this time, there was a sharp edge to it. "No crowbars or wands in sight."

"As if it would make a damn bit of difference," Snape grumbled, causing Hermione to start with surprise again.

Cuthrell swallowed uncomfortably, and she could tell that he wished he were anywhere but here. "Well, then," he said. "As long as we've established that I absolve myself of any —"



"Yes, yes," Dumbledore interrupted, finally allowing some of his impatience to bleed into his tone. "If Severus does anything inappropriate as a result of viewing Hermione's files, you're not held liable in any way." The sparkle in his eyes was gone, replaced by a flat fury that made Hermione understand completely when Cuthrell just nodded feebly and ran out of the room.

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore, sir," she said politely as soon as Cuthrell was out of sight.

"Any time, Hermione," he replied in a quiet voice. "Kingsley has brought me up to speed on the situation. And as much as I would like to stay and chat with you two, I'm afraid I must get back to school. I was actually in the middle of handling an incident involving Peeves, an unfortunately large bottle of mustard, and a couple of Ravenclaws. Madam Pomfrey is probably getting quite testy waiting for me, so I must bid you good day, Severus. Hermione." With one last nod, he Disapparated, leaving Hermione and Snape to regard each other warily.

"Mustard?" Snape echoed, glancing about the empty room. "It sounds as if Peeves is slipping."

"Or the house elves have become less trusting," she contributed absently, still fingering the folder in her hands.

Giving her a disbelieving look, Snape snorted.

Hermione recovered herself at the sound. "Well... let's get to it, shall we?" Tossing the folder onto the table, she



sat down and looked up at him expectantly.

As he seated himself, a thought struck her.

"Erm... I guess I ought to warn you..." she began haltingly. "There are photographs."

"I don't follow," he said, wariness edging his voice.

"They're fairly... graphic," she said, nervously swallowing. "I couldn't... I mean..."

He flipped the folder open in response to her stumbling and his eyes rounded. "Oh," he said quietly.

"You see?"

Snape reached out a single finger and ran it across the glossy paper, hesitation clearly mixed with disgust. "What the fuck sort of monster would do —?"

Her mouth was dry. "The report is under... it looks like things got shuffled..."

"I have it," he said, extracting a single sheet of paper from the jumble. "Or, part of it, at least."

Hermione allowed him to peruse the file in silence. Occasionally he would swear, but otherwise, he did not speak either. A single picture had slipped out of the pile and Hermione found her eyes drawn to it.

Marcus Desmond, aged twenty-four, loving husband and father of one, lay spread-eagled on an autopsy table, his insides on display for all to see. But from Ron's description, the doctor had not made that particular incision — Desmond had undergone half of an autopsy prior to death.



While a half-hearted attempt had clearly been made to clean up Desmond's body, blood still spotted the white skin, standing out as brilliant red droplets on a stark canvas. She doubted it would ever wash off completely, but no doubt, they would try. Scouring Charms, Magical Stain-Removers, even good old-fashioned Muggle elbow grease. But they would always know it had been there, could probably always point to the exact location of every single spot.

Someone had thankfully allowed Desmond's eyes to slip closed, but Hermione found herself able to vividly imagine the look of terror that his eyelids hid. His lips were pulled back in his final grimace, revealing even, white teeth, and the set of his jaw indicated to Hermione that if he'd been able to, he would have died with a scream.

Total paralysis, she thought.

They'd been completely helpless in that moment. Desmond, Bones, perhaps Weaver, and maybe Cooke, and... Harry.

All able-bodied men, full of the vigor of youth, rendered to powerless children in their last minutes. As some monster hacked into...

Unable to bear it, Hermione closed her eyes, hoping Snape would move the picture.

"Three things," he said, voice sounding impossibly loud to her ears as he spoke into the silence.

"What?" she asked, opening her eyes and finding the folder



blissfully closed, all pictures concealed within its depths.

"Three things," Snape said again, and she noticed a bleakness in his gaze that hadn't been there for a while.

"One of them, I'm sure you already know."

She shifted in her chair.

"Firstly, which as I've said, I'm sure you guessed already, the victims must have known the killer. All of them."

"I suspected as much," she replied. "But I couldn't prove it. Not even to myself."

"It's not in the file," he said in the closest thing to a kind voice she'd ever heard him use. "But if poison was indeed used, it had to have been administered through food somehow, and you're right — the time of death and the stomach contents suggest that the victim ate long before the hemlock was ingested. Which means that the killer got him to take it independently — it couldn't have been smuggled into the house. The victim was tricked into taking it of his own accord."

"That makes sense," she agreed cautiously. "But you said there were two other things."

"I did," he said with a curt nod. "Did you happen to notice, Miss Granger, the coroner's notation about heart weight and condition?"

"Normal condition," she said, parroting what she remembered of the report. "Save for a piece severed off the left ventricle. Given that the weapon used was a knife,



it could have happened by —”

“Knives generally are not strong enough to split the ribcage,” he interrupted. “The killer had to be trying to get at the heart specifically. With something more along the lines of pliers.”

“Well...” Hermione said thoughtfully. “I was skimming one particular book...”

Snape’s lips curled into a definite sneer. “*That* must have been a conversation worth overhearing in Flourish and Blotts.”

Huffing, she tried to mask her frustration and was sure that she failed. “Arthur Weasley got them for me — well, for Ron, really, but Ron’s not usually one for books — from a friend of his who works in Muggle law enforcement. The same one who helped him arrange the autopsy, actually. But as I was saying... in the book, it said that some killers have been known to take... I think the book called them *trophies*, but I think it meant like a... memento of sorts. They collect, oh, like jewelry or things like that.”

“You’re rambling, Granger...”

“I am *not*,” she protested. “I remember in one of the cases the book described, the killer took... well, body parts. Like fingers and toes and such.”

His nose wrinkled and Hermione was rather amazed when it occurred to her that she’d actually managed to disgust Severus Snape. “You’re joking.”



“He kept them in his freezer,” she replied.

Staring at her for a moment, his nostrils flared in shock. “You’re not joking, are you?”

She shrugged. “So maybe the killer... took a trophy?” Her stomach twisted as she considered the implications — that meant that somewhere out there, there was a little piece of Harry Potter, socked away in some madman’s...

“I feel nauseous,” she muttered.

To his credit, Snape looked rather green himself.

With a sigh, Hermione yanked her mind forcibly away from the subject and tried to give him a smile. “You have a third point?” *Please*, her tone begged. *Anything but this.*

Clearing his throat, he accepted the segue with unease. “Uh... yes... that is... I saw in one of the...”

She watched him shuffle back through the papers with something very like amazement. Snape was actually disconcerted.

Posture easing back into his usual slump, he extracted a single photo from the file and pushed it toward her. “Look at that... what do you see?”

First and foremost, she did not want to see anything. It was a close shot of the victim’s — she tried desperately to think of Desmond as *the victim*, not Marcus Desmond, loving husband and father of one — torso. Or what was left of it, at least. “It’s his chest,” she said unnecessarily.

“There’s a notation in the report that caught my interest,” Snape said. “And it’s actually quite clear in this



picture. Apparently the coroner can tell somehow that the initial cut started at the base of the throat and went downward."

"Yes?"

"Look at the base of the throat, Granger."

Obediently, Hermione tried to focus on that particular facet of Desmond's — *the victim's* body. "I don't see anything. The beginning of an incision..." She gulped. "Blood spatter..."

"Exactly," he exclaimed. "There's only one cut. No... hesitation. *Lacking hesitation cuts*, the report said. And that means that the killer was... skilled."

"Skilled?" she echoed.

Snape looked vaguely apologetic — the expression did not belong anywhere near his face, she eventually decided. "Well... desensitized, then. Not skilled enough — the cut gets ragged as it continues down the torso, meaning that he probably doesn't cut things open for a living. But he certainly does it enough that he can make that first cut on the first try. It's not..." He swallowed convulsively and Hermione saw one of his hands move toward his wrist. "It's not easy to do."

She decided not to press the subject beyond saying, "we know he's done this three times at least, and what you're saying is that he's probably done it a fair amount more."

"It would have been helpful to examine his previous victims," Snape said, hand drifting away from his wrist and

coming to rest by his side.

She ignored him and began ticking points off on her fingers, making a mental list of the facts. "So, what we know so far is that the killer is most likely someone that the victims all knew, that he is intelligent enough to have figured out how to circumvent their wandless magic using poison, and experienced enough to go about it quite clinically."

"Don't forget that, according to you, he might be crazy enough to take bits along and stick them in his icebox," he added, grimacing.

"Right," she said, feeling her stomach turn again. "We've mostly got the *how*, then. Which leaves us..."

"With the *why*," Snape completed uncharacteristically.

Cocking her head, Hermione studied him with disbelief. "Yes..." she said faintly. "The why. Two whys actually. One, why does the killer kill at all, and two, why did he kill these three in particular?"

"The latter of the two sounds rather less daunting," he said.

"Although it's eluded the Aurory for close to three months now," she replied. "A common thread. Different jobs, different homes, different friends, but they've got something in common."

"Political affiliations?"

Hermione thought for a moment. "No... Harry throws that off — according to Ron, he was very careful to remain neutral."

For once, Snape did not have anything overly waspish to



say, although she was certain he was thinking it, whatever it was. "Were they all in the same house at Hogwarts?"

"Bones was in Hufflepuff," she replied. "And besides, if we're right and there are more victims, I think I know at least two more — Alisander Weaver and Romulus Cooke. And Cooke went to Durmstrang."

His voice had an unprecedented note of desperation in it. "Birthdays?"

"July, October, and February," she said, defeated.

Snape huffed to himself.

Squinting at the tabletop, Hermione spoke slowly and carefully. "Maybe... I don't know... it's probably stupid, but there's one connection that no one's mentioned. They're all wizards."

She could tell he was holding back a particularly acidic rejoinder by the pained look on his face.

"And..." she said, still thinking hard. "None of them were particularly old. In fact, all of them were more or less in their prime, by wizarding standards. Burgeoning families, successful jobs..."

"Perfect lives," she and Snape said in unison, faces mirroring their shock.

"Could... could that be it?" Hermione asked timidly. "It seems so..."

"It's something, Miss Granger," Snape said thoughtfully. "All of the victims had no other reason to die. Young,

healthy, successful men, and for the most part, lacking enemies, if you ignore Potter's past."

They watched each other for a moment, neither one showing any particular emotion.

"Well..." Hermione eventually said. "Kingsley Shacklebolt thought I was barking mad *before*. He'll have me committed once I tell him *this*."

Chapter Twenty-four

His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



on's eyes ached as he pored over Harry's case file for the umpteenth time. He knew he shouldn't be reading such a thing here of all places, but he couldn't seem to leave it at work. So he contented himself by putting a Binding Charm on the folder every time he put it away so that neither Nicholas nor Françoise could get into it. Alice — still too young to be able to read — wouldn't



have been interested in a boring stack of papers anyway.

Nonetheless, there was always the risk of either Harry's wife or his son reading over Ron's shoulder, seeing things that they shouldn't, knowing things about Harry that no one should ever have to know. Ron was actually glad that they hadn't sent Harry on to the Muggle coroner for an autopsy like they had the Desmond fellow — he could not have borne those stark photographs and clinical descriptions peeking out of the file if they'd had Harry's face in them.

And Kingsley was finally listening to Hermione, especially now that she could begin most of her theories with, "Severus Snape and I think..." He wondered if Hermione had any idea how much credibility being the only person on the face of the planet it seemed that Snape would speak candidly with brought her. Probably not.

But then again...

She did seem to talk to Snape an awful lot these days. It had progressed from every week to every few days to, now, she was over there at least every other day — sometimes two days in a row — armed with files and photos and ideas. The Snape that Ron remembered would have had a hard time dealing with Hermione in the throes of research, as she was now, and he often marveled at the fact that Hermione seemed to emerge from her meetings with Snape relatively unscathed.

"Uncle Ron!" Nicholas shouted from somewhere within



the depths of the house, jerking Ron out of his semi-reverie. "Uncle Ron!"

Irritably, he replaced the Binding Charm and stuffed the file into his briefcase. "What?" he yelled from his doorway.

"Supper's ready!" came Françoise's answering cry.

When he reached the kitchen, she already had Alice bundled up in her high chair, waving a piece of bread happily in the air. "Supper supper supper," Alice crowed.

"As single-minded as a Niffler," Ron said, cheerfully tousling Alice's curls. "So... what are we having?"

"You and I are having chicken primavera," Françoise told him, holding out a wine glass full of a honey-colored white. "But I figured that the kids would balk at that many vegetables on one plate, so they're having plain old baked chicken."

"Sounds great." He sipped at the wine. "Hey, this is really good!"

"It's a chardonnay I picked up a few weeks ago on a whim," she replied. "Just thought I should... expand my horizons or something."

"Well, I like it," Ron said with an easy smile. "It's... fruity. Full, like."

Laughing, she returned to the stove and began fiddling around with plates. "When did you become a wine critic?"

He stuck his nose in the air. "Ah, yes... this chardonnay has a full flavor, with a fruity finish. Clearly a heady, bold wine, with previously unexplored nuances," he drawled,



doing his best Draco Malfoy impression and causing Françoise to laugh all the harder.

"Mum... can I taste?" Nicholas asked, tugging at his mother's trouser leg.

She sobered quickly. "You're too young."

"Aw..." he protested. "Just a little taste!"

"If we were in your native country, Françoise," Ron teased.

Making a face, she carried two plates over to the table, sitting one at Nicholas' place and the other in front of Alice. "Oh, all right. But just a sip."

Eagerly, Nicholas took Ron's glass out of his outstretched hand and brought it to his lips. Taking the tiniest of tastes, the boy coughed and began to splutter.

Both Ron and Françoise laughed.

"Yuck!" Nicholas exclaimed. "It makes my throat stick together!"

"Good," Françoise said firmly. "Now sit down — both of you. We'll be ready to eat in just a second."

Ron and Nicholas sat obediently, the empty seat that Ron still absently considered *Harry's* between them. Soon enough, Françoise plunked a steaming plate down in front of Ron and seated herself. "All right?" Nicholas asked, hand hovering over his fork.

In response, she just rolled her eyes and watched her son plunge headlong into his meal.

"I like to see a young man with a healthy appetite," Ron

said, twirling a fork through his pasta.

"There's a difference between healthy and grotesque," Françoise replied sharply. "Nicholas, I did not put that napkin beside your plate for decoration!"

Silently, he wiped his mouth and placed the napkin neatly in his lap.

"So... how was school, Nicholas?" Ron asked as he swallowed a bite of chicken.

The boy shrugged and scraped up a bit of rice onto his fork. "All right. We finished reading *James and the Giant Peach* today."

"What?"

"It's a *book*, Uncle Ron," Nicholas sighed, clearly annoyed with Ron's ignorance. "A Muggle book. I liked it a lot, actually. And in math, Mrs. Daniels started talking about multiplication. She's going to make us memorize the whole times tables!"

He was slightly more comfortable with Muggle mathematics. "Well... that's a good idea, Nicholas," Ron said apologetically. "I know it's a fair amount of work now, but later, it'll be useful."

"That's what *she* said," he pouted.

"I always liked math," Françoise said reflectively. "It was nice to be either absolutely right or absolutely wrong. Not many shades of gray in math class."

"I bet there are, though," Ron replied through a mouthful of tomato — she frowned at him and he swallowed quickly.



"Sorry — kids, don't talk with your mouth full, okay?"

Nicholas grinned up at him cheekily. "I already knew that one, Uncle Ron."

"I bet you did," Ron retorted playfully. "Just like you know that your elbows don't belong on the table."

Reddening, he jerked his elbows from the table's edge where they'd been resting.

For a good while, the only sounds in the kitchen were the clattering of forks against plates and the rattling of ice in glasses as drinks were sipped. Every now and again, Alice would make some sort of garbled noise, waving a piece of chicken in the air and laughing at nothing in particular. And sometimes, Françoise would glance over at Ron as if she was about to speak but would stay silent in the end. Ron tried to focus all of his attention on his plate.

"What did you do at work today?" Nicholas asked thickly, wiping away a milk moustache. "Catch any evil wizards?"

Ron sighed. "Not today, Nicholas. But Auror Tonks managed to knock over the water cooler this morning."

The boy laughed. "I like Tonks," he said shyly. "When she comes to the house, she changes her hair color to whatever I ask for."

"I'm sure she has just as much fun with that as you do," he replied.

"But she hasn't come over for a *long* time," Nicholas continued, wide-eyed and guileless. "Not since... since..." he faltered.



Françoise reached over the table to pat his hand comfortingly. "It's all right, Nicholas," she said. "It's okay to be sad."

"I know," he said, looking down into his lap and fidgeting with his napkin. "But I've been sad for so long..."

"It's okay to be happy, too," Ron told him gently, resisting the urge to touch him. "He'd understand. In fact, I'm sure he'd prefer it."

Nicholas' answering smile was rather watery. "It's a forever sort of sad," he said. "But it's a sad that I can be happy through, too."

And now Françoise's eyes were looking suspiciously misty. "That's the best way to put it that I've ever heard, Nicholas. A sad that we can be happy through."

"Funny," Ron said, affecting cheer with some effort, "I've never seen it on a cross-stitch sampler, though. All the *best* bits of wisdom come off samplers. Or out of one of Hermione's damned schoolbooks."

Françoise grinned, forgiving the single expletive for a change. "What's a sampler?" Nicholas asked curiously, not smiling.

"A picture, like. Done with a needle and thread on special cloth, usually. I'll show you some time," he promised. "Mum used to do them when she was pregnant with us kids."

"You know what, Uncle Ron?" Nicholas asked, looking up at him.

His smile was more genuine this time. "Obviously I don't."

"I forgot to tell Hermione the last time I saw her — will



you tell her for me?"

"Tell her what?" he questioned.

Nicholas' eyes flittered away from his for a moment, skittering around the table, not focusing on anything in particular. "I dreamed about her," he said shyly. "Only this time, I knew who she was."

"Oh, you did, huh?" Ron inquired mock-sternly. "Just what did this dream entail, young man? Do I have to defend my best friend's honor?"

Nicholas giggled, relaxing a bit. "Not like that, Uncle Ron," he replied. "But I *did* dream about her. Her and the dragon."

"Dragon?" Françoise echoed with interest.

"A *big* dragon," he explained with wide eyes. "With sharp teeth and fire coming out of its mouth. A *scary* dragon. In my dream, Hermione was running. Running down a long hallway, and at the end of it was a door. The dragon was behind the door and I knew the dragon was behind the door, but she didn't know. So when she opened the door, the dragon knew she was coming but she didn't even have her wand."

Ron didn't like this. "And then...?"

"The dragon roared at her. And tried to hurt her with its claws. But Hermione just stood there and... and *shouted* at it."

"What did she say?" Françoise asked, by now genuinely curious.

Nicholas shrugged. "I couldn't make it out. And then I



woke up. But I thought I should tell Hermione about it."

"That's... that's true, Nicholas," Ron said after a long pause. "Thank you for telling me — I'll be sure to let her know."

His eyes were wide and guileless. "She won't be mad, will she?" he asked worriedly.

"Mad?" Ron echoed, incredulous. "Why on Earth would she...?"

"Well," Nicholas hedged, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "She didn't like it before when I told her about my dream. She didn't say so, but I could tell — she was scared of me. And that's why I didn't say anything else. I don't want her to—"

"Nicholas," Françoise began, but she trailed off nearly immediately, clearly at a loss as to how to assuage her son's worry.

Taking up the challenge, Ron ducked his head so he could meet Nicholas' eyes clearly and forthrightly. "Nicholas," he said in a gentle voice. "Hermione isn't afraid of you. She worries about you sometimes, I'm sure, just like I do every now and again. But it's not fear, boyo. Although I admit, it was pretty scary the way you acted the first time you saw her. I'm sure you had her scared, but not *of* you. *For* you, maybe."

"I was scared of her," he admitted lowly. "Of what she meant."

"What do you mean, Nicholas?" he questioned, trying not to blink and eyes watering with the effort.

He ran his fingertip nervously over the rim of his milk glass. "I didn't think she was real," he replied. "I thought I'd imagined her all those years ago."



Both Ron and Françoise paled as they stared at an increasingly uncomfortable Nicholas. Neither seemed able to speak, either.

"Ever since I can remember," he continued, not looking at their stunned faces. "She was in my dreams. Not all of them, but enough that I was afraid of her. Afraid of *why* she was there. They were never good dreams. Not *very* scary, but not good either. And then... she let Papa..." He was miserably silent for a few long moments.

"Nicholas..." Ron said hoarsely, his efforts at being comforting falling flat.

"So when I saw that she was *real*," he finally said. "That I hadn't made her up in my head, well, that was even *worse*. I didn't tell her, though. I only told her about the one dream, because she asked. Because I knew that she wasn't the reason I was afraid of my dreams, afraid of her. But I didn't want to make her afraid, either. Did I do the right thing, Uncle Ron?" he asked, concern dawning in his eyes once more. "I can tell her about all of my dreams if you think I should. About the tiger, and the dragon, and the man with the blond hair."

He was absolutely baffled. Briefly, Ron toyed with the idea of taking Nicholas over to the Aurory after supper, having him speak with Hermione immediately. But then, a calming wave of rationality washed over him and he dismissed the idea as a fit of fancy. "I don't think so, Nicho-

las," he said as calmly as he could. "Hermione's got a lot on her plate right now."

But still...

Nicholas' eyes mirrored his own inner conflict.

But still...

"Maybe you should tell her later," he continued. "After she's been here longer and everything's not so crazy. What do you think about that, Nicholas?"

The turmoil in the boy's eyes faded and he relaxed visibly. "Okay, Uncle Ron."



"Explain something to me," Ron exclaimed as he walked back into the sitting room.

"What?" Françoise asked, glancing up from her book.

Sighing, he sat beside her on the sofa and leaned back, stretching his arms over its back. "Alice."

"Well... she's a two-year-old girl. It's all about dolls and ordering you around, mostly," she said with a grin, laying her book to the side.

"She was literally falling asleep in place," Ron complained. "In their playroom. But when I pick her up to carry her to bed, all of a sudden, she's wide awake and ready to play. I just don't get it..."

"As I said, Ron," she said, "she's a two-year-old girl. Being fickle is her prerogative."



"I don't think it has anything to do with age," he grumbled, earning himself a playful swat on the arm.

Laughing at his pained expression, Françoise tucked a lock of her hair over her ear. "Watch it, Ron Weasley."

"All you girls fight dirty," he protested teasingly, flinching as her fist raised in the air again. "All right, all right!"

She sniffed, but she was smiling as she spoke. "We have the vote now — we don't have to put up with chauvinistic sods like you any more."

"Aw... Françoise, you know you like having me around," he said with a charming grin.

Putting a finger to her chin, she pretended to consider it. "Well... I do like having you around to carry heavy boxes down from the attic."

With a huff, Ron frowned. "That's what a Levitation Charm was designed for."

"Did your sense of humor curl up and die somewhere today, Ron?" she asked, giving him an amazed look.

"Somewhere in between all of the serial killer monographs that Kingsley is insisting we all read and Hermione's presentations, I rather think it did," he said heavily.

Françoise's expression sobered instantly. "Is she close?" she asked hesitantly.

"As close as any of us are," he admitted. "Kingsley was doubtful at first, but he's finally come full circle. The problem is, she and Snape know about as much about serial

killers as the rest of us."

"Why don't you just call in the Muggles to —?"

"Too many," he replied, interrupting her question. "We'd need at least fifty men to launch a full investigation, and that's just too many leaks at once. Actually, that's one point that Kingsley's been firm on this whole time — both Hermione and, believe it or not, my father have pushed on more than one occasion for more Muggle involvement."

"Your father?" she asked dubiously.

He stifled a sigh. "I think Kingsley just wanted to bring in some Order people," he said. "Tonks is busy on other cases, you know, and besides, I don't know what sort of help she'd be — she's more of a field operator than anything else. And Dad's closemouthed, as far as that goes, and for all that he puts on that scatterbrained air, he's good at looking at a bunch of puzzle pieces and coming up with solutions that no one else has thought of before. I think his official position is a liaison of some sort, but Kingsley's got him fully briefed."

"I hope..." she began quietly, tears forming under her eyelashes. "I hope that no one else has to die."

"So do I," he agreed.

"Oh, and I wish, Ron..." Her tears were flowing more freely now. "I wish *Harry* hadn't had to die!"

His mouth was dry.

She buried her face into his shoulder, her nose cold even



through his shirt. "Sometimes, when I'm alone at night, I wish it had been *anyone* else. That someone else had died, and not him. Isn't that horrible? I'm an awful person... wishing *this* on someone else..."

"Shh..." he murmured, smoothing her hair with his hand and leaning into her embrace. "You're not an awful person."

"I miss him," she sobbed. "I miss him so much it *hurts* — it's like something has been torn out of my chest, Ron."

"I know," he muttered. And he did. He understood that feeling... that *incompleteness*.

Tear-stained eyes gazed up at him trustingly. "You *do*," she exclaimed. It was not a question.

"I do," he repeated, looking down at her, mesmerized by her eyes.

And suddenly her lips were on his and his hands were sliding over her shoulders, down her back.

Ron's mind was on fire. He was *kissing Harry's wife*.

He was kissing *Françoise*.

And it was beautiful.

Her lips were sweet beneath his — he could taste the salt of her tears and the wine from supper and the tang of *Françoise*. He drank her in and her arms tightened around his neck.

It wasn't until her mouth opened and her tongue touched his that Ron recollected himself.

And then he was off the couch, arms wrapped around his middle, nearly shivering with the realization.



Françoise.

Harry's wife.

Her gaze was a mixture of desire and hurt. "Ron..." she whispered, sultry and sweet and holding her arms out invitingly, and Ron knew then that he *wanted* her. Everything else be damned, he wanted her.

Something in him cried out and Ron stiffened. "I... I gotta go, *Françoise*," he stammered, his tongue feeling too large for his mouth as he spoke.

Confusion blossomed in her eyes. "But..."

He did not wait to hear what she had to say, knowing he would be lost if he did. "Gotta go," he mumbled, more to himself than to her.

Not wanting to bother with the Floo, Ron simply Disapparated, staggering only slightly as the sitting room in his own flat shimmered into view.

"Hermione?" he shouted as soon as he was able.

Silent and dark, nothing moved in the flat, save his voice echoing through the air. Ron sighed, wanting to slap his forehead in frustration. Of course she wasn't here — she would be over at the Aurory, muttering over maps and photos with Kingsley Shacklebolt.

But he didn't want to go to work. Didn't want to have to deal with anyone.

Still treading unsteadily, he moved into the bedroom, stripping off his robes and collapsing onto the bed wear-



ing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts.

The sheets smelled like Hermione. Soap and detergent and good, clean things. He buried his head in her pillow, breathing in some spicy sort of fragrance that he knew had to belong to her. And he wished he could talk to her, lay his head in her lap and pour everything out.

Curling into a ball on the bed, Ron began to cry.

Chapter Twenty-five

He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision — he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath — ‘The horror! The horror!’ I blew out the candle and left the cabin.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



I think this is a terrible idea,” Severus said flatly. “Besides, you don’t even know if it’s related.”

“But it’s a good opportunity,” Granger protested. “The crime scene is virtually *untouched*, according to Kingsley, other than the removal of the bodies. And it *has* to be related — the M.O. is nearly identical. Single incision down the torso, death from blood loss. They even recovered a teacup from



the scene that had crushed hemlock mixed in with the tealeaves in the bottom. It’s *got* to be our fellow.”

He frowned. “A second victim, Granger?”

“The wife,” she confirmed, glancing down at the parchment in her hand — it appeared to be an informal letter of sorts. “She was found in a different room than the husband. Well... sort of.”

“And how did she die?” he pressed.

Granger blew out a sigh, clearly frustrated. “All right,” she conceded. “A fairly routine, although rather grisly, stabbing. Not exactly to the letter, I’ll admit.”

“And what was the other thing you told me about her?” Severus asked, wanting to push her past her limit.

But Granger wasn’t having it. “She was a Muggle,” she replied demurely.

Pouncing triumphantly, Severus pulled out all the stops. “A Muggle,” he cried, waving his hand through the air to emphasize his point. “Killed in a completely different manner. What makes you think this is a related case? Your victims were on the verge of a divorce, even — not quite the picturesque lifestyle of the previous ones.”

With a vicious glare, she crumpled the parchment in between her fingers. “So it’s not a perfect scenario, Snape,” she said, eyes blazing. “But how many wizards do you know about that have been ritually hacked open that *haven’t* been related to this case?”



He opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off.

"Right — none."

"That wasn't what I was going to say," he retorted mildly.

Rolling her eyes, Granger sighed again. "I don't understand you, Snape. I'd think you would be interested in gathering evidence. We don't have all that much, you know."

"Exactly," he said. "We don't know much about the killer and that makes him less predictable."

"We know enough," she argued. "Almost definitely male, probably single, of larger than average build and quite strong. He's obviously got enough self-control to carry out these killings with a certain... dispassion."

"What about this one, though?" Severus asked, feeling oddly desperate. "Two victims? One with her throat slit? That hardly sounds like control."

Granger shrugged. "Maybe the wife came home while he was in the middle of it and surprised him."

"Which means he might be running scared," he said. "And what's more, we know he's escalating." Granger had introduced this particular context of the word into his vocabulary several days ago, and Severus found it echoing round and round his skull — *escalating, escalating, the killer is escalating*. "Three victims in little more than two weeks."

"I still don't see your point, Snape." Her tone was impatient and grated in his ears.

"My point, Granger," he began distastefully, "is that



there's something that isn't sitting right. There's something here that I don't like."

"Only something?" she asked with a snort.

Frowning, he closed the case file. "I don't think you should go up there, Granger."

"Why not?"

He clenched his hands into fists in his lap. "I don't *know*!"

"It's not even that far away — just the other side of the county — I barely even need a Portkey. I can go over there right after we finish up here and be home in time for supper." Her voice dripped saccharine condescension. "Would you like me to come back here and check in with you when I'm through?"

Severus slammed his body back in his chair, nearly overturning it in his irritation. "Go on, then," he snapped. "I don't care!"

"Obviously you do, though," she said dryly.

"No..." he drawled. "I cannot keep you from doing as you wish, and so I prefer to wash my hands of the entire situation."

Jerkily, Granger collected her papers and files together into a single, sloppy pile and swept the whole mess into her arms. "Fine," she said tightly, turning and striding toward the door. "I will say good day to you, then, Snape."

He winced as the door slammed loudly, the sound of metal against metal ringing throughout the room.



Severus was playing chess with Old Jack again. Over the past few weeks, they'd played often. Most usually, Old Jack thoroughly trounced him, but today, Severus rather thought he had a chance at beating the batty old codger. Jack showed no sign of noticing Severus' queen slip closer and closer to a critical position, so he tried to keep his expression bland, face tipping toward the board.

They did not speak as they played. Although when Old Jack won (usually), he would generally cry "Mate!" with exuberance if they were alone in the room. Actually, as Severus thought about it, typically, they did not even ask each other to play — there were just days when one of them went into the game room and patiently waited for the other.

He liked it this way. His newfound relationship with Old Jack — he hesitated to actually label it a *friendship* for various reasons — lacked the... *intensity* of his other relationships. Even his... well, whatever it was... with Granger — there was far too much sniping and bitterness passing between them to settle into the quiet camaraderie that he and Old Jack shared as they slid chess pieces back and forth across a board.

Severus was two moves away. His queen was nearly in place and his rook had been where it needed to be for five moves at least. He was planning to gloat mightily when he won.

"Mate," Old Jack said mildly, nudging a bishop halfway across the board.



Blinking, Severus stared at the board, stared at his poor king, irrefutably in checkmate, surrounded on all sides by menacing white pieces. When did *that* happen? He gave Old Jack a cross frown.

"Too busy attacking to bother defending, are we, laddie?" he asked cheerfully.

Severus glowered. "Again."

"I don't know..." Jack said in a mocking, thoughtful sort of voice. "I have a pressing social engagement later."

He quirked an eyebrow, silently asking a question.

Sighing, Old Jack began setting up the chessboard again. "Haircuts, today. Remember?"

"Actually..." Severus tugged at a hank of his hair with a sly grin. "They've let me slip past the last three times." His bangs now hung resolutely in his eyes, and the hair on the back of his head more than flowed past his collar.

"I'd noticed," he replied. "Do you want black again?"

"You do equally well with white or black," he said with only a small sigh. "But I suppose... as the board is already arranged this way."

Jack prodded a pawn forward. "I would have thought they would Bind you to a chair and do it anyway."

He picked up a knight and regarded it briefly before moving it into position. "I thought so too," he agreed. "But I went to my room right after luncheon instead of the common rooms, and no one came looking for me."



"I doubt you'll be so lucky this time," he said. "Not being in your room and all. And you're looking rather ragged anyway, boyo. Could do with a bit of a trim."

Severus fell silent, preferring to concentrate on the game. Jack followed suit. At least an hour passed.

His strategy was unraveling yet again when they both started at a sharp rapping noise coming from the doorway. Glancing up, he saw a nurse hovering beside the door with a cheerful smile. "Time for your haircuts," she said brightly.

Obediently, Old Jack stood and moved toward the door, but Severus stayed firmly in his seat.

"Severus..." she said, a warning glinting in her tone.

"I'd rather not," he replied placidly, trying to see how far he could push it.

Not far, apparently. The nurse's wand was in her hand, now, pointing at his chest. "Severus," she said again.

"And how is this supposed to improve my mental well-being?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

"You need to be in the best physical condition we can keep you in, Severus," she said, neat and prim, wand not wavering.

He held his ground. "Long hair is detrimental?" He'd forgotten how much fun it was to bait the staff. She would probably Stupefy him any time now. Jack grinned at him from over the nurse's shoulder.

But she chose to continue to reason with him instead. "Short hair is easier to maintain — you wouldn't want lice,



now, would you, Severus?"

"All in all," he said in a perversely decisive tone, "I'd rather keep my hair the way it is. I see no reason why I'm incapable of keeping it clean in its current state."

Still, she did not hex him. Idly, he wondered why.

"Severus," she eventually began. "To be honest, I don't see why you should have to have a haircut if you don't want to — but I'm going to have to check with Dr. Cuthrell first."

She must have read the amazement in his eyes because she continued to speak, flashing him another one of those syrupy smiles the nurses here were so good at.

"You see, Severus? You catch more flies with honey."

He made a face at her, but she let it slide, turning and walking out of the room. Jack followed her — apparently he didn't mind a haircut — and left Severus alone, wondering what had just happened.



"You know, Severus," Albus said thoughtfully, "if you wanted me to visit more often, you could have just asked."

He rolled his eyes at the insinuation but chose to remain silent. Cuthrell was in the room.

"I'm sorry to have called you down here yet again, Professor," Cuthrell apologized insincerely, "but I feel that we need to have a meeting about Severus' treatment."

"We seem to have a lot of those," Albus said. "Especially lately."



The sarcasm was lost on Cuthrell, who simply plodded forward. "I feel that I have been fairly indulgent up to this point. His therapy sessions have been largely unsuccessful, but I have tried to adhere to your requests and keep him off medication. And I stepped aside and allowed these ludicrous visits from Hermione Granger at your behest. But with all due respect, Professor Dumbledore, I must insist — Severus cannot be exempt from hospital policy in this case. If he is not required to maintain our usual hygienic standards, then I cannot hold my other patients to the same level. Exceptions *cannot* be made."

"I don't see why not," Albus replied mildly. "It is a simple haircut, Jake. It is not as if I'm asking you to indulge him in something particularly incendiary."

"That's beside the point!" he cried.

Albus' eyebrows raised in surprise. "I rather thought that *was* the point. Or was there some reason you called me away from a governors' meeting besides Severus' hair?"

Reddening, Cuthrell began immediately to backpedal and Severus smirked at his discomfort. "Erm... that is to say... I meant..."

The eyebrows rose further. "Maybe it is finally time for me to request that Severus be put under the care of another doctor. You are obviously finding it difficult to work with him."

You mean you could have gotten rid of Cuthrell? Severus mentally shouted at his uncle, glowering darkly. *Why didn't you do it ages ago?*



Albus smiled over at him and Severus had the disconcerting feeling that he knew *exactly* what his nephew was thinking. "But don't worry, Jake," he replied to Cuthrell's suddenly pasty face. "That doesn't mean I would withdraw my financial support of this fine institution."

With an audible gulp, he fumbled for words. "Perhaps..." he conceded after a moment of stuttering. "Perhaps I have taken Severus as far as I can."

"All right, then," Albus said, clasping his hands together and smiling condescendingly at the doctor. "I'll arrange for the paperwork in the morning. Now... if you don't mind, I believe there's another meeting that I should be taking part in, if we're done here."

"We're done," Cuthrell mumbled. Severus inwardly rejoiced at the defeat in his eyes.

"Good," he said, beaming at them both. "I suppose, then, Severus, that I'll probably see you tomorrow." With a nod, Albus Disapparated.

Cuthrell turned to a now bemused Severus. "Well..." he sighed. "You finally got your wish, then. I can't say I'm unhappy to be rid of you, either."

Mockingly, he stuck out his right hand. "Goodbye, then, Cuthrell," he said coldly.

To his surprise, the doctor took it, giving it a firm shake. "Goodbye, Severus."



Supper, then, was a jubilant affair. Severus dug into his potatoes with something that he dimly remembered was called *relish*. Even the watery tea didn't taste as terrible as it usually did.

No more Cuthrell.

No more of his stupid attempts at slyness, trying to catch Severus out and make him admit feelings that he had no intention of sharing. No more therapy sessions under a Body Bind.

Of course, Severus was not obtuse. He was well aware that he'd be assigned a new therapist within the week — possibly even worse than the hapless Cuthrell had been. But he had a few months yet before the novelty of whoever it would be could wear off and he settled into the old bitter hatred — a few months of grim delight at toying with them, slowly killing off any innocent desire to *save* him.

Rather like what he had tried to do with Granger.

Except that Granger hadn't broken. Quite possibly it was only because she hadn't ever had any genuine aspirations of helping him. Whatever her motive for continuing to visit him had been, it wasn't that. Otherwise, her first question probably would have been along the lines of, *Why do you want to die?*

What's more, she probably would have called him *Severus*.

With the grand exception of Albus Dumbledore, everyone else that attempted to address him by his given name managed to pronounce it with such condescension, with

such puerile glee, that it always sounded like a diminutive to his ears. Perhaps it was so many years as a teacher that had done it — many of the people now calling him *Severus* with such childlike abandon he remembered as fresh-faced, obnoxious brats. It was as if now they were saying, *See, Professor? Who's in charge of whom, now?*

He wondered what it would sound like if Granger called him *Severus* now.

Possibly not like the orderlies and doctors, who delighted in the role-reversal and addressed him as if he was a backward toddler. *Now, Sev-er-us*, as if they were about to pry some dangerous toy out of his grasp.

Or even the professors he'd worked with at Hogwarts, who still remembered the scraggly eleven-year-old with his ears sticking out from under the Sorting Hat. *Severus*, briskly, authoritatively.

And certainly not like the few Death Eaters who addressed him so familiarly — that hissing, sibilant pronunciation that simply made his skin itch with the *wrongness* of it. *Ssev-er-uss*, Lucius Malfoy used to call.

Granger's *Severus* would probably be a different category altogether.

He thought back to their earlier conversation. The stupid girl was hell-bent on going to the scene of the latest murder.

Severus frowned down at his applesauce, good mood forgotten.



Why should he care?

For that matter, why would he think there was anything wrong with it?

It was standard procedure — Aurors visited the scene of the crime as soon as they could. Some magical energies faded after relatively short periods of time, so they had to perform their charms as quickly as possible in order to obtain the maximum amount of evidence.

And since Granger had gotten it into her head that it was necessary to gather evidence the Muggle way, it was doubly important that they process the crime scene in a timely fashion. If the energy from the Killing Curse dissipated quickly, it was nothing to what a good, stiff wind could do to disturb hairs and fibers and whatnot.

Severus was admittedly hazy on how Muggles went about investigating murders and such things. He had read enough Muggle mystery novels to reach the conclusion that there were usually crafty old ladies involved, armed with arcane bits of lore and flowered hats, although he was unsure as to exactly how the flowered hats factored in to the actual crime-solving process. And the delinquent usually made one crucial mistake that the law enforcement agencies were never bright enough to pick up on.

But Granger seemed to know enough about it to sound rather confident as she nattered on about fingerprinting and fluorescent scanning and other such things that



Severus had never heard of. And she certainly had *mountains* of arcane lore to rely on — he wasn't certain that she owned a flowered hat, but the more he thought about it, the more dubious he was as to the actual necessity of owning such a thing in hunting down Dark wizards.

And yet there was something...

Some feeling, deep down in the pit of Severus' stomach. Something bad was going to happen. He felt it.

And the more he turned it over and over in his mind, trying to quantify it, the more he managed to convince himself that it was going to happen to Granger.

A bell rang, signaling the end of supper. Patients began picking up their trays and heading toward the washers; Severus joined the throng obediently, absentmindedly.

A thought was tickling in the back of his skull.

He immediately dismissed it as irrational, foolish even. But it persisted.

And so it was that instead of returning to one of the common rooms, or even to his sleeping quarters, Severus walked toward the front of the hospital, berating himself for a fool with every step.

Security at Perkins was minimal at best. Within its walls, the doctors and orderlies kept tight control, of course, but the outer rooms were not closely watched.

After all, only a thrice cursed, drooling idiot of a patient would try to escape.



Severus tried to stop his feet.

Only the stupidest of lunatics would even dream of leaving the asylum.

They kept moving, as if of their own accord. He was nearly at the door leading to the visitation room.

As soon as Severus had been admitted into Perkins — truth be told, as soon as he'd awakened in the Hogwarts Infirmary, Petrified and tied to the bedposts, for good measure — his magic had been bound. Albus Dumbledore had actually performed the charm himself. Severus barely remembered it — a fuzzy sort of pain amidst hazy screaming was the closest he could come to genuine recollection. But the end result was the same.

He currently had the magical ability of a Squib.

All of Perkins' patients did. Binding magic was a standard procedure. After all, if one became agitated enough, there was not a cage in the world that would hold him if his magic was intact. That was why Azkaban was overrun with dementors — draining the prisoners' magic was the only way to effectively guarantee that no one would escape.

Severus walked through the visitation room in a daze, hand hesitating only slightly as it grasped the doorknob that led to the hallway that ultimately went past the reception area.

No wizard in his right mind would venture out into the world without his magic.



Well... Severus had an entire facility full of sane doctors telling him he wasn't in his right mind. He pulled the door open and went through it.

The receptionist wasn't at her desk. It was actually late enough that she might have gone home for the day.

The glass door leading outside was unlocked, but all the same, Severus' resolve faded as he laid a hand on it.

It was dark outside. Night was approaching.

Why was he leaving, anyway? Granger had probably already gone to the victims' house.

What was he *doing*?

Severus' hand pushed and the door swung outward.

A blast of cold air shot through his scrubs, and he shivered.

It was cold.

Well... of course it was cold, he berated himself. It was *November*.

The leaves rattled as a wind blew through them and Severus took a cautious step outside, bare feet chilling on the concrete beneath his toes.

He was *outside*. It had been five years since he'd been outside.

As soon as this realization struck him, Severus began to walk more quickly. Through the front lawn and down the sidewalk in front of Perkins Hospital for the Mentally Challenged.

Severus walked away.



Chapter Twenty-Six

The pilgrims were dining in the mess-room, and I took my place opposite the manager, who lifted his eyes to give me a questioning glance, which I successfully ignored... Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent black head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt — 'Mistah Kurtz, he dead.'

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



he house was very dark. Very dark and very cold — apparently, the Aurors who had been called to the scene yesterday switched off the heat.

Hermione shivered as she stepped through the front door. The shiver turned to a downright shudder when the scent hit her nostrils.

A coppery sort of tang, so strong that it flooded her mouth, saturating her senses — taste and smell. She bit down on her bottom lip, hoping her nausea would abate.

Instead, it doubled, trebled, as the next wave hit her. Other odors — other... *human* odors.



Forty-eight hours ago, two people had died here. Turning around, Hermione bolted out the door she'd come through, ducking into the bushes, retching.

Why had she come here alone? she asked herself as she coughed and spat, breathing in the cool, fresh air outside.

Kingsley had offered to escort her to the site personally. Or even to send Ron, if they could pry him out of the flat. But no... Hermione had decided that she needed to go alone for some reason.

With raised eyebrows, Kingsley had consented, although ultimately he'd insisted that she notify him the minute she left the house, to make sure she was safe.

Queasiness fading considerably, she snorted a bit as she unbent, coming back to a standing position. First Kingsley, and then Snape. What was it about her that brought out people's protective urges?

Entering the house for a second time was difficult, but she managed it, rapid breaths through her nose as her stomach roiled once again.

She was reminded achingly of the Potter home as she looked around. While perhaps not as impeccably clean as Françoise's house, this one — up until *very* recently owned by Ulysses and Eleanor Bridell — had an air of neatness about it, and certainly a caring sort of quality. A family portrait, done in oils, greeted her in the foyer, husband and wife and two children smiling gently at her, welcomingly.



Hermione wondered briefly where the children were. Whether they had lived at home when it happened. Whether they had seen —

Brushing past the portrait, she walked down a short hallway, dim and oppressive in the light of a dreary, cloudy day. It had been threatening to rain all morning, but the sky simply grew darker and more swollen, the raindrops refusing to fall.

And she was in the kitchen.

The smell was overpowering.

Close to hyperventilating, Hermione paused in the archway, trying to bring herself back under control.

Why had she come here alone?

She moved her hand toward a nearby light switch — the Bridells had lived in a Muggle neighborhood, as had the other victims, Ron Weasley noticed one day — and flicked it on, fluorescents flickering into life overhead.

In other circumstances, if she'd been visiting the Bridells and been greeted with a warm house, filled with laughter, instead of a dark hole reeking of ill deeds, she would have made sure to mention what a lovely kitchen they had. And so it was — floors and walls over the counters done in white tile, although the countertops were a rich, dark marble that contrasted wonderfully with the stark, painted cabinetry. To soften this look, the Bridells had gone with a tasteful wallpaper on the remaining walls, a



delicate blend of dark green ivy and the palest of pink rosettes. The border above the paper was actually done in what Hermione thought might be oak, lightly stained, with a beautiful pattern — ivy and roses to match the wall-paper — carved into it.

A lot of thought had gone into this kitchen, and she imagined that the Bridells had shown it off to their friends, with cute little suburban stories to go with each feature.

Turning the corner, Hermione had to pause again.

Here was a feature that did *not* have a cute little suburban story to match.

Blood was sprayed liberally throughout the entire breakfast area, coating the walls, even splattering the ceiling. A horrific dark stain covered most of the oak table in the middle of the area, with a disturbing clean spot in the very center — presumably where Ulysses Bridell had lain. Bloodstains ran down the table legs.

The photographs she'd been given of this scene were far worse than the autopsy shots from the Desmond murder, although at the time, they'd been the worst things she'd ever seen.

But these photos had been decidedly more terrible. Bridell — *the victim* — sprawled lifelessly out on the table, face a rictus of pain, eyes open, staring up at nothing in terror. His chest had been carelessly split open, ribs carefully arranged in a gruesome parody of a butterfly's wings, opening upward, toward the ceiling.



She had only looked at that particular set of pictures once. And then there was the anomaly. The wife. Eleanor Bridell, a Muggle in a household of wizards, found face down in the archway between the den and the kitchen, stabbed to death.

Hermione closed her eyes, trying not to look over at the bloodstained wood. *Stabbed to death* did not nearly cover it.

Eleanor Bridell had been stabbed no less than ninety-seven times. The top half of her body had been little more than pulp in the pictures Hermione had seen, her face unrecognizable as human.

Her stomach turned over again and Hermione's closed eyes tightened.

There hadn't been any sign of sexual abuse, according to the coroner, but he had also determined somehow that the killer had made Eleanor Bridell suffer all the same. The killing cut had been an incision along her throat, but the autopsy showed that that had been one of the last ones. Eleanor Bridell had been alive to feel almost all of her ninety-seven stab wounds.

She swallowed with great difficulty, saliva rising in the back of her throat. The smell of blood was so strong that it was all she could taste in her mouth.

There were worse ways to die, Hermione supposed. But whatever they were, she didn't want to know about them.

A few more minutes, a few more calming breaths, and Hermione decided to open her eyes.



She *needed* to see this. As she'd told Kingsley, as she'd told Snape.

But she had to concede, as she stared down at the sticky, clotted mass of something unspeakable in the corner with horrified fascination, that if there indeed was evidence here, she lacked the skill to collect it.

She closed her eyes again.

Bridell had been splayed out on the table with his feet facing the kitchen sink. And there had been four chairs in the picture, if she remembered correctly. The chairs were not here now.

Opening her eyes once more, she looked closely at the floor and saw a few pieces of tape stuck to the tile, corresponding roughly to the chair placements. They'd probably had to shift things around to move the bodies.

One of the chairs had been tipped backward. Another laid on its side. The other two had been shifted away from the table slightly but remained otherwise upright.

She could almost picture the scene.

Bridell, poison crawling slowly through his system, had lost motor control and fallen out of his chair — that would be the chair on its side. If he'd fallen backward and hit the tiles with the back of his head, there would have been some sort of indicator in the autopsy. No, Bridell's head had been blessedly undamaged, meaning it made more sense that he'd slumped to the side. Which implied, then...

The killer had been sitting in the chair that was on its back.



Hermione was nearly certain that the wife had not been in the house when Bridell was initially attacked. There was no trace of poison in her system and the sheer... brutality of her killing indicated that it had been an impulsive, angry one.

Which left the only other person in the house at the onset of Bridell's symptoms as the killer.

Holding her breath, she took a couple tentative steps across the little area, standing in between the pieces of tape on the floor that marked the overturned chair.

She was standing in the exact same place that the killer had been.

The air was devoid of feeling. Somehow, Hermione had thought that by occupying the same space the killer had, she would have a flash of insight. She would be... *closer* to the killer in some way.

But there was nothing.

It was just like standing beside the table in Ron's flat. Save, of course, the blood and the chill in the air.

Reaching out a hand, Hermione let a single finger rest against the wood of the table, mind whirling.

The killer, then, had come around the table to his victim quite quickly, overturning his chair in his haste. And then he'd gotten Bridell onto the table — Kingsley and Snape had both suggested that the killer was a large fellow, and the more Hermione considered it, the more she agreed with them. With the hemlock in his system, Bridell would

have been little more than dead weight by this point, although fully conscious.

And then the cutting would have started. According to the coroner, the first cut was a long, downward stroke, beginning at the base of the throat and extending the entire length of the torso. It was not smooth, however, and had many fits and starts.

Hermione rather thought that it was during this first stroke — this first *sawing* open — that the wife came in, returning from whatever had taken her away from the house for the afternoon.

She walked briskly through the archway nearest the kitchen table — not the one she'd come in through — and into the sitting room. Another door was on the opposite side of the room and she went to it, turning the knob to test her theory. The garage. So she was right then — Eleanor Bridell had probably come through this door, into the sitting room, and run over to help her husband.

The killer would have immediately attacked her, the force of his angry blows driving her into the archway where she would ultimately meet her doom.

Quite likely, then, Ulysses Bridell died with the knowledge that his wife had died as well. She didn't know whether he had remained conscious throughout her slaying — he would have been, after all, losing enormous amounts of blood — but he certainly would have seen its beginning.



But standing here, in the middle of this forlorn scene, Hermione had no more of a feel for the killer's identity than she did when reading the case file.

Snape had been right.

She shouldn't have come.

Hermione decided she'd Floo Kingsley Shacklebolt as soon as she got back to the flat, not wanting to use the fireplace in the Bridell home.

Maybe she could pry Ron out of the bedroom and spend the afternoon doing something mindless, even.

Or maybe she could pry Ron out of the bedroom and spend the afternoon finding out why he'd holed himself up in there in the first place.

As quickly as she could, Hermione left the house, feeling the cool afternoon air against her skin, washing off the stink, the shadow that the Bridells' murders left hovering in their home.



"Ron!" she shouted, banging on the bedroom door. "Enough is enough!"

"Leave me alone, Hermione," he said tiredly, muffled through the wood.

She glared at the door, which Ron had carefully warded against any and every charm she'd tried to use to open it. "You've been in there for more than a week," she exclaimed.



"After the first three days you went without speaking, I thought you were *dead*. You *owe* me an explanation, Ron Weasley!"

Silence.

With one last huff, she stormed away, an idea brewing in her head. A few moments later, she returned, bearing a screwdriver.

Two screws and a couple of pokes into the locking mechanism with the screwdriver later found Hermione standing at the foot of Ron's bed, a scowl on her face. "It stinks in here," she said.

He did not turn over to face her, choosing instead to keep his head firmly under his pillow. "Go away."

"And it's so dark... what did you do? Cast Darkening Charms on the window glass in addition to the shades?"

"Leave me alone," Ron moaned, a single foot twitching under the sheet.

"Now, Ron," Hermione began reasonably, gathering a handful of blankets in her hand carefully, making sure he didn't see her. "You know that if the situations were reversed, you would have blasted the door to bits *days* ago. I've let you wallow long enough, and Kingsley Shacklebolt is nearly ready to fire you."

"Kingsley Shacklebolt can pucker up and kiss my arse," he muttered.

She smiled, well aware that he couldn't see her. "It's that sort of talk that keeps you from being promoted, you know, Ron."



With a single, practiced jerk of the wrist, she pulled the blankets swiftly off him. "Hey!" he protested, finally turning over to reveal bloodshot eyes and cheeks covered with reddish stubble. His hair stood up in multiple spikes all over his head.

Hermione's smile widened. "Ron, you look like hammered shit!¹²"

He glared, but it was weak.

"Get up," she said sternly, imitating Molly Weasley as best she could. "Get up, clean off some of that stench, and I'll be in the kitchen with a fresh pot of tea. Then, you will explain to me why you've locked me out of what you told me was *my* bedroom for the last ten days." She paused as he rolled back onto his stomach, placing his pillow over his head yet again. "Oh... and the door won't lock manually any more, which pretty much guarantees that any magical lock you put on it I can break through. And I will. So you'd be best off to go ahead and admit defeat."

He groaned into his pillow.

"I'll be in the kitchen," she repeated, turning on her heel and marching out of the room.

It only took him thirty minutes to appear, freshly shaved and smelling of soap. He was still wearing ragged, worn clothing, but at least it looked relatively unwrinkled and clean. "Well?" he asked, still glaring at her.

"Tea," she said in reply, pushing a cup across the table



at him. "Just like you like it."

He slumped down into a chair, wrapping both his hands around the teacup, and then fell still, watching her patiently.

Hermione tried not to laugh — Ron was doing his best to be recalcitrant and uncooperative, but she'd had three months of contending with Severus Snape. She could wait as long as he wanted to. But just in case...

"I've put up wards on the entrances to the kitchen," she said casually, taking a sip from her own cup. "I'll take them down when we're through, of course, but they're staying up until you start talking. I assume you left your wand in the bedroom?"

Ron swore colorfully and she had to resist her urge to laugh again. "I hate you sometimes, Butterfly," he said bitterly.

"You'd do the same for me," she reminded him.

Taking a grudging drink of tea, he looked down at the tabletop. "Yeah, but not nearly as skillfully, I don't think. Besides — you'd never do something as stupid as forget your wand."

"You'd be surprised," she said ruefully, remembering an incident at the monastery a few years ago. Master Xi had spent the next three months laughing gently at her. "So...?" she prompted as his posture suggested he might be more receptive.

"What have you guessed?"

"Pitifully little," Hermione admitted. "All I know is that I came here one night after spending the day at the Aurory



to find the bedroom door locked and warded to the teeth. Françoise Potter Flooded me the next morning looking for you and that's when I knew for certain it was you in the room. I suppose it could have been someone else, but it was rather doubtful."

"Françoise..." His voice rasped suspiciously on the name and Hermione's interest was piqued. "Françoise was looking for me?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Well... according to her, there was... an altercation of sorts between the two of you and you ran off. I told her that I'd keep an eye on you, although it's had to be more of an ear than an eye due to my lack of x-ray vision."

"An altercation?" he echoed with a rusty laugh.

And here it was — she tried not to show the true level of her interest. "Was there not an altercation?" she asked carefully. "I'd assumed that was the reason you came back here, but..."

"Oh... no," he said. "That's the reason I came back. But I don't know if I'd characterize it as an altercation."

"So what would you characterize it as?" she asked, quelling her rising excitement.

"More of... an incident," he replied carefully, taking another sip from his cup.

She tried to mask her disappointment. "An incident," she said uncertainly.



"Well..." Ron amended, voice thoughtful, "less the incident itself and more my reaction to it."

"You're far better at obscuring your words than you used to be," Hermione said, irritated with him.

Snorting, Ron smiled thinly. "Serves you right for being nosy, miss. All right, then. I'll tell you. Françoise and I... well... we... there was just a moment, you see, and it seemed right, so we... erm..."

Eyes widening as she understood what he was trying to stumble through, she decided to have mercy on him. "Who initiated it?"

He did not meet her questioning gaze. "As far as I can remember, it was mutual. And if it didn't start out as mutual, it soon got there."

"Holy Merlin, Ron!" she cried. "You didn't... well, *sleep* with her, did you?"

Head snapping up, he regarded her with abject shock. "Of course not!" he exclaimed. "What sort of horrible person do you think I am? Fuck, Hermione, she's Harry's *wife*!" His cheeks were lightly stained with either embarrassment or anger. "But..." he continued, more quietly this time. "But I wanted to. And I would have — gladly — if I hadn't remembered..."

She did not speak, hoping he'd work out his own thought for himself, as she had absolutely no idea where he was going with it.



"She's Harry's *wife*," he repeated, sounding rather uncertain.

"Do you..." she began after a pause, trying to formulate her inquiry as kindly as possible. "Are you in love with her?"

His eyes were wild. "I don't *know*!" he nearly wailed. "I've thought about it, but I just *don't know*."

"Jesus, Ron..." she said, unable to come up with anything better. "That's... just..."

"I know," he breathed heavily, drinking more tea. "A colossal cock-up."

"I think..." Hermione said, giving him as compassionate a look as she could muster. "I think you *really* need to talk to Françoise."

"I'm terrified to," he admitted. "I don't know what she'll say. Hell, I don't even know what *I'll* say. But I know you're right," he said quickly, watching her mouth open in protest. "And I *will* talk to her," he promised. "As soon as I scrape myself together enough so that I won't fall apart when I set eyes on her."

"Good man," she teased, trying to smile.

He mostly returned it. "So..." he drawled, obviously ready to change the subject. "You said Kingsley's ready to give me the boot?"

Hermione laughed. "I mostly said that just to get your attention. He knows you're going through a rough patch, and the fact that you're working on Harry's murder case isn't helping. I imagine he's rather surprised you didn't

hare out earlier. Me either, for that matter. He was dead against me going to the latest site, but I wore him down. Had to talk him out of coming with me, though."

Blinking, Ron looked up from his tea. "Latest site? I assume you're not talking about Desmond, are you?"

"No, there's been another one," she said. "Two, actually. A husband and wife up in Yorkshire."

"Both of them?" he asked, brow furrowed.

She shrugged slightly, swirling the dregs of her cup in contemplation. "My theory is that the wife came home unexpectedly and surprised him. The autopsy results... erm, bear that out."

"And you went to the site?"

"Yes," she confirmed with a short nod. "Just this afternoon, actually. I confess, half of the reason I dragged you out of the depths of despair was because I desperately needed good company."

Letting out a breath he'd been holding, Ron's expression was full of mixed admiration and apprehension. "So, did you...?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "The files are just as good. I expect if I knew more about actual Muggle police procedure — evidence gathering technique and whatnot — it would have been more helpful. I just thought..."

"You thought that by being there somehow, something would click into place," he supplied sagely.

"Exactly." Quiet for a moment, Hermione sat her cup back



down on its saucer, unwilling to swallow the last few bitter drops. "I only learned one thing — I think the killer administered the poison directly — he seemed to be sitting at the table himself when everything began, by the look of things."

With a grimace, he laid his left hand against the table, fingers drumming out a nonsensical pattern. "Not exactly the most useful of theories."

"I know..." she replied, tone showing her self-frustration. "I should never have gone. That house was so... so..."

"Unhelpful?" he suggested in an obvious attempt at levity.

She frowned. "I was going to say *sad*, actually. All dark and cold. It sort of reminded me of Harry's house, though, apart from that. Tastefully decorated and all that..."

"Ah," Ron said with a knowledgeable nod. "So are you going to tell me now that the killer targets blokes with wives that have good interior design sense? With sconces and whatnot?"

"Ron," she admonished, frown deepening. "That's ridiculous. Of course he wouldn't... I mean, how could he know... oh my God!" she breathed suddenly, a puzzle piece abruptly falling into place in her mind.

His fingers ceased their endless tapping. "What?"

"The woodwork..." she whispered. "The carvings in the rails... Ron, did Françoise do that chair rail in her den? With all that ivy carving?"

He blinked, clearly confused. "The rail?" he asked, think-

ing hard. "No..." he said slowly. "They brought in a fellow a few months ago to do a bunch of woodwork. He did a new banister for the stairs and a few cabinets in the kitchen and, now that I think about it, he *did* do the rail in the sitting room, with all that carving. I remember because Françoise was so thrilled with how it turned out. Why?"

"In the kitchen," Hermione replied. "The kitchen in the Bridell house — they're the latest victims — there's a rose and ivy pattern carved into some molding up near the ceiling. I wonder..."

Ron forgotten, she strode quickly into the den, grabbing a handful of Floo powder and calling out, "Kingsley Shacklebolt's office."

If Kingsley was surprised to see Hermione's head hovering in his fireplace, he did not show it, merely continuing to shuffle papers about with nary a glance. "Yes?" he asked. "Granger, didn't I already talk to you today?"

"The other victims," she said, ignoring his question. "I need you to find something out for me."

"Yes?" More irritated now.

Hermione did not care. "I need to know if they had any carpentry work done lately, any sort of distinctive carvings in the woodwork. And, if they have it, the name of the person that did it."

"What are you saying, Granger?" he asked, no longer sounding the least bit angry. In fact, a glimmer in his eyes



suggested excitement.

"I think, sir, that I may have found our missing link," she said.

The glimmer became a definite sparkle. "Right," he replied. "I'll get on it immediately — I should have everything we need by tomorrow afternoon at the latest, maybe earlier."

She ended the Floo connection, shaking a bit of soot from her hair. Turning to face Ron, who was standing in the doorway, looking absolutely baffled, she grinned. "Do you think Françoise still has the name of the person that did that chair rail?"



Chapter Twenty-Seven

I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up — he had judged. 'The horror!'

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



Severus almost felt guilty as he crouched in the bushes, squinting off into the distance, trying to determine whether or not the woman who'd been out in her backyard two hours ago hanging wet laundry would be back any time soon.

It barely mattered, though. His clearly hospital-issue scrubs were doubly cursed, being both incredibly incriminating and not nearly enough clothing for the chilly weather.

He'd spent the night mostly walking, keeping as far away from the roads as he dared. The absolute thrill of *freedom* had overridden his discomfort, but as the night waned and day broke, Severus realized he was infernally



cold and wet and hungry.

The hunger he could do little about until he found Granger — he had no money and he wasn't about to go begging. But cold and wet he could fix.

And that was why he'd spent the better part of the morning hiding out in what was looking more and more like a Muggle neighborhood, watching a woman do her laundry and trying to find some suitable clothing.

Unable to bear it any longer, Severus broke cover and dashed into the yard, snatching a pair of trousers and a long-sleeved shirt made of some light, fleecy sort of material he'd never seen before. He paused long enough to give a pair of boxer shorts hanging on the line a longing look but decided in the end that he didn't think he could bear the idea of wearing underclothing that had once belonged to someone else. This was as much as he dared to take from a single clothesline anyway — Severus ran as fast as he could, back into a more secluded, woodsy area.

He tossed the scrub bottoms away with relish as he changed his clothes, although the denim that the Muggle dungarees were made from was rather rough as he pulled the trousers over his legs and up his hips. But they fit very loosely, so he didn't give it much thought.

On an impulse, he saved the shirt he'd been wearing, though, choosing to simply put the fleecy shirt on over his scrub top. While his trousers had gotten quite mud

covered through the night of wandering, his shirt had remained fairly clean and Severus figured that he could use the extra layer of warmth.

But his toes were still suspiciously numb. Every now and again, through the night, he would stop to examine his feet closely — he was unsure how cold he had to get before frost-bite set in, although he was beginning to suspect it was not nearly cold enough yet, only being November and all.

A few backyards away from the one he'd just liberated an outfit from, Severus spied a muddled pair of boots lying haphazardly on the patio. He watched the windows for a good half-an-hour, eventually deciding that the house was unoccupied. Two minutes and a fast dash later, he was shoving his feet into slightly-too-large boots and lacing them tightly about his ankles. His toes tingled as warmth slowly returned.

Fairly certain that he now more closely resembled a relatively harmless eccentric wanderer than an escaped mental patient, Severus began walking down the road itself, keeping his expression neutral as he headed further into town. He needed directions.

Granger had mentioned that the latest murder — what had the victims' name been? — had been somewhere in Yorkshire, although she hadn't specified the exact name of the town. But Severus figured that, with one of the victims being a Muggle, news would have spread a bit. After all,



it wasn't every day that a young man and his wife were murdered in their own home. There would have been some mention of it in the Muggle papers, at the very least.

He saw a pub a few hundred meters away, slightly dingy and worn looking, and decided that it would be as good a place to start as any. He quickened his pace.

Bridell, he thought suddenly. *That* was what Granger had said their name was. *Bridell*.

Repeating it over and over in his mind, holding on to it like a lifeline as he mentally rehearsed what he would say, Severus pushed open the pub door and stepped inside, welcoming the rush of warm air that hit his face.

The barman quirked an eyebrow at his admittedly probably haggard appearance. "Can I help you, mate?" he asked, a note of suspicion in his carefully cheerful voice.

Severus coughed slightly and tried to look apologetic. "I... erm, yes. I confess I'm rather lost. I Portke — uh, I drove down here to meet a friend. We're consulting on a murder case, you see. The *Bridell* case. And I'm afraid that I misplaced the address. Do you...?"

He noticed that several heads in the bar whirled around to stare at him when he said *Bridell*. One in particular, belonging to an unkempt man with scraggly, long hair wearing a gaudy plaid shirt, caught his attention.

"*Bridell*?" the barkeep repeated slowly. "Sounds kinda familiar. Oi, James, didn't your cousin Eleanor marry a

fellow named *Bridell* all those years back?"

The man in plaid nodded, still shooting Severus a wary look. "She did. Mum got a call yesterday — both she and her husband were found dead. Murdered, like. You say you're here to investigate?" he asked Severus skeptically. "You don't look much like a policeman to me."

"Oh, I'm not," he replied smoothly, having already anticipated this question. "A private consultant, more like. My friend and I were called in to take a look at the case. But as I've said, I've forgotten just where —"

James, plaid-clad cousin to the late Eleanor *Bridell*, cut him off with a laugh. "You're a good bit off the mark, mate. Eleanor and her husband lived down in Sheffield. That's a good sixty kilometers southwest of here, at least."

Severus' heart faltered at the prospect of walking sixty kilometers. Maybe he could take a Portkey — he knew there was an official site not too far away from York. But he smiled thinly anyway. "Thank you very much," he told a still dubious James before turning to the barkeep yet again. "And if you wouldn't mind, I'd very much like to wash up. Where are...?"

"Down that hallway, next to the back exit," he said briskly, wiping a mug off with a white rag.

Nodding in gratitude, Severus walked down the hallway to the men's lavatory, eager to wash off the grime from his night wanderings.



As he looked at his reflection in the mirror, he realized he looked far better than he had a right to. His hair looked as if it hadn't seen a comb in a week at least, and he had a smudge of dirt on his left cheek, but otherwise Severus looked fairly respectable. He ran the water hot, lathering up his grubby hands with something very like elation.

He was so intent on his hands, in fact, that he didn't see the man sneaking up behind him until it was too late. One flash of an enormous reflection in the mirror, and Severus felt something heavy slam into the back of his head, right before everything went black.



As Severus swam toward consciousness, his only thought was that somehow the orderlies from Perkins had caught up with him. They'd found him and taken him back and that was why he couldn't move his arms or legs — he was Bound to his bed.

He groaned and gave his restraints a tug, feeling rope rasp roughly against his bare wrists and ankles. Possibly not the hospital, then.

"Ah..." an amused voice said. "You're awake, then."

His eyes shot open — that didn't sound like any orderly he recognized. This was *definitely* not the hospital.

A huge bear of a man smiled serenely down on him — he had to be six-foot-five if he was an inch. Severus felt

very small in his presence. Very small and very fragile.

"I'm rather sorry about having to hit you back in the bar there," the man continued, still sounding as if he was inwardly laughing at some joke that Severus didn't understand. "But I didn't think I could convince you to come along with me voluntarily." He pushed a long strand of blond hair that had escaped his ponytail out of his eyes.

Severus stared up at his captor in horrified fascination. There was... *something* glinting out of his light eyes. Something off-kilter somehow. Something that made Severus' gut clench. "Who're...?" he asked faintly, feeling his breath hitch in his throat.

Again, the man smiled — only this time, it had a decidedly sinister cast, his teeth flashing in the artificial light of the room. Severus wondered where they were. "My name is Stan," he said placidly. "And you are...?"

"Where am I?" he asked, throat dry at the thought of being held prisoner by this too-calm man.

The man — Stan — sighed and Severus detected a hint of impatience. "My flat," he answered after a slight pause. "I've only had it for a few months, so I'm afraid it's still rather impersonal looking. You'll forgive me if I don't offer you the grand tour."

"Why did you bring me here?" The feeling of *wrongness* only increased as Stan spoke.

"All in good time, my new friend," Stan chuckled. "All in good time. First, I have a few questions I need you to answer."



Some of Severus' fear was slowly turning to confusion. "Will you untie me?" he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

"Later," Stan said firmly.

His mind whirled. "I won't answer your questions unless you untie me first," he argued.

"You *will* answer my questions," countered Stan in that same mild voice. "Or I'll have to hurt you. And don't think for a moment that I won't."

Severus did not speak, anxiety rising again.

"Right," Stan said, sitting down in a chair beside the bed Severus was tied to. "First question. You said in the bar that you were consulting on the Bridell murder. Tell me, my new friend, do you work with Scotland Yard?"

Deciding that honesty would not get him into any worse trouble than he was already in, he spoke as freely as he dared to this smiling man with the disconcerting eyes. "No. I'm not affiliated with any Mug — with any official agency."

Stan's smile now had a shark-like quality to it. "That word, the one that you cut off. It wouldn't happen to be *Muggle*, would it?"

Inwardly, he swore, keeping silent and daring his captor with his eyes to follow through on his threat.

"My, my," he chuckled. "Have I caught myself an Auror?"

"No!" Severus protested quickly, wondering how this... this Muggle knew the word. "I'm no Auror."

"Then tell me," Stan said, voice dripping kindness like

honey. "Tell me, my new friend, why on Earth are you here in Yorkshire asking about a dead wizard and his dead wife? Interest, perhaps?"

Wizard, he heard echo through his head.

This Stan was no Muggle.

And it fell into place.

Severus' eyes widened. "You!" he cried, struggling against his bonds anew. "You're him!"

The smile was gone. "I'm who?" Stan asked, voice chilling.

"You killed them," he breathed. "Harry Potter, Alistair Bones, Marcus Desmond, the Bridells. You're the killer!"

Stan was on him in an instant, hovering so closely Severus could smell his acrid breath. Something sharp poked into his Adam's apple. "I wish you hadn't said that, my friend," he said sadly, eyes still flat and disconcerting. "Although you may be of some use yet."

"Use?" Severus repeated, resisting the urge to swallow against the sharp edge jabbing into his throat with all his might.

"You are a wizard, aren't you?" Stan asked. "You must be," he answered himself. "The only ones to get into the Muggle papers were the Bridells. So you must be. Tell me!" The point prodding his throat dug in more deeply.

He did not speak, eyes wide with absolute terror. Even Voldemort, crazed with power and Dark magic, had never scared him to this point.

"I will kill you either way," Stan said matter-of-factly.



Severus tried to draw away, tried to press his body down into the hard mattress as far as he could. There was a brief flash of pain in his throat and he knew that Stan's knife had pierced the skin.

The smile was back, feral and hungry. "So be it."

He bit back a scream as the knife dug into his throat yet again, dragging downward in an agonizingly slow fashion.

He had endured the Cruciatus curse at the hands of Voldemort himself. He had pulled ten men out of a burning house as his own robes charred and smoldered about his shoulders.

He would not scream.

He did not want to die this way, he realized as silent tears ran down his cheeks.

The knife continued, pulling at his skin gradually. Severus felt the hot blood running down his chest and tried to hold on to consciousness.

"You aren't like the others," Stan muttered as he went about his work. "But you'll do fine, I think. In fact —"

The knife came to an abrupt halt as a loud knocking sound echoed through the room. Severus and Stan stared at each other, caught in a bizarre tableau.

Swiftly, not speaking, Stan stood and walked out of the room, carefully sitting his knife on the bureau beside the doorway.

Severus felt unconsciousness looming on the edges of his vision, the blackness a welcome void, free of the numbing fire blossoming in his chest.



Blood pooled in the hollow of his throat as he strained to stay awake, to listen to the conversation he heard in the other room.

A door opened. "Yes?" Stan asked cautiously.

"Hallo?" a female asked hesitantly. "Stan Walker?"

"Good afternoon." Pleasant, calm, as if he hadn't just been in his bedroom, sticking a knife into someone. "What can I do for you?"

"I got your name from a friend," she replied. "Françoise Potter. You did some woodwork for her about a year ago?"

"Potter..." he repeated thoughtfully. "The name is familiar. I seem to recall..."

"A particularly lovely chair rail," the woman prompted. "Hand carved." Her voice sounded suspiciously familiar to Severus.

"Ah, yes," Stan said. "I remember now. One of my better efforts."

"And you also did some work for several of my other friends. Alisander Weaver, Marcus Desmond, Romulus Cooke."

His voice was suspicious now. "Yes."

"I wanted to speak with you about it." Severus *did* know that voice. "It's strange, you see, but they're all —"

Stan sounded distinctly nervous as he interrupted the woman. "Won't you please come in to discuss this, Ms —?"

"Granger," she supplied.

Granger! Severus heard the door close and several footsteps. His breathing, already labored, threatened to stop entirely.

"Would you like some tea, Ms. Granger?" Stan asked



politely amidst the small scuffling noises. Severus bit back hysterical laughter — tea, indeed.

The footsteps ceased. "Oh, no, thank you," she said, sounding almost startled. "I won't take up much of your time."

He tried to make a sound. A shout, a cough, *anything* to alert Granger as to his presence.

And her danger.

"Tell me, Mr. Walker," she continued, "have you been in contact with the Potters lately? Within the last, oh, I don't know, four months or so?"

Severus could hear the smile in his voice. "Now that I think about it, I was in their area a couple of months back," Stan said in an innocent tone that raised hairs on the back of Severus' neck. "I like to make follow-up calls, to make sure my work has been satisfactory."

I'll bet you do, Severus thought, giving the ropes another agonizing wrench in a futile effort to free himself. He could feel the skin at his wrists tearing.

"Did you speak with them?" she pressed. "The Potters, I mean."

"Are you *certain* I can't offer you anything, Ms. Granger?" he countered.

A feminine clearing of the throat and a nearly inaudible rustle. Severus hoped Stan wasn't picking up on Granger's impatience as easily as he himself was. Damn her, he thought as his throat worked to produce some sort

of alert. *As easy to read as a sodding Quidditch magazine — the little fool was going to get herself killed*. "I'm fine, thank you," she replied. "And what about the Weavers? I spoke with Mrs. — with Livia," she corrected herself — Severus wondered if Stan caught it. "And she was telling me about some *lovely* detailing you added when you put in her kitchen cabinetry a few months ago."

"I haven't had a chance to get back up to Edinburgh," he said smoothly, probably lying. If Granger was name-dropping, she could only be dropping victims' names. Again, Severus found himself cursing her blatantly, stupidly obvious maneuvering.

There were more footsteps. He wondered who was standing.

"I have a list of names here," Granger said, a crumpling papery sort of sound in Severus' ears now. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to..."

"Of course, Ms. Granger," Stan was saying, footsteps growing louder. *He* must be the one walking about. "I'll fetch my records from the back so that we can go over everything properly."

A hand reached into the room and Severus watched it wrap around the knife.

He tensed, gasping. It was now or never.

"*Hermione!*" he managed to shout, his ravaged throat protesting the movement strenuously.

"Severus?" he heard her ask dimly.



Stan's hand moved swiftly and the knife flashed in the light. There were loud scuffling noises.

"*Stupefy*," he heard Granger cry.

A loud thud.

A male shriek, then. Stan must have dodged the curse.

Granger shouted again, something unintelligible. And there was a thunderous crash.

Severus saw the knife skitter across the doorway, into the room he was currently in. Apparently, Granger had somehow gotten it away from Stan.

And here she came, crawling on all fours, hair wild and clothes torn. There was blood smeared on her face, but he couldn't tell if it was hers.

The blackness was threatening to take him.

Granger scooped up the knife, holding it in a trembling hand. If she noticed his presence, she didn't show it, attention completely focused on the doorway.

And then Stan was there, looming over her, dwarfing her entirely. Severus saw a wand in his hand and closed his eyes briefly, knowing it was all over.

In an unpracticed gesture, Stan brandished the wand at Granger. "*Stupefy*!" he shouted.

The wand emitted a few halfhearted, spluttering sparks and nothing else.

Granger's eyes widened.

Throwing the wand away, he simply launched himself

bodily at her, hand wrapping around her wrist, twisting it.

With a cry of pain, Granger dropped the knife.

Spots danced across Severus' line of sight — it would not be long now — and the blood slid down his neck, wetting the back of his collar.

They rolled around beside the bed. Too weak to turn his head, Severus could not see them. But he heard Granger cry out more than once amid Stan's grunts.

The lamp fell over with a smashing noise as they knocked into it in their tussle. There was a whooshing sound and Stan groaned.

With the only significant source of light gone, Severus could barely see the pair as they continued to struggle. His eyes rolled briefly back into his head as he fought the looming unconsciousness.

A shadow stood and lurched across the room and Severus realized it was Stan, back on his feet. From the way he was moving, he rather thought Stan was looking for something.

The knife.

He longed to shout out to Granger, to try and warn her somehow, wherever she was. But his throat did not seem to work any more — the only sound he could make was a gurgling sort of wheeze in the back of his mouth. Severus' hands worked uselessly at his restraints.

The room fell silent, the only sounds Severus' labored breathing and Stan's panting puffs of air as he scrambled about.



Where was Granger?

Where was Hermione?

It briefly flickered through Severus' mind that Stan had managed to take her out as well. That Hermione was lying on the floor under him, grievously injured, perhaps dead.

Stan continued to scrabble about, ostensibly in search of a weapon.

Severus was going to die. Alone and in the dark, with a cold knife pressed against his chest. He closed his eyes against the rising tears.

"Where are you?" he heard Stan whisper. "I know you're here, pretty little girl. Pretty little one who knows too much. And I won't let you leave. You're mine now..."

There was a rustling noise — cloth against cloth.

"Come on out," Stan continued hoarsely. "Come on, now..."

Severus' eyes opened against his will, straining in the dim light. There was Stan, off to the right.

In a dark corner, a shadow moved.

Severus held his breath and waited.

Stan turned his back on the corner.

With a terrible scream, Granger launched herself out of the shadow, right hand raised in the air, swooping across the room like an avenging angel.

Severus watched in silent, gurgling horror as she leapt on Stan.

There was another shriek, distinctly male, as they clat-

tered to the floor. An awful sort of sucking noise.

Silence.

The unconsciousness was stealing back over Severus when he felt a warm hand touch his cheek hesitantly. "Severus?" Hermione whispered.

He pulled against his ropes once again. "Hermione," he tried to say, but it came out rather garbled.

"Oh my God..." she breathed, hand moving away from his face. He felt her tugging on his bonds. "You're... you're..."

The ropes loosened and one of her hands went cautiously to his throat, pressing something soft and warm against his wound, staunching the blood flow.

Only one of his hands was free, but he instinctively wrapped it around Hermione's shoulder, pulling her toward him in a crushing embrace. She went willingly, her free hand snaking into his hair comfortingly.

"You're alive," she murmured shakily into his shoulder, halfway draped across his torso. "You're alive and he's dead." Was she crying?

Alive, Severus thought, feeling Hermione's heart beat solidly above his own. *Alive*.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces, so full of stupid importance. I dare say I was not very well at that time.

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



Hermione couldn't tell whether Kingsley was angry or relieved. Possibly, it was some esoteric mixture of the two.

"So what you're telling me is that you two ran across this... Stan Walker completely independently of each other?" he was asking, confusion written across his face.

"Yes," she said, exchanging a look with Severus. He had a patch of pink, new skin running down his throat — her fingers itched to touch it, to reassure herself yet again that he was unharmed.

Severus had lost consciousness there in Walker's flat. Afraid he was dying, she'd searched the room for her wand, turning Walker's body into a Portkey and send-



ing them all to St. Mungo's. Her broken wrist had been repaired before she could blink and the scratches on her face had nearly completely faded — a single red mark ran the length of her left cheekbone, but the mediwitch who'd taken care of the healing assured her it would fade within the month. Severus had taken a bit longer to heal — a concussion combined with severe blood loss meant that he'd spent the day after their little adventure floating in and out of consciousness, groggy and irritable.

Hermione had not been able to bring herself to leave his bedside. She assumed St. Mungo's had informed Perkins of the whereabouts of their runaway, and possibly Albus Dumbledore as well, who had sent an owl to St. Mungo's just that morning, and so when Severus woke up, she'd been the only person in his room. Once he had improved sufficiently, they took a Portkey to the Aurory and went straight to Kingsley Shacklebolt's office for debriefing.

Walker, of course, was taking up a shelf in St. Mungo's morgue. Hermione wondered briefly who would come to claim the body but soon found herself not caring.

"And you," Kingsley said, turning to look at Severus fully. "Why aren't you at Perkins? Did they release you?"

"Not exactly," he replied, plucking anxiously at one of the sleeves of the robe St. Mungo's had given him upon his release. "But I received an owl from Albus today. He said he's prepared to make the necessary arrangements."



Sighing, Kingsley collapsed into his desk chair so that he could glare at them both equally. "You two have put me in one hell of a tight spot. I've got at least four dead wizards, a dead killer, an escaped lunatic, and a civilian who put a knife in the killer's heart. The press is at my throat."

Severus winced involuntarily and Hermione put a hand absently on his arm.

"Don't get me wrong," he continued in a mild voice. "I'm glad you took Walker out, as far as that goes. But I don't even know *why* he did what we think he did. We need to go over everything again, I think. Starting with you, Professor. Er, Snape, that is."

"Miss Granger came to tell me that she was going to visit the Bridell house about seventy-two hours ago," Severus said, repeating his narrative for what was either the third or fourth time that day. "I urged her not to go."

"Why?" Kingsley asked abruptly.

With a shrug, Severus shifted in his chair, clearly uncomfortable. "In the first place, I thought it was unnecessary. But mostly, I had a bad feeling about it. I thought something would go wrong if she went."

"A bad feeling?" he echoed, tone derisive.

Severus held his gaze unflinchingly. "That evening, I decided to leave Perkins. My thought was to try and find Miss Granger, but I'm perfectly willing to admit that I hadn't thought my plan through completely."



Hermione suppressed a smile while Kingsley snorted outright. Severus shook his head self-deprecatingly and continued. "I spent the night walking, and the next day, after I found appropriate attire, I went into York, trying to find some information on Miss Granger's whereabouts. Specifically, I walked into a pub and asked for directions to the Bridell house."

"Which is actually in Sheffield, and not York."

He glared at Kingsley, but there was little behind it. "I didn't know that at the time. When I went back to the lavatory to wash up, Walker followed me and hit me on the head. I came to tied up in his bedroom. After determining that I wasn't a Muggle, Walker started to... erm..."

"You can skip over that," he said kindly.

Severus coughed. "We were interrupted by a knock at the door. Fortunately, I could catch enough of the conversation to hear that it was Miss Granger in the flat. So when Walker ducked back into the room to grab his knife, I was able to alert her to the danger."

"A scuffle ensued. I saw that at one point, Walker had her wand in his hand. When he tried to Stupefy her, though, it didn't work — I can only assume that Miss Granger's wand was damaged somehow. She managed to subdue him with a knife, then. I passed out soon after and woke up in St. Mungo's."

"And that's all?" Kingsley asked. "All you remember, at least?"

Nodding, Severus studied his fingernails intently.



"What about you, then, Granger?" He turned to Hermione. "A few days ago, you asked me about the victims having carpentry work done. When I contacted both Mrs. Desmond and Mrs. Bones, they admitted to having some woodwork done in the past couple of years, but neither could remember the name of the carpenter."

"I imagine they could probably identify his photograph," she said grimly. "But no... I spoke with Françoise Potter and she was able to give me Walker's name. Incidentally, so was Alisander Weaver's widow. I flooed her on a hunch and she confirmed my suspicions. I went back to the Bridells' neighborhood and knocked on a few doors. Their next-door neighbor gave me Walker's Yorkshire address."

"You're telling me I have five dead wizards on my hands, then?" Kingsley asked despondently.

"Possibly more," she replied. "I couldn't reach Mrs. Cooke, but I've always suspected that her husband was one of Walker's victims."

"Anyway..." he said, prompting her to continue.

Shrugging, she allowed her eyes to wander the room, coming to rest on a random blank spot on Kingsley's desk blotter. "I went over to Walker's flat. I know, Kingsley," she said to his open mouth. "I should have notified the Aurory, but I wasn't planning on going after him right then. I just thought I should make sure before I gave you his name. But I must have said something to tip him off..."



she trailed off. "I heard Snape call my name from another room," she continued more firmly. "So when he came back into the room, I tried to hex him."

"He ducked my Stunner. Ducked it and came right toward me. His knife caught my cheek and I'm pretty sure I dropped my wand. But I got his knife away from him and kicked it across the room. It landed in the doorway of the room Snape was in. When I went after it, I guess he went after my wand."

"And for the record, Kingsley, my wand isn't broken. It simply didn't work when Walker tried to Stun me. So he threw it away and decided to take a more direct approach. That's when he broke my wrist, and I dropped the knife." She blushed a bit. "I know some self-defense — I've been trained a bit over the past few years — that's how I got it away from him the first time, but he was just too big. Once he started hitting me, I couldn't get away."

"Fortunately, though, the lamp fell over and in all that, I managed to slip out of his grip and get away. As I did, I found the knife again. Good thing I was crawling, really, else I would have stepped on it instead of just cutting my hand with it and we probably wouldn't be here talking to you. Either of us."

"I watched Walker. There was just enough light for me to make him out. So when he turned his back, I jumped on him. He was too surprised to try to disarm me again, and I just lashed out — it was instinct, mostly." She fell quiet, remembering the sickening *give* as the knife slid in between Stan



Walker's ribs, the hot rush of his blood on her hands, the look of betrayal in his eyes as he realized what she'd done.

She'd killed a man.

A serial killer, possibly, but a man, to be sure.

Gritting her teeth, she continued, wanting nothing more than to finish. "I untied Snape as best as I could and got him to St. Mungo's — he was in a bad way. And that's when I Flooed you."

Kingsley looked distinctly unhappy. "The Ministry's going to be out for my blood. I put a civilian into the hands of a monster. Two of them, actually."

"Well..." she said, swallowing and trying to look cheerful. "We're both alive."

"Believe it or not, Granger, that's rather beside the point."

Severus was impassive. "Albus will vouch for you, I'm sure, Shacklebolt. I wouldn't worry overmuch."

"I'm not worried, Snape," he retorted with a small frown. "But I do feel rather guilty. Allow me to wallow for just a minute."

Whatever he was going to say next was interrupted by a sharp rap on the door.

"Enter," Kingsley called.

A neat young man with distinctly Asian features poked his head into the room. "Just finished up the analysis on Walker, sir. We're still working on his flat, though," he said.

"Excellent," he replied. "What've you got?"

The man grinned broadly. "Believe it or not, sir, Walker

was a pureblood. Full name, Constantius Octavian Walker — his father was old Augustus Walker, the alchemist, and his mother was Flavia Oublion. You remember the Oublion family, right? Not so many of them as there used to be, but still a good old name. Stan Walker's birth was recorded at St. Mungo's on 6 April, 1975."

"The wand didn't work..." Hermione mused thoughtfully.

"Walker was a Squib," Severus said, completing her thought. "I wonder what made him think he could cast a spell as complicated as a Stunner."

"For that matter," she said, "how did he *know* about the spell, if he didn't go to Hogwarts?"

Kingsley was unimpressed. "What else, Lee? You still look insufferable."

The young Auror continued to smile. "His mum — Flavia. She's still alive."

"Yes?" a cracked old voice asked through a small gap in the door. "What do you want?"

"Are you Flavia Walker?" Kingsley asked politely, keeping a respectful distance.

Hermione had insisted that she and Severus accompany Kingsley to the interview with Walker's mother. After all, they'd been the ones to...

Last see her son alive.



The door opened another inch. "I am," the voice quavered. "What do you want?" she repeated. Hermione thought she could see a suspicious eye peering outward.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions, Mrs. Walker," Kingsley replied, still quiet and respectful. "About your son."

The eye clouded. "I have no son."

Hermione bit her lip.

"Constantius Walker," he said, glancing down at the file in his hands. "You're registered as his mother in St. Mungo's files. We need to speak to you about him."

"I have no son," she said again. "Good day to you."

Reaching out a large hand, Kingsley kept Flavia Walker from closing the door completely. "Madam, I'm afraid I must insist. You see, my name is Kingsley Shacklebolt, Head of the Aurory. Your son Constantius is a suspect in several murder cases we've been working on and I need to speak with you. I can return later with an official order if you'd like."

She thought she heard the old woman behind the door sigh before it swung open. "All right," Flavia Walker said grudgingly. "Won't you come in?" she asked flatly.

The Walker mansion was completely devoid of warmth, either emotional or physical. Marble arches and scowling portraits loomed menacingly overhead and Hermione shivered, pulling her cloak more tightly about her shoulders. It came much closer to resembling a mausoleum in her mind than a home.



And Mrs. Walker went admirably well with her house. A tiny, shriveled old woman with a decided scowl seemingly permanently etched on her brow, her elegant, probably once-tailored, clothing hung off her frame and her hands curled arthritically under the weight of all of her jewelry.

They followed the imperious woman through several hallways, each as impersonal and imposing as the last. Finally, they came to a formal parlor, complete with antique sofas and delicate end tables. Hermione was unwilling to sit down until she saw Kingsley perch hesitantly in a wing chair, obviously upholstered in silk. Severus practically squashed himself into her side on the sofa, their shoulders and elbows bumping together awkwardly. It was oddly comforting, actually.

"I did give birth to a boy some years ago," Mrs. Walker announced, sitting primly on the chair nearest the fireplace, full of gently glowing embers. Hermione longed to reach out with a poker and stoke the fire — maybe it would heat up the chilly room — but decided that her efforts would be definitely unwelcome.

"In 1975," Kingsley said, once again glancing downward at the paperwork in his hands.

"It would have been about then, yes," she confirmed, a faraway look in her eye. "But I do not think about it much. The boy was an utter disappointment."

"Disappointment?" he echoed in an effort to draw her out.



She huffed. "We tried everything, my husband and I. But the boy simply had *no* natural ability. We brought in the best tutors, bought him the finest books, nothing."

"So your son was a Squib?"

Mrs. Walker stiffened immediately. "He was born of two of the finest pureblooded families. It was *unthinkable*. And my husband and I, we kept trying. For *years*. He couldn't even throw off the simplest of hexes."

Severus' eyes darkened as she spoke. "Hexes?" he asked her carefully.

Apparently startled at hearing his voice, she turned to study him. "Who are you?" she asked bluntly.

"One of my associates," Kingsley said, stepping back into the conversation.

She unbent slightly. "Well, of course, hexes. We had to try and draw the boy's magic out. Every day, we coaxed him. Nothing too dangerous, mind. Augustus never pushed him down more than two flights of stairs in one day. And we always fixed the broken bones right away."

Something in Hermione's stomach clenched at the innocent, matter-of-fact note in this woman's voice. She and her husband had *tortured* their poor son to bring out his nonexistent magic.

By the looks on Kingsley and Severus' faces, they'd reached the same conclusion.

But Mrs. Walker continued, unfazed by the expressions of



disgust directed at her. "When he didn't receive a Hogwarts letter, we assumed the worst and took the necessary steps."

"The necessary steps?" Kingsley prompted, not even bothering to hide his revulsion.

Her eyes were wide and guileless. "Well, he had to live in the Muggle world, didn't he? So we sent him to one of those... what are they? One of those Muggle orphanages. Oh, he cried a bit, but it was all for the best, really. Augustus and I tried to have more children, but it just wasn't possible."

Thank God, she thought, exchanging a glance with Severus and seeing that his thoughts clearly mirrored her own.

"Mrs. Walker..." Kingsley began, apparently unable to determine exactly how to continue. "Mrs. Walker... your son is responsible for the deaths of at least five upstanding young wizards over the past three months, nearly all of them prominent, respectable citizens. Do you understand me, Mrs. Walker? Your son was a *murderer*. In fact, he tried to kill both of my associates here before he himself was killed."

She looked mildly perturbed. "The boy is dead?" she asked calmly.

Kingsley jerked his head in a nod.

"I always knew no good would come of him," Mrs. Walker finally said. "All of our best efforts wasted on a useless Squib."



"You mean you didn't find any, erm, *suspicious* pieces of, well, um...?" Hermione asked the young Auror in charge of processing Walker's flat — whose name she'd learned was Byungki — with a tinge of desperation in her voice. "The coroner said —"

"I know," Byungki Lee replied with a small gesture of distaste. "I read them, too. But no. The flat came up mostly clean. We found his tools, of course. A set of hedge clippers that were, uh, *obviously* used in, well, you know. It was clean enough that it took one of those Muggle fellows Mr. Weasley had sent over to find the residue. And we're pretty sure that the dried parsley on the shelf over there *isn't* parsley, if I read the report correctly. Got to do some more tests, though, just to be sure. And back in the bedroom closet, he had a collection of knives that would have impressed even batty old Rodolphus Lestrange, from what I've heard, and this." He held out a large book, bound in black leather.

She took it out of his hands and held it gingerly. "What is it?"

"His journal, we think," he said. "It's pretty garbled. Lots of rubbish about 'gaining power' and the 'true path,' whatever that means. Auror Shacklebolt wants to go over it in detail, and we're going to get a copy over to the Muggle force for study as well. It's going to take some time before we know entirely what Walker was about."

"Isn't it obvious?" Severus asked snidely, ducking into the flat's small kitchen and glaring at a suddenly meek Lee.



"Walker must have been obsessed with becoming a wizard. And he thought he'd stumbled across a way to do it."

"By killing *real* wizards?" Lee asked, clearly skeptical.

Hermione could tell Severus was restraining himself with some effort. "In most ancient cultures, hunters believed that they absorbed the spiritual strength of the animal they killed. I believe that for many, that idea carried over to battle as well. Is it farfetched, then, Auror Lee, for Walker to have believed that he gained the strength of the wizards he killed?"

Muttering something unintelligible, Lee skulked out of the room.

With a roll of his eyes, Severus shook his head.

"What... what do you think he did with the pieces of heart that he took?" she asked quietly, sliding her hand over the journal cover. Hermione opened it impulsively. Angry, black words glared up at her, stark on the white landscape of the page. When Stan Walker had invited her into his flat, his smile had been so warm, so gentle. She'd almost missed his dead, disconcerting eyes, boring knowingly into hers even as his grin charmed her.

I alone know the Way, his journal proclaimed. I have found it and I will use it and the Power will be mine.

The smile of a child, the eyes of a corpse, and the soul of a madman.

Their strength will be my strength. I can feel myself grow



more powerful day by day.

Severus looked down his nose at her, a spark of arrogance in his eyes, disrupting her thoughts. "It was also customary for the hunter to consume the heart of the animal," he said in his best, most condescending 'lecture voice.' "The spirit was believed to be contained in the heart, so it was a logical choice, all things considered."

She wrinkled her nose and looked up at him, away from the increasingly disturbing, captivating journal, mind full of his meaning. "You mean...?"

"Aren't you the one who told me about a particular serial killer that kept his victims' toes in his icebox?" he asked dryly, giving the refrigerator a pointed look.

"But this is different," she protested. "You're suggesting that Walker was a *cannibal*."

"Not *per se*," he said, seemingly calm. "Just that he thought it necessary to consume a piece of his victim's heart. Presumably, if he were a cannibal, he would have taken more than he actually did."

Glaring halfheartedly at him, Hermione walked out of the kitchen and through the sitting room. On the way, she laid the journal down on the kitchen table, cover firmly shut. *Let Kingsley Shackbolt and his experts pore over it*, she thought, wanting no more part of Constantius Walker.

She hesitated at the entrance to the bedroom, however, remembering what had happened there just the day

before with a sickening lurch. Perhaps Walker's ghost was unavoidable, after all.

"You did the right thing," came a voice from over her right shoulder. Apparently, Severus had followed her. "You did the only possible thing, really."

She stared at a large, dark stain on the floor, vivid in the bright lights that the Aurors had set up in order to properly gather evidence. The muscles in his chest had just... given away under her blade. And that awful sucking sound as he took his last breath. Her eyes closed. "Severus, how many people have...?"

Infuriatingly, he just paused, waiting for her to finish. She could feel his eyes on her cheekbone, on her temporary scar.

With a deep breath, Hermione spoke as quickly as she could, gaze finally lifting to meet his own. "How many people have you had to kill?"

"A few," he said quietly, calm look turning to a penetrating stare.

"With a Muggle weapon?" she pressed.

Was that compassion in his eyes? As she'd never seen such an emotion coming from Severus before, she actually had no idea. "No," he admitted.

Hermione's eyes flicked back to the dark spot. "When I close my eyes, I see his face."

"Not forever," Severus promised in an uncharacteristically gentle voice.



Again, she looked up into his eyes, dragging her focus away from the spot where she'd killed a man in cold blood. They stared at each other for a long moment — comfort stretching into awkwardness stretching into an inexplicable tension.

It was Severus who looked away first this time, turning his head to glance out the window. Something in his expression shifted. "It's raining," he said quietly.

"It is," she agreed.

Swiftly, he walked out of the room, leaving Hermione to wonder. But she soon caught sight of him through the window, walking out of the building, through the grass.

Severus came to a stop in the middle of the small clearing, standing in what was threatening to become a small downpour. In a gesture that Hermione didn't even begin to understand, Severus spread his arms wide, throwing his head up in the air, mouth falling open to catch the raindrops.

Hermione stood at the window for many minutes, transfixed by the sight of Severus Snape, motionless in the rain, slicking his hair to his forehead, drinking raindrops like a child.

After an indeterminate length of time, she left Constantius Walker's flat behind, left his spirit behind, coming to stand beside Severus, feeling the cold rain trickle down her scalp, down her back, even into her shoes, throwing her head back in kind to drink her fill, feeling comforted by the act, although she did not know why.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, and invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul.

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



Are you sure you're alright?" Ron asked worriedly.

The head in the fireplace made a huffing sort of noise. "Ron," Hermione sighed. "I'm *fine*. I told you. Severus and I managed to find the killer. A Squib named Stan Walker — he was the carpenter. That's how he picked Harry. And the rest of his victims. The count's up to nine now — William Summerford's wife identified Walker positively this morning."

He shook his head. "I can't believe it," he said. "Summerford, too? We were so damned wrapped up in the idea that Harry died because of who he was. Because he was the Boy Who Lived." His silence was thoughtful. "Thank you, Hermione."

"For what?" She looked rather mystified.

"For... finding the guy," he said awkwardly. "If you



hadn't butted your nose in like you always do, we would still be standing around the Aurory, scratching our arsees, looking for some renegade Death Eater. And what's-his-name... Walker would still be loose, on the hunt."

"Oh... well..." With a pleased look on her face, he could tell she was trying not to blush. "Severus had a lot to do with it as well."

"Severus, eh?" he asked slyly.

The blush was far more pronounced now. "Watch it, Weasley," she warned.

He grinned. "Oh, I wouldn't presume to say *anything*, my lovely Butterfly. I was just... commenting. Tell me, does he call you 'Hermione?'"

"Ro-on!" she cried.

"All right," he laughed. "I'll desist. For now. Tell me..." He cleared his throat importantly in preparation for the subject change. "There's a rumor floating around that Kingsley's offered you a job. Anything to it?"

Hermione looked downward. "Actually, there is. He said I've got a spot in the Academy whenever I want it."

Dropping the teasing façade, his face was earnest. "Are you going to take it?"

With a shrug, she glanced up and he read genuine conflict in her eyes. "I don't know. I don't know if I'm ready to..."

"Stay?" he asked gently.

Her face twisted with some unidentifiable emotion.



"Not as such," she said. "It's just... I asked you once about the shadows, you know? I asked you how you could *stand* it. I don't know if I —"

"Oh, you can," he assured her quickly. "Hermione, you didn't just make it through the shadows, you passed through the fucking *abyss*. Stan Walker was a cesspool of a human being, whoever was at fault for it, him or his loony family. And you *beat* him. Believe me, I've got no worries about you on that account. I'm more worried that you'll wake up one day and decide that your pet cricket at your ninja master's house might be missing you and run off again."

Smiling nearly involuntarily, she relaxed somewhat. "I'm not going to leave again, Ron. Not with..." She cut herself off.

Ron's grin was wide and full of mocking promise. "Oh, really?"

"Ron..." she warned.

"I wasn't going to say anything," he said loftily. "Only that you must *really* not mind being around him, huh?"

She rolled her eyes. "Ron!" she snapped, more of a threat in her voice.

After a slight pause, he relented. "Oh, all right. I'm sorry. I won't say another word about *Severus*." He put deliberate emphasis on Snape's name and Hermione made a face at him.

"Actually," she said with a devious smile of her own, "I'm rather glad you said all that — it means I don't feel nearly



as guilty as I did about what I'm going to make you do."

He was confused. "And that is...?"

The smile widened. "You, my dear Ron, are going to march on over to Françoise's house and tell her all about Stan Walker."

His curse was eloquent and heartfelt.



Françoise's eyes were tired. "Ron," she said as she opened the door.

"Françoise," he replied carefully.

"I've been meaning to —" she began.

"Yeah," he said. "Me too."

With a little sigh and slump of the shoulders, she stepped aside, allowing him in. "The kids are up in the playroom," she told him. "Would you like something to drink?"

"I'm fine," he said. "Actually, I came here mostly to tell you some good news."

They walked through the foyer and into the sitting room. "Good news?" she repeated, sitting on the sofa, clearly asking him to sit beside her.

Instead, Ron sat in an armchair, trying not to notice the disappointment in her eyes. "Hermione Floored me a little while ago. Apparently, she and Snape managed to find Harry's killer."

"Snape?"



"She informs me that it's a painfully long story that ends with him escaping from Perkins," he said lightly. "It turns out, though, that she was right — that name you gave her? The carpenter? He was the guy."

Her face blanched. "Stan? Stan Walker?"

Nodding, Ron shifted in his chair. "Hermione walked in just as Walker was trying to kill Snape. There was some sort of struggle and somehow Walker wound up dead."

If possible, her face whitened further. "He's dead?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, sweet Merlin," she said softly. "Stan Walker was a murderer? I'd no idea... he was so *polite*. Ron, I let him play with my *babies*!"

For a horrifying moment, he thought she was going to throw up and was instantly out of his chair, beside her in a flash, rubbing her back soothingly. "Shh," he muttered. "Françoise, you didn't know..."

"But I *should* have," she wailed. "I put my family in danger! I let that man into our home!"

Unthinkingly, he gathered her into his arms. "It's all over now, Françoise. He's gone." Continuing to make comforting noises, he began to gently rock back and forth, cradling her as if he was consoling Alice after some small hurt, clucking in her ear.

"My poor, sweet Harry," she cried into his shoulder. "I —"

"No," Ron said firmly, tipping her chin up so that he



could look down into her wet eyes. "No, Françoise. Don't think for a *second* that you were in any way responsible for Harry's death. It had nothing to do with you. Stan Walker was a sick, twisted man, and *he's* the one who killed Harry. It's *his* fault. And only his. Do you understand?"

"If I hadn't —"

"No," he repeated, frowning sternly. "I won't allow you to carry that guilt. Françoise, *it's not your fault.*"

Sighing, she relaxed into his embrace again, and Ron curled his arms tightly around her small frame, feeling her back quiver under his touch as she wept. For ages he held her, until she stilled and he thought for a dim moment that she'd actually fallen asleep.

"Thank you, Ron," she said quietly, startling him out of silence.

"For what?" he asked in the same peaceful voice he used with the children.

He could have sworn that she burrowed into his chest, her nose nuzzling against his pectoral muscle. "For being here. For holding me when I need to be held. For helping me cry. Lots of things."

"That's what friends do for each other," he said, discomfort rising in his gut.

Lifting her head, she narrowed her eyes as she studied his expression. "Is that what we are, Ron? Friends?"

"Sure," he replied with a shrug. "I've always thought of

you as my friend."

Whatever she'd found in his gaze, it apparently satisfied her. "Good."

And Ron's eyes widened involuntarily as she pressed her lips to his for the second time, sweeping him up in a kiss so sweet that he felt a tear trickle down his cheek. Her hand went tentatively to his other cheek, gently stroking his skin.

His arms tightened further around her shoulders, even as he told himself to pull away, even as he inwardly screamed at himself, he gathered her close and relished the feel of her soft lips against his.

After a long moment, Françoise pulled away, hand still against his cheek. "Oh," she sighed.

And then they were kissing again. Eyes closed, Ron felt all sorts of unwanted sensations washing through his veins. Sweet comfort melting into a hotter lust in his blood, Ron instinctively deepened the kiss, silently delighting as Françoise responded in kind.

Before long, though, his mental state grew too disorienting to ignore, several internal voices crying out at once — self-hatred, lust, anger, pity, all railed at each other in his mind. Head ringing, Ron jerked away from Françoise and held her shoulders in his hands, a careful arm's length away. "Françoise," he said painfully. "Françoise, no!"

Her face began to crumple, a thundercloud of pain. "Not again," she pleaded. "Don't leave me alone again!"



He hated himself for what he had to do. "Françoise," he said again. "We *can't*. I can't."

"I just wanted..."

With a sigh, he shook his head. "No, Françoise."

"We could make the hurt go away," she said, misery coloring her voice.

"But it would still be there the next morning," he said reasonably. "We would wake up and the hurt would be back. We could never make the hurt disappear, Françoise."

"But —"

"Françoise," he said, not unkindly. "Françoise, I'm not Harry."

"But you could be!" she wailed. "So easily!"

He recoiled at her words, even as she blanched at the realization of what she'd just said. "No, I couldn't be," he replied, rather shaken. "I'm just plain old Ron. You *want* me to be Harry, Françoise, but I promise you, I'm not."

"When I'm with you..."

"When you're with me," he interrupted, "you remember all the good times. You remember Harry. But Harry's dead, Françoise. And he's not coming back."

She made a choking noise that sounded like a mix between a sob and a crazed laugh.

"I know," she gasped miserably. "I know he's dead. And I hate him for dying when I need him the most! For leaving me, for leaving our children, for..." She gave him a pierc-

ing look. "For leaving you."

He glanced away.

"Oh, Harry always needed you *far* more than you needed him, but you still needed him. Just like Hermione Granger. You always needed each other. I hated Hermione for so long for leaving you two, but I always at least had a good idea of why she left. But Harry... I don't know if I can ever forgive him. Him or that *fucking* Stan Walker."

Ron blinked at the expletive, strange and out of place on Françoise's lips.

"So I hate him and I love him and all I want to do is forget for a little while."

His smile was sad. "I could never make you forget. Every time you see me, Françoise, you see Harry."

"I don't —"

"Yes, you do," he countered, taking in a deep breath and dropping his bombshell. The one he hadn't even shared with Hermione. "And that's part of the reason I'm leaving."

Her eyes rounded and her mouth fell open. "What?" she breathed.

"Only part," he repeated. "But I've given it a lot of thought these last couple of weeks. Françoise, I know that you see Harry every time you look at me, because *I* see Harry every time I look at *myself*. Every time I look in the mirror, I see Harry's ghost over my shoulder." His laugh was bitter. "I've spent so many years as *Harry Potter's friend* that I've com-



pletely forgotten how to be *Ron Weasley*."

"You don't have to leave to —" she began.

He cut her off again, knowing that if she asked him to stay enough times, he would. "I do, though. I need some time away from everything to get my head back together. Actually, I've already spoken with Kingsley Shacklebolt about it — handed in my resignation and everything — and he's kept it from Hermione for me. I'm planning on leaving in the next couple of days."

Ron could see the acceptance dawning in her eyes — grim and unwilling, but acceptance nonetheless. "Where will you go?" she asked dully.

"I don't know," he said. "I've never been to Australia..."

"How long...?"

With a little shrug, he looked away. "Until I'm ready to come back."

Her hand was unexpectedly gentle on his. "I'll let you go, Ron. I don't want to, but I will."



Nicholas was alone in the playroom when Ron walked in. "Alice went to her room to get her dolly," he said, correctly reading the question in Ron's eyes. "She'll probably get distracted by something, though. She always does."

Smiling a bit, he nodded. "Can I talk to you for a few minutes, Nicholas?"



"Sure." But he didn't stop setting up his toy soldiers. "But make it quick — this is going to be a war zone in a bit."

"Between who?" he asked, dropping into a crouch beside the boy.

"Aurors and vampires," Nicholas replied tersely, rearranging a squadron to his satisfaction. "The Aurors have a bunch of dragons on their side, but the vampires've got giants, so it's going to be a tossup, really."

"Nah," Ron said in a teasing voice. "The good guys always win."

Nicholas was pensive. "Not always. Sometimes the good guys get hurt, too. Sometimes they lose, even when they should win."

Sobering, he watched Nicholas studiously put his battling armies into their positions. As soon as they were arranged to his satisfaction, he could order them around like chess pieces — they'd been a Christmas gift from Albus Dumbledore. "Nicholas, I wanted to tell you, Hermione and her friend caught the bad guy yesterday. The one who hurt Harry."

"The one who killed my papa," he corrected mildly, turning a figure around. "The one who made him bleed."

Ron sucked in a breath. "Nicholas..."

He kept his eyes focused solely on his toys. "I didn't want to see," he said. "I tried to close my eyes. But I couldn't help it. And then... even when I close my eyes, I



see him. He was hurt badly, wasn't he?"

Deciding not to sugarcoat the truth, Ron nodded shortly. "Yes, Nicholas, he was. *Very* badly. The man who hurt him was an evil man."

"Was?" Nicholas asked perceptively.

Inwardly, he swore. "He died, too," he replied. "He was trying to hurt Hermione's friend."

"The snake," he supplied with a sage nod. "The dragon was going to eat the snake, but Hermione shouted at the dragon and made it go away."

His jaw dropped as he realized that the boy was making a fair amount more than a modicum of sense. "How did you...?"

Nicholas finally looked up at Ron with a sad smile. "I dreamed about it again. Last week. After you went away and Mum started crying again."

That hurt.

"Have you come back to stay, Uncle Ron?" he asked, cocking his head. "Mum doesn't cry as much when you're here."

"I..." he began, trailing off when he realized he didn't know how to phrase it delicately enough.

With a calculating gaze far beyond his seven years, Nicholas frowned at him. "Are you going to marry my mama?"

For the second time in as many minutes, Ron's mouth fell open. "Nicholas... what on Earth...?"

"You spend all your time with her, when you're not at work or with Hermione. And I asked Hermione and she said

she doesn't want to marry you. And Alice likes you. So I thought..." Pausing, Nicholas looked rather confused.

Alice likes you, he heard. "And what about you, Nicholas?"

He would not meet his uncle's eyes. "I don't mind," he said quietly. "Especially if it makes Mama happy." He sounded very young

Nothing short of Harry Potter walking this Earth again would make Françoise happy, Ron thought ruefully, but he kept it to himself. "Nicholas..." he began.

"After Papa... after he went away, you tried so hard to do what he did," Nicholas continued, turning a single soldier over and over in his hand. "You tried to be Alice's papa and you tried to be my papa. But I don't want you to be my papa. You're okay as my uncle, but you're not my papa." He spoke hesitantly, as if he was afraid of making Ron angry.

Feeling an overwhelming rush of compassion for Harry's son, Ron put a steadying hand on his shoulder. "I don't want to be your papa, Nicholas," he said quietly. "I prefer being your uncle — no one is able to replace your father. And don't worry, kiddo — your mum and I aren't going to get married."

He stifled a chuckle as Nicholas sighed with obvious relief.

"Actually," he continued. "I wanted to tell you something else, too. Preferably before your mum tells you all about it. She's not very happy with me, you see."

"Oh, I knew *that*," he replied with a little smile. "Ever since you went away, she's been mad at you."



"No, Nicholas, it's something else." His face was unreadable. "Nicholas, I'm going away for a while."

He perked with interest. "Where to?"

"I don't know."

"For how long?"

"I don't know," he repeated.

Wrinkling his nose at him, Nicholas put down his soldier. "Uncle Ron, you don't sound very good at planning trips."

He tried not to smile. "Nicholas, this is serious, all right? I'll probably be gone for a long time."

"Like a month?" he asked cheerfully.

"More like a year or two," he said.

Probably failing in the attempt, Ron tried to mask his delight as Nicholas' jaw dropped. "A year?" he cried. "But that's... *forever!* What're you leaving like *that* for? Are you mad at us?"

"Oh, Merlin's arse, Nicholas," he exclaimed. "Of course not! It's just... something I need to do."

"Like when Hermione left when you were young?" he asked timidly.

Ron considered it. "Actually... yeah, sort of. Only, unlike Hermione, I fully intend to write letters. I also plan to come back sooner than thirteen years from now."

"Oh... okay," he said, turning his attention back to his soldiers. "When are you leaving, Uncle Ron?"

"In a couple of days."

"So soon?" He nudged another formation into position.



Ron watched him shove a lock of hair impatiently out of his eyes and was reminded achingly of Harry. "It's for the best, Nicholas."

They were quiet for a bit, Nicholas meticulously organizing his armies and Ron regarding him as if this were the last time he would ever lay eyes on the boy.

"Hey... Uncle Ron?"

He hummed questioningly.

"Erm... I was wondering... maybe you'd like to play armies with me?" Nicholas asked, suddenly shy. "'Cause I have two. You can even be the Aurors," he offered graciously. "And I even promise not to cheat, even though both armies would listen to me."

Ron laughed and ruffled Nicholas' hair playfully. "Sounds like fun. You do realize, though, that I'm going kick your arse, right?"

"Uh-uh," he retorted stoutly. "I'm going to kick *your* arse."

Sighing, he frowned at Nicholas. "Uh, Nicholas? Don't say 'arse' in front of your mum, okay?"

"Okay, Uncle Ron," he agreed with obvious glee, meaning that he was probably going to say 'arse' in front of his mother, as often as he could.



Chapter Thirty

*'His last word — to live with,' she murmured.
'Don't you understand I loved him — I loved him
— I loved him!'*

*I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.
'The last word he pronounced was — your
name.'*

— Joseph Conrad, *HEART OF DARKNESS*



By all accounts, Severus," Albus said cheerfully, "you've been rather busy as of late. Were you waiting for me to get rid of Cuthrell to leave Perkins or was that coincidence?"

He rolled his eyes and took another sip of tea. "I assure you, it was merely coincidence. Or Providence, depending on one's point of view."

"Whichever it was, it seems to have been for the best," he said. "Would you like a Peppermint Toad, Severus? Minerva brought a sack of them back from the last Hogsmeade weekend — they're quite good." He held out a paper sack with one of his best imperturbable smiles.

"Albus," Severus sighed, holding up a hand in refusal.



"You only try that ridiculous little trick with the sweets with me when you've got something particularly bad to say, so let's just skip the games and have it out."

Contriving to look wounded, Albus tucked the sack away somewhere in the confines of his robes. "Actually, I rather think you'll be glad of my news."

Severus was unable to mask his impatience. "Albus..."

"Oh, very well," his uncle said, heaving a sigh of mock misery. "I spoke with the administration at Perkins, and it seems they feel they are... unable to continue meeting your needs. Especially after this last escapade."

"You mean..." he began slowly. "They threw me out?"

"Right on your charming little ear," Albus agreed. "They were willing either to issue you a certificate of impeccable mental health or to give you a stellar recommendation to the hospital of my choice."

Slumping his shoulders, his voice was low. "And which hospital did you choose, then?"

Since he was looking down at his teacup — a sad little affair decorated with pink pansies and an inexplicable crack down one side — Severus missed Albus' expression completely. "Actually..." he said quietly. "I chose the other option." And with that, he hoarsely whispered an incantation Severus had never heard before.

The teacup shattered as it hit the floor, falling from Severus' suddenly senseless hands. Little tingles, an odd



mixture of pain and joy, ran down his limbs and his skin felt as if it was on fire. Green spots danced before his eyes and there was a dizzying moment when he thought he was going to pass out.

And then it was over, nearly before it had fully started. Flexing his hands, Severus stared down at them in wonder. "What did you...?"

"Catch," Albus said, pitching something through the air.

Blinking, Severus automatically looked up and wrapped his fingers around the long, thin object flying toward his face. He realized with a shock that he was holding his wand.

Albus smiled indulgently at the look of complete and total surprise on his nephew's face. "Well, Severus, it seems I've finally managed the impossible and taken you completely off-guard."

He held the wand gingerly between his thumb and pointer finger, remembering the feel of smooth wood against his fingers as if in a dream. "Are you saying...?"

"I've taken down the binding, Severus," he replied, nodding carefully, not breaking eye contact. "All of your magical faculties have been returned to you. I've also spoken with Gringotts and the Ministry and restored your accounts with both. Welcome back, my boy." If his voice was gruff, Severus chose not to notice.

"You mean... I'm free?" he whispered, staring at his wand. "But, why now?"



"Severus, it's been more than three years since your last suicide attempt. More to the point, you've been out of Perkins for four days now and you haven't so much as given a bottle of Dreamless Sleep a sideways glance, according to young Hermione."

"Hermione?" he asked, suspicion dawning in his eyes and a dozen conspiracies immediately springing to mind — old habits die inexorably hard, after all.

Albus' smile was sly, bordering on a mirror of Severus' own usual smirk. "She and I spoke this morning — you were still asleep, I believe. But she offered to testify for you at Perkins if need be. Fortunately, the staff at the hospital had no intention of taking you back anyway, so it was unnecessary. That one's a good girl, though — and it appears that she managed to do in three months what we haven't been able to for five years."

"Rubbish," he snorted. "Granger had nothing to do with it."

"Rubbish," Albus retorted, "as you say. I'm not Jake Cuthrell, Severus — I mean nothing of the sort that he tried to imply. But you cannot deny that if she hadn't, erm, sparked your interest in something other than staring blandly out of windows and insulting your therapist, you'd still be there, eating your oatmeal and drinking your tea-flavored water. I had lunch at Perkins one day," he explained to Severus' quirked eyebrow.

"It was nice to be... useful again," he conceded reluc-



tantly. "And I suppose that I realized I wasn't a useless husk of a human being like I'd thought. It was also..." His response was careful and measured, so quiet that Albus had to lean in a bit to hear. "It was... helpful to work for someone other than you."

Eyes full of sadness, Albus' voice was heavy. "I have done you no kindness, Severus."

"You took me into your household and raised me when no one else would," he replied mildly.

"Raised you?" he echoed with a trace of bitterness. "No, my staff raised you, Severus. I just footed the bill. I wasn't there for you like I should have been. Can you ever forgive the mistakes of a foolish old man, my boy?"

"My mistakes have been my own to make, Albus," he said. "And while you may not have always... stepped in to keep me from making them, that does not make them any less my own."

He shook his head. "You may believe that, Severus, but I still claim full responsibility for your well-being, and in that I have failed you. I will apologize every day if I must, but I will have your forgiveness."

"You have it, then, if it's so blasted important to you," Severus said, rather mystified at Albus' behavior. "If nothing else, to head off the thought of an old man hovering beside me every morning, pestering me with ludicrous, unnecessary requests."



Albus smiled, but it was weak. "Of course it's important to me," he said.

Feeling the internal tug as Albus carelessly poked his fingers into that old wound, Severus bit back his frown.

But his uncle must have caught a glimmer of it, at least. "Severus," he sighed. "I know I've not told you often, and I've certainly not *shown* you often, but I do love you. If I had a son, he could not possibly be more dear to me."

The frown deepened. "Albus, you don't have to —"

"I do," he said sharply, cutting him off. "Severus, I allowed you to spend your entire life believing that you are alone, but I will not do it any longer. Even if you have no one else in this world, you'll always have one barmy old man who loves you with all his heart." Albus allowed a grin to flit briefly across his face. "More than Sirius Black and Harry Potter combined."

Damn it, Severus swore as he felt tale-tell prickles at the corners of his eyes. He would *not* cry. Would not, would not, *would not!* "Uncle Albus..." he sighed.

"And then there's that," he continued in a brisk tone that Severus suspected was masking his own tears. "We'll have no more of this 'Albus' nonsense. I know it's a bit late for it, but I'd much prefer to be your uncle. If you'd like, I can even have a set of robes embroidered. *Severus' uncle*. Of course, that's only if you'll have the matching ones that say *Albus' nephew*."

A weight fell off Severus' shoulders, then, as the moment



passed. "You really are a crazy old *goat*, aren't you?"

Eyes widening at the old family joke, Albus chuckled — it soon turned into a full-belly laugh — and after a pause, Severus joined in.

"Oh... good old Aberforth," Albus said through panting breaths as their laughter wound down. "I still invite him to Hogwarts for Christmas every year, but he's yet to take me up on it."

"I believe the Muggles have a good expression about the odds of survival of a snowball in the depths of hell that would describe the likelihood of Aberforth Dumbledore voluntarily darkening the door of Hogwarts while you're still Headmaster," Severus said dryly, clearing his throat.

"Well, he'd probably be very disappointed, anyway," Albus said.

"True," he agreed, tone bland. "There's no proper livestock for *miles*."

"I guess that this year," he began, still smiling at Severus' jab, "I ought to proffer an invitation to *you* as well. Although, if I recall, you were never as impressed with Hogwarts Christmases as the rest of the children," he continued thoughtfully. "Minerva would be glad to see you, though. You two always got on so well together."

Severus lifted an eyebrow at that.

"Well," he amended. "I explained most of the situation at hand to her. She has a fairly pronounced soft spot for

you, Severus. Inasmuch as Minerva has soft spots of any sort, that is."

The eyebrow rose further.

Coughing, Albus obviously decided to backtrack. "Ah, well... yes. But it *would* be nice to see you back at Hogwarts, Severus. For Christmas at least." There was an expression in his eyes that Severus did not like. "And while I'm afraid that our potions position has been taken for an indeterminate length of time, Professor Vector has been making retirement noises, and I know you're more than qualified to —"

"Absolutely not," Severus interrupted. "Albus — Uncle," he amended to Albus' pointed look. "You know as well as I do that not only do I hate teaching with every fiber of my being, *my students* hated me teaching with every fiber of *their* beings."

"Your results were spectacular, though," he said, a wistful note in his voice. "Well... your test scores, at any rate. I must say that you were fairly effective at killing interest in your subject as well. Hogwarts has produced fewer Potions Masters from your teaching years than at any other point in its history."

"You see," he exclaimed with something close to glee. "No, Uncle Albus. I'll go work for Cornelius Fudge filing paper clips in some useless Ministry department before I'll go back to teaching."

"Paper clips?" Albus echoed.

He rolled his eyes and made a huffing noise. "Figuratively."



"Well, then," he conceded. "If it's a Ministry job you're after, I can speak with —"

"No!" Severus said firmly. "I'm going to find employment on my own. If I need a recommendation, I'll ask you for it, but otherwise, this is something that I can do for myself. If the great Albus Dumbledore has to step in and find his pitiable nephew a job, I won't ever have so much as an ounce of credibility, in *any* field. Especially combined with my track record."

Clearly unhappy with this, Albus made a face but changed the subject gamely. "Are you planning on staying here, then?"

Looking around Ron Weasley's dingy flat and dimly noticing the broken teacup on the floor for the first time, Severus thought about it for a moment. "Weasley hasn't said anything to me about me being here one way or another. Actually, I haven't laid eyes on him since I've been here — he's spent so much time with various relatives and friends that I doubt he's even slept here for the last two days. Granger's really the only other person around, and she assures me that Weasley has extended me an open-ended invitation. Although, now that my financial situation is... less dire, I should probably find a place of my own. I could go to a hotel until I can arrange something."

"Nonsense," Albus retorted. "If you need a place to stay, I've got not only an entire castle full of spare rooms up at

Hogwarts, but a family estate as well. Just say the word, my boy, and the keys are yours. What use do I have for a country estate, anyway? I barely spend any time there."

"Maybe," he said shortly, eyes fixed on the broken teacup.

For the first time in five years, Severus Snape lifted his wand. Pointing it at the teacup shards, he whispered, "*Reparo*," in a shaky voice, feeling a heartbreakingly familiar rush of energy down his arm. He closed his eyes.

When he was finally able to bring himself to open them, he saw a whole cup sitting on its side on the floor — even the crack he'd first noticed had been fixed. With no small amount of wonder in his eyes, he leaned over and picked it up, not noticing Albus' broad smile.



"I refuse to have this argument again," Severus sighed.

"Which one?" Hermione asked irritably as she rummaged around in the refrigerator. "I rather thought we had two going on at once."

He poked at the table, watching it wobble precariously with a slight frown. "Either." He poked it again. "Both."

"Well, then, let me settle one of them at least," she snapped, tossing a head of lettuce on the counter. "Ron's sublet his flat to me at a ludicrously cheap rate, and it's unbelievably *stupid* for you to move into a hotel while you're looking for a place of your own when you can stay



right here. Hell, go stay with your uncle. He told me the other day that he offered you a mansion."

Shaking his head, Severus began obediently slicing up the hunk of cheese she shoved into his hand. "I'm not looking for charity."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Then don't take the mansion," she said, muffled as her head went back into the icebox. "But don't think for a second that *I'm* offering you charity. You'll have to sleep on the couch, unless you transfigure it yourself. I expect you to pay half of the rent, and buy most of your own groceries. I'm mostly broke and currently unemployed, you see. Although Kingsley said that he wouldn't mind seeing me in the Auror training program. I don't think that's a paying position, though."

He chewed thoughtfully on a sliver of cheese. "You *should* go into training. As the captor of the wizarding world's first official serial killer, I'm certain the Ministry would be willing to put you on some sort of living stipend while you were in training."

Slamming the refrigerator door, she went to the counter again, hands laden with various sandwich articles. "You were saying something about charity..."

"It's not the same," he protested, taking a tomato from her hand and cutting into it.

"Close enough," she retorted. "There's ham and turkey. Which do you want?"



He hummed. "Both, I think. If there's enough." Finishing up the tomato, he went over to a cabinet and picked out a plate. "And I suppose," he said in the most supercilious set of tones he possessed, "that staying here would be infinitely preferable to either of Albus' offers. I'd rather not spend my days bumping around the Dumbledore estate with only house-elves to talk to, and I think I'd prefer Perkins to Hogwarts most days of the week."

"Hogwarts can't be *that* bad," she mused, handing him a couple slices of bread.

"It'll be *worse*," he grumbled, taking a few bits of lettuce and arranging them artistically on one of the bread slices. "All of those damned women *fussing*. They'll want to 'hear all about it,' and tell me that I'm a 'good boy.' At least at Perkins no one wanted to *talk*."

She passed him a plate full of sliced meat. "Well, we've settled that, at least."

His face shuttered. "The other suggestion is not up for debate, Granger." Sandwich now assembled, save the cheese and tomato sitting on the table, Severus walked away from her deliberately, carrying his plate. With relish, he Summoned a carton of juice from the icebox once he'd sat down, as well as a glass from a cupboard.

"Showoff," she said, a disconcerting, teasing sort of affection in her voice.

Swishing his wand in the air — not casting, just enjoy-



ing the *feel* of the magic tingling down his arm — Severus frowned. "Not hardly," he said.

Absently, she piled together a sandwich of her own and joined him at the table. "I'm sure Ron would like to see you."

"Nonsense," he said, pouring himself a glass of juice. As an afterthought, he Summoned a second glass and poured her one as well.

"He *would*," she persisted, putting the last of the tomato on her sandwich and trying to close the whole mess with minimal spillage. "He's always spoken well of you. Well..." She wrapped her hands around her sandwich and attempted to pick it up — a tomato slice splattered back onto the plate and a bit of turkey flapped out of one side. "Since I've been back, at least." Carefully, she reached out a single finger and poked the turkey back into place.

Cradling his own sandwich, Severus took a vicious bite out of a corner. "Merely obligation, I assure you," he said, chewing as he spoke.

"No," she protested. "He really respects you. The whole Aurory does, you know. I just thought... well, since I'm going over to Françoise's house to see him off this afternoon, that you might come along."

"I can think of an infinite number of things I'd rather do," he said, taking another bite. "Some of which involve rabid animals and steak sauce."

With a glare over at him, she sipped delicately at her juice.



They finished their luncheon in silence, alternating between scowling at their plates and scowling at each other. When she finished, Hermione pushed her chair back from the table with deliberate force. "*You* can clean up the kitchen," she said. "*I'm* going to get ready to go over to Françoise's." And she flounced out of the room.

Sighing, Severus finished up his own sandwich and drained his juice glass. He obediently put away the leftover sandwich ingredients littering the counters and began moving the dishes into the sink.

As he took Hermione's plate off the table in preparation to wash it, he felt a telling jerk behind his navel. Falling forward into darkness, Severus cursed, realizing she'd tricked him.



"That was *low*," he mumbled into the dirt. "Even for you."

"I rather thought you'd like it," Hermione said cheerfully, a good distance away. "Turn the plate into a Portkey and Apparate once I was sure you'd touched it. It took you *forever* to get around to clearing the table."

He did not turn over, preferring to continue to address the grass he was lying in. "I thought it would be best to take care of the perishables first."

"Well, you ought to get up," she replied. "Everyone's due outside in a minute and you don't want to make a poor first impression, do you?"



"I ought to just Apparate," he sighed.

"You should," she agreed. "But we both know you won't, so why don't you go ahead and stand? There are little children for you to menace."

Rolling his eyes only slightly, Severus picked himself up off the front lawn, turning around to look up at a fairly stately old Victorian home, complete with an expansive veranda running across the entire front of the house and gabled upper story windows. "This is Potter's house?"

"Yes," she said. "This is where Harry lived."

"I wouldn't have expected..."

She studied him impassively. "Harry always *wanted* the normal family life, so I'm sure he made many efforts along that vein."

Severus did not know what to say to that — to the *sadness* suddenly shining out of Hermione's eyes — but he was saved from having to respond by a suddenly opening front door.

Ron Weasley, as gangly and redheaded as ever, stepped out onto the Potters' front porch, a small girl with curly blonde hair safely ensconced in his arms.

"That's Alice Potter," Hermione supplied in a whisper. "Harry's daughter."

He squinted at the girl, seeing nothing of her father in her face. Possibly noticing his attention, the girl caught his eye suddenly and waved, smiling brightly. Severus took an involuntary step backward in surprise.



Weasley was giving him a curious look but ultimately chose to look down at the girl instead, saying something that made her clap her hands and laugh in delight. As he stepped out of the doorway and started down the steps, a little boy with black hair trailed in his wake. *This* one Severus dimly recognized.

"Nicholas," she whispered in his ear. "Harry's son."

"I remember," he said dryly. "Potter used to bore us all to tears at Order meetings with baby pictures."

"Be nice," she admonished, tapping his elbow sternly. He tactfully remained silent.

The boy was followed by a rather smallish looking young woman — shorter than Hermione, to be sure, but not abnormally so — with honey blonde hair nearly matching the baby's. It fell neatly down to her shoulders. Her stylish clothing suggested an air of sophistication to Severus that he would not have believed possible of someone affiliated so closely with Harry Potter.

"And there's Harry's wife, Françoise," she concluded.

The unlikely quartet made its way down the front walk, Weasley at its lead. "Hermione," he said warmly once he was close enough, a broad smile on his face. "And Snape?"

"Weasley," Severus said with a curt nod.

Clearly curious, apparently Weasley decided to let it pass, saying nothing in reply.

The woman — Françoise Potter — came forward. "Ah,"



she said with a smile that reminded him somehow of Albus. "So *you're* the infamous Professor Snape. I've heard so much about you."

"I'm sorry to say that large parts of it are probably true," he said stiffly.

Laughing, she reached out and touched his forearm — Severus tried not to flinch and mostly succeeded. "I'm glad, then," she told him, smile widening and becoming even more enigmatic. "You will be a very interesting person to get to know, I think, Professor."

He tried not to shuffle his feet. "I am no longer a professor, Mrs. Potter."

"A fact for which the entire wizarding population of Britain under the age of eighteen should be grateful," Hermione said snidely, eliciting a snigger from Weasley and a thin smile from Severus himself.

"Indeed," he said with quirked eyebrow.

"Well..." Weasley said into the suddenly awkward silence, clearing his throat suggestively. "I know that you brought in old Snape here as a distraction, Butterfly, but I really do need to get going."

"I know," Hermione told him with a sad sigh. "And I understand, Ron. I really do."

With clear sorrow in his eyes, Weasley disentangled the little girl from his arms and placed her carefully on the ground, kneeling down. "Goodbye, Alice," he said quietly

— Severus was absolutely shocked at the gentleness in his voice. "You be a good girl for your mum, you hear?"

The girl's nose wrinkled. "Bye, Unca Ron?" It was clear that she didn't understand the gravity of what was happening.

He patted her head one last time and turned to look at the boy hovering around his mother's legs. "Nicholas?"

The child shuffled forward, eyes fixed firmly on his feet. "I'll see you later, huh, Uncle Ron?"

"Yeah," Weasley whispered. "I'll see you later, Nicholas."

From Hermione's unexpected shift at his side, Severus surmised that she was surprised to see Nicholas Potter wrap his arms around Weasley's neck and bury his face in the crook of his neck. He made a mental note to ask her about it later.

Weasley lightly pushed the boy away. "I'll send you an owl as soon as I get a chance, Nicholas. Oh, and don't forget — you have a long story to tell Hermione, about the dragon and everything. I think it's okay to now."

The boy sniffled and nodded and Severus felt a suspicious tug in his chest but dismissed it as a lingering effect from the healing he'd experienced a couple of days ago.

Rising to his feet, Weasley turned to Françoise Potter and Severus guessed from the look in his eyes that she was a large part of the reason he was leaving. "Françoise..." Weasley said, sounding strained.

"Go, Ron," she told him with a cheerless smile. "I'll be waiting for you when you come back."



His responding grin was not comforting in the slightest. "No, you won't," he corrected. And she wrapped her arms around his waist, squeezing so tightly that Severus rather thought Weasley would be having difficulty breathing.

But the embrace soon ended and Françoise Potter, apparently unable to stand it any more, retreated into the house with her daughter, without so much as a backward glance. The baby Alice made a few token noises of protest as she was scooped into her mother's arms but remained mostly quiet.

Weasley stood before Hermione and Severus with a sheepish look on his face. "Well..." he drawled.

"Weasley," Severus said uncomfortably, wondering what to do.

"Snape," Weasley replied in kind. As he held out his hand, Severus was surprised to see genuine respect shining out of the boy's eyes. "I never thought I'd say this, but I think I'm going to miss you."

He took the proffered hand. "I seriously doubt it, Weasley."

Hermione made a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob as they dropped their hands. Severus stepped back to allow her more privacy to tell Weasley goodbye.

"Oh, Ron," she sighed, rising up on her toes to hug his neck and give his cheek a chaste kiss.

Weasley's hand went to her cheek and she leaned into the touch. "I might miss you the most, my radiant Butterfly, for all that you've put me through."



"Ron," she said again, voice now definitely more sob than laugh.

"You'll stay in England become an Auror, won't you?" he asked quietly. "After all, there needs to be *someone* around to give Kingsley Shacklebolt hell and you seem to be a natural at it."

"You'd better go soon," she told him threateningly, "else I'm not going to be able to let you go."

Pulling her into his arms again, Weasley rested his chin on the crown of her head. "It's not like we'll never see each other again, Hermione. And *unlike* you, I plan on writing often."

She lifted her head, but Severus could not see her face. "Oh, get out of here, you stupid boy," she sighed.

With a parting smile, Weasley released her and started walking down the street — there was a Portkey station not a kilometer away, Severus knew. Standing about four houses down, Weasley halted, turning and cupping his hands around his mouth. "I love you, you know!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Severus rolled his eyes at the display, but Hermione smiled widely. "I love you, too, you great prat!" she called back. Cheerfully waving, Weasley kept walking — she watched him until he was out of sight.

"Merlin's *arse*," Severus thought he heard a little voice somewhere behind him groan. Turning around, he saw



Nicholas Potter standing in the grass with a look of disgust on his face. "Oh... sorry," he said, noticing Severus watching him, straightening up and making an attempt to look remorseful, although whether for the sentiment or the expletive, he was unsure.

He shrugged. "As it so happens, I quite agree with your assessment."

The boy's dark eyes were wide, a mix of curiosity and surprise. "Who're you, anyway? I've never met you before."

Severus was rather taken aback. "My name is Severus Snape," he replied stiffly, figuring the boy would recognize the name.

"You know Hermione?" he asked, clearly unfazed by his name.

"I do," he agreed cautiously.

"Oh," the boy said with a brief, dismissive sort of nod. "Do you know how to play Soulblade?"

"What?" Severus asked, baffled.

Something sparked in Nicholas' eyes that Severus did not like and he suddenly found himself at the mercy of this little boy, being tugged by the hand up the walk toward the Potter house. "Come on," he cajoled eagerly. "I can teach you. It'll be fun, I promise!"



An Epilogue

The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky — seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.

— Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS



y dearest Hermione,

I find myself dreaming about you sometimes. Nothing inappropriate, mind. But nice dreams all the same. Last night, for instance, I dreamed that you and Harry and I were sitting beside the lake at Hogwarts, chatting. 'I'm glad you're happy,' Harry said in my dream and for once, I'm able to believe him. His ghost is naught but a tickle in the back of my mind, these days. A good tickle, mostly.

And you may tell my little monkey, Alice, that she's taken your five Galleons. I have indeed shaved off my infernal beard (see enclosed photograph, taken by a pair of lovely German tourists the last time I was in town). The final delousing was the last straw, you see.



I'm not surprised that Harry's little Looking-Glass girl has turned out to be the first Slytherin Potter in — what was it you said? — seven generations. She always was a devious little scamp. It is a shame that she won't wind up Gryffindor's Seeker, though. I have been looking forward to her Quidditch debut for many years now. Feel free to read this portion of my letter to her, by the way. I'm sure she'll be amused and offended, as she always is when I hear from her.

Also feel free to pass on my congratulations to Nicholas — Head Boy, wow! His mum must be thrilled. Personally, I knew he was bound for Head Boy the minute I heard he'd made prefect. Make sure to warn him about the twins, though. They'll give him hell all year. I'm sure he's gotten quite good at defending himself, though, for a Ravenclaw.

I've moved again, this past month, and finally managed to run across your monks. Master Xi sends his regards, by the by. Why on Earth didn't you warn me about his rather intriguing way of introducing himself? 'Hallo, I'm Ron Weasley,' I told him. 'I believe you know my old school friend, Hermione Granger.'

'I know,' he said in pretty good English, before belting me in the face with an open fist and landing me flat on my back with a single kick. In the thirty minutes he insisted we spar, I think he 'killed' me no less than fifteen times. Only then did he confirm that he was, indeed, Master Xi. He was, however, kind enough to wait for me to remem-

ber how to breathe once again before beginning our next lesson — Weeding for Morons.

You owe me big time, Butterfly.

Oh, yes. I know all about your monks now. They've told me many interesting stories. I'm particularly fascinated by the one that somehow wound up with you in the middle of a snowstorm wearing only a bath towel. And here I was, thinking you took to Zen like a duck to water.

Watch it or I'll send a letter to your Severus telling him all about it.

How is the old bat these days, anyhow? Nicholas never did tell me how the last Battle for the Playstation Master of the Universe made out, and he usually rather enjoys giving me a blow-by-blow account of how he slaughtered Snape at Ultra-Mega-Triple-Death-Wars or whatever the newest game is. I suppose Snape has improved somewhat and Nicholas has finally lost his edge — don't tell me you finally gave in and let him get his own Playstation. I *told* you that letting him wire Dumbledore's old estate for Muggle electricity was a big mistake. Although I suppose that the idea of anyone *telling* Severus Snape what to do is laughable at best. I'm sure you come closer than most, though.

And I know Françoise is still quietly scandalized at you two, still living in sin after all these years. How oddly against her French background, really, but Françoise has always been a rather strange blend of French sophistication



and English pragmatism. I don't know anyone else that gets along with my mother *and* Petunia Dursley equally well.

I try not to think about Françoise and mostly fail. Now, don't frown at that, Butterfly. It's not what you think. Well... that's not true.

It's exactly what you think, but don't believe for a second that I don't know what a bad idea it always was. I'm well aware.

She writes me sometimes. The fact that she still uses Hedwig is a good reminder. Sometimes I try to convince myself that the reason she's still unmarried after all these years is because she's waiting for me to come and sweep her off her feet. But then the illusion shatters and I remember that she's waiting for Harry. Always for Harry.

You see, Hermione. You see that I've changed. I think I now understand why you stayed in Tibet as long as you did. The Path is awfully compelling — perhaps some day I will know what Master Xi means when he tells me that I must not travel on the road to enlightenment, that the road must first come to me.

Sort of makes me think about what you said to me all of those years ago, when I asked you what you'd been doing for all the time you were gone. *Learning to be still*. Are you still now, Butterfly? If I recall, at the time, I told you it was a difficult thing to imagine — you being still. And now that I've learned Master Xi's definition of the word, it's dif-



ficult on most days to think of *myself* as being *still*. But today, maybe. Watching the sun rise over the mountain peaks, thinking about you as I write this, thinking about all you've told me through the years.

A man once wanted to rid himself of his shadow. He ran and ran and ran under the hot sun, trying to escape it. Eventually, his heart burst from the exertion and he fell down, dead.

Funny, if he'd only gone and sat under a nice, shady tree, his shadow would have disappeared.¹³

Stillness...

Hermione, I hope that at the end of every day, you come home from the Aurory, ignore Kingsley Shacklebolt's owls (I know he sends them, don't bother denying it), and curl up in your manor with your Severus on something comfortable and push the shadows back into the corners. Be *still*.

And I know you can. You've always been a better student than I. Although, I admit that this particular course of instruction is somewhat more appealing than our old schoolwork used to be.

I *like* waking up at the crack of dawn. I *like* meditation. I like the simplicity of pulling the weeds from the ground. Somehow, I feel larger, living this small life, as if I'm part of some sort of pattern. It makes me think of what Albus used to say once in a while. 'The whole is usually greater than the sum of its parts, Ron Weasley,' he would tell me with that damnable twinkle in his eye.



Maybe one day I'll know what he means.

My roundabout, rambling point is that my heart still hurts, most days. But it's a good hurt and one that I may come to understand, in time. I may, one day, wake up and find that I am truly *still*.

And now, my lovely Butterfly, Master Xi comes tapping at my door — the onions wait for no man.

Love,

Ron

P.S. As per usual, tell your Severus that if he breaks your heart, I'll hunt him down and use his skull to practice the newest tricks Master Xi has taught me. I'm sure a few of my brothers (and Ginny, too, undoubtedly) would gladly assist me.



Endnotes & Footnotes

Endnotes:

DARK GODS IN THE BLOOD very nearly didn't get written on at least a dozen different counts, the largest reason being that I was afraid that I couldn't tackle a story of the scope that I knew it would wind up being. Having said that, though, it's been an enjoyable, albeit intense, ride. And I would like to take a moment, briefly, to acknowledge a few people and answer a few commonly asked questions.

First of all, thanks a heap for reading and thanks an even bigger heap for reviewing. While I read each and every one of my reviews, I am unfortunately lax in replying to them. But if you did review, be assured that I paid attention to your comments. I wound up adding at least five pages (according to my formatting scheme, this comes out to a little more than 3,000 words, roughly) of tweaking to a story that I had considered *complete* based on my reviews. While I didn't, you know, add in extra chapters or anything, I did add short scenes and exposition bits. So a big thanks for telling me what you thought about my little tale.

Now, onto the pertinent questions. Or, at least, the



most common comments.

I should probably say right off the bat that I never, ever intended *Dark Gods* to be a whodunit-type story, meaning I never intended it to be particularly possible for the reader to follow the evidence and “guess” the killer along with Hermione and Severus (although I like to think that knowing the conclusion, you can re-read the story and see that I’ve dropped subtle clues). But when I started receiving conjectures as to the identity of the killer as I posted chapters, I just couldn’t bring myself to say that — I thought it might dispel all of that lovely tension I was attempting to build and render Severus’ introduction to our buddy Stan anti-climactic.

Besides, some of your theories were absolutely *fascinating*. I think that every single character I even off-handedly mentioned in the story was a suspect, from eighteen-month old Alice Potter to not-even-appearing-for-a-full-scene, obvious-red-herring Draco Malfoy, with Dumbledore, Neville, and Dudley as the most-suggested suspects. My personal favorite theory, however, was the suggestion that the video game *Soulblade* had something to do with Harry’s death. Fifty points for originality...

Another issue that I received a fair number of comments/questions on was, of course, the romance question. There were, naturally, several potential pairings here (Ron/Hermione was suggested from the get-go, but as a natu-

ral Snape/Hermione ‘shipper, I find that pairing difficult to even *read*, much less write), and if I’d been writing a WiP, I suppose I could have been persuaded to have more of an overall romantic flavor to the story. But I’d decided in my, what, second outline that Françoise was going to attempt to seduce Ron and that Severus and Hermione were going to wind up “getting together” *after* the story ended, thus prompting the epilogue, actually. I wanted to allude to their relationship to give it some closure. Ron, though, has a way of whispering in my ear and he turned the epilogue into much more of a statement than the simple sum-up I’d originally intended.

As I said, then, *Dark Gods* was about *understanding*, and I went back and forth on the romance issue myself in the writing. In the end, I decided that the characters I’d drawn here were far too hesitant and had entirely too many trust issues to come together within the timeframe of the actual story.

Because, again, as with *ORDINARY PEOPLE* (shameless plug for my own work, yes?), I’d always intended this to be a very character-driven tale. An exploration of the quote that one of my old high-school teachers used to attribute to Karl Jung: “There is no coming to consciousness except through pain.” In many ways, I saw the ‘serial killer’ thread as secondary to this idea.

Although quite necessary to the plot, both as resolution



to Harry's death and as a method of making this more than three hundred pages of people talking. And I will go ahead and confirm the rumors — yes, I am a fan (not avid, just familiar enough to have read the entire Hannibal trilogy) of the work of Thomas Harris, and for the most part, the parallels people have drawn between certain elements of *SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* and this story were deliberate. I wanted a broader tale, though, in that I was looking for more of a study of grief and loss *through* the human heart of darkness rather than Harris' more explicit exploration of the heart itself. How Ron and Hermione, and ultimately even Severus himself, are transformed by this tragedy and its eventual resolution. I went creeping back through my old outlines and notes and I found something I wrote some months ago as I was struggling with some characterization issues (probably at three AM and jazzed out on caffeine) that sums up what I was trying to achieve with *DARK GODS* rather nicely: "I like to think that each of the main characters finds *stillness* (to borrow Ron's phrase), in their own fashions — an inner peace that was lacking, an acknowledgement of shadow-within-self..."

And you see why I thought this story was entirely too ambitious for me...

Another person I'd like to take time out to thank is Jodel over at Red Hen, and my reasons are twofold. Firstly, she is the author of a series of essays on the Potterverse, which I

and my friends have read and discussed many times. And while I did not consciously use these essays in my drafting of *DARK GODS IN THE BLOOD*, it has been recently brought to my attention that these essays have been an enormous unconscious influence (particularly, I now see, upon further examination, in Ron's discussion with Hermione about the nature of Harry's connection with Voldemort). It would be unfair if I did not credit her with these wonderful theories, and I encourage everyone to go and check her essays out. Also, Jodel has been kind enough to do a lovely graphically-enhanced version of *DARK GODS* in .pdf format, found on both her website and mine (http://www.geocities.com/hayseed_24/index.html) and I wanted to thank her again for all of the work she put into this project. Go check her out at <http://www.redhen-publications.com/index.html>.

One last final thanks and then I'll go away, I promise. To the one person with whom I talked about this story *incessantly*, about plot points and dialogue bits and every aspect of the writing process that writers find fascinating but no one else wants to hear about. But she listened to me at least ninety percent of the time, and for that I am eternally grateful. Anyway, if this story is dedicated to anyone, it's dedicated to her. She knows who she is...

hayseed

Started: 10 August 2003

Finished: 07 March 2004



Footnotes:

¹ For any interested parties, Françoise is pronounced “Fran-swahz.” This is, of course, an incredibly Anglicized pronunciation. I’ve probably just offended every single French-speaking reader I’ve got by not describing the nuances of the *cédille* in loving detail, but oh well...

² Jan Vermeer was a 17th century Dutch artist in the Baroque style whose genius was not fully recognized in his lifetime. Very little is known of his training (although the rest of his life is well-documented) but some sources say that he was trained by a former pupil of the great Rembrandt of the Utrecht school (thanks, Janson!). While I don’t mean to suggest that Harry and Françoise would have an *actual* Vermeer in their home, a 19th century copy would not go amiss in their décor and would certainly be worth a pretty penny.

³ Yes, yes. Right from SILENCE OF THE LAMBS. I didn’t realize I’d done it until I was doing my final edit, but it just fits entirely too nicely to take out.

⁴ Plato’s REPUBLIC is indeed a treatise on ethics (the fundamental question Plato desires to answer is “What is good in and of itself?”), however he develops this huge metaphor of ‘the ideal city’ within it. The method Plato proposes to control the lower populations of said ideal city is to

instruct children in the belief that there are three sorts of people — gold, silver, and bronze — and everyone works according to their composition. Just to let you know.

⁵ Machiavelli, for all his reputation due to the publication of THE PRINCE in 1529, was not Machiavellian. THE PRINCE is a work that details the ‘proper’ way to rule a kingdom, which is, incidentally, rather despotic. However, Machiavelli himself was a staunch republican, calling for the unification of Italy under a single, democratic leader. I rather thought that Snape and Hermione both would appreciate the irony of such a thing and would thus be familiar with the tale. Machiavelli was indeed exiled to his country estate for the last few years of his life — called San Casciano, I believe. Thus endeth the impromptu history lesson.

⁶ Soulblade is an actual game created for the Playstation. Not sure about the release date, but it has to be prior to 2000 because that’s when I stumbled across it — in 2012, when the story is set, it is indeed an *old* game. Unlike Hermione, I happen to be a sort of idiot savant at Soulblade, but like Hermione, I stopped playing video games roughly when consoles came out (to illustrate, my favorite game is Galaga) — my pinball addiction doesn’t count. But play Soulblade if you get a chance — it’s fun. If you’re over the legal drinking age in your country, play Soulblade while intoxicated — it’s even more fun (if you’re not, pretend I didn’t just say that).



⁷ Matthew Hopkins was, of course, real. He called himself the 'Witch-Finder General' and, according to sources, had anywhere from 200 to 400 'witches' executed during the span of his career, which seems to have predominantly been the 1640's. He remains a controversial character to this day. I am, naturally, making him an Auror who possibly teetered on the edge of the Dark arts himself with only the most ironic of intentions.

⁸ Quotation, of course, taken from Lewis Carroll's ALICE IN WONDERLAND. The Cheshire cat uses this logic to explain to Alice that he is mad (and everyone in this wood is mad, thus Alice herself must be mad, and so forth). I'm reasonably certain that Snape would be familiar with most of the major works of English literature in passing, but I would think (this is pure conjecture, mind...) that he would be drawn to both of Carroll's Alice books just as a matter of course.

⁹ Ron's definition of a colander is a sort of family joke that wormed its way into the dialogue. For whatever reason, I couldn't retain the word 'colander' for a suspiciously long part of my childhood, up to and including large chunks of my adolescence. Refrain from the inevitable puns, please. I knew the definition of the word, but I would regularly forget to apply the word to the actual object. And so, many times in the kitchen, when I was trying to ask for it, I would just yell at whoever was offer-

ing to fetch it, "You know! That bowl that spaghetti stays in when water goes out!" This level of abject stupidity coming from an otherwise reasonably intelligent being, of course, delighted my family, and I have yet to live it down, many years after the fact.

¹⁰ The book Old Jack is talking about is, of course, Joseph Heller's CATCH-22.

¹¹ All of my information on poison hemlock is, to the best of my knowledge, correct. If you're particularly interested in the nuances of *conium maculatum*, there are various botanical sites on the Web that list more than enough info. The plant is, of course, most well known due to the fact that it was the poison that Socrates was ordered to swallow in 399 BCE upon his conviction on charges of 'corrupting the youth of Athens.' There is a full account of his death in Plato's Dialogue entitled PHAEDO (for interested parties, the most common translation is Jowett). It has, however, little to say on the nature and symptoms of hemlock, although one might note the description of full paralysis.

¹² All right, all right... so I stole the expletive from STEEL MAGNOLIAS (one of my absolute favorite movies), but it's just such a good one.

¹³ This is, indeed, a Taoist epigram (loosely translated from the English source I read it from, I'm sure). I am uncertain of its origins, but be assured that I'm nowhere near



bright enough to come up with something so profound on my own. It's the sort of thing I think Master Xi would say to Ron (and probably Hermione as well), though.

Colophon

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign, utilizing commercial clip art from Dynamic Graphics, modified in Adobe Photoshop. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop, It will be obvious to the reader that the "little gods" interlock pattern is inspired by a sketch by M. C. Esher. The Frontspiece photo was shot locally in Angeles-Rosedale Cemetery of West Adams, in Los Angeles. Angeles-Rosedale is one of the two oldest cemeteries in that city. It, and its annual tour, sponsored by the West Adams Historical Association have been featured on Huell Howser's show — some years ago.

Fonts used in this publication are: the Triplex family, by Zuzana Licko, distributed by Emigré foundary for body text. Titling and various other decoratins are set in Bodega Serif, dingbat is from IGC's Quirks.

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

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