

# Iridescent Snow

*by labrt2004*

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.

## Red and Gold

*Chapter 1 of 11*

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"Oy, get it, mate! Whoever loses has to try Fred and George's Lockhart Lollies!" Ronald Weasley shouted with a magically amplified voice. The red-haired Keeper then took to zipping round and round the goal posts in a descending spiral, childish howls of glee becoming increasingly louder as he spun down towards the Quidditch pitch.

Harry and Ginny had both directed their brooms into identical kamikaze dives, their practice robes flaring out behind them in a streak of scarlet. Concentration contorted both their facial features as they plummeted in tandem after the Snitch, which seemed to have plans of its own. It zoomed towards the ground at a hazardous speed, the two reckless Gryffindor Seekers crashing downwards in its wake.

On the top-most row of stands, the Head Girl, Hermione Granger, looked up from her Transfiguration homework as the Gryffindor team practice began to wind up. Rolling her eyes, she shook her head and tried to tune out the mayhem that was starting to unfold. Evidently, her friends had much excess energy to dispense. For the past several weeks, Hermione had started to take her schoolwork out with her to do on the Quidditch pitch while the Gryffindor team trained. Hermione's new Head Girl duties included a heavier patrolling schedule, and as much as she loved the old, magical castle that was Hogwarts, the frequent late night strolls through the darkened corridors had started to make her feel damp and cold beneath her skin. The warm September breeze and the *swish* of brooms sweeping by were pleasant to her and helped soothe away her NEWT-induced stress. The wind liked to blow away her notes, but that could be easily remedied with a simple sticking charm, which she now applied to secure a page in her textbook.

In spite of her efforts to ignore the rowdy Quidditch team, however, Hermione could not help but bite her lip in worry as she watched Harry and Ginny's progress. They jostled each other rather dangerously, their hands outstretched towards the Snitch. The angles of their broom handles were perfectly matched, and both hunched forward in instinctively aerodynamic positions. And neither seemed to care that they were about to plunge straight into the earth. Unable to stave off her concern despite having watched Harry play Quidditch for years, Hermione frowned and sighed, her fingers playing with the handle of her wand as she considered whether she ought to cast a cushioning spell. Harry had already established a reputation for consistently defying gravity, with his trademark dives and teeth grinding recoveries, but Ginny, only a year younger and with a mere two years of team experience, was ending up in the hospital wing after each game almost as often as Harry.

Hermione had already leapt to her feet, wand in hand, when she heard a victorious yell emerge from the red blur that represented the forms of the two Seekers. Abruptly, Harry and Ginny straightened their brooms and rolled smoothly out of the dive, banking around to where Hermione now stood, her mouth dry with relief. Blinking in surprise, Hermione noted that it was Ginny's hand that held the still struggling Snitch as the two zoomed by, heading for the far end of the pitch where the rest of the team had gathered. *Oh Merlin, Harry's going to be mad!* Hermione thought with slight trepidation. She didn't suppose that Harry's pride would take well to Ron's kid sister beating him to the Snitch.

Sure enough, as Ron and the other Gryffindors hovered by the goal posts, egging him on good-naturedly, Harry had proceeded to chase Ginny around the perimeter of the pitch. "You think you're so great, huh, Ginny? We'll see how great you are when they set off Malfoy against you during a real match!" Harry was shouting, though Hermione could tell that he was amused.

Ginny, laughing saucily, whipped her broom around to face Harry. "Oh, sod off, Harry, I beat you and you know it!" The sixth year's flame-colored hair fanned out behind her as she took off again, singing, "And *you* have to have a Lockhart Lolly!" Grinning through his glare, Harry bent forward and urged his broom faster in pursuit. Hermione shuddered. Whatever a "Lockhart Lolly" was, she was sure that she was glad not to be having one.

Sitting back down, Hermione continued to watch the Quidditch pitch contemplatively. Her homework lay at her side, for once, abandoned. It was easy to forget sometimes that the Wizarding world was in the midst of war. How could one remember the Prophecy when Harry Potter was dive bombing with his broom, his robes tangled about him and his boots spattered with mud? No one would suspect that the Quidditch player whose eyes sparkled with merriment behind glasses knocked askew had spent the better part of his sixth year learning advanced defense techniques to prepare for his face-off with Voldemort. *So good to see that boy relaxing and enjoying himself* Hermione thought, then wrinkled her nose as she realized just how much she had sounded like Mrs. Weasley.

A throat clearing softly from somewhere to her left startled Hermione out of her reverie, and turning, she jumped in shock to see Professor Snape standing beside her with a rather annoyed expression on his face. Her next urge, strangely enough, was to laugh, for the Potions master looked quite out of place in the Quidditch stands, standing there stiffly, his black robes filling out behind him with each gust of the wind.

"Hello, Professor Snape," Hermione said. Though she managed to keep the laughter at bay, a smile still crept beneath her eyes. Cringing inwardly, she waited for him to insult her. *Well, at least my teeth are no longer large* Hermione thought with only some sarcasm.

Yet, the sole reaction Snape gave to her uncharacteristic mirth was to follow her gaze out to where Harry was now hobnobbing with his teammates by the Hufflepuff stands. Seeming to address no one in particular, he said, "You are wanted in the headmaster's office, Miss Granger."

Hermione was sure that Dumbledore wanted to make an announcement to all the prefects. With a nod, she replied, "If you give me a moment, sir, I'll go fetch Ron over there, as this practice is just ending."

For a moment, the professor said nothing. His eyes moved to the bench, where her cloak sat in a crumpled heap, to the Transfiguration text in which she had stuck a quill between the pages to mark her place, and then finally back to her. With a flush, Hermione realized that her uniform skirt was wrinkled from holding her books in her lap and her Gryffindor tie was gone. She wondered if he was going to take points for not being neatly attired.

Something that was not quite Snape's usual disdain flickered across his face, but before Hermione could decide what it was, Snape said softly, "There is no need to inform Mr. Weasley, Granger, the headmaster wishes to see you alone." And as if suddenly recovering his sneer, the professor added, "Much as I agree that Potter and Weasley are sadly lacking in brain, they will survive for the moment without your constant surveillance."

Carefully maintaining a neutral demeanor, Hermione noted the fact that Snape had insulted her only with great effort and that there was an unusually guarded quality about his gaze. Dipping her head in assent, she murmured, "Yes, Professor." She quickly *accio*-ed her school work into her bag and followed the Potions master back into the castle.

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Having finally extracted Granger from the bloody Quidditch pitch, Severus now wished that they could simply Apparate to Albus' office. The fact that the student walking beside him was underage for Apparating mattered little; Severus knew that the insufferably clever witch had probably already mastered joint Apparation and could easily whisk the Weasley dolt to safety in a moment's notice if too large an arachnid happened to cross the boy's path.

This walk was the least desirable task that he had been given in a long time, short of anything he had to perform for the Dark Lord. Of all the staff members present when Albus had informed them of the news, he was the only one composed enough to go seek out Granger. As they made their way to the headmaster's office, he was grateful for the Head Girl's rare silence. Severus figured that she must be the only one of the Golden Trio intelligent enough to know when to be quiet. Or perhaps he had revealed too much to her when they were on the Quidditch stands. It was such unsavory tidings that he bore with him, and Granger had looked so... content when he had come upon her. For once, her nose had not been buried in her blasted textbooks, and she had even cast off her Head Girl robes. He found no pleasure in marring such a moment of tranquility, and his hesitation must have shown.

At least Granger understood she was not being summoned for a pleasant afternoon tea with Albus. "Chocolate Frogs!" Severus snapped at the headmaster's ridiculous gargoyles. He would not relish the scene he was about to witness, and it looked like Granger had decided that she wouldn't, either. As the guardians sprang apart to reveal the stone escalator, Severus stepped aside to allow the girl to pass. She directed a nervous look to him, which he pointedly ignored and swiftly stepped into the tower behind her. He wondered how much he could depend on Minerva not to start sniffing as soon as Granger set foot into the room. The steely head of Gryffindor House was really starting to grow soft.

To her credit, Minerva was dry-eyed when they entered the headmaster's office, though Severus decided that she did look rather tragic without her usual square glasses perched on her nose. Albus sat behind his desk looking weary and old, which unsettled the Potions master more than he was willing to admit. Flitwick and Sprout flanked him, looking the picture of misery.

Granger paused at the spectacle of her undone professors, and to Severus' irritation, the girl turned around and looked *ahim*. As if he would be the one to guide her through her dilemma. Sighing, he stopped behind her and muttered under his breath, "Well, go on in, Granger."

Albus stood and gestured to the chair across his desk. "Miss Granger, please take a seat."

Granger did so slowly, glancing about her with wide-eyed confusion. Severus took a place by the bookshelves, next to Minerva, and crossed his arms.

Albus stepped around to where the girl sat and placed one gnarly hand upon her shoulder. "My dear, I am afraid I have rather unpleasant news for you. Both your parents were killed this morning, and the Dark Mark was found above your house."

What little color there was left in Granger's face instantly drained, and from his vantage point, Severus saw the girl's shoulders stiffen and her grip tighten about the arms of her chair.

"My... my parents, Headmaster?" she uttered in a remarkably steady voice. Severus grudgingly admitted that the girl was uncommonly disciplined.

"Yes, Hermione. I am very sorry. It appears as if Tom Riddle and his followers have taken yet more victims," Albus confirmed quietly.

The tears had risen in her eyes, but were not yet forthcoming. "But... why?" she murmured.

Severus barely restrained himself from flinching when he heard Granger's question. Why? The Potions master felt the weight of so many years serving the Dark Lord suddenly press down upon him, a burden that was lightened only with the cynicism that he had learnt at the feet of his Master. *You do not ever ask the Dark Lord "why." You only ever ask, "What's next?"*

The headmaster squeezed Granger's shoulder as he considered her question. Considered how to give an answer kinder than that afforded by reality, Severus realized, for he knew that Albus saw the truth as clearly as he did. At length, the old wizard replied, "Voldemort's ultimate goal is Harry's destruction. He understands that Harry needs the support and love of his friends, yearns for it, in fact. By targeting your parents, Hermione, he has hurt you, and he hopes that through your weakened state, he can reach Harry."

*And see that it does not happen,* Severus added to himself. Though Granger would certainly infer Albus' unspoken command, as she infers everything. Albus' kindness never comes without a price.

"H-how?" Granger choked out.

"*Avada Kedavra*," the headmaster answered gravely.

With a strangled sob, Granger finally fell forward in her chair, head buried in her hands, shoulders shaking with her sorrow.

Severus bowed his own head. It had been years since he had joined the Dark Lord's service. He had held countless people at wandpoint, snuffing out their lives with a curse that he had learned to incant in clipped and measured tones. But never had he ever lingered to face the devastating grief of the child left behind.

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Many thanks to Potionmistress for betaing this chapter.

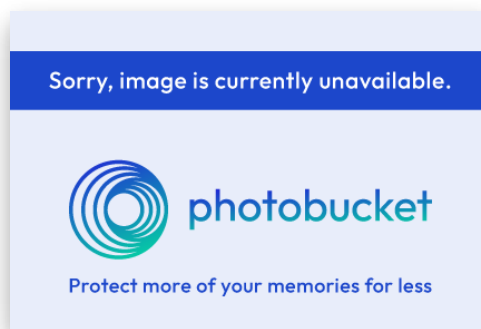
**Reviews much appreciated!**

## Be This the Whetstone of Your Sword

Chapter 2 of 11

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

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Dead by *Avada Kedavra*. She hadn't written them a letter in a week. She hadn't even been there with them when... it had happened. The room suddenly seemed devoid of air, and her head started to spin. Fawkes flew down from his perch and placed himself at her knee, nudging her hand with his beak and trilling softly. With the infusion of strength from the phoenix, Hermione looked up through the blur of her tears and saw Dumbledore settle down before his desk again, the flowing robes that the old wizard favored draping loosely over his chair.

"Hermione, Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape will escort you to the morgue at the Ministry of Magic. Your Muggle relatives have had their memories modified. They believe your parents both died of carbon monoxide poisoning and that their bodies are currently at the coroner's. You will, of course, be excused from classes for as long as you need to put your affairs in order," the headmaster stated kindly.

She somehow found the wherewithal to nod at this and, standing up on shaky legs, followed Snape's retreating form out of the office. McGonagall brought up the rear in their sad little procession, and as they emerged from the tower into the corridor, Hermione felt the Transfiguration professor's thin hand drape around her to pull her into a comforting one-armed embrace. This unusual show of affection only made the lump in Hermione's throat grow larger, but she tried to give her Head of House a smile, anyway.

Professor McGonagall was more than adequate company for this trip, especially in her strange new motherly persona, Hermione thought idly, and she wondered why Dumbledore would wish to send Snape along with them. The man had remained completely silent during her exchange with the headmaster, and as she watched him plow ahead of them, his robes billowing behind him, Hermione observed that he was obviously not pleased to find himself in the position of accompanying her. She certainly had no desire to impose upon her dour Potions professor...

Her question was answered, however, when they rounded a corner and were met by Harry and Ron, both carrying their brooms and looking like they had run a great distance in a very short amount of time. Professor Snape stepped aside with an impatient huff. His face pale and anxious, Ron hurried forward and gasped, "Hermione! We... we just..." He struggled to speak, panting between his words.

Harry, who appeared equally ragged, finished, "Ron's mum just sent an owl, we just heard about your parents, Hermione! We're... very sorry," he faltered, looking stricken. A split second later, Harry broke into a hideously silly grin. Before Hermione's addled brain could figure out what was going on, though, the boy had hastily raised his elbow to cover his mouth while turning a bright shade of red.

"Er..." Ron cleared his throat awkwardly and stared at the ground.

"Sorry," Harry murmured from behind his robe sleeve. "It's... you know, the Lockhart Lolly."

In spite of herself, Hermione felt the corners of her lips lift. "Oh, it's quite all right," she breathed in faint amusement. "Put your arm down, Harry, and let me see properly what Fred and George cooked up this time."

With another reproachful glance at Ron, Harry lowered his arm, and Hermione saw that his mouth was stretched out in an exceedingly wide smile, white teeth glistening in a truly Lockhartesque fashion. After a few moments, the smile faded into a grimace and then Harry's mouth resumed its normal shape. "It comes and goes," he explained sheepishly. "The candy causes me to walk around smiling like a bloody idiot at the most inopportune moments." Looking about him, Harry suddenly noticed the presence of the glowering Potions master and Professor McGonagall, who was looking increasingly irritated herself. "Uh... what's happening, Hermione? Where are they taking you?"

"They're taking me to the morgue to claim the bodies of my parents," she responded in a miserable tone, feeling her briefly forgotten sadness returning anew.

"We'll go with you!" Ron declared emphatically. The red-haired boy gripped his broom as if about to mount it.

McGonagall actually hesitated at this and looked to be debating whether or not to grant them permission. The Gryffindor Head dabbed at her eyes absently with a lace-hemmed handkerchief, and Hermione, who had no wish for the added presence of her well-meaning friends, was just dredging up the words to refuse them, when Snape slunk his way from the shadows of the wall and placed himself before them.

"You'll do no such thing, Weasley. It is Granger's parents who are deceased, I believe, not yours. If you set foot out of this castle, you will find that the rest of term shall be rather unpleasant for you...however short that term may prove," the Potions master interjected silkily.

Professor McGonagall looked rather relieved at having the decision made for her and simply nodded sternly at the two boys.

Outraged, Ron snarled, "But Professor..." at the same time Harry protested in a wounded tone, "That's not right!"

Sighing, Hermione placed a hand on both their elbows and said, "Thanks for your concern, but I agree this time that it's best for me to... just get this over with, if you know what I mean. It's pointless for all three of us to go."

That seemed to subdue them well enough, and after bidding her friends goodbye, she was on her way again, her professors in tow. Snape had barged out into the courtyard without looking back, and Hermione felt an odd sense of gratitude to him for interceding on her behalf, though she knew he had done so out of spite for Harry and Ron rather than any concern for herself. But Dumbledore apparently had foreseen this development and had sent Professor Snape along to ward off any other unwanted attention, for McGonagall seemed to have lost her edge. It did make sense, Hermione considered sadly. Professor McGonagall had known her parents and had met with them to discuss her progress during school, whereas Snape hadn't... plus Snape didn't care about anyone anyway.

When they arrived at the phone booth leading to the Ministry of Magic, Hermione was again surprised when Snape took the phone receiver from her hands and brusquely informed the Ministry that they were here to "see about Miss Granger's parents." Dazedly, Hermione pinned the badge that fell down the coin chute to her robe. According to the badges, they were "visiting the deceased."

Hermione tried not to look at any of the doors they passed when they stepped out of the lift. She still remembered the trip she had made with Harry and Ron to the Department of Mysteries two years ago, and the memories made her skin crawl. Presently, they arrived at a door tucked away at the end of a narrow passageway on which hung a crooked little sign saying, "Morg." The portly wizard sitting at the reception desk was nodding off over a half-eaten ham sandwich when they arrived. Hermione hesitantly pressed the bell sitting on the counter, and the man jerked awake with a snort and peered at them blankly before grunting, "Can I help you?"

Squaring her shoulders, Hermione tried for a calm voice, though it still cracked. "Yes, I'm here to inquire about my parents, David and Jane Granger, who were killed by uh... You-Know-Who this morning."

The reception wizard seemed unfazed by the mention of Voldemort. He merely hefted himself up from his chair, dragged open a filing cabinet, and muttering to himself, waved his wand over the folders sitting inside. "Let's see... Graley, Grambo, Grandel... Granger. Here we are. Muggles?" he asked, looking down at the two files he held in his hand.

At Hermione's nod, the Ministry wizard waved them through the doorway, into the cool, dry room that housed the morgue. The dim space felt appropriately depressing. The floor was a washed out grey, and the stainless steel walls each contained a grid of rectangular panels. Hermione swallowed nervously as she imagined what must lay behind the walls. The man ambled leisurely to two adjacent panels and tapped them both with his wand. Immediately, they popped open like drawers, and a bit unsteadily, Hermione made her way over, Professor McGonagall following close behind.

The sight of her parents, lying there side by side, in the long narrow boxes, caused the bile rise in Hermione's throat. She stood rooted in place, unable to breathe, as the reality of her parents' deaths was finally laid before her eyes. Her father, still wearing his flannel pajama top, slightly thinning hair mussed with sleep. Her mother, in her white night shift. Both wore hauntingly peaceful expressions, as if they were in a deep slumber and waiting to be reawakened, she thought fleetingly.

She was vaguely aware of Professor McGonagall conjuring a chair behind her and pressing her firmly into it. She sat there stiffly for a few moments, and then tentatively reached out to grasp her mother's hand. It was cold... so cold... Holding the lifeless hand up to her cheek, Hermione bent her head and cried.

The minutes stretched on, the silence punctuated only by the sounds of her own muffled sobbing, until finally, she felt a hand slide beneath one arm and gently pull her up. "Come, Miss Granger, you need to go home and rest. Severus, you, too," came the abnormally soft voice of McGonagall. Her Head of House seemed to have regained her equanimity, and Hermione, struggling to her feet, belatedly realized the oddity of Professor McGonagall shepherding Professor Snape about. Looking up, she saw the stony Potions master staring fixedly at the remains of her mother, his eyes dark and shadowed, his mind far away.

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With a groan, Hermione sat up in bed and kicked away the warmth of her covers. She reached over to her nightstand and clumsily patted a hand over her Muggle alarm clock until she finally managed to silence the shrill beeping. Sunlight streaming into the room caused her to squint, and sluggishly, she glanced about, half-expecting to see the maroon curtains that hung around her bed in Gryffindor Tower. Instead, she found herself staring blankly at the crème-colored walls of her own bedroom.

The momentary confusion was quickly dispelled, however, as memory surged forward like a swelling tide. *Dead. Her parents were dead.*

Closing her eyes and drawing her knees up against the rest of her body, Hermione willed herself to breathe through the overwhelming tightness that had settled into her chest. *They hadn't done anything to Voldemort. They didn't even know the monster existed...* Clenching her head between cold fingertips, she felt her eyes burn with tears, and she wanted nothing more than to fall back against the mattress, burrow her way into the bed clothes, and cry herself back to sleep, as she had done the previous night, when utterly spent with grief and anger, she had parted ways with the professors, Apparated into her house, and tumbled her way into bed.

She could not go back to sleep, however, much as she would have liked to, and perhaps after a good, hard *Obliviate* to her own head. There was a house full of Muggle relatives to look forward to, and by the looks of their incredulous faces when she had walked past them on her way to bed last night, she had yet to come up with a convincing explanation for how she arrived in the middle of the night without so much as opening the door.

The heel of her hand scrubbed at her cheeks, wiping away the errant tear or two that had squeezed its way out. With great effort, Hermione forced her legs over the side of her bed. She had not bothered to change out of her school clothes after coming home, and now, the material of her skirt stuck to her thighs as she stood up while her robes tangled messily around her. Slowly, she shuffled over to her dresser and dared to look into the mirror. Her hair was a tangled and unruly mass, the curls having escaped the tight knot she had used to restrain them. With a shaking hand, she reached up and brushed one strand out of her face, only to notice that her eyes were red and swollen, and her complexion pasty. For a few moments, Hermione stood transfixed by this ghastly image staring out at her from the mirror.

"Hermione Jane Granger," she mouthed to the reflection, watching her chapped lips move soundlessly around her name.

Who was she, really? Strangely, she had never truly pondered this question before. She supposed that she was the studious Head Girl, always surrounded by the books that delighted her. She had never thought about what would happen to her after Hogwarts. Or considered the fact that she would not be a student forever. Why should she, when she was so content among the old, dusty tomes that she found in the Restricted Section, books whose pages contained something different each time she opened them, books whose authors talked back to her, and even books that were supposed to drive the unsuspecting witch or wizard mad if they read them too much? She wouldn't have minded if she had to spend ten more years at Hogwarts, even if only to scrape something new each day from the volumes populating the library.

She remembered in fifth year, when she, Harry, and Ron had met with Professor McGonagall to discuss their future plans. Harry had been so certain that he wanted to become an Auror, but she had picked up one pamphlet after another, unable to find a profession that truly appealed to her. It had seemed so early then. She was Hermione Jane Granger, Hogwarts student, and that was good enough for her. She would think about the future when she received her OWL scores. And then she had decided that she could wait until the end of sixth year.

But now, at the cusp of her graduation, she had yet to figure out her next destination. With her parents obliterated by a madman and herself suddenly responsible for all their assets, she realized with dismay that not only was it time to decide what to do with herself but that she would also no longer have the luxury of being just one among many students toiling at her books with her life neatly contained between the protective boundaries of the castle.

Hermione blinked at her wan counterpart. Never did she imagine that she would feel so utterly terrified by the idea that she would have to *do something*...

A knock on her door pulled her out of her gloomy musing. Quickly, she shrugged off her Hogwarts robes. Furtively shoving them underneath a pillow, she called out dully, "Come in."

A mousy-haired woman entered the room: her mother's sister. "Hermione, dear..."

"Auntie Cathy," she acknowledged quietly, wincing at her aunt's taken-aback expression. She wondered just how bedraggled she looked.

Cathy's eyes glistened as she whispered, "My poor child." Hermione allowed herself to be pulled into her aunt's arms. "I am so very sorry."

"It's... all right," Hermione responded lamely. She hoped her aunt would release her soon, as she felt dangerously unstable in the embrace of someone who so resembled her mother. "Um, thanks for coming."

To Hermione's relief, Cathy let go of her. "Of course!" The woman looked her up and down appraisingly before declaring, "You need breakfast. I've laid it all out on the table. Your uncle and I have been talking about your parents' funeral arrangements, and we thought we'd help you with them, but you have the final word, of course. Fill up, and then come into the sitting room to discuss David and Jane's eulogy." With that, her aunt blew her nose, shook her head, and left the room.

Hermione sat down on her bed again after the door closed. The thought of arranging her parents' funeral made her feel queasy. In her bitterness, all she wanted to do was lash out in sarcasm. "Poor David and Jane are dead because a raving lunatic is aiming to off my best friend," certainly would not do.

She had been bleakly contemplating a spot on her comforter for some time when, with a start, Hermione remembered that the Muggles in attendance would know nothing about Voldemort. They were all under the impression that her parents had died in their sleep! Even better, she thought sullenly. She would have to make up outrageous lies. Hermione frowned. But there were going to be wizards there, too, she was sure. Harry, the Weasleys, and she imagined Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore would definitely show up. *They* knew the truth. *They* would appreciate the sacrifice her Muggle parents had made for the wizarding world. She refused to masquerade behind fabrications when they were perfectly aware of what had really happened. But she couldn't very well break the International Statute of Secrecy, could she? Especially with such sensitive material?

She considered holding two separate services, but quickly rejected that idea. One funeral would be harrowing enough. Perhaps a magical screen under concealing charms on which she would broadcast a separate eulogy? No, that would be too distracting... With a sigh, she looked around the room disconsolately until her eyes fell upon the sheets of parchment that had accumulated on the floor beside her bed. Cocking her head, the young witch sat up straighter and regarded them thoughtfully. She reached down and grabbed one sheet, her notes from last year's Charms class. Absently, she pulled out her wand, and after a moment of deliberation, pointed it at the writing and murmured, "*Celare*."

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Carefully weighing out one last aliquot of moonshade, Severus spelled the row of vials shut and stored them away for use the next day with his fourth years. A wave of his wand cleared the work bench, and the Potions master stalked out of the laboratory, heading towards his private quarters.

As soon as he was through the door, Severus made for the sideboard and poured himself a glass of wine, then thought better of it and substituted it with cognac. He would need something strong tonight if he intended to finish marking the stack of essays that awaited him. With a sigh, Severus lowered himself wearily into his office chair and downed a bit of his drink. Leaning over his desk and propping his head up with one hand, the professor shut his eyes and allowed the soothing, earthen flavor of the cognac to coat his palate before slowly swallowing it.

Albus, once again acting in his capacity as an interfering nuisance, had arranged for him to chaperone Granger's pity party. The headmaster had some hare-brained notion of forcing him to confront his past. *As if he hid from it* Snape thought angrily. The sight of Granger's grief had resurrected too many old memories, calling forth the ghosts that persisted in haunting him, though he valiantly banished them from his presence with each new day. Her horror-filled eyes, her plaintive questions, and her anguished cries had all unnerved him more than a Death Eater meeting.

It had been a long while since a crisis such as this had befallen a Hogwarts student. With a grim snort, Severus realized that the only similar incident that had preceded this episode had involved none other than the celebrated Lily and James Potter. The parents of the wizarding world's revered hero. And Potter had been a mere two years old when the event had taken place. Longbottom could be counted, too, if one wished, but Frank and Alice weren't quite dead, and their son, too, had never known his parents. Diggory, well, Diggory was dead, wasn't he?

Granger alone was subjected to a head-on blow. Tragedy did seem to follow the young lady around, for the Head Girl lived a most wretched existence. An existence not

unlike his own, Severus thought with a wry smirk. Buried in books, with no semblance of a social milieu save for trotting in Potter's shadow or minding dunderheads such as Weasley. Though he seemed to recall a passing fascination with house-elf welfare. The girl was pompous in her abundant knowledge, and no amount of point deductions in class could put her off from reciting entire passages of the textbook.

But it was not the addition of yet more misfortune to Granger's life that had affected him so. Nor was it the vivid reminder of his pledge to the Dark Lord. In fact, for a long while, he had successfully lived with the knowledge that he routinely pointed a wand against the hearts of Muggle-borns, murdering them with a softly spoken incantation, and that he had oft stood by watching impassively as young children were tortured to insanity. For those sins, Albus had insisted, he had long made atonement. Severus knew better, though. Having blood on his hands had simply ceased to concern him. It was matter of growing comfortable in his iniquity.

Indeed, the sordid legacy of his Death Eater days and the promise of eternal damnation for his cursed, black soul were not the reasons that he sought the blissful respite of fine drink. He quaffed the remainder of the cognac and savored the numbing emptiness that followed. No, not the nameless, faceless Muggles and half-bloods. But rather the memory of another child from a different time and place. A child who, like Granger, had wept before the body of his dead mother, wand clutched tightly in his convulsing right hand. A child who had then appeared before the Dark Lord to announce that he had performed what his Master had commanded of him. A child who had not yet succeeded in casting *Avada Kedavra* in a steady voice, since it had been but his first time.

The professor often wondered which of the fates had such a twisted sense of humor as to allow him to continue to exist.

Reaching forward he brought his hand near the candle that sat on his desk. The heat made his fingertips prickle, and impulsively, he darted his thumb out and immersed it in the liquid wax that had pooled at the base of the flame. He hissed slightly at the pain, but with a strange sense of satisfaction, he watched intently as the translucent liquid slowly solidified into a cap of glistening white wax. His flesh was an angry red beneath where he peeled the layer off. He crumpled the now-brittle material between his fingers, and the flecks fell piece by piece onto the surface of Tarquin Duffy's essay.

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The chapel was quiet when Severus arrived. The formless buzz of many hushed conversations lent a heavy, almost soporific quality to the atmosphere. He slid silently into the pew where Albus and Minerva were sitting, trying not to stare at his colleagues, who were looking out of their element in Muggle garb. His own clothing was quite enough to divert him. Muggle notions of proper dress for a male certainly did not take into due consideration the need for movement. Or for adequate concealment of private body parts. Against Minerva's advice, he had still retained his usual heavy cloak over the... suit...he believed was the name of the ensemble...for *he* would not suffer having his backside on full display to the general public.

It looked as though Minerva was not yet done with him. The witch leaned past Albus, who was sitting between them, and whispered archly, "Fancy seeing you here, Severus. Were the Grangers friends of yours?"

The menace of a woman had her eyebrows raised, and Severus responded coolly, "That is none of your concern, Minerva."

If she and Albus were under the impression that he was here out of sympathy for Granger, then they were both even dafter than he had imagined. Gryffindors were second only to Hufflepuffs in their appalling emotional displays. He was certain that Granger had no need of him to fill out the ranks in the parade of teary-eyed mourners, he thought with a disdainful glance at the pew occupied by Potter and the Weasley clan. Yet, Severus was loathe to admit that he himself did not completely understand why he had felt compelled to attend the Grangers' funeral. He wasn't naïf enough to believe that he was doing penance.

But in the past few nights, he had been more sleepless than usual. Fragments of his past had seeped into his exhausted mind, causing his brain to be awash in fevered remembrances from days of yore. When he had been young and foolish, eager for acceptance and approval. Even after the third night, when out of sheer desperation, he had sprung up from bed and commenced pacing about his chambers, the phantoms did not cease to follow him. They hounded him mercilessly, snaking up from the dark abysses of memory...a lithe and elegant form slowly crumbling to the ground, the faint sound of an expiring breath, the searing gaze of glassy eyes... Bloodless, but a blood crime nonetheless, against the very one whose life gave rise to his own.

Despite the passage of two decades, these memories alone would not be wrestled into submission. Perhaps the knowledge that all other atrocities he had ever committed paled in comparison to this one had helped him take his Death Eater days in stride. But the sight of Granger that day at the morgue had undone it all. The idea that he had had a hand in creating scores of other orphans like her was suddenly unbearably vile when it had not affected him before. And the all-too-stark reminder of what he had done all those years ago...

Albus had taken to patting his knee. With a reproachful glare, the Potions master jerked it away. "Severus, you know I did not request your presence here today. None of us, least of all I, would have thought any less of you had you stayed at Hogwarts with the rest of the staff," the meddlesome old fool was saying.

Ah yes, Albus knew, didn't he? It enraged him that the headmaster knew and was using it against him. Severus could not think of any response that didn't include name calling, so gritting his teeth, he remained silent and flicked open the program sheet with angry gusto.

He skimmed the biographies of the deceased and the sundry photographs that were attached until his eyes were arrested by a lone line in the middle of the page.

### ***Be this the whetstone of your sword***

Beneath it was written, "*The death of my parents is too tragic for me to communicate through the few paltry words of a eulogy. But they lived full, good lives, and I ask that we all let their sacrifice be our inspiration, a bright beacon of light for wizardkind. Let us rally our strength to win this war against the forces of the Dark so that no more innocent lives will be lost.*"

Furious, Severus tore his gaze away from his program and found the diminutive form of Granger sitting in the front pew. How dare that reckless, arrogant child flout Wizarding Law, and in the most egregious manner! One and the same, all these imbecilic Gryffindors...

He was in the midst of choosing a suitable memory modification spell for the Muggles in the vicinity when the corner of his eye caught the unmistakable bluish tint of a magical screen. With barely contained astonishment, he held the paper nearer and examined it more closely. The paper was indeed spelled. It looked as if Granger could not resist flaunting her talents once more, Severus thought. The girl had produced the text in a magical medium visible only to wizards and then superimposed the screen atop the program intended for Muggles.

Severus' brow furrowed as he realized that it was really quite an impressive bit of magic for a witch beginning her seventh year at Hogwarts. The spell would have required some form of magical recognition embedded into it, as well as a variant of a disillusionment charm, material that was not generally learned until the apprentice level.

He again considered Granger, sitting rigidly in her mourning clothes, her face obscured by a bit of black netting. For an excessively talkative teenager, the craftsmanship and skill evident in her magic was truly astounding.

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When it was his turn to process past the open caskets, he gave Miss Granger a brief handshake and said formally, "I wish you well."

A startled look passed her face before her hand warmed a spot on his robe sleeve, and she said softly in return, "Thank you, Professor."

Some days later, after Miss Granger had returned, he was doing his nightly rounds in the corridors when he caught sight of her emerging quietly from the library, arms laden with books.

He recalled the words she had written: "*Be this the whetstone of your sword.*" He was not one for starry-eyed idealism. The high-minded rhetoric the girl had presented during the service had not fooled him. He knew all too well the results of nursing obsession, of being abandoned by fate to lick one's wounds. And he saw with grim clarity the possibility of her being driven to... regrettable ends to avenge the death of her parents.

He watched her cautiously close the library door and walk in his direction. It was long past the permissible hour for roaming through the castle, even for the Head Girl. His jaw muscle twitched. Swiftly, he backed into the shadows, then turned and retraced his steps down the corridor. Miss Granger was a Gryffindor, and one of the noblest color, he decided with an inner sneer. He yanked at the edge of his robe. The sword, in her hands, would be used to slay none but dragons and basilisks.

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Author's Note: Shakespeare fans may recall Malcolm's famous line, "Be this the whetstone of your sword" (4.3.231), from *MacBeth*. MacDuff had just found out that MacBeth has murdered his wife and children, and Malcolm is encouraging him to avenge his family's deaths.

Many thanks to Potionmistress and Natalie for betaing this chapter.

**Reviews much appreciated!**

## Let Grief Convert to Anger

Chapter 3 of 11

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

This story is A/U after Book 5



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

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A *thunk* caused Hermione to lift her eyes from the book she was reading and glance sharply around the dark common room. When all she saw was Crookshanks stalking away from the fireplace, scruffy tail waving lazily in the air, she exhaled in relief. The wisps of hair that had fallen into her face shifted, and with a yawn, she rubbed some moisture back into her stinging eyes and straightened her sore legs out beneath the table. Her concentration broken, she felt like she had been dragged out of bed before she was fully awake and was still trying to rouse herself. As she rolled her stiff shoulders back, the bones in her neck cracked in protest.

The common room was deserted, as the other members of Gryffindor House had long gone to bed. The sole source of light was the whitish glow furnished by Hermione's wand. Her schoolbag lay open on the ground beside her, its contents spilling out to reveal an assorted collection of broken quills and crumpled parchment, messy artifacts she would have blushed to have Harry, Ron, or some other classmate see. With all the students gone, only the long, angular shadows cast by the pile of books she had painstakingly amassed from the Restricted Section kept her company.

These scarce hours, spanning the last stroke of midnight and the first glimmerings of dawn, were when the house-elves were at their busiest. The unique brand of magic they possessed allowed them to Apparate soundlessly, so Hermione did not notice their presence until she had already spent a few nights sitting up in the common room. If she schooled her attention, she could see them bobbing about the Tower in her peripheral vision. But as soon as she turned her head, the elf would disappear from sight, its task of sweeping the grate or straightening the sofa cushions instantaneously accomplished.

She had started to keep the same hours as the house-elves in order to do some research. The first few nights had been rather awkward, as they squeaked in surprise at coming upon her sitting in the common room and then immediately recognized her as the House-elf Liberator, which sent them scurrying away in fear. With some embarrassment, Hermione had informed them that she had no intention of tricking them into accepting clothes.

Now, she and the house-elves more or less coexisted in peace, for which she was glad, because research, she had learned, was best done in the heart of night. Not only were there fewer distractions but also, it was during this murky, amorphous interval of darkness, when one day dissolved into the next, that Hogwarts truly pulsed with the magic of the Founders. When all was still and quiet, the centuries-old spells that had been poured into the worn walls of the castle crept forth like nocturnal creatures venturing out beneath the moon. Every drop of water she heard falling outside the window, every sigh the castle made as it settled into its ancient foundations, every creak of a floorboard, and every soft whoosh that sounded in the corridor beyond the portrait hole, Hermione knew, was magic.

Despite her devotion to *Hogwarts, A History* the discovery of the castle's magical essence had still taken Hermione by surprise. What fascinated her even more was that as an inhabitant of the castle, she was able to weave herself into the enchantments. *Well, of course!* Hermione had murmured the first time she had experienced the immersion. She wondered why she hadn't noticed the magical outflow before. It was really just basic spell theory, another of the dry concepts that she had diligently shoveled into her brain when she had been preparing for her OWLs. As a witch, she was a magical conduit, and flowing magic would naturally pass through her.

Hermione was unsure of the effects that would come of routinely intermingling her own magic with the castle's. Her eyes glinted against the wandlight as her pensive gaze hardened into determination. She only knew that the ancient spells surrounding the castle were potent... And for the aim she had vowed to achieve, an additional boost of power from Hogwarts would certainly not be unwelcome.

It had started as a wild whim, one of many that had swirled amidst the storm of desperate anger that had enveloped her the night following her parents' funeral. She was sitting alone in the suffocating silence of her empty house, her eyes resting unseeingly upon the stack of documents from the solicitor's office. It seemed to have burst from her, out of nowhere; one minute she was exhausted--on the verge of nodding off--the next minute, she was shouting, to no one in particular--chair upended behind her--papers scattered on the floor. A hollow promise, born of rage. A cocky dare that she had thrown at Fate as a return challenge for what Fate had placed before her. Cut for cut, swipe for swipe. A crazy, extravagant bluff, to take the edge off of the gnawing, all-consuming pain that she had felt. But at some point during the evening, rash resolutions somehow started turning into reckless reality. Suddenly, the outrageous claims had become fashioned into a breathtaking vision.

She could do it. She *would* do it. The counter to *Avada Kedavra*.

Hermione sighed. Grandiose declarations were all well and good, but only if one had hope of following through. Listlessly, she slid her thumb down the crisp edge of *The Compendium of Common Curses*, which lay open before her. Tonight definitely had not brought her any closer to her lofty goal. She had been meandering through the theory of spell inversion for the past hour and a half, and after Crookshanks' grand entrance, she had found herself unable to read at all. With her mind so restless, no amount of her usual intellectual discipline could enable her to make sense of the text.

Instead, her wandering thoughts dwelled insistently upon the events that had taken place in her fourth year: the Tri-Wizard Tournament and Voldemort's resurrection in the graveyard. She recalled with a shudder Harry's brazen escape. *Why* had he been so obstinate? *He shouldn't have resisted.* With a sigh, Hermione admitted that the thought was pointless. Harry would have preferred to die in a mortal fight rather than submit to Voldemort's orders and cling to the hope of survival. It was Harry's defiance that had furnished the proverbial "enemy's blood, forcibly taken..." If he hadn't struggled when Pettigrew had sliced his arm... would Voldemort have risen again? And would her parents still be alive...?

Shutting her eyes, she slammed her quill down upon the table and gave herself a mental shake. She was being ridiculous. To be blaming *Harry* for her parents' deaths? Harry, who had made unfathomable sacrifices to the war since the moment of his birth? Harry, who lived in the shadow of an impossible calling, a grim destiny? A fine friend she was turning out to be, criticizing his conduct at the graveyard when she herself grew nauseous merely from *thinking* upon the incident.

She yanked the *Compendium* a bit closer and doggedly applied herself to the science of magical apexes. While the book droned on about spell synthesis, she wondered what would have happened if she had been the one at the graveyard that night. Probably still would have ended up making a trip to the Wizarding Morgue, she thought darkly, and not by way of the front door this time. She didn't share wand cores with Voldemort...

With a huff of frustration, Hermione abandoned her pretense of studying and conceded defeat. Her mind was obviously not going to be diverted from the path that it had started down tonight, in spite of her best efforts. She attributed this sudden bout of vacant musing to her flagging strength. After weeks of sleep-deprivation, it did not come as a complete surprise that she should be deprived of all but the most idiotic thoughts. But could exhaustion explain *these* thoughts, this sudden fixation upon Harry's fourth year rendezvous with Voldemort? After all, Harry had had quite a few other run-ins with the Dark wizard. She was free to choose among *several* reunions, Hermione thought peevishly. Perhaps bed would not be such a bad idea, after all...

She pressed her forehead down upon the heel of one hand. Even as she was considering her present predicament, a remote locale of her brain still ruminated fitfully, chewing and gnashing randomly through the disjointed memories that cluttered her mind. Hermione furrowed her brow as something tried to claw its way out of the mental background noise, scratching urgently at the surface of her consciousness.

The Hospital Wing in fourth year, when Harry had described the spell that had brought Voldemort back to life...

*Bone of the father, unknowingly given... Flesh of the servant, willingly given... and of course, Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken.*

Hermione flinched. That the spell had resurrected Voldemort aside, something in the wording of the incantation was distinctively unsettling, causing the hair on the back of her neck to stand up and the pit of her stomach to turn to ice. Glancing about her, she now found the common room to be intolerably bright, bleached in the flood of light from her wand. With a sense of strange gut panic that rose out of nowhere, Hermione hastily gathered parchments, quills, and inkstand, shoving them haphazardly into her bag. Small details around her that she had previously overlooked, such as the brooding bust of Merlin sitting upon one of the bookshelves, suddenly leapt out at her with macabre vividness. Slamming the *Compendium* shut, she threw it into the bag along with everything else, then sucked in a shaky breath. Feeling absolutely ridiculous but yet unable to quash her inexplicable unease, she flew up to the dormitory and fairly dove into bed.

Safely ensconced beneath her covers, Hermione's eyes latched onto the one memento of her parents that she kept near her, a Muggle snow globe containing a miniature castle. The ornament occupied a space on her nightstand, and though the label on it read, "Chateau Chambord," her parents had been convinced that Chambord would pass quite easily for Hogwarts and had given it to her as a start-of-term gift in the beginning of seventh year. Reaching for it with trembling hands, she carefully inverted it, then set it back down, watching as the iridescent snow fell serenely over the castle. As the little world enclosed by the globe once again became coated in powdery white, she felt her racing heartbeat gradually slow.

Finally, as the silence of the dormitory grew heavy, she whispered, "*Nox*," and the light vanished, leaving only formless darkness in its wake.

Surely, she had gone mad.

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Potions class the next morning was an exercise in torture for all parties involved. Hermione, whose concentration already wavered from poor sleep, was unable to shake off the lingering apprehension from the night before. She could not bring herself to pay attention to the properties of Nodal Potions when *something* was obviously odd about that spell used to restore Voldemort. She felt like she was being presented with an important but incomprehensible answer to a puzzle. Furthermore, she was more than a bit nervous about her panicked flight from the common room. More of this, and she might as well hide from her own shadow.

Her uncharacteristic distractedness created problems for her lab partner, Harry, who kept shooting her covert glances that spoke of both his concern and irritation. Though Hermione thought Harry's brewing skills to be serviceable enough, her friend found himself, for the first time, in the position of directing them both.

"Hippogriff gizzards!" Harry hissed from beside her, and with a light start, Hermione nodded and plunged a hand into the bucket at the end of their bench. She handled the cold, slippery organs without giving them much consideration and hardly noticed the rather unsavory consistency of the liquid that emerged from beneath her pestle as she absently ground them in the mortar. *At least they didn't grind Peter Pettigrew's hand* she thought distantly.

"Uh, Hermione, it says 'to dislodge tendons and fat by briefly crushing,' not bloody pulverize!" Harry commented, peering dubiously at the reddish-brown slop that had been the Hippogriff gizzards.

With sinking heart, she read the protocol, and nodding in agreement, she muttered, "Merlin, Harry, I'm really sorry for being so careless."

As her hands made yet one more trip into the bucket, Harry asked a bit hesitantly, "Hermione, is there something wrong? I mean, I'm getting a bit worried here, since you're basically letting *me* do all the work this time, and you know as well as I do that that's not going to get us half a decent grade!"

"For once, Potter, I am inclined to concur."

The smooth voice of the Potions master sounding from behind caused her hands to freeze mid-exit from the bucket, leaving the gizzard juice trickling down her arm. Mortified, Hermione lifted her eyes to meet the disdainful ones of Professor Snape, who surveyed the two students imperiously over his long, hooked nose. Arching an inquiring eyebrow, Snape gazed pointedly at the messy, ingredient-splattered lab bench and at Harry thumbing frantically through their Potions Manual.

"Miss Granger, I do believe I have been giving you too much credit. I had thought your intelligence and your sense of self-preservation would prevent you from handing



Potter the reins in the collaborative project. "

Hermione focused on keeping her eyes level with the expanse of black robe that covered the professor's chest while Snape continued his diatribe.

"I see, however, that you are as foolish as the rest of your House. As momentous as it is that you are not prepared for class, I am still obliged to take ten points from Gryffindor."

Her cheeks burning, she was torn between shame and anger. Though she felt properly chastised for her poor performance in class, she was incensed by Snape's unfair inclusion of Harry. When she finally drew adequate breath and replied, "Yes, Professor," her words emerged as a cross between a croak and a squeak.

"Sir," Harry said fiercely, "Hermione is unwell. Even *you* should be able to notice that."

"Twenty more points for speaking out of turn, Potter," Snape countered calmly. Crossing his arms, Snape silently regarded her, much in the same way one would size up an owl at Eeylop's. Then, after a light sigh, the professor surprised Hermione by asking in an almost conversational tone, "Miss Granger. A Nodal Potion is?"

She had no idea where Snape expected to lead this bizarre exchange, but now that her mind was saturated with adrenalin, she figured she might as well prove that she actually *had* done the reading.

"A potion whose ingredients are chosen not for their own magical properties but for their ability to serve as magical 'nodes,' or conductors, for the brewer's personal magic."

Snape sneered. "So your capacity to memorize the text has not diminished with your capacity to follow instructions. The reason why the protocol calls for loosely pounded Hippogriff gizzard and not gizzard *juice*?"

"Because..." *Ingredients used as magical nodes must remain physically intact* she had meant to say, but the rest of the sentence never made it out.

Instead, her train of thought came to a screeching halt as all of a sudden, the loose facts that had been steadily accumulating in her mind began to weave themselves together like threads in a tapestry. The imposing figure of Professor Snape melted into a faint blur, while the cacophony of cauldron-stirring and ingredient-chopping that usually surrounded the potions classroom faded into a muffled din.

Nodal Potion.

*Bone of the father, unknowingly given...*

*Flesh of the servant, willingly given...*

*Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken...*

Blood. Enemy. Force.

Hermione's eyes widened as understanding descended upon her like a cresting tidal wave.

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Severus waited for the Granger girl to respond, his patience fast wearing thin. As he had expected, ignorance was not the root of her incompetence, for her answer to his first question alone had put to rest any doubts that she had read her text once, if not multiple times.

"Mudblood didn't do her homework?" Draco jeered from somewhere behind him.

"Mr. Malfoy, I do not believe I required commentary from you," Severus replied without turning around. After seven years of teaching Granger, Severus knew that the irksome child was not simply suffering a fit of malaise. Granger could brew Pensieve Base in her sleep; even at her worst, she had never been known to make such a grievous error. However, his sharp powers of observation had not missed the dark circles that had started to appear under the girl's eyes. A decade spent as a Head of House and his own experience led him to suspect that impending NEWTs was hardly the cause of Miss Granger's loss of sleep. He wondered how Minerva was handling her precious little know-it-all.

The lack of any forthcoming response to his second query piqued his curiosity and made him inspect his student closer. Her eyes had glazed over, as if she were watching a spectacle invisible to all but her. Her breathing was irregular and rushed, and she seemed to have forgotten the here-and-now. *Unwell*, as Potter had claimed, was a slight overstatement, but she was certainly not herself.

"Miss Granger," he snapped. "Much as I am aware that you are unaccustomed to not knowing the correct answer, your reaction is hideously exaggerated."

At his remark, awareness seemed to return, and the dazed eyes gradually regained their focus, though they still retained a stunned light. Slowly, the girl nodded in response to his admonition.

Severus acknowledged that Granger's decidedly peculiar behavior was cause for concern and perhaps even warranted a trip to Pomfrey, but at the present moment, he felt nothing but fury at her disruptive antics. He allowed the class to wind down to its own destructive end, his frustration causing him to double the point deductions for every spoiled potion. By the time the period was finished, only three pairs of students out of the nine comprising the class had succeeded in brewing the potion without having him spell their work away. As he inspected the three samples lined up across his desk, he was rather startled to note that Potter and Granger's potion was among the chosen few.

For one fleeting moment, Severus regretted not delivering a stiffer punishment and marking them both down as zeros for the day. Self-recrimination was quickly forgotten, however, when he realized the utter incongruence of Granger turning in a perfect potion. First, she had seemed so utterly distracted that she had committed an error he thought worthy of none but Longbottom; then after recovering from her rousing demonstration of ineptitude, she proceeded to calmly brew the correct potion without so much as a misalignment of her shrivelfig roots. Such behavior in the Head Girl did not reflect well upon Albus' tastes, Severus thought with a smirk, never mind that Miss Granger was typically as unflappable as a sphinx.

He was just about to dismiss the class when once again, he heard the voice of Draco, this time sputtering angrily, "How *dare* you point your wand at me, Mudblood!"

Whipping his eyes away from the potions, Severus was presented with a most unusual sight. Draco and Granger stood on opposite sides of the aisle, wands raised at each other, fully prepared to duel. The blond Slytherin had two bright crimson splotches on his cheeks and a noticeable tremor in his wand arm, both sure signs of the boy's barely-contained rage, but Granger, on the other hand, had an unruffled, relaxed carriage and looked almost tranquil.

One swift *Expelliarmus*, and both students' wands flew into Severus' waiting hand. Planting himself before the girl, Severus found himself speaking to the top of her wild curls, as she did not even bother lifting her head to meet his gaze. "Miss Granger, this little game you are indulging in today calls into question your continuing in the position of Head Girl. Fifty points from Gryffindor and detention in my office tonight at seven-thirty."

"But Malfoy..."

"Raised his wand in self-defense," Granger interrupted Potter, her voice steady and even. Then, still determinedly staring a hole through Severus' chest, she said, "As you wish, Professor."

Potter had gone ashen, his mouth hanging ajar as he stared incredulously from behind. Even Draco seemed too taken aback by Granger's unexpected admission to gloat over his victory; the Slytherin had scrutinized the girl through narrowed eyes for a few moments before gathering his supplies and filing out the door with the rest of the class. As for Granger, she merely wiped down the bench with impeccable thoroughness before wordlessly exiting the classroom.

As Severus watched the door close upon her retreating form, he conceded that he was perplexed. Her flightiness at the beginning of the class was more than sufficiently exasperating, but if he hadn't known better, he would have been ready to believe that the Head Girl and star pupil of Hogwarts had... resolved to earn herself a detention.

It was thus with more than the usual amount of interest that Severus sat at his desk that evening, waiting for Miss Granger to arrive.

At precisely half past seven, three sharp raps sounded on the door, but before he granted permission for her to enter, she marched right in and demanded briskly, "Professor, I wish to speak with you."

Thoroughly offended by her rude entrance and her audacious greeting, Severus snarled, "I did not assign you detention for us to socialize."

Apparently, the meek and compliant student he had dealt with this afternoon had all but disappeared, for after folding her lips briefly, Granger plowed on. "No, but I earned detention with that purpose in mind."

Severus resisted the urge to blink in confusion. So she *had* deliberately sought a reprimand, but because she wanted an excuse to speak *with him*? What in Merlin's name... "There is nothing between us that needs to be said," he spat in response. "Now I suggest you start sorting those dragon heartstrings while the night is young, Miss Granger."

He might have never said anything at all. Undeterred, Granger absently flicked her wand towards a spot behind her right shoulder and conjured a chair. Severus endeavored to not notice that Granger had mastered, at the age of seventeen, Dumbledore's favorite magic trick, deciding instead, that he had much rather dwell on how much he resented her blithely adding furniture to *his* office without so much as consulting him.

His fingers curled into a fist beneath his desk, and he could feel his anger coalescing into a few choice words, but their emergence was abruptly truncated when Granger locked her brown eyes to his and declared, "I know how to counter Avada Kedavra."

Any of a number of scathing replies that immediately came to mind would have been an appropriate rejoinder to her outlandish statement, but something in the girl's demeanor stayed his judgment. Severus noted the clear, alert gaze, the white-knuckled wand grip, the impatiently tapping foot, the flushed cheek. Out of nowhere, the memory of a hushed conversation from a few years back in the staff room flashed before him, when Poppy Pomfrey had sworn upon her entire store of Pepper-up that a second-year girl had successfully brewed a Polyjuice Potion.

Almost against his will, Severus found himself leaning forward and softly demanding, "How?"

The tension that suddenly flowed out of her was perceptible as she sagged back against her chair and murmured, "Thank you, Professor," which he merely acknowledged with a slight nod.

"You see, ever since my parents passed away, I have been seeking a method to put a stop to that awful spell, and at first, I thought it was simply a matter of uncovering an obscure counter-incantation from a book in the Restricted Section..."

"Spare me the superfluous preambles and please just enlighten me as to how you have managed to succeed where innumerable others more powerful than you have not," Severus interjected impatiently.

Briefly, Granger's face bore the cowed expression that Severus had come to expect in all his students, but then the girl lifted her chin slightly and stiffly said, "Just a moment, I am getting to that."

He knew that he should have ejected her from his office then and there, but for some reason, all he did was fold his arms across his chest.

"Sir, I'm sure you've realized that the potion which revived Voldemort after *he* was hit with *Avada Kedavra* was a Nodal Potion."

Severus dipped his head in assent as he inquired with a touch of disdain, "You are referring to Water of Styx, Miss Granger?" He should have known that all the girl had done was forage through a copy of *Master Brewing*. Granted, not many Hogwarts students were even capable of extracting meaning from it, so he prepared to be regaled with Granger's prodigious powers of reading comprehension.

The cold reception from her audience had apparently failed once again to put Granger off. Talking so fast that she was tripping over her own sentences, she continued, "Since the potion is Nodal, its ingredients aren't very useful by themselves, but combined together they conducted and amplified Voldemort's extremely weak magic, right? So then suppose that instead of viewing Water of Styx as a potion, you treat it as a verbally incanted spell, Professor. Then the three ingredients that it requires...father's bone, enemy's blood, and servant's flesh...wouldn't they effectively form the three apexes of a spell? Because the magic of any spell always begins in an apex?"

Her lunacy was oddly engaging, and as he leaned back into the ample support of his chair, she pressed herself forward and earnestly said, "What if I managed to adjust the apexes? If the original potion conferred some measure of resistance to the *aftereffects* of *Avada Kedavra* in that it restored Voldemort to his full power, shouldn't a well-devised variant be able to counter it completely? If you alter a spell's apex, you alter the spell, right? Couldn't the same principle potentially apply to a potion?"

The question, posed with such perfunctory intensity startled him. The truth was that Severus really could not vouch an answer either way; he would think few besides the likes of Dumbledore, let alone a mere seventh-year student, possessed the intellectual force that went behind proposing such an absurdly ambitious scheme to counter the most dreaded spell known to Wizardkind.

"It's just an Arithmancy problem, Professor! We could find substitutes for the original ingredients if we work out the correct final ratio for all the interacting magical elements."

Pretending potions were spells and using Arithmancy to counter *Avada Kedavra*? It was harebrained, it was crazy and fantastical.

*But it's also bloody brilliant*, he thought as he idly took stock of the hundreds of bottles lining his ingredients shelf.

"Yes," he finally replied at length. Tapping his chin with a distracted air, he considered the challenge of knitting together the three major magical disciplines of Potions, Charms, and Arithmancy. "Yes," he repeated, this time more to himself.

When his gaze returned to the student sitting before him, he was surprised to notice that she was now worrying her lower lip with her front teeth. After successfully tabling *that* wild proposition, whatever else could she possibly be holding back?

"Sir, would you be willing to... assist me?"

It took a moment for him to grasp the staggering implications of her request. Abruptly, Severus uncrossed his legs and sat up straight. "Miss Granger, to assist you would require that we both work with one of the Darkest potions ever brewed by man. You do not suppose that Albus would simply add it to the seventh year Potions curriculum, do you?"

The coldness that stole over her eyes was something Severus thought he'd only find in the gaze of his most rapacious Slytherins, and he felt considerable unease at seeing it stir in the depths of her eyes.

"Professor, Voldemort killed my parents."

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*Miss Granger,*

*Against my advice, the headmaster has consented to allowing you to work on your project on the condition that you conduct all research and testing in my presence. Please see me in my office Wednesday evening at seven-thirty to discuss the pertinent details.*

*Professor Severus Snape*

Severus replaced his quill into the inkstand, and after sealing the missive, spelled it to its proper recipient.

Once again, he found himself thinking upon Granger, whose situation now occupied no small amount of his attention. Leave it to her to come up with an irresistibly elegant idea that was so risky it would make Merlin himself shudder in his boots.

He had known this would happen. The instant he had witnessed her wealth of magical ability that day at the funeral, he had foreseen her succumbing to the lure of the Dark. It was always anger that pushed one over the precipice, he reflected grimly.

But Albus, damn him, had been all sanguine confidence. Had some claptrap theory about how Granger's intentions were noble, so that she would be immune from the devastation that Dark magic inflicted upon the user

"Miss Granger's extreme intelligence is an asset to the war, Severus, and it would make little sense to quash her genius before it even has a chance to bloom..."

Severus had wracked his brains that entire night trying to explain the sudden surge of hatred he had felt against the silly headmaster after hearing those words...

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Author's Notes:

1. The title of this chapter is the line that follows Malcolm's proclamation, "Be this the whetstone of your sword" (4.3.231), from Shakespeare's MacBeth.

2. I guess this story would be considered AU now, given all the events that took place in Book 6, but after many tears and angry fist fights with my pillow, I can now proudly say, "I don't give a damn!"

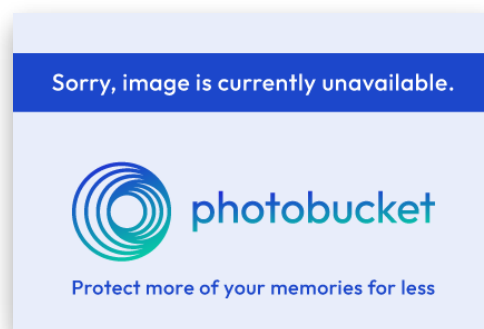
Many thanks to Christine, my partner in crime at work, and Potion Mistress for betaing this chapter.

***Reviews much appreciated!***

## Blunt Not the Heart, Enrage It

*Chapter 4 of 11*

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

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"So you're saying you got into that spat with Malfoy *onpurpose*?" Ron asked for the third time.

"Yeah, if you had only been there to see it..." Harry muttered, shaking his head.

They had just exited the Great Hall after breakfast the next day and were on their way to Transfiguration. She had not had a chance to speak with her two friends since dinner the night before. After her audience with Professor Snape had ended, she had rushed to the library and attacked the Restricted Section with renewed vigor, not emerging until long after Ron and Harry had gone to bed. She had a distinct feeling that her efforts now to clarify the circumstances surrounding her detention were not having the desired effect, seeing how Ron hadn't looked so flummoxed since their fourth year, when he had awoken to find himself sopping wet in the middle of the lake.

"Yes, Ron. Now will you please be quiet for just a moment and listen?" she pleaded. The lower years could not cease their excited chatter about how the Head Girl had received detention from Professor Snape, and the upper years, especially ones hailing from Slytherin House, had all taken to casting narrow-eyed, quizzical looks her way

whenever they passed in the corridors. The last thing Hermione needed was Harry and Ron questioning her sanity.

"It was because I needed an opportunity to speak with Professor Snape alone," she said. A loud herd of Hufflepuff first-years streaming past them provided ample cover for her hushed tones. "I've been doing some research for a project I'm working on, and I wanted his opinion on a new idea I had come up with." She resisted biting her lip as a tiny stab of guilt urged her to reveal the full extent to which she had sought his tutelage.

"You lost fifty points from Gryffindor so you could talk to *Snape*?" Ron all but shouted. Some of the Hufflepuffs paused.

"Ron, *shhh!* It was for something important!" she responded, exasperation making her voice loud in spite of her own admonishment. She quickened her pace and her friends followed. The two boys flanked her, their loping strides easily keeping them apace with her. Though Ron was looking faintly ill and Harry's green eyes were narrowed uneasily behind his glasses, Hermione was oddly comforted by their company. So many nights sitting alone in the Gryffindor common room had started to impose upon her a chronic sense of separation. Now that she had a promising path of research to pursue, the intellectual fever that had gripped her mind broke just enough that she found herself being glad even for Ron's apoplectic exclamations.

And yet, Hermione couldn't bring herself to tell her friends the complete truth about what she planned to do. First, the idea of admitting that she was actually attempting to do what scores of witches and wizards had failed to do for thousands of years was absurd enough to keep Hermione's lips sealed. And that's without mentioning that she was going to perform Dark Magic inside Hogwarts and unauthorized spell creation. A year ago, Hermione reflected, if she had gotten wind of a student dabbling in any such thing, she would have immediately marched them up to Headmaster Dumbledore, as any Head Girl with half a wit would surely do.

But now, after the death of her parents, Hermione saw many things in a different light. Where she had once seen black and white, she now saw varying shades of grey. Her conscience still rebuked her, insisting that her ends did not justify the risks she was imposing upon herself and the school (or enduring the blistering presence of Professor Snape for hours on end, for that matter), but she could now easily silence it. For better or for worse, she would find the counter to *Avada Kedavra*.

"Hermione, what's this project about? This wouldn't have anything to do with those hippogriff gizzards, would it?" Harry asked, drawing Hermione out of her reverie. They were now all standing outside the Transfiguration classroom, two minutes early thanks to the speed they had picked up along the way. "Because I'd never seen anyone smash hippogriff gizzards like you did," Harry continued, a hint of teasing in his voice, but behind it, that same veiled note of cautious inquiry that he had been projecting toward her ever since yesterday's disastrous Potions class.

"Or with all those bloody books you keep in the common room?" Ron added suspiciously. "One of them accidentally fell from a shelf and hit me on the head the other day. A *Comprehensive Guide to Magical Vengeance* or some other rubbish... Hey, I bet it hit me on purpose if it has a title like that!"

"It's nothing, really," she replied easily. "You know how Professor McGonagall confers additional honors upon some students at graduation if they do a bit of extra research here and there? I was just pursuing a lead that might enable me to make a potion to lessen the effects of Dark Magic." There. She had said it. The cover she had invented in between the many hours of research at the library yesterday. She hoped her explanation was vague enough that it didn't reveal anything crucial, yet sounded important enough to warrant losing fifty points.

Ron appeared aghast, most likely from the idea of anyone actually wanting to do more work than required. "Blimey, Hermione. How many honors do you want? Even if you somehow manage to find a counter to *Avada Kedavra*, you still just lost us fifty points and had to be with *Snape* for three whole hours!"

For a moment, she felt her breath hitch, but when she turned around and saw that nothing but merriment resided in Ron and Harry's eyes as they playfully poked her in the ribs, she knew that the interrogation was over, and they had forgiven her for both counts of capital crime: that of losing House points and also that of earning detention with Professor Snape.

But she still could not help but grimace to herself at the irony of Ron's joke. "If only you knew," she muttered, following her friends into the Transfiguration classroom.

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At seven-thirty that evening, Hermione declared to Ron and Harry that she was going to make another trip to the library and then purposefully strode out of the Gryffindor portrait hole to Professor Snape's office. Most students had retreated to their common rooms by this time of the day, so the walk to the Potions lab was fast through the sparsely populated corridor. She felt strangely calm, considering that she was about to willingly subject herself to the instruction of Hogwarts' most unapproachable, unaccommodating, and uninspiring teacher.

The trepidation, however, was merely saving itself until the very last minute. As soon as she arrived outside the dungeon classroom, she suddenly wished she had brought along all her Arithmancy guides and Potions texts in addition to her neatly charmed anti-smudge notes. She bit her lip unhappily as she eyed the sliver of amber light shooting out from underneath the doorway. She was quite certain that Professor Snape would expect her to have mastered every last detail of her proposed experiments, right down to the five imaginary solutions to Waldekroer's Amplifying Equations... of course she had learnt them all at one point or another, but she could only recall with confidence three of them... Sucking in a bracing breath, she quickly rapped on the door before her nerves could lead her further astray.

The harshly spoken "Enter" that answered her knock did little to assuage her worries, and as she opened the door, Hermione was prepared to encounter anything from exploding cauldrons to the ire of Voldemort himself. So when all she was presented with was the tableau of the professor serenely sitting behind his desk marking essays, it took more than a moment for her to blink away her astonishment. Looking grim, though not particularly angry, Professor Snape apparently did not find her presence significant enough to interrupt his perusal of the parchment before him; though he nodded once as she slowly approached, he did not lift his head. Hermione's eyebrows rose in spite of themselves...she supposed it was a pleasant surprise that Snape actually *read* the essays first before giving them all Dreadfuls.

In the absence of any other directive, Hermione helped herself to the chair before the professor's desk. She had already mentally recited six of the ten permutations for floor cleaning spells before Snape finally leaned forward, jabbed a quill vindictively at the inkwell, and scratched an undoubtedly scathing comment on the essay. "Miss Granger," he said clinically, as if about to introduce a new potion the class would be brewing. "The nonsense that your younger school mates insist upon passing off as essays necessitates my marking them in one sitting, for fear I might otherwise choose to simply burn them instead." His silky tones were punctuated by the scraping sound of quill against parchment, and Hermione came to the thunderstruck realization that the professor might actually be attempting to excuse his own poor manners.

"Um, of course, sir," she replied uncertainly.

With a wave of his wand, the essays were banished, and for the first time that evening, Hermione found herself the sole target of the piercing black gaze. With some effort, she refrained from squirming.

"Now, I believe you wished to begin testing your theory regarding a possible counter-spell, or shall we say, potion, to the Killing Curse?"

Hermione nodded as the tiniest hint of excitement skipped down her spine. She was beginning to feel that feeling again...the pleasant, heady sensation experienced by a child entering Diagon Alley for the first time, or perhaps by Crookshanks upon discovering that the house-elves might be made to do his bidding, too. She had tried to explain to Ron and Harry, who of course did not understand... *Well, you know, right before a Transfiguration exam, for example, you feel a rush.* of course that had not gone over well with either of her friends, so it was even more futile to explain how wonderful it feels to have an endless world of possibilities at wandtip or the exhilaration that one might experience at the prospect of revealing unknown truths.

"I would first like to test whether Nodal potions can be altered to suit certain specifications," Hermione began, already reaching inside her school bag for her notes. Her fingers shook a little, as she realized that not only had she never dared allude to anything she preferred in the dour professor's presence, but that she was also now engaging a brilliant Potions master in a discussion on his own specialty after a mere two nights' worth of reading.

The professor's head dipped once, as long, straight fingers rose to frame a jaw made firm by years of practiced intimidation. "That is a sound enough idea," he said levelly.

Feeling neither affirmed nor abashed, Hermione waited for Professor Snape to continue while trying to not grip her notes quite so hard.

"I would suggest that you begin by selecting one of the elementary-level Nodal potions that you have been studying in class. Being Ministry-approved brews, they are of course guaranteed safe to a certain extent, but they also have the added advantage of being fairly standardized so that experimentation with the components of the potion should prove far easier. As for which potion you use, that choice is yours, Miss Granger." Snape paused, slowly turning his head so that his ever-cryptic gaze was now angular. "After all, there is no need for us to fling ourselves blindly into the Dark when other avenues are available."

Hermione, who had been vacillating between finding the Potions master's intensely dark stare singularly unnerving and strangely absorbing, had up until this moment been steadily avoiding meeting her professor's eye. But his last pronouncement, uttered in that odd tone of voice, elicited such a startled reaction that her gaze was drawn upwards against her volition, her own eyes locking with the professor's.

The meeting was brief, for Snape made eye contact for only half an instant before turning impassively away. Yet Hermione felt herself stiffen unaccountably, as several new thoughts battled for her attention. There was, first of all, the unsettling effect of seeing Professor Snape's rather shrewd gaze alight upon her without the usual hatred and malice. *Imagine that, the universally feared naked glare of Snape isn't so much a glare at all* Hermione mused, then promptly rid herself of the notion when unexpectedly, she felt the heat rise beneath her collar at the notion of *nakedness*. And then of course there was what he had said. It would have been much easier for Hermione to approach the professor for help in her project if she could convince herself that Snape had no compunction whatsoever about what they were doing. Now this just made everything much more complicated...

Hermione ceased her wool-gathering and forced herself to focus on the matter at hand. The professor's back was now turned to her as he straightened out his ingredients shelf, and Hermione used the opportunity to regain her bearings. "All right, why don't we use the Pensieve Base, then, sir. We just covered that in class, and it is still fresh in my memory."

"Which is no doubt vast beyond earthly comprehension," Snape said dryly. Turning back to her, he extended a hand to receive the parchment full of calculations that she was offering.

Relief stole irreverently through Hermione. Tonight, she decided that she had much rather face the usual Snape, the one who did not bear anomalous traces of humanity.

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His arm snaking carefully around the jars of boomslang skin that sat on the edge of his second highest shelf, Severus listened as Granger stood behind him, hurtling through the explanation of her Arithmantic scheme at a mile a minute. His fingers inched forward, toward the back of the shelf, where he knew resided a jar of exceedingly rare phoenix eyes.

"...instead of the dried rosemary, you add two thirds that amount of its conjugate ingredient, which would be... let's see, asphodel. You derive it from Waldekrocker's Third, of course, which is..."

Raking his other hand exasperatedly through his hair, Severus interrupted with an impatient sigh, "I am well aware of how to utilize Waldekrocker's Equations, Granger. I have seen your calculations. For now, omit mundane derivations from your explanation and only tell me how your results will affect the potion."

Granger was silent for several moments, and without turning, Severus was able to tell that she was frustrated. For the better, he decided. From the brief glance he had spared for the numbers lined up neatly down the parchment, Severus knew that she had been both meticulous and proficient in her handling of the Arithmancy calculations, and even he would admit that the girl was in possession of an unusually powerful intellect, a trait that perhaps would one day draw her towards magical research. Yet, she still had to be taught the difference between rattling off every fact she knew and selectively choosing certain elements of her knowledge to incorporate in her investigative endeavors. Mere memory as opposed to *understanding*, Severus thought to himself. Something he, too, had had to learn before ever resembling anything close to a successful Potions master.

Reaching as far back into the shelf as it could, Severus' hand grasped empty air. Granger had now resumed her bloody lecture and Severus listened with half an ear while seeking out his wand.

"Right. So asphodel, at a weight that is two thirds what was originally rosemary. Then you keep the hippogriff gizzards, but substitute Grindylow claws for the adder scales. One part gizzard to three part claws. This will make the Pensieve Base more... well, robust, I suppose..."

He pointed the wand towards the shelf, and after a softly incanted Summoning spell, he finally held the small glass jar of phoenix eyes in his hands. He returned to his desk and placed the jar down carefully in a spot between his Potions journals and his inkstand. The yellow colored orbs made a *clinking* sound, as if he had set down a sack of Galleons. Phoenix eyes, with their unparalleled potency as a potions ingredient, were not to be handled carelessly. Having expended no small amount of thought on Granger's project, Severus wondered whether she would be able to make the same leap of logic that he had regarding the role they might play in her efforts. But that question, he knew, was a matter for later debate. Right now, it seemed his most primary concern was to get Granger to unstick her face from her parchment.

The girl had trailed off, sounding significantly more apprehensive about the Pensieve Base than she had been five minutes ago when she had professed to being competent at creating it. A smirk edged its way onto Severus' features as he imagined that this would be the point where he was expected to play the part of noble professor and offer the fruit of his experience.

Once again facing his student, he answered snidely, "Indeed, one cannot predict how your proposed changes will affect the potion. As you have no doubt realized yourself, Arithmantic laws such as Waldekrocker's, while they are very useful in the study of spell-casting, are generally disfavored when it comes to Potions making. Do you know why?"

Granger frowned at the question, evidently not expecting to wander so far from the realm of textbook computations and trivial facts. "No, I can't say I do," she replied in a small voice. "I had always assumed it was just because potions are altered by way of adjusting ingredients, while incantations for spells, which are created in the non-physical medium of the caster's magical core, can only be altered through the magic inherent in numerical law."

"A partially correct assessment. But that merely explains why the traditional methods of Potions experimentation are preferred and not why Arithmancy is *not* used. Yes, Arithmancy is compatible with spoken incantations, but it is useful in contexts aside from being a supporting element for other branches of magic. Numbers have unto them a magic of their own right."

Enlightenment dawned once more over Granger's face. "That must be why some wizards use Arithmancy to decide when they want to hold certain events or... decide how many rose bushes they want to plant on the perimeters of their estate," she finished with a derisive sniff.

"Yes, as Mr. Malfoy has no doubt informed his entire Arithmancy class, numerical magic is highly regarded in Pureblood circles, hence Narcissa's predilection for it," he answered blandly. Granger's eyes, brown in their usual state, turned honey-colored as they widened. Severus examined a fingernail while he waited for her wonder to pass. Idly, he pondered whether her surprise was due to the fact that he knew it had been Draco who was once again inflicting his arrogant presence upon others...and Narcissa who had had the vapid tastes in gardening.

When all appeared well with her once more, Severus continued, "Numbers, whenever and however they are invoked, always bear magical power, even if only in their unwavering consistency and order. Muggles, too, have knowledge of this fact in their studies of mathematics." He had taken to pacing a bit behind his desk, a habit acquired from a decade of lecturing dimwits who needed moving targets to hold their attention. "Potions, a discipline built upon precise measurements of quantities and the interactions thereof, is awash with the power of numbers. To disturb the magic of one entity with the magic of another is never a matter to be undertaken lightly, and to intersperse an already existing numerical magic with complex and powerful Arithmantic-induced reactions... it is unheard of if not impossible. The variables one would have to keep track of would grow to a truly unwieldy magnitude. Potions, in summary, is incompatible with Arithmancy."

The Potions master paused in his ambulation. Granger, true to form, was now furiously taking notes on the back of the calculation-laden parchment. Severus figured he could not very well object to that, irritating as her over exuberance may be.

"Nevertheless, due to your strong command of Arithmancy, you have managed the unusual feat of deriving plausible theoretical quantities for a hypothetical potion. You shall therefore attempt this Pensieve Base. There is no method to postulate whether the ingredients of Nodal potions act as magical apexes, nor whether they can be manipulated as such. We find out only by brewing the potion. The results may very well yield no conclusions, and possibly you might even produce a dangerous substance, in which case, I shall be forced to terminate your labors," Severus finished in a firm voice.

He expected her to be disappointed at the prospect of her pet project coming to a premature conclusion, but instead, he found himself at the receiving end of a worshipful smile. He might as well have handed Granger the Holy Grail. Severus, who was decidedly unused to having students regard him with anything but various manifestations of fear or sullenness, found Granger's unconcealed joy rather unbearable, and so with a *swish* of black cloak turned swiftly away.

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Once he had set Granger to brewing, Severus returned to the refuge of his desk and prepared to settle in for an hour with his Potions journal. The reassuring sound of her chopping asphodel was Severus' indication that his assistance was, for the moment, unneeded. Granger, at least, was one of those students whom he could leave for a reasonable length of time with a potion without fear that one or the other might not emerge from the ordeal fully intact.

Habit and experience had him casting a cursory glance in her direction nevertheless. She was bent over her bench, concentration apparent, and wholly unaware of his surveillance. He sighed wearily. The series of strange events involving Granger recently was growing too long for his liking. At the fore of his mind was the whole matter of this entirely unorthodox position he was now taking on...an advisor for the Head Girl's Dark Arts project. Severus still believed that Albus had been missing a few of the screws that were holding his already loose brain together when the Headmaster had all but forced him to agree to the endeavor. Aside from taxing his extremely limited spare time and being an overly ambitious undertaking for a seventh-year witch, the project was, by all accounts, dangerous. Never mind the violations of Ministry regulations or the tampering with magical theory, but *Water of Styx*? Water for the departed soul. Lethal or life-giving. Depending on whose side one was on. The potion that gave rise to bodily form by consuming the soul.

It was not lost upon him that it was to his advantage not to quibble much over what would happen to Granger if she practiced Dark Arts. After all, there was the possibility, however minute, for a true breakthrough. And corrupting Granger would fit the persona that he adopted every day for the benefit of his House, his masters, and more often than not, his own amusement, he thought darkly. If manufacturing fabrications was to be his life's burden, as it most likely would, he might as well derive some enjoyment from terrorizing the young and impressionable. He thus understood that his concern over her involvement in this project was an anomaly. That it *did* disturb him that Granger would be experimenting with Water of Styx truly annoyed him, just as he had been annoyed by his undue grief for her dead parents, or by his lax enforcement of curfew, or by Albus' mercenary attitude towards the girl's welfare. Severus Snape did not abide phenomena that had no logical explanation.

Today's exchange between him and Granger, the first of what he grimly deduced would be many similar sessions, certainly did not improve the situation. He had been barely able to conceal his own discomfort after uttering those thoughtless words about the Dark, when the girl's overly inquisitive eyes had shot straight up to his, rattling his defenses as they did so. Granger, in the span of a few short weeks, had managed to intrude into his most private of spaces: his thoughts. The only thing that kept him sane this evening was her endless prattle, which would give him something to snap at.

The girl had finished chopping asphodel root and was now diligently attending to a lightly steaming cauldron. The smoke somewhat obstructed his view of her. Her features flickered in and out of view behind the light blue wisps that were rising from the potion. Her lips were slightly quirked to one side, and her brows seemed to have knitted themselves into a permanent V shape, so frequently were they contorted during his classes. A few stray hairs were matted against her forehead from the hot moisture, though thank Merlin, most of her unruly mane remained sequestered behind her head in a hair tie. Severus did *not* appreciate the results that took place after hair fell into simmering potions.

Unexpectedly, Severus found the general effect of the girl brewing was not at all displeasing. In fact, she formed a rather elegant picture, robe-clad arm forming slow circles over the cauldron... no doubt because nothing she touched was coming to ruin, as they so frequently did in the presence of Longbottom or Potter, Severus decided. Severus felt a small stirring within him that was as fleeting as night pixies, fading as quickly as it had come.

Repressing the urge to swear, Severus closed his eyes briefly and ran a hand tiredly over his nose in a gesture of exasperation. He must be more exhausted than usual, to have his mind wandering in this inappropriate manner. He was sure after so many years, it was all a moot point; he was in more danger of consuming one of the Headmaster's lemon drops than he was of entertaining unprofessional aspirations toward Granger.

More to distract himself than out of concern for Granger's progress, he put down his unread Potions journal and asked, "Is the potion advancing as planned?"

She nodded her head and then ladled a sample of the substance for his examination. "It seems like there are some changes taking place... This is a darker blue than normal Pensieve Base, I think."

He took in the indigo-tinted fluid inside the vial she presented him and said in agreement, "It is. Keep working on it and you may test its effect when it is complete."

Three lengthy articles in *Potions Weekly* later, Granger had dampened the flame under her cauldron and was peering uncertainly at her potion.

Severus retrieved the Pensieve from its place inside his desk drawer and set it before him. The Pensieve still held his most recently regurgitated recount of a Death Eater meeting, the bluish white memory swirling gently inside the basin. Quickly picking at the feathery substance with his wand, he restored the memory to his mind. He remembered all too well what had occurred last time he had used a Pensieve in the presence of a student, and he would be damned if it happened again. "Bring the potion here," he instructed sharply, and he was pleased that Granger gave him an apprehensive look.

"Activate the Pensieve. We will test it with one of your own memories."

She ladled a spoonful of potion into the Pensieve, and after a moment, it was absorbed into the stone surface.

Granger then deposited a memory and waited eagerly for it to settle. But instead of smoothing into a shimmering liquid surface, the memory slowly disappeared into the walls of the Pensieve, just as the Pensieve Base before it had. She gasped, then looked closer. "It didn't work!" she murmured in disappointment.

Nonplussed, Severus leaned in to have a better view himself. Though he had assumed the potion would be altered, he hadn't foreseen an interaction with the Pensieve itself. He wondered whether the Pensieve was now altered as well. "No matter," he said. "I had warned you that the results would be unpredictable. But you may leave the potion here. I want to see what effect it has on the Pensieve."

His eyes fell on the jar of phoenix eyes he had set aside earlier. "You would also do well to figure out how you intend to experiment with Water of Styx."

"Well... I don't know what you mean, Professor."

Whether it was due to what seemed to be an unusual obtuseness on Granger's part or to patience worn thin from weeks of restless contemplation, Severus stood, every part of him suddenly rebelling against this undertaking, against this potion, against *Granger*. Anger gliding through his gut like a snake searching for prey, he asked fiercely, "Do you *actually* intend to use 'bone of the father?' And 'flesh of the servant?'" All his efforts to maintain calm before the girl appeared to have all been in vain. "I know you believe it is fortuitous that in your case, you actually *could*. Your father is dead and either of your sycophant friends could probably be persuaded to offer a limb. But while the Headmaster has forced me in allowing you to research a Dark potion in my classroom, I absolutely forbid you to brew Water of Styx!"

He stopped when he noticed he was almost shouting. Granger had taken two steps back and was now eyeing him with a mixed expression of fear and hurt. She blinked rapidly several times and then softly said, "I hadn't thought of that, sir. I..." Her voice caught, and then turning, she quickly exited the classroom.

With a growl, Severus banished the Pensieve and sank into his chair.

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Author's Notes:

1. The title of the chapter is once again an allusion from the lines of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. These are the lines following the ones for which the previous two chapters were named.
2. Many apologies for anyone who had been expecting an update. A year is certainly longer than usual between chapters, and I plead guilty to covering my head and running away when RL reared its ugly head.
3. For anyone with a Livejournal, I'd love to friend you! Mine is listed in my profile.
4. And as always, many thanks go out to my betas, Potionmistress and Natalie :-)

***Reviews are very much appreciated!***

## Wizard's Debt

Chapter 5 of 11

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

It was only after she had tripped on a step containing an especially wide crack that Hermione realized she did not actually know where she was. She blinked in alarm...being lost as a seventh year, and Head Girl, no less, could prove to be rather embarrassing. So eager had she been to depart the Potions classroom that she had failed to notice in which direction she was heading. Stifling a yelp at the sudden pain in her toe, she sat down, clumsily adjusting her robes around her. She looked about and noted that she was in a staircase leading up to the top of one of the Hogwarts towers. Not recognizing the color of the stone walls, she was sure she was not in Gryffindor, though judging by the lack of foot traffic, she supposed she wasn't in Ravenclaw Tower, either. Craning her neck slightly, she saw half a window peeking around the curve in the staircase and wondered if she could get a better sense of her location from the view outside. But before she could give her quandary further thought, she felt her injured toe complain with another spasm of pain. With an impatient huff, she pointed her wand at it and muttered a healing charm. Then hoisting herself to her feet, she turned her attention to the window.

She peered down into the nighttime darkness enveloping the school grounds and immediately recognized the glowing speck that was Hagrid's hut sitting along the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She cringed at the memory of witnessing Umbridge barge her way into Hagrid's home with her retinue of Ministry duds during her fifth year OWLs. She must be in the Astronomy Tower then, she concluded. How in Merlin's name did she manage to wander her way up the Astronomy Tower? She scrubbed angrily at the wetness clinging around her eyes. Well, obviously, she had lost her poise and given in to the compulsion to flee, she thought, feeling confounded and unhappy. Professor Snape's cold rebuke still rang in her ears and thinking of her mother and father still chafed at a raw spot inside her. But the most prominent feeling of all was a sort of self-directed rage, an admittedly strange reaction. Even now, she still panted from the effort of her frenzied flight. Why had she run away like a frightened animal? It wasn't as if she hadn't long grown accustomed to Snape's cruel and malicious ways. She and her Gryffindor fellows had endured much worse from him during class, yet here she was, a spineless fool cowering in a staircase! Why hadn't she simply ignored the stinging insults, as she always had, and focused on her potion?

She had but one purpose in working with Snape; she had even risked her reputation and her credibility as Head Girl to gain the opportunity, and now she had squandered it in a paroxysmal moment of indiscipline. Even if she had somehow miraculously garnered a modicum of his respect for her theories, she knew that she had surely forfeited it all after *that* display. The thought of her nascent success and its now-quashed potential made her feel even more miserable.

Sighing, she gazed aimlessly up the winding stairway and contemplated where she ought to go next. The Common Room was the obvious answer, but she found herself continuing to climb upwards anyway, though at a much more leisurely pace this time. Since her traitorous legs had borne her here, she might as well enjoy a bit of fresh air and take in the magnificent view. Plus, she considered with dark humor, she wasn't in any hurry to explain to Harry and Ron how fifty precious house points had resulted not in the hoped-for lessons with Snape, but rather in an ignominious exit from his classroom.

As she clambered around the last turn of the spiral, she found her path to the outside doorway blocked by a large lump, indistinguishable under the flickering light of the candle sticks.

"*Lumos.*"

Wand in hand, she approached. To her shocked horror, she realized that she was looking at a person. Robes strewn over the face concealed the identity, but Hermione noted the Slytherin crest on the uniform. She quickly thrust back the robe.

"Malfoy!" she gasped.

The instinctive revulsion that followed the recognition of one her chief tormentors at Hogwarts almost caused her to drop the robe back onto his face, but with trembling fingers, she set it aside. She rapidly gathered her wits about her and took a closer look at her fellow Prefect. He lay haphazardly across the steps, limbs askew, as if someone had tossed him away carelessly. His eyes were closed and his blond head lolled, the neck extended at an unnatural angle. Fearing the worst, Hermione bent and pressed two fingers beneath his jaw. Her own breathing came in tattered bursts as she concentrated on detecting any sign of life. She was relieved when she felt a faint but steady pulse.

"All right, alive, that's a start," she murmured to reassure herself, there being no one else around to hear her words.

Rocking back on her heels, she held her wand between her fingers in a moment of deliberation. She considered sending a messenger Patronus. No one had ever taught her how to perform this spell, and she was unsure whether she was even permitted to know about it. One glance at the deathly still Malfoy cemented her decision. With a shrug, she produced a glittering silver otter from her wand and sent it to Professor Dumbledore. Now was as good a time as any, she thought.

Her attention returned to Malfoy. Since she was not a Healer, she knew that there was likely very little she could do for him. She racked her brains for something helpful to cast while waiting for assistance to arrive. Perhaps she could determine what kind of spell had put Malfoy in this state. Bending over him once more, Hermione waved her wand while incanting, "*Ostende*," in the hopes of gaining some idea of his magical condition.

No sooner had the spell left her lips before she felt an overwhelming tightening in her chest. The air struggled to enter her lungs and her sense of hearing became oddly diminished, or perhaps it was merely being accosted by the sound of her own frantic heartbeat. Panic surged through her, and she scooted quickly away from Malfoy. Bracing herself against a wall, she tried to resist allowing her vision to swim. And then, as suddenly as it had all begun, the unpleasant sensations came to an abrupt end. Her breath rushed into her with an unencumbered gasp, as much from surprise as from need, while she stared bewildered at her wand.

"Merlin!"

She looked at Malfoy anxiously and then her wand again, her mind comprehending the implications with mounting dread. She didn't know for certain, but she had a fair guess; if she was correct, then Malfoy's life was in grave danger, his body being consumed alive by his own magic even as she stood here. *I don't know the counter incantation!* she thought disjointedly. Professor Dumbledore and the rest of her teachers were on their way here, surely. But even another moment would be disastrous for Malfoy. Her lips worked soundlessly as she assessed her options. She couldn't counter it, but perhaps...? Without further thought, she jabbed her wand toward him and exclaimed, "*Ostende!*" again, this time with urgent speed.

Now the suffocating sensations were expected and therefore slightly more bearable. She knew that she had one attempt, or at most two, to try to mitigate the *Perurere* curse before the terrible Dark Magic that had wrought it would overpower her, too. Fleeting, she considered with irony the wonderfully stimulating discussion she'd had with Professor Snape about spell apexes just hours ago, before the effort of staying conscious drove all else from her mind. As she battled against being dragged into the looming darkness, she schooled all her energy to focus on Malfoy's magical core. She shut her eyes in an attempt to better visualize it, though she knew that it made her all the more vulnerable to losing herself. She could feel the coursing magical current, and how it swelled at each apex. With only abstract theoretical knowledge to guide her, she didn't know whether she could find the dark contaminant, or even what to look for.

Yet... Something was definitely there, subtle and slippery.

She screwed her eyes tighter, causing little starbursts to flash behind her eyelids. *That*. Apparently, there was nothing to see while accessing a spell apex. There was only what one could feel. While most of the magic felt familiar and soothing, there was something else here too, hot and repugnant, leaking toxic essence. Beads of sweat dripped down her temples, and her chest felt like it had been weighed down by lead. With every fiber of her body screaming that she couldn't do it, that she hadn't the strength, but yet knowing that she *must* succeed, she shouted, "*Expungere!*"

The last thing she heard was her own voice reverberating forcefully against the walls of the narrow tower. The dark fog that she had been holding at bay pitched upwards to consume her, and her wand clattered to the ground, falling from nerveless fingers. She didn't know what she had done or whether it had worked. All she knew was that she couldn't keep her eyes open for one more minute, that she simply must sit down...

---

*Inexplicable.*

That was all Severus could think of as he braced himself over his desk in his office, head bowed over the mysteriously dry and empty Pensieve, which he had banished, but then re-summoned, for lack of anything better to do. Granger had left ten minutes ago, yet he still was here, frozen in place, feeling strangely stupid and thoroughly incapable of any coherent action. His lips felt dry. His knuckles were sore from bearing all his weight.

*Damn her!*

He allowed himself to sink slowly into his chair again. He felt brittle. He was a Potions Master, a man with an instinct for perfection. He gravitated toward the calm, the well-reasoned, the logical...qualities that recommended him in his profession. Ingredients in correct proportions, flawless execution of protocol, well-articulated steps carried out in precise order...these were what he subsisted on. Governed by intellect and the unsentimental exhortations of his well-disciplined mind, his whole existence was a study in indifference. It could not be any other way. To stray would mean a summary death at the hands of the Dark Lord.

He was therefore not *ever* prone to random fits of passion. Anger, he understood, for he frequently cloaked himself in it as a means of self-preservation, as well as to more convincingly serve his two masters. But fury and menace of any kind should always be premeditated and controlled, never allowed to commandeer the faculties.

Well then, this unfettered maelstrom of wrath and fervor in reaction to Granger, this could not be tolerated. He must put a stop to it immediately. Even now, with a jar of phoenix eyes glaring at him and a malfunctioning Pensieve sitting right before him, he could think of nothing but her. Or rather, his reaction to her. As with everything having to do with Granger ever since that brisk fall day when he was entrusted by Albus to convey her to the headmaster's office, nothing he felt or did when around her was normal. This latest outburst was not only atypical of him, but, he realized bitterly, both unprofessional and humiliating.

Certainly, the fault was all hers, he decided, and he felt a small measure of consolation. Granger was an uncommonly intelligent young witch. It was expected that she would know better than to attempt idiocy of such unparalleled magnitude. Was he truly meant to believe that she intended to brew Water of Styx with no thought of safeguards? Of course he had every right to be irritated. She was being foolish beyond justification, in spite of her admittedly singular talents. Even the most patient and tolerant of instructors would have been exasperated...and *he* was neither patient nor tolerant. As for his own lack of control, he was convinced, as he had always been, that he was being stretched to his limits. These last few weeks, he had known no peace. Between the unwelcome intrusion of his own personal demons, his ceaseless ruminations over Granger's theories, and his general preoccupation with... well, *Granger*, he decided that he had finally found his way into some bizarre incarnation of hell.

Severus closed his eyes. Why then, for Merlin's sake, did he feel... he had no words to summon from the limited supply of vocabulary he kept on hand to describe *feelings*. He was opposed on principle to the notion of feeling *anything*, a habit he adhered to with conviction, for it had saved his life more than once. Yet, he supposed he felt as if he had somehow behaved in a manner that reflected poorly on himself. In those charged few seconds after he had admonished her, he saw, and he remembered, with a spy's unerring vividness, the flash of raw pain that had darkened her eyes to the color of mahogany. He knew that she had tried to conceal it. It was easy for one who frequently hid his own thoughts to recognize another individual doing the same. But she was young and inexperienced, and his hard, unyielding words forced up a vulnerability that flowed unbidden from her, like a weeping wound that had been lanced. He doubted she knew how very disturbing the effect was. He recalled how the color had risen in her cheeks and how her hair, dampened from the heat of potion fumes, had clung miserably to her neck. There was something claustrophobic about the memory, how his mind's eye seemed to forget all but that brief moment when she looked upon him in uncomprehending betrayal.



Surely, he must put a stop to it. There would be no more private sessions between him and Granger. With what felt like the first rational impulse he had had in some time, he resolved to...

He tensed and whipped about. Before he even knew what he was doing, his wand was already out pointing straight in the face of an intruder.

"Severus, I must be constantly reminded not to come upon you in one of your rare unguarded moments," the headmaster said wryly in greeting, eyeing Severus over the half-moon spectacles on his nose.

Severus glowered, not appreciating how Albus had a way of treating him like an errant school boy. "My apologies, Headmaster. Perhaps if you entered a room through doors or fireplaces like the mere mortals among us..." he suggested snidely, lowering his wand.

"... a courtesy that I'm afraid I was unable to abide by this time, Severus, as we have a rather urgent situation to attend to. Miss Granger has informed me that she has found a member of Slytherin House, Draco Malfoy, incapacitated in the Astronomy Tower," Albus replied.

"*Malfoy?*" Severus said incredulously. He was instantly out of his seat, striding after the headmaster. What could possibly overcome the preening son of Lucius Malfoy that would also involve the maddeningly conscientious *Granger*? He kept those thoughts to himself and instead inquired, "Do we know anything of his condition? And is Granger harmed?"

"Unfortunately, there were no details in Miss Granger's message. Was it you that taught her the use of the messenger Patronus? That was most impressive spellwork on the part of our Head Girl," Albus observed serenely, as though they were not both sweeping through the castle at a bruising pace, but merely promenading through the corridor.

"I taught *her*..." Severus sputtered, appalled. Albus favored him with raised eyebrows.

Their arrival at the Astronomy Tower saved him from having to answer for anymore of Albus' misguided speculations. The headmaster led the way up the stairs, spry and quick in spite of his years, his signature robes afloat behind him.

They both noticed the unforeseen addition to their problem at once, and Severus' heart leapt to his throat unexpectedly. *Granger was hurt, too.*

They quickly took in the scene. Draco lay face-up, splayed across the steps in the most grotesque fashion, and Severus suspected there were more than a few broken bones inside the boy. Granger was lying a few steps beneath him. Unlike Draco, she was crumpled in a heap face-down, her wand on the ground a few feet away from her. Evidently, someone had a great desire to see Draco Malfoy harmed. Severus was quite certain that said adversary was definitely not Granger.

"Tend to Miss Granger, Severus," Albus ordered, voice taut with worry as he lowered himself next to Draco.

Severus swiftly knelt beside the girl. He swept the abundant curls aside, searching for a pulse. It was strong, and he let out a breath he wasn't aware he had been holding. Gently, he turned her so that her face was no longer pressed to the ground. A small amount of blood was flowing from the corner of her lip, which Severus assumed was from the impact of the fall. He spelled it away. Her skin was cold to the touch, he realized, and her coloring was alarmingly pale.

Before he could cast a warming charm however, she stirred, and her hand batted weakly at him. Blindly, she attempted to roll and she would have succeeded in hurling herself further down the stairs if Severus hadn't reached out and dragged her into his arms. She groaned at the abrupt yanking sensation and opened her eyes. They roved about foggily until they met his, and he saw the startled confusion.

"fessor Snape?" she slurred. She struggled feebly against him, then gasping from the exertion, she collapsed against his chest. "What..." she murmured.

Severus found that he himself was momentarily disoriented. He had grabbed her without thought, a reflexive maneuver to prevent her from further injuring herself. Now he held her in an awkward sort of embrace. He felt distinctly uncomfortable, for he had not been in such close proximity to another since... a very long while. She felt fragile and soft, unlike the heavy, muscular bodies of his Death Eater fellows that he had on occasion been forced to torture. His fingers found no easy purchase as a result and he fumbled clumsily with her weight. Her face somehow became buried in his robes.

"Miss Granger," he ground out slowly in what he hoped was some simulacrum of soothing. "You alerted the headmaster to the fact that Draco Malfoy was in distress, and we arrived only to find that you yourself have also been injured. If... you would be so kind as to... elaborate, if you can recall..."

His own ineloquent query was interrupted by Albus, who had been probing Draco with his wand and quietly casting a series of complex diagnostic spells. "I fear that we have a very serious situation on our hands, Severus. Mr. Malfoy is the victim of a *Perurere* curse." Albus paused, then finished in bemused tones, "Although this spell seems to have been curiously quenched, as if someone had snuffed it out mid-progress."

Granger, who had been lying in silence, made an attempt to sit up again, and then failing once more, whispered something inaudible. Severus, troubled by her visibly weakening state, leaned down close to her and growled, "What did you say, Granger? Do not fall asleep! Stay awake, for the love of Merlin!" He shook her slightly and endeavored not to be distracted by the subtle scent of gardenias that rose from her hair.

"I said, I found the apex, I found it!" she gasped. Her eyes rolled back into her head. His arms were still around her and he felt her grow slack again.

"*You found the...*" Shock assaulted Severus' brain. Apexes? It could not be possible. Cursing, Severus managed to draw out his wand in spite of Granger in his arms, and he bit out, "*Patefacio vestri potestas!*"

The spell confirmed what he already knew. Granger's magic had been drained to debilitating levels, and she was suffering from magical exhaustion that occurred only with the use of extremely advanced core magic. Advanced, *untrained* magic, Severus reminded himself faintly. In the predictable fashion of her blighted House, Granger had chosen to launch herself straight into the path of a deadly curse... and had *succeeded*. It was almost too much to grasp. He had known some seasoned Aurors who could barely perform the spells of that class.

He looked back up at Albus. "It is difficult to believe," Severus began slowly, "but it seems as if Granger has managed a core magic intervention. I myself am hard-pressed to think it attainable by a seventh year student, but she has just insisted to me that she '*found the apex*,' and now I have assessed her magical levels and found them to be abysmally low. Albus, there's simply nothing else that fits."

Albus nodded gravely. "I believe that as Miss Granger has yet to encounter Dark Magic, such an onslaught to her naïve sensibilities must have been quite traumatic."

Severus dipped his head in impassive assent, yet felt an eyelash twitch.

To Severus' chagrin, after a momentary but intent glance, Albus felt the need to say to him, in that infuriatingly solicitous manner of his, "Ah, do not worry for Miss Granger, Severus, she shall be restored to good health after a few days spent with Poppy."

"I am well aware, Albus, I thank you," he answered stiffly, scowling at the headmaster's unwarrantedly amused expression.

"Come, Severus, to the hospital wing with our young charges. They have both had a difficult evening, though I daresay they will soon be right as rain again." Albus rose, the sound of his cracking knee joints the only incongruous reminder of his advanced age. Carefully levitating Draco in the air, the headmaster added, "Miss Granger is an immensely well-read student. She would have easily been able to infer the cause of Mr. Malfoy's incapacity and recognized the gravity of his condition. However, I confess myself astonished. It takes extraordinary courage and skill to subject oneself to such powerful, elemental magic without prior exposure. It is evident that she saved Mr. Malfoy's life, at great peril to her own."

Albus was making his way back down the stairs. Severus prepared to follow suit, and raising his wand, he murmured, *Mobili...*"

He did not know what stopped him. For the first time, he allowed himself to look closely at the light burden in his arms. He experienced a sense of disquiet while doing so, as if he were violating her by observing her in her unconsciousness. But still he looked, remembering the muted anguish with which she had left his classroom earlier, contrasting it with her currently preternatural expression of peace.

Perhaps it was out of respect for the exceptionally difficult and accomplished magic she had just performed. Or perhaps he was reluctant to impose upon a magically compromised individual yet more spells. But almost against his will, Severus found himself compelled to stow his wand, and then to cautiously readjust Granger in his arms, so that her head rested more fully in the crook of his elbow. Slowly he stood, and tightening his hold, he began to descend the steps with meticulous care, his burden cradled securely against him.

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"That is *impossible*, Professor Snape, I *refuse* to believe it!"

Severus towered imperiously over Draco's bed in the hospital wing, his expression grim and his arms crossed. All the years of the boy's pampered, spoilt upbringing were now being brought to bear, judging by his pugnacious expression and his argumentative tones. He sat up in his bed, ensconced in pillows and sheets like a king, his eyes flashing with the righteous indignation of his supposed persecution. In no jovial mood himself, Severus feigned ignorance and sneered, "Oh, believe it, Mr. Malfoy, and believe it well. You were at the receiving end of a rather potent *Perurere* and your magic has done quite the number on you. Just attempt to take some food and drink and we'll see how well your digestive system has fared!"

The boy's sallow hue became splotchy red with humiliation. "You know that isn't what I meant! I meant the Mudblood! What kind of sick joke is this? What do you *mean* she saved my life and that I'm now beholden to her? Dumbledore must have put you up to this. It has to be the most absurd thing I have ever heard!"

Well-practiced in the ways of his House, Severus swooped down over his student and grabbed a handful of his hospital gown. Still weak from his ordeal, Draco hung limply, gaping up at him, open-mouthed with terror.

Leaning in so close that he could distinguish the silver shards in Draco's gray eyes, he hissed, "Listen to me carefully, Draco. I will not accept this insolence. I am not in the habit of repeating myself, so I will say this only *once* more. Yes, you are indeed tied to Granger by way of a wizard's debt. She found you in the Astronomy Tower, being devoured alive by your own magic and half dead already. At the risk of her own life, she was able to intercede and halt the progress of the curse. You would do well to cease these childish antics at once and face reality!" He took care to thoroughly enunciate the last word to ensure that the child would understand. Then he promptly released him, letting him fall unceremoniously back upon the bed.

The child looked stricken, but Severus felt no sympathy for him. He was truly his father's son, blinded by rhetoric and dogma. Lucius had achieved his ends, Severus thought disdainfully, if he was aiming to produce a sniveling, brainless fool of an heir.

"Why are you telling me this, Professor? You know I'd rather die than have my father know," Draco whispered.

"Because, you sightless idiot, you may very well *be* dead if you ever try to lay hands on Granger again! *Wizard's debt*, boy, do not forget!" Severus scathed.

Draco sagged, appearing deflated. "A *Mudblood*," he muttered. "It's really the bloody truth."

"Yes," Severus agreed silkily. "The Mudblood. But it would perhaps be easier if you did not refer to her as such."

Draco guffawed mirthlessly, believing him to be joking. Severus did not care.

"Rest," Severus commanded. "The headmaster is securing the castle. In a few hours, we will return to ask you questions. You do not have to speak to anyone if you do not wish to. However, I suggest that for once you subscribe to nothing but honesty, Draco. It is for your own good. You do not know with whom you deal."

With that, Severus spun away. He would leave the patting and reassuring to Albus. Comforting was not in his purview, not that he believed the prideful Slytherin would accept his comfort.

He was almost out the door when he spotted Granger's bed, on the opposite end of the hospital wing from Draco's. She lay still as a statue, spelled into healing sleep by Pomfrey's potions. Potter and Weasley, of course, were there, the Weasley boy holding her hand. Severus frowned at the boys' grubby appearance, evidently a result of Quidditch practice. He stalked soundlessly over, avoiding detection by the Gryffindors. He permitted himself one cursory inspection of the girl, cocooned tightly within the coverlet, brown curls arrayed wildly upon the pillow. He was pleased to see that her color had improved slightly.

Then sweeping by Weasley, he grabbed his wrist, prying the boy off his hold of Granger. He pronounced softly, in a voice that brooked no disobedience, "Your hands, Weasley, are in contact with a sickbed. Spell the mud off them before I do so for you."

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Author's Notes:

1. Apologies again for the unbelievable 3 years between updates. I'm highly doubtful anyone who was originally reading this story is still following it. I know better than to make promises now. But being out of school helps a lot, and I still do love writing fic, so I'll keep my fingers crossed!

2. A lot has happened between when this story first got published and now. For starters, both HBP and DH came out. So obviously, this story is now HBP and DH disregarded. I've tried to work in any new canon knowledge gained from the new books without losing consistency with the previous chapters. Finally, I've graduated college and am now 23 as opposed to 18. So if you notice changes in writing style or outlook, I am trusting that it will be for the better :) I am hoping that becoming older has earned me some new flair at the very least!

3. For anyone with a Livejournal, I'd love to friend you! Mine is listed in my profile. Also, I am on Twitter as @labrt2004

4. And as always, many thanks go out to my betas, Natalie and Snarkyroxy!

***Reviews are very much appreciated!***

## No Man is an Island

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

It had been a strange night for Hermione, full of half-dreams, fragments of overheard conversations, implausible and perplexing memories, and through it all, a heavy, unshakable languor which made opening her eyes impossible. She was vaguely aware that perhaps she had done something of great significance, but it was hard to figure out precisely what; she drifted along in a potion-induced haze, any thoughts which might have threatened to take form instantly swept away. Perhaps under different circumstances, she would have objected to having mind so clearly separated from body. But in her current state, it was difficult to muster up the energy to care, for she slept almost constantly. Once or twice, when she had resisted the enticing calls of slumber, she had found that she was no match for the insistent black void that kept coming to claim her in its thick, soundless embrace.

Fussing attention rained upon her, and she was in no position to resist. There was always a motherly *cluck* here, or a worried-sounding *humph* there; a vial being held to her lips and reflexive swallowing of foul-tasting substances; her hand being held and the hushed murmuring of her friends; a cool touch upon her forehead or the faint brush of cleaning spells over the bed. But what she remembered most, given what little she could remember at all, was the sound of a smooth, deep voice, its rich tones washing over the sea of her blank consciousness, rousing her from her interminable trance. She did not know to whom the voice belonged, nor did she know why it was there, a patent departure from the constant and unremarkable droning which filled the hospital wing. But she heard it often, sometimes far away, sometimes right next to her. It was on some occasions low and roughened, on others, clear and melodious. As she lay there in unnatural stillness, through the minutes and hours, not certain whether she slept or woke, the words floated around her in disembodied wafts.

*"...Listen to me carefully, Draco!"*

*"...Wizard's debt, boy, do not forget!"*

*"...no obvious motive for committing the act..."*

*"...no contact with anyone for hours..."*

*"...was told nothing of significance, Albus. Then again, he would not confide in me completely, would he?"*

She knew the voice should mean something to her, just as she knew there must be some reason for which she was here in a bed, her mind thick and unwieldy as molasses. But all her thoughts were as snowflakes in early spring...disappearing as soon as they alighted, melting into thin air...

"How foolish you have been."

Something jolted in Hermione. There, that was the voice! She was hearing it again; this time it was so close, and it was barely a whisper.

She wanted desperately to open her eyes and to escape from this mental hinterland. She struggled, but her body remained resolutely still; already she felt her mind fading to nothingness again, her feeling of disappointment the last to slip through before all became black once more.

The next thing she knew was unlike anything she had ever experienced before. It was the complete and total absence of everything except overpowering *sensation*. She felt as if her skin were alive and crawling, tiny pinpricks marching up and down her body, over every inch and into every fold. She was able to zero in on the exact points of contact between herself and the surrounding bed sheets, for the feel of them became so oppressive that she tried to scream, except all that came out was a hoarse croak. Her entire body began to shake from the unbearable assault onto hypersensitized nerves.

Was she finally awaking?

Footsteps hurried over, two sets, one on each side of her bed. The sheets were abruptly jerked away from her body, and she would have cried with relief, except that a palm suddenly landed on her forehead and the touch inflicted so much pain that she flailed about like a fish out of water, wanting to faint. A moan sounded, which might have been hers.

"Be still, child, for just one moment!"

Madam Pomfrey.

"The potion's effects are fading, it has run its course."

The voice again!

Hermione's eyes flew open, her body finally remembering how it was done. The light was only slightly less agonizing than the pain...objects wavered and shimmered with weird auras, and colors were unrecognizably bright. But she needed to find the source of the voice; her finally-conscious brain, addled though it still was, demanded it, *craved* it. She twisted her head in the direction from whence it came.

For one glacial moment, all her distress was forgotten:

"Snape!"

She uttered his name without knowing it, and it hung there, suspended.

Then the horrible pain returned anew, and Hermione opened her mouth to scream, this time in earnest.

A vial was pressed to her lips.

"Drink, Granger."

The command was austere, but there was steel behind the words. It was enough to make her quiet, to help her grope about for the last vestiges of her dignity, to allow her to reach forward with shaking hands and accept the proffered potion. Though her fingers managed to close around the vial, Snape's hands never released it, perhaps due to wise distrust of her ability to hold it.

The potion flowed into her mouth, its acrid taste making her gag. But Snape had gently tipped her head back at the last moment, and the potion slipped down her throat. Immediately the riotous sensations left her, leaving only a dull, unspecific ache in its place.

Hermione wanted to sink back gratefully into the now unoffending, if sweat-drenched sheets, but Snape had thrust a new potion beneath her lips.

"Another," Snape ordered.

She complied readily, not just a little persuaded because it was *that* voice. The sound of it immediately overrode any thought of objection...she merely instinctively trusted it as the voice that had filled all those countless hours of void.

This time, the potion went down readily, and to her surprise, the remainder of the pain disappeared, too. Hermione wiggled her toes beneath the sheets experimentally.

"I must say, I don't see much of this kind of damage around here," Madam Pomfrey said with a hint of disapproval. "One of you with your magic eating you up and here you are coming in with close to no magic at all." Hermione considered these cryptic statements with puzzlement while Madam Pomfrey held out an empty tray, and Snape placed the used vials upon it, lining them up neatly.

Then to Hermione's mortification, Madam Pomfrey proceeded to expertly roll her about in the bed while changing her sheets. Her limbs were briskly being repositioned and her body deposited like a sack of shrivelfigs without regard for which direction her hospital gown had wandered. "Ah, no magic to change *your* sheets, my dear," the Mediwitch declared unhelpfully while Snape stood stonily by. Hermione's cheeks were flaming as the coverlet finally landed upon her again.

Before turning to leave, Madam Pomfrey insisted, "Don't keep her awake too long, Severus. The headmaster will no doubt traipse in shortly, and between the two of you the poor girl will get no rest."

Snape did not seem inclined to stay at all; he actually appeared a bit put-out. His hooded gaze scrutinized her, and Hermione saw something flicker across his black eyes. Then he looked away from her at a blank spot on the wall above her head before reluctantly lowering himself into a chair by her bedside.

Hermione's heartbeat quickened as she watched the professor smoothly cross his legs, then drape an arm languidly over the chair. She felt out of sorts and nervous, now that she wasn't drowning in pain or wading through murky semi-consciousness. Professor Snape regarded her silently in that unnerving way of his. Hermione had a multitude of questions lined up in her brain, but the chief among them, the one at the fore of her thoughts, was the one she could not put into words. She balled the sheets into a fist. Was it really his voice that she had heard, and his voice she had sought? How could it have been Snape, her reclusive, icy Potions professor who had been the one to warm her in those arctic hours of darkness?

She knew that she was expected to speak, so at length she finally asked, after clearing her throat awkwardly, "Why couldn't I wake up?" It wasn't the first question that had presented itself to her, nor was it even the most pressing one, but it seemed like an easy question, something safe that she could handle.

"You were magically induced to sleep by way of a Dreamless Sleep potion. It is a strong formulation that is difficult to overcome. I suspect there were times when you had thought to awaken but discovered you could not," Snape said steadily. His eyes bored into hers.

Hermione nodded, unsettled.

"You were treated thus to allow for your magical core to regenerate. You arrived with close to none left and drastic action was necessary. When the potion wore off, you began to awaken again."

Hermione realized that the professor's voice, though still cool, had taken on an edge, and one hand now gripped the arm of the chair, long fingers wrapped tightly about the wood.

"What you felt when you awoke, the... discomfort, was the sensation of your germinating magic. It is known to be a painful process. You were then imbued with two protective potions, one to deaden the pain, and the other to protect your sympathetic nervous system while your magic continues to regenerate."

That certainly sounded right, Hermione decided, for she had a dim recollection of Harry describing the pain that occurred when one regrew bones.

Snape's words were truly starting to have a bite to them now, and she was afraid to ask the next question, but she had to know, didn't she?

"A-and how, sir, did I end up in the state that I am?"

Expecting to be reproved, Hermione waited for the caustic explanation of whatever foolish deed she had committed. She did not expect Snape to rise to his feet so suddenly that it caused the chair to jump backwards with a *screech*. He loomed over her, back as straight as a rod, glittering eyes accosting her over his well-delineated nose. Something seemed to strain violently beneath the black depths of his ruthless stare. There was a slow intake of breath, followed by a small tic in his jaw. Softly, he said, "You do not remember."

It wasn't a question, but Hermione still shook her head, terribly confused now and shrinking back defensively. Her mouth had gone dry, as if her body had decided to abandon all other duties in favor of focusing wholly on Snape.

Seeing her spastic movement, the professor seemed to catch himself, and closing his eyes briefly, he turned away from her and muttered in a voice laced with longsuffering, "It was because you were being unaccountably *irrational*, always placing action before thought, like the rest of your Gryffindor colleagues."

"Ah, but she did save Mr. Malfoy's life!" Dumbledore's cheerful voice pointed out this essential fact to all as he strode into the hospital wing. "Severus, I see you have been keeping Miss Granger company."

Snape cast a look of ill-concealed annoyance at Professor Dumbledore. He stepped aside and intoned with frosty politeness, "Your pardon, Headmaster, I have potions that need attending to." Without looking at Hermione again, Snape walked out of the hospital wing, all billowing robes and rigid gait.

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"Merlin's balls, Hermione, what possessed you to risk your own life for the sake of *Malfoy*?" Ron asked, holding a chocolate frog card up in one hand while idly flicking it with the fingers on his other hand.

Tap, tap.

"Do you *really* got to do that, Ron?" Harry asked crossly from his perch at the foot of the bed, scowling as Ron's fingers knocked against the card.

"Sorry, mate! It's just, you know..." Ron shrugged vaguely. "Hermione's gone and saved Malfoy's arse, and I don't know what to do with myself!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. She supposed she should be happy that they weren't grilling her on why she was in the Astronomy Tower in the first place; they had assumed that she was carrying out routine Head Girl duties, which suited her just fine. "Yes, I kept him from being eaten alive by his own magic, what *else* should I have done? Were it you in a similar situation, you would have chosen to do the same thing!"

Harry snorted in a way that suggested he wasn't in agreement, and Ron simply shook his head.

"But who do you reckon would want to off Malfoy?" Harry asked. He glared forebodingly in the general direction of Malfoy's bed. "He's a mean-spirited git, it's true, but usually I'm the one getting death threats..."

"I really don't know," she responded. Dumbledore had spoken to her at length about the incident, both of her part in undoing the curse cast on Malfoy and of how both he and Professor Snape had been unable to apprehend Malfoy's assailant. "Dumbledore said that immediately after Malfoy and I were brought to the hospital wing, he had left to scour the castle for intruders and to strengthen the protective wards. But no one turned up, and when they questioned Malfoy about what he had been doing, he claimed that the last thing he remembered was going to sleep in his bed!"

"Huh. So whoever this bloke is..."

"Or *she*," Hermione inserted peevishly.

"Whatever! So whoever this person is, they actually got into Slytherin, cursed Malfoy in his sleep, and then dumped him in the Astronomy Tower?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Or they were part of Slytherin themselves," Ron said darkly. "They've got some seriously unbalanced people in there!"

Hermione shivered. "Yes, neither of those possibilities sounds too appealing."

"But I heard from Professor McGonagall that you did a bloody cool spell!" Ron said appreciatively. "Something about how no Hogwarts student in one thousand years had ever managed it. Wow, Hermione, that's pretty amazing."

"Plus," Harry added in an authoritative tone, "you've got the wizard's debt now. That will definitely come in handy."

Hermione felt herself smile just a bit. "Thanks, though Snape did accuse me of being a thoughtless Gryffindor."

"Aw hell, you know Snape, he's just a snarling, greasy bat. Figures he wouldn't have anything good to say. I'm just really sorry that you had to endure all his endless potions. And it was probably a good thing that you weren't conscious when he brought you into the hospital wing. If it were me, being in such close contact with him would have caused me to die on the spot, forget mucking up magical cores," Ron said fervently.

Hermione frowned. She shook her head, saying, "No, it wasn't like that at all, Ron. He was furious, I'm sure, but his care was unimpeachable. He hardly said anything... snarly... to me at all, in fact!"

Harry waved a hand dismissively. "Well, he couldn't very well poison you right under Dumbledore's nose, could he? Of course he did everything right."

She knew that there was more to the truth than that. As the discussion between Harry and Ron shifted to the latest Quidditch news, she mulled over Professor Snape. She was still uncertain about what to make of him. His sarcastic aloofness and biting remarks belied his real, if understated care and concern. It had been Snape who had borne her to the hospital wing and who had been by her bedside when she awoke, delirious from pain. Actions any Hogwarts professor would have taken, Hermione was sure, but the fact that it was Snape, for whom such tokens of humanity must have rankled at all his unfeeling senses, made it altogether mystifying.

And that was not to mention his voice, which had been like a beacon in a storm, which she could still replay with vibrant clarity in her mind, and which still warmed a deep and undefined part within her.

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Severus had no potions to brew, but the suggestion that he did had always been a dependable mode of exit whenever he wished to escape the noxiously ebullient presence of the headmaster. He had used it so often that he was sure the old man was merely indulging him now, but Severus couldn't be convinced to care even if it meant the Dark Lord's demise. He had had more than enough ruckus in the space of one day to last a whole year; he now had every intention of savoring a few hours of solitude, and he would not answer for the consequences if anyone dared to disturb him.

With an impatient wrench of the door knob, he let himself into his rooms. The door slammed shut, and without turning he pointed his wand behind him, casting a litany of warding spells that he was certain neither Merlin nor Albus could breach. The incantations issued from his lips in rapid succession, and the air crackled with magic. He shoved his books aside, some of them falling onto the floor with noisy *thumps*. Normally a man who opted for stealth, he felt frustration bleeding out of him with each unrestrainedly loud action.

But still, it wasn't enough; he stalked to his warded door, raised his fist, and plunged it straight into the hard oaken surface. The pain dragged a curse out of him, and he felt splinters tearing at his flesh. Small rivulets of blood appeared on his knuckles, and as he watched them ooze, he felt his rage abate at last and with that, finally came blessed relief.

How inexcusably imprudent she had been! How laughably foolhardy! Malfoy was spared from death, but only after she had ransomed his life back, depleting her own magic until she approached the brink. Granger had unwittingly placed herself in the midst of affairs that she had no business being part of. Albus' words had rung like an ominous death knell. *"This cannot be contained in a night, or perhaps even a week; I'm afraid Mr. Malfoy must now be extremely vigilant. When the father was captured, the mother grew desperate. She has made overtures to many, including myself, and that, I fear, will attract not merely a bit of unwanted attention from her erstwhile friends in Tom's circle."*

A night full of Severus' most vicious intimidation tactics paired with many vials of Veritaserum, both within and without his House, had still yielded nothing. A killer was at large...and two students had nearly died.

Severus could not ever recall when he had been so burdened with care, as when he had held her in his arms, rushing her to the hospital wing. He had doused her with Dreamless Sleep, and for hours, she lay there as he carried out his duties to the headmaster, his House, and the school, neither staying nor leaving, not daring to so much as glance at her. But he had felt that from one moment to the next, his heart was racing so hard it might have burst forth from his chest. It was not merely a matter of alertness or of being on guard, as he was during the occasions when he was summoned by the Dark Lord and he knew his very life hung on his every thought. No, *this* was chaotic and uncontrolled, a wild state of lawlessness that induced him to do impulsive and reckless things.

He railed against it, despised himself for it. How could this waif of a girl, so unmistakably beneath his concern, become such an all-consuming object of fascination, holding him in twisted thrall? Her woefully deficient sense of self-preservation aside, Severus could not forget the adeptness with which she had handled the rarely-performed core magic intervention, or the inescapable fact that she had indeed saved the life of Draco Malfoy, dubious though the boy's merit might be. It was a true testament both to her diligence and her abilities. In a different time and place, Severus would be blind to not recognize and appreciate her formidable gifts. It was the one characteristic of

Granger that distinguished her from her more forgettable peers.

He had not the faintest notion, however, why admiration of such traits should leave him unable to breathe whilst at her bedside, until he had assured himself that she breathed, too.

He merely knew that the time had long passed since his life was his to live. For his one transgression in the days of his unrepentant youth, he would now spend a lifetime at the precipice between Light and Dark. It was a demanding vocation, one in which he could ill-afford another such lapse again.

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He came upon her when she was alone, an uncommon state for her. The potions she required were not stocked routinely in the infirmary, and he had come to re-administer them to her, a task for which he could not work up the loathing that he wished. She was still recovering...it would be two more nights that she must stay in the hospital wing and at least a fortnight before she regained full use of her magic. He watched her sigh impatiently as she set aside one of her texts, expression clearly mutinous in reaction to her forced confinement. She appeared bored, and Severus was not surprised. One such as she did not take well to the unstimulating environs of the hospital wing.

She looked towards Draco's bed, where the boy was sound asleep. Then she looked to the nightstand adjoining her own bed, which now held a small collection of her possessions, brought to her from Gryffindor Tower by the devoted Potter and Weasley.

He should have foreseen it, from the speculative glint that appeared in her eyes as she inspected the contents of the nightstand. In the next instant, she had her wand in her hand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he snapped.

Her startled face followed the progression her wand made as it zipped its way towards where he stood just inside the door. He mentally noted that it was the second time in recent weeks that he had had to disarm the Head Girl, which was two more times than in the past seven years of their acquaintance.

He was beside her faster than he himself believed possible. "Just *what* did you think you were doing?" he asked. "Was there someone else here you believe in need of saving?"

She had the grace to appear ashamed, two pink spots spreading on still-pale cheeks.

"I was merely going to attempt *Wingardium Leviosa*, sir," she mumbled, eyes now fixed upon her coverlet.

"I assume that at some point during your illustrious academic career, you did gather that persons drained of their magic should refrain from casting spells?" he inquired sharply.

His remark appeared to dispatch with her embarrassment. Now she actually looked at him in disaffected challenge, which was startling to say the least. "One wonders why my overly-paranoid caregivers did not simply confiscate my wand then. And I won't insult you, Professor, by informing you that *Wingardium Leviosa* would have drawn out less magic than exists in a Squib."

Severus remained silent in response to her outburst, eyeing her coldly.

She seemed finally to realize she was raving. "Oh, Merlin," she spat out bitterly. "That was very rude, sir, I apologize..."

But these weren't words of Granger's usual caliber, accompanied by the over exuberance that typically tried his patience. Indeed, her visage was clouded with a black look, which was accentuated by her pointed silence and her folded lips. Severus was curious in spite of himself.

What was this? He wondered if he had been too quick to assess. Her unusually foul humor was more than boredom and irritation.

He folded himself into the chair that he had taken up the night before and placed the potions on the nightstand.

"A good point you bring up, Miss Granger. I shall therefore be keeping your wand for the time being, lest you are tempted again." He tucked the wand into his robes, feeling it prod against him. Seated, he was able to have a clearer view of her eyes, and he realized from their swollen redness that she had recently shed tears. He kept himself from frowning.

"You are not well?" he offered as way of an opening. Merlin help him, now he was attempting to pry into another's feelings. Legitimency remained an option, and a far easier one, but she was still convalescing. He restrained himself.

She watched as he sat, her expression growing progressively alarmed. But in response to his question, her eyebrows furrowed and Severus imagined that it was not the query she had been expecting.

"I am as *well* as I could be, given the condition I find myself in!" she said after a pause. She sighed, raking troubled eyes over his face, as if searching for some deeper meaning. She seemed to hold an internal debate of sorts, before grumbling, "Oh, bother, it may as well be you then."

She shifted about a bit, as if getting more comfortable, then began slowly, "I'm not used to being such a complete invalid. Actually, I don't think I've *ever* been like this. I'm not just talking about being stuck in a bed, or being made to take potions, or feeling a bit weak and under the weather..."

She looked tentatively at him now, and Severus nodded at her to go on, still feeling himself on unsure footing.

"What I'm talking about is this complete...*helplessness*. Especially this no magic thing, Professor. I know that I shouldn't complain, having brought this upon myself, but truly, I can't do *anything*, at least not in the Wizarding world, where Muggle conveniences like hairbrushes simply do not exist!"

An odd understanding came over Severus. Having frequently been laid low in the sick ward himself from his excursions with the Dark Lord, Severus was not unfamiliar with the teeth-gnashing dissatisfaction that came with losing magic. For a witch such as Granger, it was surely galling. He had nothing to say about hairbrushes, of course. But neither should Granger, whose restless intellect was starved for fodder and forced to dwell on inanities.

"If it is any consolation, it hardly makes a difference," he opined, his lips quirked.

She seemed baffled at first, then her eyes widened disbelievingly. She reached up and patted her hair, laughing. "Ah, do you believe so, Professor? I had no idea you were an authority on such things. Though really, my hair is hopeless with or without magic, which is probably why you see no difference!"

The sound of her laughter caused a small knot to release in his stomach. Some distant part his brain approved.

Her laughter died down now, and she resumed her brooding stance. "But yes, you see, I really don't know what to do with myself. I can study, but I can't practice, I can't summon things at will, I can't even indulge in some of the sweets my House mates have sent me, since most of them are magical." She gestured disconsolately at the meager supply of Muggle chocolates sitting on her nightstand.

"You will be released from the hospital wing in two days," he said reasonably. "And your magic is not restricted indefinitely. Melancholy does not become you, Granger, anymore than it becomes other eternally-upbeat Gryffindors."

"How remiss of me," she rejoined mockingly. Before Severus could decide whether her cheek warranted discipline, her voice lowered to a bare whisper and her gaze became downcast. "And worst of all, I can't pursue my project. My parents have still sacrificed in vain."

Severus' eyes narrowed. So revenge was still on the girl's mind?

"Do not be foolish!" he said in a hard tone. "You speak of this vengeance like it is but another assignment from one of your classes. Do not forget that the headmaster and I have only consented to allow you to experiment with your theories on a probationary basis."

She nodded once, jerkily, but her gaze was still obstinate.

"You are not..." he began, but she interrupted pointing at his right hand.

"You ought to do something about that, Professor!"

He glared at her, and tugged his robe sleeve further down to cover the hand still bearing the wounds from the night before. "Do not change the subject."

"You can perform a healing charm. Why on earth--? Ah, is it your dominant brewing hand, Professor? It needs to heal naturally in order to avoid damaging the integrity of your potions?" she asked brightly.

"Yes," he said through gritted teeth. At the moment, she was wreaking havoc on his good judgment.

"Honey and vinegar, then."

"I have not the faintest idea what you are talking about," he snarled.

"Honey and vinegar, when applied to wounds, can speed healing," she said pedantically.

Severus decided he had had quite enough. With a muttered oath, he turned to the potions, made a show of levitating them with his wand, and shoved them before her face.

"You will drink these."

He wondered if her confinement had really caused her to lose her wits, for she was now wearing an insufferable grin. "Of course, Professor."

He watched her take the potions, exasperation causing his temple to pulsate. He wondered what had inspired him to be subject to this churlish tirade of hers. He had far better things to do than listen to Granger's confidences. Yet, as he surveyed the sight of her swallowing the potions determinedly, features distorted in distaste, and perceived her animated eyes darting to him surreptitiously, believing him unaware, he confessed a mindless relief at witnessing her alive, unharmed, and well. After seeing her awaken, *screaming* in torment... It had shaken him and now it promised to haunt him. It had been more difficult than he cared to admit to put her agony from his mind as he administered to her the potions.

She stifled a yawn after she had downed the brews, and Severus took this as a cue to depart. He had already stood up when her voice, now much softer, drifted up to him sleepily, "I'm sorry."

He looked at her questioningly. Her eyelids were starting to droop, and her face had lost its moody angles.

"For messing up with the Pensieve Base...I was being pretty stupid, wasn't I?"

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but found that the words were reluctant to emerge. He blinked, then murmured, "Think nothing of it, Granger."

"I can come back, then?" her speech was almost indistinguishable as torpor descended upon her.

"Yes, I suppose you may."

"Good." Her eyes closed, and her head turned slightly into the pillow. Tense fingers released their hold upon the coverlet.

Severus stared, his breath lodging in his throat. His hand rose slowly to hover over her face. He closed his eyes, his mind flooding with warnings. His fingers quickly retracted into a fist, and he remained standing over her, immovable. Then, in spite of his own admonitions which insisted that this was not for him, his fingers unfurled, trembling, and brushed against her mussed, uncharmed hair with a touch so feather light that he would later convince himself he hadn't touched her at all.

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Author's Notes:

1. The title of this chapter, "No Man Is An Island," is the title of one of my favorite poems, written by John Donne:

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man  
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe  
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as  
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine  
own were; any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know for whom  
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

2. For anyone with a Livejournal, I'd love to friend you! Mine is listed in my profile. Also, I am on Twitter as @labrt2004

3. And as always, many thanks go out to my betas, Snarkyroxy and Natalie (LaSyren)

**Reviews are very much appreciated!**

# The Madness of Neville Longbottom

Chapter 7 of 11

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

It was not a good day to be a recovering patient in the Hogwarts hospital wing. Hermione sat in her bed, books littered around her. Outside, rain poured in miserable torrents, and not even the castle's magically enhanced lighting could hide the fact that the sky was menacingly dark. The ceaseless sound of water rushing over the castle overhangs carried through the infirmary windows, its splashes and gurgles punctuating the silence.

She was due to be released at dinner time. Thank Merlin, she thought. She didn't know if she could stand another day of this cooped-up quiet, her wand gone from her, with only Harry and Ron's occasional visits to break the monotony. Oh, and *Malfoy*. That was the worst part. For days, they had occupied the same hospital room but had pointedly refused to speak to each other. Hermione was fairly certain that saving a person's life entitled one to nodding pleasantries, at the very least, not to mention an expression of thanks; she and Malfoy had instead staked out opposite ends of the hospital wing like warring tribes, and though the place wasn't large, they managed to completely ignore each other, carrying on as if the other did not exist. When Malfoy wasn't sulking in his bed or whinging to Madam Pomfrey, he held court with his Slytherin cronies. They ignored her too, of course, if they saw her at all, though Pansy Parkinson had very delicately wrinkled her nose when she walked by. Hermione had given up trying to eavesdrop on their conversations. There hadn't seemed like much to listen to anyway...all they ever did was snicker or swear.

There still remained a tortuously long half-day before all of it would be over. In the meantime, there were books to be read. Hermione squinted, trying to decipher her Potions text. She could not, for the life of her, figure out what had gone wrong with the modified Pensieve Base she had brewed for Professor Snape.

*Snape.*

Her head lifted from her book at the thought of her Potions professor. His name rolled around in her brain with an intimate frequency now. When had he changed from being the teacher who ridiculed her for sport to the man who sat by her sickbed? He had said she could come back... and it had filled her with unexplainable gratitude. She shook her head slightly, as if to purge her wandering mind, and returned to her studies.

Her original Arithmantic calculations were spread before her, the frayed edges of the parchment weighed down by various books. After inspecting them in the obsessive manner afforded only to people with limitless amounts of spare time, she had not been able to find a mistake. Now she wondered whether she had been brewing the whole blasted potion incorrectly to begin with. She didn't see how that was possible, since she could make Pensieve Base with her eyes closed, but it was worth checking, at least. She started to flip a page which had become stuck due to the humidity. Without a wand, all she could do was mutter, and running her fingers across the pages irately, she managed to turn them after they gave way with a ripping noise.

*"Pensieve Base is a Class B potion that is used to prime Pensieves before they are filled with a memory. The potion can be brewed and stocked..."*

*Thump.*

Hermione frowned at the intrusive sound which interrupted her reading, coming from Malfoy's side of the room, but without looking up, continued scanning the text.

*"...before use. When one desires to use a Pensieve, one must first ladle the Pensieve Base into the apparatus and wait for the potion to be completely absorbed. Depending on the preferences of the user, Pensieve Base can be..."*

*Whoosh.*

She looked up, irritation flaring, and was confronted by the sight of Malfoy waving his wand, stacking his books into an elaborate and precariously balanced tower.

After a moment of uncomprehending glaring, she sighed and rolled over, deliberately putting Malfoy and his antics behind her.

*"...tailored for clarity of audio versus visual aspects of the memory. To gain in one is to sacrifice in the other; in general, brews are optimized to create a balance between the two, though specialized formulations are used by witches and wizards who work in fields that demand high-fidelity recall of either sound or sight."*

Hermione chewed on the end of her quill. Everything written so far about Pensieve Base was exactly as she remembered it when she had read these passages the first time for Professor Snape's class. There was nothing in here about...

*Wham!*

Furious at being disturbed yet again, Hermione turned around in the bed, hissing under her breath, "What the ~~hell~~?"



Malfoy's books were now in a pile on the floor and he was starting to levitate them, apparently intent on repeating the whole performance once more. Hermione would rather be hexed than continue to endure this racket.

She swung her bare feet over the edge of the bed and marched purposefully to Malfoy's side of the room. "For Merlin's sake, Malfoy, what's your problem?" she demanded.

He inspected her with supreme distaste, as if she were a stray animal that had landed on his doorstep. She bristled.

"What's it to you, Granger? Mind your own damn business," he returned venomously. He still appeared wan, and his face had a tight, pinched look about it which contrasted with the liquid silver of his eyes.

"Unlike you," Hermione replied through clenched teeth, "I'm endeavoring not to let my brain rot to pieces while stuck in this place. I can't read if your books are falling to the ground every two seconds!"

"What, are your pets, Potty and the Weasel, not paying you enough visits to satisfy your lusty appetites?" he sneered, his gaze openly leering.

"You miserable coward! How dare you, after I've..."

"You've *what*?" Malfoy interrupted. "Come to gloat, have you, Granger? So you think I'm twined around your little finger now because you saved my hide?" His voice dripped with bitterness.

He spoke facing slightly to the side, as if he could not stand to even look at her, but now he turned fully, and Hermione was struck by the seething hatred in his eyes. "Well, let me tell you something," he continued, his voice dropping low. "You can go to hell! I would rather have been reduced to a bloody pulp by my own magic than be touched by the likes of *you*."

"Duly noted," Hermione returned frigidly.

She turned abruptly and walked away, disgusted, but her bile spent. She expected that Malfoy would continue to grate against her nerves for the remainder of the afternoon, but after she had settled back in and chanced a look in his direction, she saw that he was now sitting silently on his bed, head bowed low. As a flash of lightning bleached the room briefly in brilliant blue and threw jagged shadows across the walls, Hermione saw that the bitterness and sullenness were gone from his face. In their stead was only the expression of one deeply and profoundly lost.

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Hermione stood on the steps of Hagrid's house and pulled hard on the massive wooden door, barely managing to close it behind her. It latched with an angry groan, and she wiped her brow, relieved. The sounds of Fang chewing and slurping in satisfaction could be heard coming from the inside, as the dog devoured his dinner. She had volunteered to look in on Hagrid's faithful pet while the man was away, despite the dog's frightfully large size and its overabundance of drool. After being held in captivity in the hospital wing for three days, she was glad for an excuse to roam the school grounds.

As she started to make her way back, she drew in a deep breath, enjoying the crisp air of the approaching dusk. In the distance, the slanted rays of the setting sun bounced off the stone exterior of the castle, making it appear as bright as a jewel. The afternoon's storm had passed, leaving the damp grass smelling fresh and feeling soft underfoot. Hermione slowed, savoring her surroundings.

Her drifting gaze was arrested by the sight of a figure clad in black, cresting the hill and coming towards her. The person moved with confident ease, effortlessly sidestepping the myriad tree roots and fallen branches that riddled the rocky pathway. Hermione knew who it was without needing to see his face. She stopped and waited, her eyes fixed on him, as he got closer and closer.

"Let off your leash, finally, Granger?" he said by way of greeting. A small, covered basket hung from his arm. His usually flattened mat of black hair had been remolded by the breeze, some of it falling loosely about his chin.

"Yes, Professor, just this afternoon, as a matter of fact," she replied, a little shakily. Was he about to take points for her unsanctioned outdoor wandering? He was close enough that she had to look up at him. He is so very tall, Hermione thought irrelevantly. Surrounded by the vast expanse of trees, boulders, and sky, she felt even smaller.

He did not respond, but instead, peered at her with an unreadable expression. Hermione could only stare mutely back. Their eyes met, his dark flint searing against her honeyed brown. The air between them shifted subtly, as if someone had drawn a finger lightly over the still surface of water.

It lasted both an eternity and a heartbeat.

Hermione blinked, her lips parting slightly in surprise. She could hear the roar of rushing blood in her ears.

Snape drew back, a shadow falling across his already oblique gaze, the only reflection in him of her own startlement. "Return to the castle," he reproved softly, without rancor. Then he calmly took a step around her and made for the Forbidden Forest, his only parting gesture a perfunctory inclination of his head.

Hermione stood rooted in place, watching the back of him disappear into the cover of the dense trees. Without knowing what came over her, she broke into a run, tripping over the pebbles and twigs, following him. He had already gone a considerable distance, and her breath was heaving by the time she caught up with him again.

"Wait, Professor!" she called out, wheezing.

She felt a little hysterical, but she had stopped caring the moment she had taken off after him.

He turned, a livid scowl twisting his features. "Did you not hear me the first time, or are you now deaf as well as daft? Are you seeking to bring further ruin upon your health, you imbecilic child?"

Yet, even in all the jumbled confusion of running and shouting, Hermione realized that the vitriol issuing forth from his mouth was in direct opposition to the hand that had darted out when she had reached him, grasping her by the arm, steadying her.

"I am perfectly *fine*," she said impatiently. "It is not curfew yet," she pointed out. She wasn't certain why she had decided to come after him...she only knew that she must now attempt to stall, at all costs, being summarily hauled back to the castle, no doubt after a thousand-point deduction from Gryffindor. She frantically evaluated the possibilities in her head before stating, "If... if it is moonstone you're laying out for the night, can I come with you? I've always been, ah, curious about it, since it's quite a potent potions ingredient."

His head angled at her unlikely story, and his eyes gleamed in the shady darkness. He quickly unhandled her, throwing her back a step in the process, then continued walking into the forest. "Do not wander off on your own," he said without looking back, resigned displeasure evident in his voice.

He walked at a brisk clip, but Hermione stubbornly hurried along, keeping him in sight. She was sure the professor wasn't intending to do anything with moonstones, but she didn't care. She felt giddy and unhinged. Strange bird calls sounded overhead, accompanied by the scampering of hidden creatures. The Forbidden Forest was usually a place she steered clear of, for she had had more than her share of near-death catastrophes here, and she suspected that the beings inhabiting this gloomy realm remembered her all too well. The thought that she might be in danger briefly crossed her mind, but it was quickly extinguished in a surge of rash courage.

They stopped at a clearing, where an unusual amount of sunlight pierced through the foliage, causing the ground to take on the mottled pattern of leafy shadows. The moldering remains of felled trees lay everywhere...the centaurs' doing, Hermione presumed. Snape was focused very intently at a spot in the center of the clearing, and she followed his gaze, wondering what was so absorbing about a patch of overgrown weeds.

"*Oenothera Biennis*," Snape murmured, quietly.

Then she saw them, too. They were tall stalks, growing against a tree trunk, and so she had mistaken them for common forest vines. At the crown of each plant was a splash of delicate, yellow blooms. The petals were just beginning to open.

"Evening primrose," Hermione breathed.

He nodded. "They will open tonight."

Their voices were hushed, neither wanting to agitate the forest life.

"But here?" Hermione whispered, frowning.

"Sprout's doing. They are not native to this area, but they do well enough in any dry, undisturbed patch of soil." He looked at her wryly now. "As usual, Granger, you were correct in your assumptions; I was indeed coming to the forest to earn my keep as a Potions master." He gestured to the basket he carried. "I am sure you do not require an explanation of the plant's worth in medicinal potions."

Hermione shook her head. "And they must be harvested on the night they are to bloom?"

"Correct." He set the basket down and approached the plants, bending down to inspect them under the waning light of evening. "If you wish to make yourself useful, you may furnish us with a bit of light," he said, a touch haughtily.

Hermione shrugged and quickly produced a bluebell flame from the end of her wand. She studied the bobbing light which was now dancing on the forest floor. With a twitch of her wand, she had the flames split into three and hovering about them like cheerful fairies. Satisfied, she went to join Snape, who was now carefully plucking the blooms from their stems and depositing them in the basket.

His fingers were lithe and his motions economical. He looked up, briefly inspected her handiwork, then raised his eyebrows. "Pleased to have your wand back?"

"Yes," she said simply. She reached out and stroked one of the flowers. It felt velvety in texture. More of them were starting to unveil themselves now that the night was falling. They emitted a pleasing aroma, unimposing and sweet.

"They are beautiful," she said with reverence. "Odd things they are, blooming only in the night."

"The moths prefer them," Snape said noncommittally.

She noticed that he was no longer occupied by the primrose. Without warning, his wand circled about his head elegantly, and her three flames erupted into fireballs, landing on the shrubbery and burning harmlessly, consuming nothing as they glowed.

Hermione was the one now who glanced archly at her professor. "Ah," she commented. "Very... Biblical."

Snape curled a lip. "Far be it for me to be compared with the gods." He paused, then added, "It is better this way, you must admit. How am I to finish the task at hand with those interfering bobs of yours?"

She felt a smirk tug at her mouth. "If you believe *those* were ostentatious..." She aimed her wand carefully at Snape's burning bushes, and the flames instantly transformed before their eyes into fiery creatures. A snake, a lion, a badger, and a raven prowled around them.

Snape appraised them. "Poetic. And Albus wondered that you were capable of a mere messenger Patronus," he scoffed.

"Pretty, aren't they?" she said, managing to keep a straight face. She felt lightheaded---probably from her still-mending magical core.

"Without doubt," he said sourly. This time, he did not bother with taking out his wand. His eyes still fixed upon her, he whispered indistinctly, and her blazing creations froze into ice.

Hermione turned and gaped, unabashedly impressed.

"Don't know that one?" Snape asked waspishly.

"No," she said faintly, touching the glimmering surface of the ice in admiration. "How?" she couldn't stop herself from inquiring. "Fire to ice bridges three intermediary transfigurative states, and wandlessly, too?"

"One of the headmaster's old favorites, I believe. *Not* a transfiguration, Granger."

She heard the unspoken note of challenge and cocked her head, working her way through the puzzle.

"Ah. I suppose it helped that it rained this afternoon? You banished my fire and summoned the ice. There's plenty of water sitting around..."

"You did at least succeed in not losing your mind whilst in the hospital wing," was all Snape said.

She grinned crookedly at the grudging compliment. "And the wandless aspect?"

This time, he did smile, though it looked a little tight-lipped and repressed. "Ah, that would be experience, Granger," he said loftily.

"Right," she said, tossing her head.

They were silent now, standing facing one another. The primrose lay forgotten at their feet. They regarded each other, their eyes meeting again, and Hermione thought that he might dismiss her, as he had before. But he didn't...he only scrutinized her with an expression that was uncertain and questioning, the dark pools that were his eyes swirling with currents which Hermione did not understand.

The light from the day had almost gone, the sky now streaked with amethyst and red. A breeze shook the trees, chilly now from the nightfall. She shivered, though she was sure she wasn't cold.

"You have not your robe," he said softly, chiding.

"I... was not planning on needing it."

Wordlessly, his hands went to the clasp of his own ubiquitous black robe, and he slipped out of it and had it wrapped around her in one fluid movement.

Hermione stood transfixed, not daring to breathe. The robe felt warm and carried an unfamiliar but soothing scent, vaguely herbal and intensely...masculine. The thick material pooled at her feet, having been tailored for a much taller wearer. Dazedly, she realized it had never occurred to her that beneath the trademark billowing robes must have stood a man with quite a substantial frame; here he was before her now, the garment gone, well-muscled beneath the plain black shirt and slacks.

The sound of loud flapping wings drew both their attentions to a disturbance in the treetops, the source invisible to Hermione.

"Thestrals," Snape said, following some unseen trajectory.

"I...I cannot see them," Hermione murmured, her voice breaking slightly. "Even after... you know."

He turned to her, the strange, tentative look in his eyes again. He absently picked out one last primrose from its stalk, and taking her hand, he placed the single yellow bloom in her palm and slowly closed her hand around it, saying, "It is much better this way, Granger."

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Severus walked through the castle corridors, performing the last round of the night. He kept watch for the usual miscreants...hormonal teenagers out of their Houses, lost First Years, the occasional n'er do-well. He felt distracted today, however. He had almost missed Zabini and Bulstrode lurking behind a suit of armor. He was not going to delude himself by believing he did not know *why* he was preoccupied. He was more concerned because he felt... indifferent. Even... relieved.

"It is enough," he whispered to himself.

He had given up pretending that she did not affect him. True, Granger picked up spells quickly, and perhaps was even worthy of dueling him, if her general repertoire was as impressive as her illumination spells. But she was also part of some larger cosmic mystery, he decided, for which men such as him were not destined to have knowledge. Tonight, he had already strayed far beyond what was permissible. He would accept that the experience was not altogether unpleasant. But there could simply be no possibility of repeating it.

He fingered his robe, now back upon his own shoulders. His sensitive brewer's nose detected a trace of gardenias, however faint, that he had come to associate with her presence.

He had tried to rid himself of her when he had found her standing outside on the grounds, but she had followed him like a lost crup...and he had let her. She had gotten him to indulge in wand work, the likes of which he hadn't done in years. Could she be considered beautiful? He did not know. How *could* he know? He only knew that she had curls that cascaded about her face, begging for a man to run his fingers through them, that she had eyes that shone like stars when she looked at him, and that she possessed a guileless brilliance that he feared every day would be marred by her simmering plans for vengeance. And now, she had worn his cloak. It was out of his hands; he could only hope that she would quickly forget the incident, or perhaps that, still recovering from her injury, she was even less lucid than he was.

*It is enough.*

"Professor Snape!"

He whirled around, towards the source of the voice. It could not be *her* again. He looked down the far end of the corridor towards the staircase and narrowed his eyes, straightening up in alertness.

It was indeed Granger, but she was not alone. She was flanked by Potter and Weasley, and between the three of them, they were levitating another student, the identity of whom he could not be certain from the distance. They were making an appalling commotion, bumping into one another as they clumsily descended the stairs.

He quickly went to them. Looking down at their immobilized fellow, he was confounded by what he saw. "*Longbottom*? What is the meaning of this?" he thundered.

"Sir, we brought him down as soon as we could!" Granger said hurriedly. "We need to get him to the hospital wing!"

"And your Head of House?"

"Well, Professor McGonagall stayed behind, because, um, Neville was a bit destructive and he hurt many of our Housemates and scared most of the First Years to death," Potter answered, looking at Severus apprehensively. "We aren't out here on purpose!"

Severus disregarded Potter's last bit of incoherent rambling and tried to picture Longbottom terrorizing Gryffindor Tower. He imagined there was far more to the story than this, but he took one look at Longbottom's Petrified form and said curtly, "Come."

He extracted his own wand, divesting the students of their burden. As they proceeded to the hospital wing, he asked, "What exactly was the nature of Mr. Longbottom's behavior?"

"He'd been acting kind of off for the past couple of days," Weasley said. "Kind of quiet, reclusive. We just thought he had a bit on his mind, or that he was just being *Neville*. But then tonight, he totally lost it! Went barking mad... sir," the boy explained with his typical eloquence.

"It was dreadful! He staggered about, turning over furniture, hitting students. He was unresponsive to anything that we said to him. He said things himself, but none of it was comprehensible! We fire-called Professor McGonagall as soon as we could get a body-bind on him..." Granger reported fretfully. "Oh, I do hope he's all right! What do you suppose is wrong with him, Professor?"

He knew better than to make eye contact, lest his treacherous heart betray him again. Instead, he continued walking, the floating Longbottom leading the way. Without turning, he replied, "I doubt I would be the one to tell you, Miss Granger. I am certain any number of calamities could have befallen one such as Longbottom."

They were all mercifully silent after that.

When they reached the hospital wing, Poppy met them at the door. "I just received word from Minerva!" she said, ushering them to a bed. "Put him down, quickly! I need to see to him before she sends down the others. Oh, Severus, hello, you seem to be in here quite frequently these days."

He released Longbottom from the *Mobilicorpus* and dropped him upon the bed, not bothering to respond to Poppy's chattering.

They all stood around the still Petrified Longbottom, the three Gryffindors fidgeting anxiously. Poppy bustled her way to the foot of the bed, pointed her wand at the boy, and incanted, "*Finite!*"

Immediately, Longbottom's features unfroze, and he lunged from the bed, wild-eyed and thrashing. Without thinking, Severus swept an arm out to push Granger further from the bed, managing to drag Potter and Weasley along, too. "Back!" he hissed.

"Nee-Dukes! Nee-Dukes!"

Longbottom seemed to speak, though as Granger had alluded to earlier, nothing he said could be construed as coherent. They all watched in revolted fascination as the boy gibbered and drooled, moaning and convulsing. Poppy had placed magical restraints upon his feet and hands and he bounced about within the confines of the bed helplessly.

Poppy was measuring out a dosage of Calming Draught for the boy and was preparing to administer it.

"Nee-Dukes!"

Severus slanted his head toward Longbottom, listening more intently. He held up his hand, forestalling Poppy. "Just a moment," he said tensely.

"Nee-Dukes!"

Nee-Dukes? It wasn't any spell or word he knew, but the boy was determined to say this and nothing else.

Weasley suddenly gasped, then elbowed his way forward. "Nee-dukes! Honeydukes! Is he saying Honeydukes, as in the sweets shop?"

Granger and Potter looked at each other, then at Weasley, before recognition dawned upon their faces, too.

"Honeydukes? Yes, we had a Hogsmeade trip a few days ago! Could he have ingested something harmful there?" Granger speculated.

Poppy, running diagnostic spells, shook her head distractedly. "No, nothing out of the ordinary in his blood...in fact, I don't even detect any magic on him that isn't his own!"

Longbottom continued to twist about, his eyes now following all of their movements in paranoid fashion.

A new idea occurred to Severus. He examined the immediate area and found the object he sought, Longbottom's wand, sitting on the nightstand. "*Prior Incantato!*"

A ghostly image of a sleeping Draco Malfoy burst from the end of Longbottom's wand. The spell form of Draco jerked awake, his eyes wide open but unseeing. A guttural scream was ripped from inside him, which echoed loudly within the walls of the hospital wing.

Astonishment initially prevented Severus from moving a muscle. Then, drawn out of his shock by the sound of Draco's continued screams, he waved his wand and ended the spell with a harsh, "*Deletrius!*"

None spoke after the screams faded. Even Longbottom had quieted, now merely rocking back and forth silently. Severus looked up, only to collide with the sight of Granger's horror-filled eyes, the grimness of this reality gripping her above all others.

He tore his gaze from her, seeking Poppy. "Send for the headmaster," he said with forced calm. "Also, Draco Malfoy."

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Author's Notes:

1. Evening primrose is quite a lovely plant. I adore the fact that it opens at night rather than during the day. I did do some research on it...I took some extra liberties with its habitat in order to make it work for this story...but not too much :)

2. For anyone with a Livejournal, I'd love to friend you! Mine is listed in my profile. Also, I am on Twitter as @labrt2004

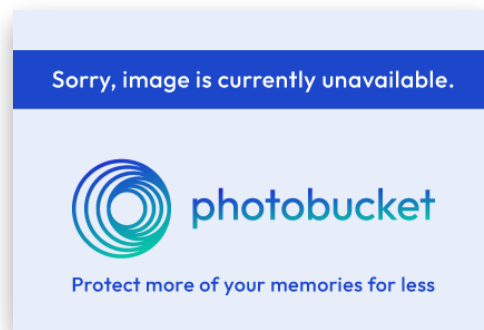
3. And as always, many thanks go out to my betas, Natalie (LaSyren) and Snarkyroxy!

***Reviews are very much appreciated!***

## Perurere

Chapter 8 of 11

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

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Hermione stood to one side of Neville's bed as mayhem erupted around her. Mere moments after Professor Snape had ordered the headmaster and Malfoy notified, Professor McGonagall had arrived in the hospital wing, five students in tow. Harry and Ron were in the midst of frenzied conversation, talking over one another, and she supposed she was participating, too, because at random intervals, she was nodding absently to them.

But they might as well have been discussing the weather; she felt like she had been hit in the head with a bludger. People rushed past her, students groaned in pain, potions vials *clanked*, but her world had come to a screeching halt.

That had been *Neville's* wand that had regurgitated the *Perurere* when Snape had performed *Priori Incantatem*. *Neville* was the reason that she had almost destroyed her magical core?

Try as she might to mold her mind around such an absurd turn of events, all Hermione could do was stare in stunned silence at her friend still flailing against his restraints,

inhuman sounds emanating from him.

Madam Pomfrey rushed up and down the aisle of the hospital wing, attending to her many charges. Hermione narrowly avoided having a tray of Skele-Gro spilled upon her as she hovered awkwardly in the midst of the foot traffic. Someone herded her out of the way, into a corner.

"Do strive to avoid getting yourself killed, Granger," a low voice said softly in her ear.

She looked up with a start, but Snape had already turned away to rejoin McGonagall. Unthinkingly, Hermione's fingers flew to the pocket of her skirt, where the primrose he had pressed into her hand still rested. Thoughts about Neville were momentarily displaced as she was reminded of the meeting in the woods. Her palm tingled, as if remembering the feel of his grip. It had been the briefest and most unobtrusive of touches, yet her breath had quickened like it was a sensual caress. He had looked at her as if reading her very soul, whereas she could barely glean anything from those restless and tumultuous eyes. What kind of thoughts dwelt within such a heavily fortified, fiercely defended mind?

She watched him now conferring with Professor McGonagall, their exchange inaudible to her, and felt thrillingly voyeuristic. He had graceful brewer's hands that tapped agitatedly when he crossed his arms, a slightly aristocratic carriage that she suspected was mostly for effect, and an underemphasized physical appeal that she couldn't quite put to words.

The arrival of Harry and Ron, who had finally wandered over to her corner of the room, put an end to her clandestine observations. They all slumped against the wall wearily.

"I still don't believe it," Harry declared glumly. "Neville wouldn't hurt a fly. I'm positive he was placed under *Imperio*."

Hermione shook her head unhappily. "A person who is *Imperius*-ed carries magic that can be traced back to the caster. Remember Madam Pomfrey said she couldn't find any magic on Neville, except for his own?" She furrowed her brows in thought. "But," she began again slowly, feeling her mind start working again, "*Perurere* is a very Dark curse. Where on earth would Neville have learned how to cast that? I think it's clear enough that he didn't do it of his own will!"

"Although it would certainly be rich if Malfoy not only owed you a wizard's debt but also was bested by Neville, of all people!" Ron said a little too dreamily.

Hermione threw him a withering look. "Yes, except for the part where I almost became a Squib because of him?"

Ron smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, not so much that part," he conceded.

The appearance of Dumbledore and Malfoy at the entrance of the hospital wing prompted them to push themselves up again. The Slytherin boy's face was uncharacteristically blank as he followed the headmaster into the room. He did not even spare Hermione and her friends an unfriendly look as he passed them. His lips were set in a grim line, even as Hermione perceived a slight limp in his step.

"Poppy," Dumbledore greeted the Mediwitch. Snape and McGonagall ceased conversing to join the headmaster, and all gathered around Neville's bed. Malfoy took one look at the crazed Neville and recoiled, blanching.

Dumbledore gazed sadly upon the boy in the bed, and said to Snape, "You are certain, Severus?"

Snape nodded once. "The spell does not lie, Albus. I am sure you will wish to examine it for yourself."

"Minerva?"

"I would it not be true, but you see how he is now, Headmaster. He got to be very violent, absolutely beyond control. I brought in these five children *after* wading through scores of other more minorly injured students. There are still many left in the Common Room waiting for me to put them to rights again!"

The headmaster turned now to Malfoy, whose presence no one had acknowledged yet. "Mr. Malfoy, this is a very grave charge we are bringing against Mr. Longbottom. Since it concerns you, your presence was requested, but what I will do now may prove to be very disturbing, and it would be understandable if you preferred not to watch."

"I'll stay," Malfoy said tightly. He shoved his hands into his pockets and shifted from one foot to the other.

Hermione didn't think she could bear to see the *Priori Incantatem* again, and she had half a mind to leave herself. But she stayed, watching with renewed horror as the image of Malfoy emerged from the end of Neville's wand.

His eyes wide and his face pale as parchment, Malfoy beheld his spell counterpart. When the Malfoy from the wand began to scream, he staggered backwards, breathing heavily. Snape caught him by the arm and gave him an upwards tug, preventing him from falling.

When the spell ended, Malfoy was looking down at his feet, his shoulders rising and falling visibly from labored breaths. He looked back up, eyes wild. "*Longbottom* did this to me? Longbottom, who can't even manage a tickling hex?" he said hoarsely. "This pathetic excuse of a wizard caused me to be in the debt of a Mud..."

"Mr. Malfoy!" McGonagall cut in, warningly. "Do you forget to whom you speak?"

Hermione assumed her Head of House meant the headmaster and not her. Strangely, the intended slur didn't offend her nearly as much as it ought to. She was much too caught up in Neville's plight, and she itched for an opportunity to speak her mind; plus, Malfoy was babbling almost as much as Neville, and it came across as pitiful rather than malicious.

Dumbledore patted Malfoy's shoulders kindly in a way that Hermione suspected the Slytherin boy did not appreciate. "Let us not lose our heads just yet, dear boy."

The old wizard bent his tall, wiry frame over Neville's bed and said in a clear, steady voice, "Neville, do you remember what happened to you three nights ago? Do you have any explanation of how Mr. Malfoy came to be cursed by your wand?"

They all craned their necks to watch, wondering if Neville would somehow react differently to the authority of the headmaster. But he merely carried on with his mad man's behavior, moving his head continuously in circles and displaying no signs of having heard Dumbledore's inquiries.

McGonagall shook her head, murmuring, "Poor, poor Alice and Frank..."

Dumbledore sighed, his fingers combing through his long beard. "May we not extract some sort of confession from him? Perhaps a memory? Perhaps..." The headmaster trailed off, thoughtful.

Snape immediately stiffened. "Legilimency on a boy that is a raving lunatic, Albus?"

"It cannot be helped," the headmaster replied with uncharacteristic force. "There were no witnesses, and this is the only hope that remains for the boy to acquit himself." With that, Dumbledore took Neville's chin in his hand, forcing the boy's head to still. He gazed intently, skilled enough not to require a spoken incantation. Neville's eyes dilated under the powerful mental incursion of the headmaster.

After a few moments of suspenseful silence, Dumbledore looked up again, disturbed disappointment evident on his face. "Alas, I am drawing a complete blank. His mind is damaged too completely. For now, we must assume..."

"I do not agree to this," Malfoy snapped, the patrician accents of his upbringing becoming more pronounced in anger. "It is obvious that you have the wrong person, Headmaster. I will require a more thorough inquest to uncover the true identity of my assailant."

Dumbledore was unfazed by Malfoy's blustering. "I am afraid that is not for you to decide, my boy. Presented with evidence such as this, we are left no choice but to treat Mr. Longbottom as a suspect."

"Wait!" Hermione exclaimed. She, Harry, and Ron had inched their way into the circle. "Sir, what about 'innocent until proven guilty?' Even *Malfoy* doesn't believe that Neville did this! How can you justify punishing him if the *victim* refuses to recognize him as the perpetrator?"

"Granger, be quiet!" Snape said threateningly. "This is not the occasion for you to argue your point."

She looked at her Potions professor defiantly, meeting his glittering dark eyes without fear. "Professor, think! Neville had no motivation, and most likely, he didn't have the requisite knowledge to cast that kind of spell! Who's to say that his wand wasn't simply taken from him and used by someone else? You *must* see that this is completely outrageous!"

There was a collective intake of breath after her tirade. Snape's face was overlaid with rage, but Dumbledore held up a wizened hand, preventing either of them from furthering the exchange.

"Quite right, Miss Granger. Unfortunately, this incident continues to burgeon in complexity every time I turn my eyes to it. I had no intention of disbursing punishment. I go only as far as suggesting that Mr. Longbottom must be presumed a *danger*, both to the school and to himself, until this matter is straightened out." The headmaster exhaled resignedly, looking at Neville with pity. "It is necessary to remove Mr. Longbottom to St. Mungo's. Perhaps he will also have hope of a cure there."

"Oh, uh, all right," Hermione said idiotically. She tried to think of something intelligent to add but found that she was overcome by a feeling of foolishness.

Across from Neville's bed, Snape glared at her in disdain.

---

After the long day and eventful night, Hermione finally lay in bed in Gryffindor Tower. Sleep evaded her, as it so often had in recent months. The girls' dormitory was quiet, especially since one of its most gossipy and giggly occupants, Lavender, was now in the hospital wing. But her thoughts, zooming through her head at breakneck speed, were creating pandemonium loud enough to wake the whole school.

Her Potions professor had worn the look of someone prepared to strangle her while they were in the hospital wing. It was an extreme overreaction to a student talking out of turn. Snape, whose mind brimmed with fearsome intelligence, surely recognized that the notion of Neville attacking Malfoy with a *Perurere* was preposterous! Perhaps he knew something else then? He had his own ideas for what had taken place? But more to the point, Hermione thought, *who is he?* He was surely more than a baritone voice, a protective cloak, and a set of hypnotic black eyes...

She turned to lie on her stomach, eyeing the snow globe that still sat next to her bed. Though Neville, Malfoy, and Snape had lately kept her far from the pursuit that was still closest to her heart, she had not forgotten. She closed her eyes, remembering the family trips to France and Australia, her father's unrelenting attempts at convincing her to use teeth whitener, and her mother's unrivaled chicken casserole dishes.

*The counter to Avada Kedavra.* The zany little idea that she had dreamed up all those nights ago in her parents' empty house. She had clung to it, like one cast out to sea would cling to a bit of insubstantial driftwood. But now that it was starting to become more than the half-baked scheme of her imagination, it was no longer merely the desperate hope of a grief-stricken young girl. It was now something she could build upon slowly but surely, something she could visit every day and come to believe that maybe, just maybe, she could go on living without breaking into a million pieces. Though the familiar burn behind her eyes was still there whenever she thought about her parents' senseless deaths, the belief that she would still make them proud ignited an even hotter flame inside her, which kept her warm day and night, as much sustenance to her as food and drink...

The next morning, on her way to her Charms class, Hermione spotted Malfoy walking alone a bit ahead of her in the corridor. She quickened her pace.

"Malfoy!" she called out.

The blond wizard stopped in his tracks. His hand fisted at his side, and without turning, he asked coldly, "What now, Granger?"

She caught up to him. "Yesterday, your reaction to Neville being the one who cursed you...was that just because you couldn't stand the idea that someone like Neville could bring you down or do you actually have reason to believe it was someone else?"

"Saving me wasn't enough? You seem to like meddling in my affairs a lot of late. Owing you my life doesn't mean we need to socialize," Malfoy said, still averting his eyes.

Hermione slowly let out a breath, trying for patience. "Well, *you* seem to believe that you're really important enough for me to waste thought on. Think what you like, whatever lets you sleep at night! What I'm after is Neville's welfare, of course. You saw him. I'd like to find out who did that to him... Who knows, it could help you out too," she finished airily.

All she got in response was mulish silence. They plowed on, until they had turned a corner and were at the entrance to the Charms classroom, when he stopped so suddenly that Hermione almost slammed into him. He turned to face her. The presence of purplish bags under his eyes showed that he hadn't slept any more than she had. Staring fixedly at her, he said in a voice devoid of intonation, "I am sure you and your almighty brains have long figured out what kind of curse *Perurere* is. What you *don't* know, and what you won't find written in any blasted book in *this* school, is that *Perurere* is a... family favorite. Mainly, my father's joyful pastime. So you decide if Longbottom was the one."

"Your father? But he's in jail!"

Malfoy looked incredulously at her, then threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, yeah, Granger, forgotten all about that."

---

There were already four people in the parlor of Malfoy Manor when Severus arrived after Apparating to the edges of the property. He immediately sought out his usual place, a shadowed corner facing the windows and door. He had long learned that it paid to keep an eye on routes of entry and exit.

They were attired for the occasion, of course, their faces concealed behind their white masks. But he knew all their identities from height and build, which he could easily discern from the moonlight pouring into the room. There was Yaxley, tall, lumbering, and brutish, like a well-fed dog. And the one by the fireplace, pacing predatorily, as light-footed as a feline, that was Bellatrix. The quivering, squealing mass trailing Bella could be none other than Pettigrew. And alone by the window, slim and regal, her head held rigidly high, was Narcissa Malfoy, the mistress of the Manor, now without her husband. Severus' lips curled cynically behind his mask. *Friends and colleagues, all.*

Faint pops sounded as more of the Dark Lord's servants appeared at the Apparition boundary and then streamed down the moonlit path toward the entrance, like participants in a peculiar masked parade. Though the room was starting to fill, no one spoke. Rodolphus made a graceless appearance, tripping as he crossed the threshold, but the reaction from his peers was strangely subdued, with only one half-hearted snicker from the Carrow brother. The atmosphere was tense, and the fear among them was palpable.

Their Lord was enraged and they were all in disarray. It appeared that one from amongst them had taken action against the son of the Dark Lord's most high-ranking

servant, but the hit had been botched. The Malfoy boy had lived, a most unacceptable outcome. Severe punishment was forthcoming, of course.

Severus continued his sullen watch from the corner, his own anxiety manifesting through his placid stillness rather than in the nervous restlessness of his colleagues. Certainly, he would need to avoid any encounters with the Dark Lord's wand, just as he did for every other Meeting. He closed his eyes, erecting strategic blocks throughout his mind, an instinctive preliminary Occlusion. There would be no time to dwell on minutiae, no allowance for error.

The ambient temperature dropped slightly, and the hair on one's neck always stood before it happened. Right when the Dark Lord arrived, the Mark on his servants' arms burned, not steadily and insistently as it did during a Summons, but rather, with a burst of uncontained pain. Severus felt it now, and with composed steps, he emerged from the shadows and joined his peers in a circle at the middle of the room to prepare for the arrival of their Lord.

Pop.

As one, they all dropped to their knees, a sibilant chorus of "My Lord" rising up from them in greeting.

"Well, my snakes, what have you got to say for yourselfsssss?" the Dark Lord demanded in his reedy voice. Red eyes flitted dangerously, the only feature visible from inside the hood that hung over the reptilian body. "Do not all cower before me like stupid beasts! Or *are* you all simple?"

Bony, claw-like hands stroked a wand. Nagini, the Dark Lord's familiar, unwound herself from around her master's neck and slithered lazily to the ground, tongue darting in and out inquisitively. Pettigrew shrunk back and blubbered piteously, watery eyes bulging from behind his mask.

"Quiet, you useless creature!" the Dark Lord hissed, wand pointed at the trembling man. Pettigrew's moaning abruptly stopped, cut off by a choking sound. The man's silver hand scratched at his throat convulsively, futilely trying to find air. Severus could hear his lips smacking together in a frantic effort to beg for mercy.

"Now, tell me, who was the one audacious enough to make an attempt on the Malfoy brat's life? Narcissa? I assume it wasn't you, *you'd* still suckle him at your teats if you could." The Dark Lord let out a high-pitched laugh.

"*My Lord...*" Narcissa moaned, throwing herself at the Dark Lord's feet. "*Please...*"

With what passed for disdain on his emaciated features, he kicked the prostrate woman, sending her flying into a wall.

A sudden gasp sounded from among their ranks, followed by panicked wheezing, as Pettigrew was finally able to take in breaths again. None dared to pay the rat heed, however, as the Dark Lord had now taken to walking around in their circle, inspecting each bowed head in turn.

"Such an offering might have normally pleased me...I delight in a blood sacrifice and the Malfoy heir would ~~would~~ *certainly* have been quite an offering from my lovely Narcissa, even if her gift to me were torn forcibly from her arms. I reward those with initiative, who are able to anticipate my heart's desires. But who was incompetent and careless enough to let him *survive*?"

Narcissa sobbed, on her hands and knees, groveling, grasping at the hem of her master's robes. "My Lord! He is just a boy!"

"And then allow him to be nursed back to life by *aMudblood*?" the Dark Lord continued, deaf to Narcissa's pleas.

Mudblood. *Granger*. Suddenly, disorganized snippets of memories flashed rapid-fire like photographs, all the more vibrant against the stark backdrop of his heavily Occluded mind. Her unconscious form in the hospital wing. Her tilted head as she concentrated in thought. Her bluebell flame in the forest. A primrose... The images swirled, while his stomach plunged to his feet in fear. There was no time to consider how his thoughts of Granger could have breached his carefully forged defenses; Severus hurriedly flushed out the thoughts and tucked them deep within him, far from the reaches of his consciousness.

"Severus? Bellatrix? What do you know of this foolishness?" The Dark Lord was now putting the question to his next highest ranking lieutenants, after the now deposed Lucius. His master's voice sounded distant as Severus scrambled his way out of his foggy mindscape, perspiration soaking the base of his neck, in a rare instance of strained Occlumency.

Severus slammed on the mental blinders as he felt the Dark Lord's eyes alight upon him. "Would it not be possible, my Lord, that the Malfoy boy was attacked by one who does not serve you?" he offered carefully.

He felt the edges of his awareness prickle as the Dark Lord raked through his mind, plundering, scorching, and pillaging, giving no quarter in a battle of attrition between evenly matched adversaries. Severus let his shields yield in a convincing manner, presenting the Dark Lord with a plausible palette of thoughts to inspect. A resentful moment with Dumbledore, a stormy diatribe directed against some sixth-year Gryffindors, a solitary period within his lab, brewing one of the Dark Lord's potions.

The foreign presence grazed along, then withdrew. "Nonsense! I know my wily serpents. There isn't one of you who wouldn't leap at the chance to destroy each other, let alone the heir to my dear old friend."

"It was Lucius!" insisted Bella, fretting. "It was *Perurere*, wasn't it? That was Lucius' signature; he practically invented the spell."

"No!" said Narcissa, her voice hitching. She had risen now, though her clothing was wrinkled and her blonde hair unkempt. "Lucius would never do such a thing. And...he is in Azkaban!"

"Grow up, sister! Do you still take your husband for the tender lad of your Hogwarts days? You don't really believe four walls and some Dementors could stop a man like him, do you?" Bella reproached sharply.

"*It was not him*," Narcissa persisted stubbornly.

"Silence, woman, I know it was not that inept husband of yours! He is much too cowardly to offer up a blood sacrifice." The Dark Lord smiled malevolently. "Though rest assured, my dear, had I ever commanded it of him, he would not have dared resist."

Swallowing a wave of nausea, Severus listened to the madman's pronouncements, unwillingly reminded of a similar sacrifice his master had demanded *of him* more than two decades ago. The price of power, his Lord had explained. *Show me that I am your greatest love.*

Lucius' wife wisely said nothing, though Severus could make out the desperate terror in her eyes.

"Now then, who knows the truth? No one? Surely not," the Dark Lord purred in ominously soft tones. "I shall trust that this is merely an inconvenient time to speak up. I will simply mete out my pleasure at random."

The Dark Lord surveyed his servants as unbearably long seconds passed.

"Severus."

His heart pounded. "My Lord?"

"You have served me well, yet I find that I have been lax in my management of you lately. Am I to understand that you helped the Mudblood recover her full strength? This is the Potter whore, yes? The one whose parents I dispatched?"

"Yes, Lord," Severus said deferentially, falling once more on bended knee. "However, it was at Dumbeldore's directive. I could not risk losing our access to the old man by disobeying. And I hoped to position myself to gain the trust of the girl."

His master's unresponsiveness caused Severus' alarm to heighten.

At last, the Dark Lord spoke again, his usually shrill voice gently cloying. "This gathering today, with Bella's suggestions of Lucius' interest in securing my favor, it does bring back memories, dear boy. Tell me, did I also require of you a blood sacrifice before joining my ranks? It was your filthy mother, wasn't it? Married a Muggle?"

"Yes," Severus whispered, blood draining from his face.

"And again, tell me," the monster continued, leaning low to curl a cold finger beneath his chin, "do you regret that?"

"No, my Lord," he replied, his voice shaking.

"There is that, at least. *Crucio*."

Immediately he crumpled to the ground, the excruciating pain wrenching scream after scream from him. Years of experience had not made enduring the Unforgivable any less painful, yet Severus had come to understand its purpose, its dark secret. As the agony engulfed him, wave upon wave, he recited all sins, past and present, because for him, there was no shortage. He reveled in the mind-numbing pain, lost himself in it. Yet, though *Crucio* was one of the few true opportunities for penance, he was no fool: there would be no restitution for the damned.

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It was two hours past midnight when Severus at last Apparated back to the edges of the Hogwarts grounds. Weak from the aftereffects of the *Crucio*, he found that his fingers were bleeding from barely averted splinching. His mind exhaustedly blank and his legs feeling supportless beneath him, he made the lengthy journey back to his chambers. His body ached as he dragged himself through the corridors. He had no thoughts save for an overpowering desire to down his stock of healing potions and collapse into his bed like a dead man. It was his cursed luck that it was the middle of the week and classes were in session the next morning.

He hadn't the strength to reflect on the ill-fated meeting. There had been Bella, and Narcissa, and his uncharacteristically faulty Occlusion, and the fixation with blood sacrifices, and his mother...

He was thanking Merlin that he had finally rounded the last corner before his chambers when he stopped short, tired and abused muscles protesting as he dug his heels into the ground.

*She* was there. Granger, of all people, was sitting outside his door, perusing a book, her school bag open beside her.

Inexplicably, his vision became hazed with red.

"GET OUT!" he shouted. He felt dangerously unstable, his mind and body taxed from the night.

With a yelp, she leapt up. "Professor Snape!"

"*Out!*" he sputtered, seeming incapable of saying anything else. He felt something unraveling in him, seeing her here. She was so confusedly bound up in every aspect of his life now, it made his head hurt to think about it.

"I had questions... but you're injured!" she gasped, staring at his bloody fingers and evidently impervious to his ire.

That, and her always meddlesome concern left him even more enraged. "Questions?" he spat. "You always have endless *questions*, don't you? One hundred points from Gryffindor! I have no tolerance for your foolish heroism!"

Of its own accord, his hand whipped out his wand, and he shot a blasting curse at her. His brain careened; *she* was the reason he had almost committed a catastrophic error during his audience with the Dark Lord today. If his master had seen *those* memories...

She screamed and ducked, her hand reaching for her own wand. Backing away, she said urgently, "Listen Professor, Neville didn't do it! Malfoy thinks so too!"

He chuckled derisively at her conviction. "So you trust Malfoy now, you ignorant child? Leave the Death Eater's son alone! You are barely able to guard your own worthless life!"

He was reminded of the night in the hospital wing, when she had arrogantly mouthed off at him, so utterly assured that she had everything all figured out. *Never thought twice of running headlong into danger, did she?*

Again, automatically, his wand rose. "*Sectumsemptra!*"

"*Repello!*" she cried. The spell bounced off her hastily thrown barrier but carried enough force to knock her to the ground. She quickly flipped onto her torso, into a defensive position. "*Expelliarmus!*"

Dazed, he watched his wand twist forcefully out of his grip and clatter onto the ground.

She scuttled to her feet, wand still pointed at him, panting and eyes wide with fear. "Pr-Professor?"

He blinked, then sucked in a slow breath, the first one he remembered taking all night. He eyed his wand on the ground as if he had never seen it before.

Then the reality of what had just occurred fell upon him like a ton of bricks. He had attacked a student, he had attacked *her*.

*What had he done?*

"G-Granger..." he gasped. He saw her disheveled appearance, the tear in her shirt sleeve, a bruise slowly forming on one cheek.

*He had hurt her.*

His mind now overwhelmed by a different sort of haze, he took a step toward her. She quickly took two steps back, still brandishing her wand.

*He had lost control.*

Guilt mingled with regret, and self-loathing blossomed in him. "Forgive me," he said, anguish coloring his tones.

*It was unforgivable.*

She did not respond, but she lowered her wand a fraction of an inch.



He took another step toward her. "Forgive me," he repeated, much more quietly.

She did not back away from him this time, just stood there watching him warily.

There was a clenching feeling inside him so painful that he wondered if he were undergoing *Cruciatius* again. He, who prided himself on his self-mastery, had tried to cast *Sectumsempra* at a defenseless girl! His faculties, already raw and debilitated from his ordeal at Malfoy Manor, threatened to collapse completely.

"Please," he entreated bleakly, reaching his hands towards her, not knowing why.

At that, the brittle, frightened look left her eyes, replaced by something Severus didn't understand.

His hands first landed on her arms, where they squeezed uncertainly, and then shakily, they made their way to her shoulders.

"I... did not... I was not..." The words floundered then died. He shook his head, closing his eyes. After a moment, he opened them again, and saw that the new expression was still present.

Slowly, his hands crept to cup her face, turning it upwards. He stroked lightly across her jaw line, his fingertips still caked with blood. Her skin was smooth and warm and achingly delicate. The enticing gardenia scent wafted through his nostrils, like a balm for his ravaged nerves.

Primal need, untempered by his incapacitated brain, was coursing through him. He bent his head, lowering his mouth so that his lips hovered tantalizingly over hers. They remained that way, terrifyingly close, yet still apart. He could feel her breath brushing against his face, sense the invitation issuing from her moist lips, and he longed for nothing more than to seal the minuscule distance between them and grind his mouth hungrily against hers. But as their heated gazes met, he glimpsed the tender trust written in her eyes and felt as if he had been doused by a bucket of cold water.

*Not for him.*

With an agonized groan, he tore his lips away and crushed her body to his chest, his mouth blindly searching before finally burying itself into her hair.

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Author's Notes:

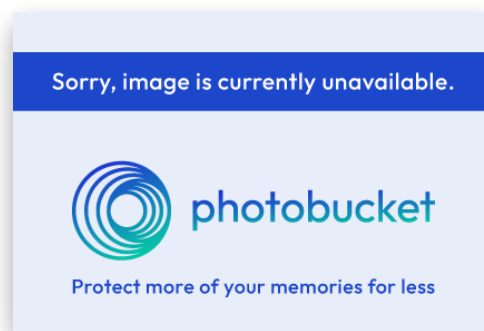
1. As you all know, there is the canon version of a "blood sacrifice," with Lily and Harry. However, I've always found it implausible that Voldemort would have known nothing about the concept, even if he didn't understand the spirit. So I wanted to write in my own version of how I think he would have envisioned a blood sacrifice.
2. For anyone with a Livejournal, I'd love to friend you! Mine is listed in my profile. Also, I am on Twitter as @labrt2004
3. And as always, many thanks go out to my betas, LaSyren and Snarkyroxy!

***Reviews are very much appreciated!***

## His Own Airy Citadel

Chapter 9 of 11

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

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She didn't know what she had been expecting, but she certainly had not expected *this*. She knew she should have been afraid...after all, he had been intent on harming her. The instinct to flee was still flooding her body with adrenaline, causing her to tremble in his arms. Snape was powerful, Snape was *deadly*...the warnings sounded one after another through her head in rapid succession, like the chaotic footsteps of an ambushed army. And now, her arms pinned to her sides and her face pressed against his chest, she was folded into his black robes, every inch of her absorbing the warmth of his startlingly heated body. She did the first thing that came to her mind: she inhaled. There was the spicy male tang again that she remembered from the forest...the mixture of earth, plants, and musk, which seemed to her oddly fragrant. Her heart was pounding out a staccato rhythm in her chest as his scent stole through her nostrils, new, yet familiar and pleasant.

He had been so close, and she had barely stopped herself from raising her mouth expectantly, so sure that he was going to...

Her thought hung unfinished in her head, just like the unfulfilled kiss. She tried to stifle the unwarranted disappointment.

His lips were skimming lightly through her hair now, as if afraid to upset her already disarrayed curls. He might have muttered something, but she didn't hear.

She shut her eyes and dared to let her cheek rest against him, her head nuzzling against the coarse material of his robes, an infinitesimal indulgence of some deep-seated need within her. Still, it was enough for her senses to hum with pleasure.

As if reading the turn in her thoughts, he abruptly released her, loosening his hold and setting her away from him quickly. A haunted, troubled look hung over his features.

"You are... all right?" he asked, his breathing ragged.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

He turned his back to her now, pacing agitatedly. "The spells, this... everything." He gestured vaguely about while she suddenly felt a blush creep its way into her face. "It is inexcusable. I was not myself," he said, his words muffled from behind his fingers as his hand rose to cradle his forehead. "I am *still* not myself. I... Merlin! You turn me into an asinine fool." Hermione frowned at these declamations, but before she could devise an appropriate reply, he spun around again, his eyes unnaturally bright. "Tell me again that you are unharmed. You must go to Poppy."

"I'm not hurt," she replied, trying to make her voice sound even. She watched him. She watched *him watching her*, his eyes smoldering ominously. She was well aware that she should just turn around and leave. What reason was there to stand here in a corridor, in the middle of the night? Or to prolong an awkward situation, reckoning with an obviously disturbed man?

Yet, even as she rattled through all the mental calculus, she was approaching him cautiously, as if he were a wounded animal. "Are *you* all right, Professor?"

He said nothing, just looked at her broodingly as she came closer. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. When she had almost closed the distance between them, he directed his gaze elsewhere and muttered, "I would advise you not to come nearer."

Her fear of him remained, along with the memory of *Sectumsempra's* brush against her skin, even as she had enjoyed a forbidden moment in his arms. She really *shouldn't* be going near him. Strange areas of her body were still sore from falling on the ground. He had tried to hex her, then he had tried to kiss her. He was at turns vengeful and violent then sorrowful and broken. He was dangerous and complicated... But she had seen the deranged despair in his eyes the minute he had appeared in the corridor, fingers bloodied and face lined with pain. The turmoil in the dark eyes, the misery in his halting pleas...something was making her stay...and causing her to throb with unknown grief.

Her hand shot out to grab one of his before her courage failed her.

"For my peace of mind, Professor, just let me heal this."

He appeared to want to say something, but she shook her head dismissively.

"Yes, I know, Brewer's hands. I will not use a spell."

She lifted her arm, inspecting the tear in her shirt sleeve. She grabbed the end and tore off a strip of the material.

"*Scourgify! Aguamenti!*"

Cleaned and moistened cloth readied, she took his hand, uncurled the clenched fingers, and wiped the dried blood from them, exposing skin rent with hundreds of small cuts.

"You'd think a Potions Master would take better care not to wreck his hands so much," she grouched as she reached for the other hand.

"A splinching accident," said Snape acidly. "Not that it is any of your affair."

It was the first allusion he made to the night's events which had sent him back to the school in such unrestrained fury, and pausing, Hermione looked up at him in question. Then she thought better of it and proceeded with her task. *Not yet*. She didn't dare broach the topic...the hexes or what had come afterwards. She kept herself from chewing her lower lip. She wasn't even sure *she* could talk about it yet... especially the last part.

She extracted her wand and said, "*Accio* hand cream and dressings!"

Snape had not withdrawn his hand, which she took to be an encouraging sign. He merely regarded her disbelievingly, like she had summoned Basilisk venom. "*Hand cream?*"

"Antibiotic ointment... a Muggle invention," she said lightly as the requested objects whizzed down the corridor into her outreached hand. "My mother insisted on placing it with my things at the beginning of each school year, though I've never found a use for it until now."

She squeezed the cool, slippery substance from its tube, the sound of the squirting an affront to the silence of the corridors and the sober mood of them both. She spread it in a thick layer over the cuts on each hand. His hands were large, completely dwarfing hers as she held them, as well as feeling perilously heavy. It took a bit longer than she anticipated to completely smooth the cream into them, with her own hands shaking slightly. The continuous contact with his skin jarred her nerves to life, and she found herself noting every crease and callous that her own fingers encountered. Her breathing diminished to a bare minimum; she was afraid that the movement of air would prove too much for her tense body.

Snape's fingers tightened imperceptibly within hers, and the shadows that always seemed to lurk in his eyes became more pronounced, but otherwise, he did not react to the ministrations. He only stared irritably into the middle distance while Hermione attended to his injuries. She was annoyed at her own contrasting lack of equanimity.

She finished by binding up the fingers tightly within the dressings. Reluctantly, she released his hand, letting her own drop again where it twisted nervously in the fabric of her skirt.

He held out his hands and evaluated the now-stubby digits, wrapped in white. "My thanks," he said after a long moment of consideration.

"Of course." She cast her eyes down and refrained from fidgeting. Her fingertips were still pulsating, strangely bereft with the feel of his rough skin gone from them.

"Miss Granger."

The exacting, formal tone of his voice caused her to lift her head. Exhaustion pulled at his features, making them appear harsh. He dragged bandaged fingers roughly through his hair, causing it to stick out at odd angles.

"I must appeal to your forgiveness once more. Though my conduct tonight suggests otherwise, you must never believe that I would raise hand or wand at you, again or ever."

With the distraction of his bloodied hands gone, Hermione's eyes roamed over his countenance with undivided attention. His hair hung lankly about his face, looking lifeless and miserable against the bloodless, pale skin. She saw the unsettled layers of distress shifting in his eyes, saw the raw bleakness which bled from him. Suddenly, her

acing mind stilled. This moment changed nothing, offered no answers, and certainly didn't lessen the edginess of being in his presence after he had attacked her. Yet, empathy was making her eyes sting slightly, and her heart swelled with something she had no adequate words for. She instead settled for saying sincerely, "It is all done. Don't dwell on it any longer." Then she added, "But what happened to you tonight, Professor?"

She tried not to sound challenging or accusatory, but the question still caused muscles to tighten visibly near the base of his neck. He scowled at her before he quickly swung his gaze away again, turning around so fast that his robe flapped audibly behind him. "You are truly of the belief that my activities outside this school concern *you*, a mere student?" he asked, disdain coloring his voice in acerbic hues.

He was facing the wall, and Hermione studied his back, always tall and straight, extraordinarily so, even when a lesser man would have long ago bent. "Well," she said bluntly, "I do think I have some stake in the matter, yes. You did try to split my veins open just a few minutes ago."

"Which I very much regret, I told you that." He sighed, then reached out to brace himself against the rough granite of the wall while collecting his thoughts. "I recognize that you find yourself in the most intolerable of positions. It is... reasonable for you to expect redress from me after I had attacked you and then... I was forward with you. And as I said, you have my word that it will never happen again." After a taut pause, he said bitinglly, "But never presume to pry into my private affairs, Granger. They are laughably beyond the ranges of your understanding, not to mention *none of your business*." His back was still turned, but the brutally cold warning of his words was unmistakable.

"I..." Hermione began, a protest mounting on her lips.

"I trust you will arrive punctually at my office tomorrow evening for your research session. Good evening."

With that, Snape unwarded his chambers and slid quickly into the darkness inside, leaving her to watch, speechless, as the door clicked shut behind him.

For a full minute she stood there and fixated on the wood paneling of the door, as if expecting him to emerge again. There was an uncomfortable pressure building in her skull that was starting to turn into a wicked headache. She sucked in air through her mouth; breathing through her nose felt too restrictive. It was only when she noticed that her fists were clenched that she finally recognized the anger.

*Redress?* What in Merlin's name was he talking about?

She gritted her teeth and forced herself to move away from the door and walk through the corridor.

The nerve of him! She expressed *concern* and he thought she expected *redress* like they were two stuffy Wizengamot members having a spat in court? Who talks like that, anyway?

"Bastard!" she seethed under her breath. Her steps quickened, for she suddenly felt the need to put as much distance as possible between herself and Snape. Miniature dust clouds erupted beneath her feet as she stormed over the stones lining the corridor floor.

But it wasn't just his insistence on being infuriating and starchy. Her surging strides halted as tears of humiliation welled up in her eyes. He had dismissed her like she was a delinquent first year. *Laughably beyond the ranges of your understanding*. Well, Snape wasn't one to mince words. What had she been thinking? What had overtaken her senses so completely that she thought it was a good idea to... *care* about him? It was sheer madness, remaining even an instant more in his presence after he had tried to kill her! How stupid of her to hope that she could weather the toxic cesspool that was his personality.

She thought about the moment in his arms, when he had pressed her so fervidly against him, when they had been so recklessly close and she had secretly savored his warmth. "Detestable boor," she muttered. It is all very well for *him*, isn't it? A small lapse in judgment, a moment of *being forward*...was that how he had put it? She was just a bigger fool to expect these encounters, which caused her blood to heat and her head to spin, to mean anything at all to the surly and insensitive creature.

Finally, she arrived at Gryffindor Tower and let herself into the dormitory quietly. She crept to her bed and sat down to undress, empowered by her newfound disgust. Better she saw him as he was now rather than later, she reassured herself sternly. Was he ever meant to be anything to her other than a taciturn, ill-tempered professor? The singular moments that they had had together, the ones that she had begun to stash away desperately, greedily inside her heart...she closed her eyes now...they were merely the usual random life occurrences to which she had somehow started to assign imagined significance. She resolved to forget it all...the steadfastness of his voice in the hospital wing, his comforting presence at her bedside, the spelling session in the Forest that had managed to turn into something else entirely... Bone-weary, she crawled underneath her covers and curled tightly into herself, her arms wrapping about her body. And then, in that moment of spasmodic self-comfort, the frightfully clear epiphany came to her, just as she was shutting her eyes and surrendering herself to sleep.

*It didn't bloody matter. She could never forget.*

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Severus closed the door to his chambers with ginger movements and quickly made use of an armchair. The pain was almost unbearable now. *Cruciatus* was still decimating his nerves, and he struggled to retain coherent thought, for he could not risk losing consciousness without first imbibing healing potions. The room was pitch black. His muttered wandless spell to light the sconces did not have the desired effect, and he suspected the debilitated state of his body. But light would have to come later. Shifting carefully in the chair, he extracted his wand and pointed in the direction of his potions lab.

"*Accio* healing potions!"

His brain registered relief when, in spite of the dark, the potions landed safely in his hands. Hastily, he uncorked the vials and consumed their contents one by one, the order in which he had to take them a routine he knew by heart through hard, bitter practice. When he had finished the last vial, the pain faded with startling speed, leaving him to listen to his own thundering pulse and broken breathing. Doubling over from relief, he lifted his arm and gasped, "*Lumos*!" With the aid of the magical instrument, light finally flooded his chambers.

By chance, his eyes landed first upon his fingers, which were wrapped neatly in linen. His wand was still grasped between them. With a surge of revulsion, he tossed the stick upon the ground where it lay inert upon the carpet.

*What in the frozen depths of Hades had he been thinking?*

He was less deserving of wielding a wand than the idiot first years in his Potions class.

Severus cursed, then smiled darkly to himself. So it had finally caught up to him. He wondered that it had taken so long. A lifetime spent in the company of worthless cowards...his father, the Dark Lord, Lucius Malfoy...all of whom preyed upon the defenseless and the weak had finally made its mark. Albus could offer all the reassurances he liked, but the notion that he had rehabilitated himself was a self-indulgent lie. The sheer magnitude of his failure, laid bare before his eyes tonight, mocking all the headmasters' pretty hopes...it was proof enough.

He just wished that it had been anyone but her... Granger. He stared at his hands in puzzlement. The girl had not done a half-bad job of healing them. *Woman*, he amended. Not girl, if the way he had almost lost himself with her was any indication. He remembered the shock he felt when he had held her in his arms...shock at how she fit against him so well, her body molding itself against his effortlessly. Severus cringed. Perhaps it would not be remiss to avail himself of the wenches in Hogsmeade. He never believed himself susceptible to carnal afflictions, not nearly as much as strutting fools like James Potter or Sirius Black, and certainly not with a student. But mere moments ago with Granger, he had been little more composed than an untried teenager, reacting with a frenzy that was mortifying. Severus reconsidered his chagrin. It was possible that it was a good thing he had attacked Granger, he realized. The sooner she shed any vainglorious illusions she had of him, the lesser the likelihood of him repeating that disastrous performance.

A knock sounded from the entrance way. Severus' jaw clenched. He knew who it was without needing to open the door.

"Enter." He was just surprised that the visitor had bothered knocking at all.

There would be hell to pay with Albus, he was sure.

The headmaster appeared in his field of vision, but Severus did not have sufficient energy to meet the old man's eye. "I do not believe I've ever witnessed you entering a room through a door, Headmaster," he said tiredly.

Albus was quite obviously in his face now, and with a scowl, Severus finally lifted his eyes. His mentor made no reply, but simply stood there and considered him gravely, the serene concern which emanated from his gaze making Severus glare. "Well, no need for suspense. If you're here to lambaste me, Albus, then by all means, do so!"

The headmaster sighed, then walked over to the fireplace where the grate had been scrubbed clean by the house-elves and lay empty. "My dear boy," Albus said as he got down upon his knees and methodically arranged himself into a kneeling position. "I came over merely to make certain that you are whole and well." He took a log from the pile and placed it on the grate.

"I do not need to be checked on," Severus snapped. His attention, however, was being diverted by the sight of the headmaster, his robes and beard dragging upon the floor as he continued to slowly move logs into the fireplace, cradling each one with great care. "What the..." Severus sat up and reached for his wand, still on the carpet. "Albus, for Merlin's sake, let me..."

The old man held up his hand and shook his head. "No, Severus, please allow me."

Severus rolled his eyes and sagged into the chair again. "May I ask, what exactly are you doing?"

Albus smiled, looking a little too pleased with himself. "Why, I am building a fire. I would have thought that to be quite apparent."

"Why?" Severus demanded, wishing he wasn't sounding so much like a peevish child.

"Because the room is slightly chilly, don't you think?" Albus replied, still in that patient, conversational tone.

The Potions master now gave up any expectation of reasoned discourse with the old fool. Instead, he eyed the ceiling and noted blandly, "Those of us older than twelve generally favor *Incendio* and the like for such occasions."

Albus merely chuckled.

Moments later, the headmaster raised himself off the ground and a blazing, crackling fire appeared, the warmth immediately filling the room. Severus admitted that it was a welcome addition as he closed his eyes, letting the heat seep into his aching joints. He heard, rather than saw, Albus settle into the other chair.

"Severus."

"What now?" he muttered, his eyelids cracking open slightly.

"I built you a fire because I want you to be warm. And because I believed that that was probably about the only help you would accept from me before throwing me out of your chambers," the headmaster added with a wink, which only served to make Severus roll his eyes once more.

"Do not be ridiculous," he responded unenthusiastically. Leave it to Albus to resort to this sort of irrational nonsense. He would not deny that the headmaster was the least dubious of the characters who paraded through his life. But *help*? Help was for little boys who got into school yard spats or girls who lost their kneazles, or he'll admit, some fully grown wizards who had committed such atrocious errors of judgment that they faced insurmountable difficulty. But of what use would help be to him?

The old wizard nodded toward the empty potions vials that Severus had lined up neatly on the ground next to his chair. "You have taken potions, I see. Not a good night?"

Severus sighed and sunk his forehead into the palm of his hand. "He was angry tonight," he began, in spite of himself. "He is convinced that the attempt on Draco's life was the work of a Death Eater, though it is not yet clear which one."

"And what was your opinion?"

"It has the look and the feel of one of the Dark Lord's own. The victim, the execution of the deed, the choice of spell, everything. I admit I am in agreement with him. His instincts are usually correct, even if his style veers on the side of paranoia. But there was nothing but chaos tonight, I couldn't tell who was responsible. He seems to believe it was a twisted demonstration of love and fidelity."

Albus nodded. "Ah, Tom is back to his old tricks again...the blood sacrifice? And I suppose one thing led to another," the headmaster finished with a wan smile while gesturing towards Severus' slumped form.

He hated the sympathy, but at present, he seemed to have run out of ways to avoid it. "Naturally." He smirked.

"How long?" Albus demanded quietly.

"Long." He supposed he was expected to elaborate.

"If it was serious..."

"Do not even think about interfering. I've not lost my senses. The rest can be dealt with." To his dismay, Severus realized that he had raised his voice.

Albus' blue eyes homed in on his own and he felt himself being assessed in a peculiar reprisal of what he had done with the Dark Lord mere hours ago. He was spared the mental invasion of Legilimency, but Albus was somehow satisfied anyway and turned back to the fire after a moment. They fell silent, and as the burning logs snapped and threw embers, Severus noted the headmaster now staring intently at the flames, the greatest mind known to modern wizarddom visibly weighing one intractable care against another.

At length, the old wizard sighed. "Well, it seems that Tom and I are equally confounded. It burdens me a great deal that three of our students have been directly hurt."

"It is likely an isolated incident," Severus said, heeding the inexplicable urge to reassure. "Granted, it is still too early to tell, but I would venture to say that other than the usual intrigues surrounding Potter, there are presently no undercurrents in his circle portending any additional strikes."

"A relief, certainly, though we are still left with our mystery assailant. And how, if you would, did your fingers come by this state?"

It occurred to Severus that the purpose of the headmaster's visit had yet to be addressed. "You always did have the most subtle way of changing the subject, Albus," he commented sharply.

"Why, inquiring minds would like to know," the other wizard replied with good cheer.

"If you know what took place tonight, which I am certain you do or you wouldn't be stationed in my sitting room on a social visit, then why trouble yourself by asking?" he hissed.

At this, Albus leaned forward in his chair and stated softly, "Severus, there is no need for self-recrimination. Nothing has changed. You remain ~~ye~~*yourself*."

"Save your placating rubbish. You think it is acceptable for me to attack students in corridors with lethal spells?" *And wish to god I could take her to bed* he added to himself, stoically feeling the burn of humiliation.

"No," Albus acceded, "that was not well done. But you are completely missing the point. Why Miss Granger?"

"*Why* her? How in Merlin's name should I know? She was there, she couldn't stop meddling in others' affairs, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was..." Severus paused, then forced himself to swallow. "I was..."

"Out of your mind with pain? You were never a merciful judge of people, least of all yourself."

"Be that as it may, I don't suppose you intend to just leave me be, do you? That would be shockingly unconventional for you. You've come to hand out punishment."

"Punishment? I know how you are, Severus." Albus stood now and gripped one of his shoulders, the bony, frail-looking hand belying its iron strength. "You cannot postpone forgiving yourself forever, mark my words. You have somehow found, in spite of all you have been through, the courage to have expectations. *This* is why I have come, Severus, not to punish you, as you are so quick to believe, but to remind you that things are not always as they seem."

Severus had no response to these maudlin pronouncements; he rarely did when Albus took it upon himself to lecture. Instead, he absently studied his Dark Mark, feeling resentful. The old coot talked in riddles and made unsubstantiated assumptions about his own capacity for loftiness. Was it any wonder that half the members of the Wizengamot were clamoring for his retirement at any given time?

"Brood if you must, my boy," came the dependably cheerful voice. "I shall not keep you any longer. I expect your outlook will improve tomorrow."

And with this last bit of infuriating optimism, the headmaster departed, leaving Severus to contemplate sleep at last.

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Severus spent the next day anticipating the arrival of half past seven like a man counting down to his execution. After Albus had left, he had first made himself a nightcap, hoping that it would induce calm. The alcohol served to lull him quickly enough into stupor, but it was not the deep, undisturbed sleep he had been hoping for. Instead, he had passed a restless night filled with fitful dreams. Granger had been an unwelcome apparition, his mind's eye blithely filling in details to supplement what little visual memory he had actually been able to accumulate from their charged interaction the night before. The eyes were just a bit richer in brown, her skin a bit more luminous, and that striking look of vulnerability mixed with fierce pride, which always made him ache, that much more pronounced when placed in the glaring focus of his subconscious. Far from being more collected, he sat behind his desk now waiting for her to arrive, even more deranged this evening than when he returned to find her camped outside his rooms last night.

He wondered if she would come at all. Certainly, he had commanded it of her, in the way that teachers command students. *Come to this place, at this hour, I will expect to see you there*. Yes, that is how it normally goes, isn't it? And that is how he was used to conducting himself toward students, but would she still listen? It was not lost upon him that perhaps he had forfeited his place as any source of credible authority.

The knock at his classroom door made him look up, and he was unexpectedly glad. It was precisely half past seven. Wordlessly, he waved his wand and the door swung open.

She stood unmoving in the doorway for a moment, mostly still in the shadow of the dimly lit corridor. For an instant, she hung back, might have melted into the darkness, but then in a flash, she took a step forward, and the light from the classroom spilled upon her. Hard, determined eyes met his own as she strode towards his desk and took a seat.

"You came," Severus said thoughtlessly before he could stop himself. He immediately wished he had.

"Yes," she agreed, an eyebrow rising. "You seem surprised."

His speech sounding clumsy to his own ears, he cleared his throat. "I thank you for your assistance again last night. As you can see, my fingers have become much improved."

"I am pleased to hear you tell me so, since I would have thought it was clearly none of my business," she answered in smooth, icy tones.

They were just words, but Severus was gripped by his own suddenly pounding heartbeat. Vaguely, he recalled the final scene to last night's protracted drama and his own harsh dismissal of her. He took a closer look at the woman who now sat before him. Gone was the slight quirk to her lips that he had gotten used to, that indulgent half-smile that he sometimes secretly wondered if she reserved just for him. Instead, her mouth was now set in a thin, straight line. Even her hair was pulled back in a severe plait today, he noticed, with nary a stray curl in sight. Anger...at him, no doubt...had not diminished her. In fact, she was an even prouder and more magnificent creature.

But her current state filled him with a sense of unhappiness and confusion. Somehow, he needed to make things as they were again, her haughty demeanor be damned.

Slowly, he withdrew his wand, and as she watched with her unnervingly alert stare, he placed it between them, on the desk.

She appeared mystified, then her eyes widened and she laughed incredulously, which caused Severus' insides to curdle with humiliation. "Oh, you can keep your wand. I'm certain you learned your lesson the first time you tried to strike me. And don't worry, I won't go running to Professor Dumbledore."

"Very well," he heard himself say. There was no problem projecting his usual disaffected indifference now. Any desire he had had to quell their differences instantly evaporated in the bitter sting of her derision. He deserved what he got, he concluded grimly as he pushed his chair back from his desk. Gryffindors, particularly Gryffindor *children*, are all vain, prideful, arrogant brats, and if he had remembered that key tenet, he wouldn't have been routed by a mere wisp of a girl.

Opening his drawer, he pulled out the Pensieve again. "Fifty points from Gryffindor for disrespect towards a professor. And now, let us return to our project."

Looking up, he savored the savage feeling of satisfaction at the look of black hatred which rose in her eyes.

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Author's Notes:

1. The title of this chapter is derived from a letter John Keats wrote to J.H. Reynolds, in which he said, "Now it appears to me that almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel." I believe Keats was trying to express how it is possible for man to produce a very complex illusion from almost nothing. See the rest of the letter here: <http://42opus.com/v5n1/tojhreynolds>

2. For anyone with a Livejournal, I'd love to friend you! Mine is listed in my profile. Also, I am on Twitter as @labrt2004

3. And as always, many thanks go out to my betas, LaSyren and Snarkyroxy!

***Reviews are very much appreciated!***

# Degrees of Freedom

Chapter 10 of 11

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

Author's Notes: I usually put these at the end, but I feel that I need to give the shout-outs in the *beginning* so people will pay attention! Thank you to Snarkyroxy and La Syren for betaing this story. Also, thank you Ferporcel, Annietalbot, and Machshefa for their input at various points in this chapter and for holding my hand when writing it became hard...

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She sat in the hard, uncomfortable chair, watching him with detached fascination and feeling her own blood run cold in her veins. He could deduct points if it pleased him... it was of little consequence to her.

Snape appeared to have slipped on a placid mask of dispassion, but she had spent enough time observing him that she could tell by the dark fire burning in his eyes that he was seething. He continued to leave his wand sitting upon the desk, out of spite, she figured. She turned her gaze to the Pensieve. He could take his lordly arrogance to hell; she could play this game of brinksmanship as long as he needed.

In any case, she had no intention of spending the rest of the evening dancing around his clearly unresolved personal conflicts. She opened her school bag and pulled out the worn parchment bearing all the Arithmantic calculations again. As Snape watched impassively, she smoothed it out upon his desk and then took out another piece of parchment, also filled with ciphering, though this one was crisp and new. She spread them next to each other, then pointed to the second parchment, on which she had painstakingly reworked all the equations from the beginning. "I was hoping we could try again, with the Pensieve Base, sir. I scoured through all the literature I could find on it, but I haven't managed to figure out why it acted so strangely. That's to be expected, I suppose, with experimental potions. But I figured, maybe we could try once more, with a different formulation, just to put to rest any doubts."

Snape raised an eyebrow quizzically before snatching up the parchment and scanning its contents.

"It's Arithmancy, and one wouldn't expect more than one answer, but I looked at all the old calculations and thought there probably could be more than one solution because of..."

"Degrees of freedom," he said curtly, cutting her off. He thrust the calculations back. "You've made an insightful choice by reinstating the adder scales. Ingredients originating from adders are known to be more stable. I suggest adding the scales before asphodel, however. The reason the protocol suggests differently is because students are better at gauging the potion color when the asphodel is used first; adder scales have more potency as a launching ingredient for a potion, though, and you have enough ability to handle them thusly."

Hermione sat back in her chair with a start. Professor Snape's approbation came as a surprise. She had been steeling herself against anger, mockery, and scorn. Her wits in short supply, she managed to say, "Thank you, sir."

He merely cast a cold look at her before turning away. "We will proceed as we did in our last session. You know where to procure the ingredients. Brew the potion without incident, and then we will observe its effects."

Sighing, she made her way to the cabinet where the adder scales were kept and gathered the prescribed quantity. *Damn the infernal man.* How had he managed, in the blink of an eye, to turn the situation so fully upon its head? His mannerisms were as changeable as the perilously shifting staircases in the dormitory tower.

With flair borne of irritation, she quickly dumped the adder scales into a cauldron and began work on the asphodel roots. After some minutes of what she hoped was dignified silence from herself, she looked up, only to find that Snape was no longer present in the Potions classroom. Rather than sitting at his desk and reading, he had retreated through the door connecting his classroom with his private quarters. Hermione frowned. She knew that she should have taken this departure from routine as an affirmation of her own competence, but instead, she found herself infusing a surge of discontent energy into her cutting, slicing so hard that the dried roots bounced up from the table with each fall of her knife.

He emerged sometime later, after she had already set the potion over the flame to brew. She was perched atop one of the lab benches and was distractedly browsing through her Transfiguration readings for next week. Upon hearing his entrance, she jumped to her feet and shut the text, fixing her attention on him. Her breath hitched when she noted that he had shed his familiar teaching robes, granting a view of a broad shoulder as he turned to close the door. His waistcoat was black, the only color she'd ever observed him wear, but the sight of it uncovered was discordantly intimate, and Hermione barely prevented her mouth from dropping open in bewilderment.

"All is well, Miss Granger?" he asked briskly as he made his way to his desk.

"Yes, I am waiting for it to boil," she answered in a rush.

"You will notify me when it is done," he said. Then he gathered a stack of parchments from his desk, and without another word, returned to his chambers.

Hermione kneaded her forehead, frustrated. The potion was starting to boil now, and she mentally filed away her discomfiture for further inspection at a later time. She could not risk any disruptions to her concentration whilst she was in the midst of counting her stirs. She merely wished... Merlin, the man simply needed to keep all his clothes on, she thought with a stab of annoyance.

The potion finished, she resolutely tamped down upon her injured pride, walked to Snape's door and knocked. The man was behaving civilly, against all expectations, yet it was his very civility that was infuriating. Promptly, the door opened. "It's done," she informed him tersely.

Snape evaluated her critically. "I see you have managed," he said before sweeping past her. Even without those robes, he succeeded somehow to give the impression of billowing, Hermione thought with disgust as she followed him to his desk.

They settled themselves on opposite sides of the Pensieve, and Snape picked up his wand. "Unfortunately, we will need to avail ourselves of a Pensieve from among Albus' considerable collection, since this one is still harboring your memory. I am sure he would not mind in the least," he finished with a faint sneer.

"Sounds reasonable to me," agreed Hermione, matching Snape's frosty courtesy.

He waved his wand, and the required second Pensieve was conjured. With a silent flick of his wrist, he deferred to her, signaling her to proceed.

Hermione commenced replicating the sequence of actions from their first experiment, carefully ladling the modified potion into the Pensieve and waiting for it to be absorbed. At the next step, when she was required to furnish a memory, she chose one of innocuous origin, a recollection of last week's Herbology lecture. This time around, she took great care to avoid sharing a memory that held even remote personal significance. *No need to hand him ammunition*, she thought darkly.

The effects of the altered Pensieve Base were instantly apparent the moment the silver threads of memory touched the dark, polished surface of the stone bowl. Instead of settling into the normal calm sheen, the liquid frothed and boiled violently, slipping and sliding along the sides of the Pensieve. She watched, gripped by suspense, waiting for the memory to evaporate altogether, but it did not; it continued to bubble soundlessly. In her mind, a picture of what should follow was slowly forming, the next step in their inquiry inevitably revealing itself.

With a slight shiver, she leaned forward, closer to the Pensieve. At the same time Snape pressed his two bandaged hands upon the table and angled his tall form nearer. Startled, she looked up at him. He, too, was keenly watching the simmering silver surface, contemplating it with an analytical intensity. Hermione immediately recognized the blaze in his eyes as a mirror of her own anticipation.

"We can enter the memory," she stated, rather than asked. Her voice was thick, suppressed excitement causing control of her senses to grow tenuous.

Snape nodded, though he held up one hand in forestallment. "Sense, Granger, put it to good employ. This is no time for Gryffindor intrepidity," he said cuttingly. He studied anew the strange consistency of the memory, eying it sharply, his wordless command for restraint still present. Hermione was acutely aware of his palm just barely making contact with her arm as his hand blocked her access to the Pensieve.

"You are, I trust, familiar with Occlumency?"

Hermione hesitated, then reluctantly bowed her head in assent.

Snape regarded her with faint amusement. "No need for timidity. Like as not, you made it your business to master it when it became clear that Potter was incapable?"

She had read enough about Occlumency, of course, and had even tried it in fits and spurts when curiosity struck her. And indeed, she had grown very curious about it when Harry was struggling to learn it. Knowing about Harry's awful lessons with the professor in their fifth year, and she wasn't exactly eager to be subject to them herself.

"*Master* wouldn't be the right word," she muttered.

He smirked, and with a touch of hauteur, replied, "An elementary knowledge would be quite sufficient, Miss Granger."

"Well, isn't that a relief." She had meant to ask a question, but it had come out with more bite than she'd intended. She waited for the point deductions that would surely follow...and basked in the pleasure of not caring.

There was no indication that he had heard her. "Occlude when you enter the Pensieve," he said intently, bending lower over the table to meet her gaze.

She flinched at the unexpected proximity but held her silence. Merlin, she was acting the model dimwit, being buffeted every which way by Snape's behavior.

"There is no telling what effects the potion could have on one's mind. I will accompany you into the memory, as I do not trust you to be well-enough equipped to handle every eventuality." Snape's tone did not invite debate.

Not that she was inclined to put up a fight, anyway. She was anxious to find out what had happened to the potion. "All right," she quickly agreed.

The real challenge lay in getting through the session... *with him*.

They faced each other, the Pensieve between them. Hermione schooled her mind for Occlumency, feeling her eyebrows knit together in an effort to focus. In contrast, Snape, quite at ease, observed her without expression, *his* Occlusion, she guessed, requiring very little thought.

"Granger."

Her eyes opened at the sound of her name...she hadn't noticed that they had closed. Snape's flint black gaze was upon her, piercing her with rough, unapologetic heat. Without blinking, she endured the onslaught, thrilled by the dripping uncertainty which hung between them. The connection held strong, and then there was a subtle sifting in her mind, like water trickling through sand, that was over before she knew it had occurred; Snape's attention had already moved elsewhere by the time Hermione realized that she had been Legilimized.

"The Occlusion is adequate," Snape pronounced.

A heavy hush descended over the already quiet Potions classroom. An unspoken consensus passed between them. With a last sideways glance at Snape, Hermione dipped her head into the Pensieve.

The scene, blurry at first, gradually fell into place around her, the memory unfurling in wavy, shimmering sheets. Her seventh year classmates were gathered in the Herbology greenhouse for their lecture. Her present-day self watched from the corner of the room as Professor Sprout demonstrated the proper way to pot snapdragons to the class. To her left, Hermione was aware of the shadowy figure of Snape.

"Now mind you, they are not called 'snapdragons' for nothing!" Sprout was saying.

*Well, I should think not!* thought Hermione to herself. *Their snapping action is enough to land anyone at St. Mungo's! But they are harvested as a valuable medicinal ingredient.*

She knew that next to her, Snape was watching her closely. A disturbing black apparition within her own memory, he tracked even the slightest twitch of her finger with an eagle's acuity. She tried not to be distracted by his sullen presence.

*So what was different about this memory?*

"Of *course* they aren't called that for nothing! Longbottom's grandmother probably promised to feed him to the bloody things if he misbehaved..." Malfoy whispered to Goyle.

Her counterpart in the memory threw the Slytherin a glare.

*Worthless, bullying shites!* she thought vehemently.

In her peripheral vision, she saw Snape start. Without warning, his fingers closed around her wrist in a painful grip, and he yanked her out of the memory. The scene quickly melted away as she was forcibly removed from the Pensieve.

She collapsed into a chair, shaken, her head still spinning. She rubbed her tender wrist and looked up at Snape in confusion. "What was that for?" she asked angrily.

"Do not act persecuted," he replied in a hard tone. "You have not the slightest idea what has just occurred, do you? You have created singularly potent Dark magic."

"Dark magic? It was just a memory! In fact, I was still trying to figure out the difference between that memory and regular memories when you hauled me away."

"The difference, Miss Granger, was that you have managed to concoct a Pensieve Base which not only hosts memories, but *also* thoughts."

Hermione shook her head slightly, trying to make sense out of Snape's words. Thoughts? "You mean, *my* thoughts. You could hear what I was thinking," she mused, finally stringing together the facts. "Yes, I suppose I *was* remembering what my exact thoughts at any given moment were...but they seemed to me just like normal thoughts, the kind which occur in one's head."

"You wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. Had I not been present, I suspect you would never have made the distinction." Snape's voice had grown thoughtful, the contempt that had carried his words faded. He continued, "It must have been the adder scales."

"The very reason they are in the protocol for Pensieve Base to begin with...adder scales are associated with memory. And the Arithmantic alterations must have induced this layering effect," Hermione postulated, following Snape's lead. She braced an elbow against the bench top, her chin coming to rest in her hand. "This is Dark magic, then? It's true that a Dark spell need not inflict death, injury, or pain. Reading minds could be Dark, too," she observed contemplatively.

"Yes, more precisely, invasion of minds is Dark."

"Legilimency, then..."

"Quite right, Granger, Legilimency is Dark," Snape answered, eyebrows lifting in sardonic challenge.

She folded her lips. "Well, supposing this potion *is* Dark. What led you to characterize it as *singularly* potent?"

"If one were to cast *Legilimens*, one would not be able to read a mind. The mind is not a book." Snape paused, looked deliberately at Hermione, and sneered. "I elucidated this concept to an uncomprehending Potter once. Perhaps it will be lost upon you, also."

Hermione crossed her arms. "You would not even have begun the explanation if you truly thought so."

Snape made no reply, silently acknowledging her riposte. Coolly dusting invisible lint from his shirt, he continued, "In Legilimency, one captures only imprints of thoughts, open-ended fragments that may or may not be meaningless, depending on the skill of the Legilimens. And even that much is considered by the magical community to be Dark. Now, as we have it, there is a potion which not only strips all objectivity from a memory but also lets one bear witness to the *exact* thoughts of another. It supersedes *Priori Incantatem*, or Veritaserum, or even forcible memory extraction."

"This kind of magic isn't *necessarily* harmful, though," Hermione insisted. "Professor Dumbledore, for example, he's an Occlumens. Besides, I think this potion could prove very useful for figuring out what happened to Neville."

"Only a naïve Gryffindor such as yourself could propose such a thoughtless idea," said Snape repressively. "Is it your constant wish to meddle in the affairs of others? Do not confuse the headmaster's Light credentials with the choices that he has made regarding his magic. Magic is dark, Granger, not wizards. Any and all are free to use whatever spells they wish, but until you have attained the mastery and experience of the headmaster, I would not advise you to do so. Longbottom is above your reach."

The anger that Hermione had carried into the room in the beginning of the evening, the unfocused resentment that she felt toward the professor, seemingly forgotten in the shared thrill of a joint discovery, burst back into existence again. He was, by nature, cruel and belittling, and in the excitement of investigating the new potion, she had almost forgiven him.

Silence was wedged awkwardly between them.

Finally, Hermione said brittlely, "So that was the proof of concept. Can I go on with the real potion, Water of Styx, sir?"

Snape's voice was wintry: "You may."

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Severus wearily pinched the bridge of his nose and studied the sullen-faced student sitting before him. His head was threatening to split from the intolerable hour he had spent with Granger, yet here was the younger Malfoy, somehow landed upon his stoop again. Curfew had long come and gone, and Severus had begun preparations for slumber when the urgent pounding on his door had begun.

The boy appeared pale and drawn, and Severus detected a faint line of perspiration dotting his hairline. Suddenly, his exhaustion was pushed far from his mind.

"Mr. Malfoy, to what do I owe the pleasure?" he inquired silkily.

"I...I'm sorry for coming this late, sir. I thought about waiting till tomorrow but decided that this was ah...urgent enough to disturb you." The shaky words came pouring out of the typically articulate boy. He fumbled around the inside of his robe and pulled out a sheet of parchment. "On my pillow tonight," Draco explained.

Severus drew his wand. "For the love of Merlin, boy, tell me you were not stupid enough to..."

"I checked!" Draco managed to protest in whining tones, in spite of his obviously rattled state. "I'm not a complete dolt, Professor. Of course I looked for curses first before I picked it up."

"You know nothing of what to look for," Severus muttered distractedly as he levitated the parchment onto his desk and started a series of detection spells. "I will thank you next time to await proper assistance, especially given the recent trouble you've attracted."

The parchment appeared to be clean, and he finally took it in hand and scanned the contents. With sinking heart, he read the lone sentence scrawled in elaborate, barely-



legible script. It was as he had thought. "You've been threatened," he said grimly, tossing the parchment down upon his desk again.

Draco's face fell. "I gathered as much, though I couldn't make heads or tails out of it. It's some sort of code, isn't it? *Three nights in seclusion with a king*"

"It is word play. Three *knights*, the variety one finds on horseback. Your elusive enemy is undoubtedly congratulating himself on his own cleverness."

"I still don't get it."

"Under the right circumstances, three knights and a king are sufficient to force checkmate during a game of chess," Severus explained. He puzzled over the note, picking it up again and crushing the parchment between his fingers, trying to decide if there was anything suspect to the texture.

"So I'm to be checkmated? In three nights?" Draco choked out.

Severus was aware of the need to tread lightly. He was still uncertain of where the boy's loyalty lay...if indeed he had any loyalties at all. He shook his head. "It is difficult to say." He reread the sentence, then sighed. "There is more to it than that. Our friend is rather more... creative than I am prepared to be right now. I will require some time to examine this."

Draco visibly deflated at his words, the tint of hopelessness spreading throughout his eyes unmissed by Severus, who scrutinized him watchfully. "I see. Well, thanks for your time, Professor. I'm assuming that he's not after my blood *tonight*, as that would just be abhorrently lacking in subtleness, not to mention spoil all his fun and games," the Slytherin said lightly, dry levity, the currency of all Malfoys, taking over. "So I think I'll be off to bed now."

Severus was not fooled. One wave of his wand was all it took to slam the office door back into place and bar Draco's exit. The boy turned slowly to face him again, expression guarded.

"Sit, Draco." Severus felt himself parody the headmaster as he gestured invitingly to his student. He considered with interest this latest scion of pureblooded inbreeding. Though fate and choice had dictated the overlapping orbits of Lucius and himself, he had never had much patience for Malfoy hubris. Over the years, he had watched with gritted teeth as Lucius had cleared the way...money efficaciously won the loyalty of the dull and greedy...for the ascendance of his precious son within Slytherin House. Reared from the cradle with every expectation to inherit a rich and powerful dynasty, Draco was instead now living the hounded existence of the hunted, with a price on his head.

He chose his words carefully. As one in his position, even a slight misstep would be fraught with danger. "Why do you simply stand by and *allow* yourself to be persecuted? Have you evaluated the loyalties of those who surround you?"

"Yes," the boy spat. "There are plenty of people around here whom I distrust, starting with Dumbledore! The old man is so biased that he leans when he walks...I'm not convinced at all that he cares a whit about finding out who is after me, and in fact, I don't see him taking out the mourning garb if I *did* get offed by whoever this lunatic is. I mean, for Merlin's sake, *Longbottom*? You've *got* to put a stop to it, Severus, he hates Slytherins, he hates *us*!" he shouted, lapsing into the more familiar address from his childhood days, forbidden to him since his entrance into Hogwarts.

"Get a hold of yourself!" Severus snapped, cutting off the boy's hysterics.

Draco blinked. "Sir."

He knew this outburst was a sign of the boy's psychological deterioration, inevitable under the circumstances for a young man who had never known a day's hardship.

"Longbottom *is* linked to the incident that night, whether you like it or not!" Severus said unyieldingly. "And believe me when I say this, Draco, it is emphatically *not* in the headmaster's best interests to feed you to the wolves. He has a considerably more flexible moral compass than you might believe, and he is a formidable strategist, which is, at present, more than I can say for you."

Draco sat, fists clenching and unclenching in his lap, and Severus read the indecision and anguish which passed in turns over his visage. There was more the boy wished to confide, Severus realized, but Draco did not trust him. He would not force the issue; it was for the best, since Severus did not want to compromise his position with the Dark Lord.

With his wand, he prodded the note toward Draco. "If things are not as you like them, then seek out the right people and effect the right events so that you *can* make them as you like. Do not simply paint a target on yourself and wait for your enemies to find you."

He made no response, nor did Severus expect him to. Within the ranks of Slytherin, the most crucial ideas were often not the ones said aloud, but rather found in the silence of unspoken intimation. Draco would simply have put to use the cunning and instinct which had landed him in his House. Severus hoped that it would be enough.

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By the time Draco had left Severus' quarters, the night was already well underway. Though sleep, long denied him, was on his mind, Severus only made it as far as entering his bedchamber before his body steered itself automatically to the chair rather than the bed. He settled into it, then stared blankly at his ceiling. The day had been taxing. He drew in a breath...he grasped at mental straws, finding his ability to process had ground to a halt...and slowly, he released his breath again. Impulsively, he debated...

Before the thought had fully formed, a flash of movement appeared out of the corner of his eye. Startled out of his reverie, Severus bolted up and blindly jammed a wand at the disturbance, which promptly emitted a squeak of fear. Cursing, Severus followed his wandtip to where the house-elf, Winky, cowered tearfully at his feet.

Disgustedly, Severus stowed his wand again and demanded, "Who gave you leave to appear here?"

"Master Professor Snape is *wantses* Winky to be here, sir!" she answered in the grating high pitch which afflicted all her kind.

"I asked for no such thing!"

"Begging pardon, sir, Winky is not meaning to be intrusive! But sir calls Winky to be bringing him foods. Perhaps sir is not using house-elves in a long time and forgots how," the creature stammered, bowing excessively.

"Food," Severus repeated unnecessarily. He cleared his throat. "It was just a thought. It was not even a completely finished thought." He tried not to dwell upon the fact that he was currently in the midst of quarreling with a house-elf.

"If Master Professor Snape is hungry a lot when he thinks about foods, then Winky always comes. Sir needs foods!" Winky insisted mulishly.

"Fine," he growled. "Bring me something. Anything. Something to induce mental function would be appreciated," he finished with a scoff.

"Yes!" the abominable thing gushed. "Winky is bringing sir that right away!" She backed away from him deferentially before disappearing with *asnap*.

Minutes later, Severus found himself barricaded into his armchair by an elf service cart piled high with pastries, cheeses, and spreads, as well as an assortment of herbal teas. Carbohydrates and proteins. *Food that induces mental function.* Half-hearted irritation flared as he slowly reached for a peach scone, all the while reminding himself to never again tread on the wrong side of a house-elf's literal comprehension of the world. As sustenance started to flow into his body to replenish admittedly depleted stores, Severus realized with dismay that he had indeed not eaten since his breakfast that morning in the Great Hall. It was little wonder that the menace of an elf had shown up.

He found no pleasure in his daily meals, particularly when surrounded by the insipid conversation of his colleagues. He did not, however favor skipping meals, for the simple reason that he still remembered far too well the leaner and more impoverished times in his life when meals had been a coveted luxury.

Severus closed his eyes. There was no question as to what had caused him to eschew food and drink.

Even thinking about her *now* produced a certain tightening in his stomach which chased away any more desire for food, reminiscent of the twisting in his gut which had failed to cease all day as he thought about their impending research session.

He had no earthly idea what his expectations had been, exactly. He just knew that there had been one moment of madness when he had been on the verge of giving in to rogue and foolhardy desire. Her egregiously juvenile behavior had shoved him back into reality.

He had achieved his goal, he thought bitterly, though never to lesser satisfaction. He had forced normalcy upon them both, keeping his temper in check and cloaking the restless stirrings inside him. He had risen above baser urges and trained his mind to the task of teaching. Never had he doubted that he would succeed in checking his own impulses. It was merely that the effort was so unduly challenging. Even after he had deliberately chosen to remove himself from her presence, retiring to his quarters while she was brewing the potion, he was still plagued by disquiet. It made little difference whether she was within sight or not; it took all his strength to maintain the appropriate veneer of disdain, to remain resolutely unmoved.

He thought back to how they had ended the evening. Severus had watched her arrange books, notes, and quill inside her school bag with neurotic precision. Her calm exit had been a triumph of self-comportment, but acrimony had spilled off her with every step. The classroom door then shut behind her, in what he had thought was an absurdly soft manner...it would have been infinitely more satisfying had she slammed it, he'd decided. At least then, he would have had no need to match her exemplary conduct and could have indulged his wish to smash his entire store of potions ingredients. As it was, he had warded his classroom and returned to his quarters.

The whole affair left a rather unpleasant aftertaste. And as Severus sat, contemplating the fingers of glowing flame which stretched and shrank within his fireplace, he realized with a sense of desolation that many more nights such as this lay ahead.

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Author's Notes:

For once I have nothing swotty to say about the chapter title :-D. And all my thanks occurred at the top. \*points up. But here's the usual stuff:

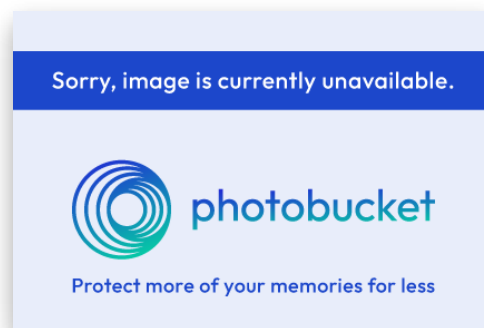
For anyone with a Livejournal, I'd love to friend you! Mine is listed in my profile. Also, I am on Twitter as @labrt2004

***Reviews are wonderful! Please do leave one if you feel so inclined, they are very much appreciated :)***

## The Right Road Lost

Chapter 11 of 11

Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light... This story is A/U after Book 5.



Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. I'm just shamelessly feeding off of her. I make no money from my writing.

Summary: Tragedy prompts Hermione to make a breakthrough discovery, and Severus Snape grudgingly agrees to assist her. Things do not progress smoothly, but sometimes, it is merely a matter of seeing things in a different light...

Author's Notes: Thank you to Snarkyroxy and La Syren for beta reading. Thank you Indigofeathers for help with a yucky sentence that I'm afraid is still yucky and which I decided to keep anyway :)

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Hermione drained the last of her pumpkin juice, then stared into the bottom of her empty glass. The distorted images of Ron and Harry, who were sitting across the table, were mildly entertaining to her. She idly tapped her teeth against the rim as she continued to hold the glass up. She could look down it all day, she mused, her eyes slowly crossing from the effort. The disturbing truth was, she was seriously considering doing just that, as it seemed a better alternative to facing down the many predicaments currently burgeoning forth from every corner.

"Hermione!" shouted a voice, and then a foot kicked her under the table.

Abruptly, she set the glass back down, flinging small droplets of juice residue onto her own face. Ron was staring at her, eyes squinting in a baffled manner, as if trying to figure out a creature in Hagrid's class. "Yes?" she answered. Blinking the sticky moisture off her eyelashes, she realized that he was trying to figure *her* out.

"What's the matter with you?" Ron asked, leaning closer. "You haven't said a word this whole time we've been at lunch."

Harry nodded in agreement while handing her a napkin.

Miserably, she looked between her two friends and wondered what to tell them. How was she supposed to explain Snape, and being with him in the forest, then being hexed by him, and the new Pensieve Base she had made, and the extraordinarily Dark potion she was planning to make this very night? But mostly Snape, she thought, sneaking a side-long glance at the Potions professor seated at the high table.

She had left last night's research session not only angry, but *frustrated*, and she hadn't stopped thinking about it since. He had been so bloody *calm*. His calm infuriated her. The ease with which he had faced her, all nonchalance, reminded her that she was troubled by feelings which weren't calm at all. His reasonable, measured behavior flung her own struggles in her face, mockery of the most insidious kind, mockery so subtle that she nearly missed it.

While she labored to not give a damn, he was effortlessly civil.

She looked at him again, this time fully turning her head toward the high table. Snape ate like it was a chore, his hand mechanically conveying the food to his mouth as he slowly chewed. His gaze roamed predatorily across the Great Hall, moving from one house table to the next, no doubt scanning for detention fodder. Then, to Hermione's horror, as she was openly staring at him like a lackwit, his eyes landed squarely upon her. Heat exploded onto her cheeks as she sat, hopelessly unable to turn away, pinned in place by the piercing coldness of his regard. The clamoring of two hundred chattering students instantly dimmed and the world contracted inwards to include just the two of them as he ambushed her from all the way across the Great Hall. The agony did not end until Snape disinterestedly returned to his meal.

Glancing down at her own untouched food, Hermione worked her lower lip as a decision precipitated in her mind. Abruptly, she stood, turning to her friends again. Harry and Ron were looking entirely too patient and resigned as they waited expectantly for her to come up with a reply to their still-unanswered question. Hermione smiled wryly, struck by a flash of penitence as she realized that during their seven years together, they must have grown quite used to her mind wandering off in the middle of conversations.

"Come on," she beckoned to them. "I want to show you something."

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If she hadn't had so much on her mind, the expression on Ron's face when they stepped into the Room of Requirement only to find a potions lab might have caused Hermione to stop and savor the priceless moment. He had gone whey-faced, asking in a tight voice, "Hermione? What's the bloody meaning of this?"

"What does it look like?" said Harry with a smirk. "We're going to make a potion. Though Ron does have a point there, what the devil *are* we doing? Polyjuice?"

"We're going to *make* a potion," Ron repeated faintly. "Merlin, I didn't take *nearly* enough Pepper-up this morning."

"Don't worry, Ronald, you won't even have to go near a cauldron. *I'll* make the potion. Pensieve Base, to be exact. You two just need to help me think of an excuse to go to St. Mungo's. Or a way to sneak into in. Also, see if you can get your hands on a Pensieve, somehow." Hermione enumerated hastily, moving about the room, pulling potions ingredients off the well-stocked shelves. Harry plopped himself in a chair which had just appeared in the corner. "Okay, Hermione, we can do that, but want to tell us what you're up to, first?"

She didn't stop moving, for she needed to be active, to focus on something, anything. She could no longer bear the endless cycles of anger, despair, mortification, and desire.

"I created a new formulation of Pensieve Base during my research sessions with Professor Snape," she said, crouching down to open a cabinet which she knew would contain cauldrons. "It not only lets one view another's memories, but it also lets you listen to their thoughts, too. I think we should try it on Neville to see if we can find out anything new." Her voice reverberated into her own ears, since she was talking into the confines of the cabinet. She picked out a cauldron and hefted it onto a work bench in the middle of the room.

Selecting a knife from the array which conveniently presented itself at the side of the bench, she began slicing asphodel, the steps for creating the potion now a familiar routine. She was halfway through the second root when she paused mid-slice, overcome by an uncomfortable prickling sensation. The room had gone deathly silent. She breathed deeply and closed her eyes, willing tranquility into nervous limbs, then placed the knife down and turned.

Neither Harry nor Ron had moved from their places. Both stared at her in frank disbelief.

Ron was the first to speak. "You *what*?" He shook his head slightly to clear his shaggy mane from his face.

"I thought Dumbledore already tried Legilimency on him," Harry pointed out.

"Neville's mind is probably so badly destroyed that Legilimency won't work on him. Legilimency isn't mind reading, it's more like thought-interpreting," Hermione found herself lecturing in a frightfully Snape-like fashion. "And if the thoughts are damaged beyond recognition, then the Legilimens wouldn't be able to derive anything that's meaningful."

"Well, looks like someone's been hanging around the Dungeon Git," Harry grumbled.

"Sorry," she sighed, genuinely repentant.

Ron piped up, reluctantly interested. "But your potion would work on Neville's brain?"

"Yes, because the potion lets you... *listen* to the person's thoughts, like an audio recording." In spite of herself, she blushed with pride at the impressed looks which now crossed their faces.

"Wicked! Though that sounds kind of creepy, to be honest," said Ron thoughtfully.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, "did you let Snape listen to *your* thoughts?"

"Unfortunately, yes," she said, rolling her eyes. "Though I'm not sure even *he* found anything incriminating in my thoughts about last week's Herbology lecture. Actually, come to think of it, he did... hear me think some nasty thoughts about Malfoy."

She was rewarded with an appreciative snort from Ron.

Harry rose from the chair and joined her at the table. "Cool. I know Dumbledore has a Pensieve laying around somewhere. I'm sure we could just ask to borrow it."

Hermione shook her head. "That wouldn't work, because, um, Snape mentioned something about how this might be a Dark potion and that I was insane to want to try it on someone else." She glanced ruefully at her friends and shrugged.

"Merlin's balls, you mean he said you *couldn't* and you're going to do it, anyway?" Harry asked uncertainly.

Her lips stretched in a thin smile. "Something like that."

She resumed slicing, determinedly ignoring the fact that they had all reverted to silence again. "It's not like Voldemort's magic, or anything. It's just that the ethics of listening to somebody else's thoughts are slightly questionable," she rattled off to no one in particular. *Why*, for Merlin's sake, were they both being so difficult today? Weren't they

the ones who were always bursting with ways to flout the rules?

Out of nowhere, a hand appeared, grasping her wrist gently, stilling the knife which she was wielding at furious speed. She looked up, surprised.

"Hermione, we're a little worried about you. This scheme of yours, it sounds dodgy. *You've* been a bit off-kilter lately, too, which we totally understand, with your mum and dad and all the endless time you spend with Snape." Ron squeezed her hand. "But we're your mates. If this is what you want to do, we're there with you. Harry's got his Invisibility Cloak..."

From her other side, Harry nodded. "And I think I've just figured out a way to get that Pensieve.

"Dobby!" he called.

The elf appeared on cue, elephantine ears quivering in delight, dressed in shrunken swimming trunks and a Hufflepuff tie. "Harry Potter calls Dobby?"

"Yeah, thanks for uh...showing up so quickly," Harry said, causing the elf to practically moan in ecstasy. "I need you to get me a Pensieve. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir. Right away!" Dobby bowed gratuitously, then departed.

Ron spoke up again. "And if we need an excuse to be at St. Mungo's, I remember Mum talking about a barmy cousin that's there somewhere. I don't remember the specifics, but I bet Ginny does. She's terrifying really, the way she holds on to that kind of stuff."

Hermione looked at both of her friends and smiled gratefully, knowing words would have just been superfluous.

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Neville hadn't changed much since they last saw him a little less than a week ago. He was quieter now, much to Hermione's relief, though he still gibbered to himself unceasingly, trapped in a broken world where none were able to follow. Held under his restraints in the sterile St. Mungo's room, the air hanging heavy with potion fumes, Neville looked even more alone and helpless.

"How do you reckon we'll get a memory from him?" Ron asked. "It doesn't look like he's going to be able to fish one out on his own anytime soon."

"Actually, I know a spell for that," Harry mumbled.

Hermione and Ron turned to him, startled.

"Well, if you're constantly being told that some evil bastard is going to take over your mind, you can't help but be curious about the possibilities. I've done some reading." He shrugged noncommittally.

"That's great!" Hermione complimented him.

With an ironic grin, Harry pulled out his wand and walked to the head of Neville's bed. Pointing the tip of it to Neville's temples, he whispered *Exitus monumentum*."

Luminous silver threads began emerging from Neville, clinging to Harry's wandtip. He moved it in a winding motion, spooling the memory round and round until it formed a glowing, translucent mass at the end of the wand.

As Hermione uncorked the vial of potion, Ron cleared a space on the nightstand and carefully placed the Pensieve on it. Harry was holding his wand out, but he was hesitating and not allowing it to touch the Pensieve. The pulsating memory hovered over the bowl, casting silver light onto each of their faces.

"There's so much here," he said. "The spell picks up whatever random memories are floating around when it's cast...I doubt he's able to Occlude, so we got a lot. Think it'll overflow from the Pensieve?"

"No, I don't think so," Hermione murmured, motioning for him to continue. "There's no such thing...at least I hope not!" She laughed sheepishly.

Ron paled slightly but said nothing.

She had no doubt they were both convinced that she had taken leave of her senses. In truth, Hermione wasn't so sure herself. She only knew that this brazen excursion to St. Mungo's and the willful disregard of Snape's orders felt astonishingly good. It muted the uproar which was taking place in her mind...the inability to place Snape within any of the numerous logical schemes and paradigms which her organizational brain craved. So explanations would just have to wait.

Harry looked grave, but he obligingly unloaded the memory inside the Pensieve. Anxiety nibbled at her for a split second before it was forgotten in the pleasure of seeing the liquid settle easily within the Pensieve.

She nodded in satisfaction toward the bubbling memory. "You enter it the usual way. But listen for Neville's thoughts...I'm not entirely certain how it works for someone else's memory, since I've only been inside my own."

Joining hands for comfort as much as safety, they let themselves fall into the Pensieve together. Within the swirling depths of the memory, they still held hands. Hermione looked around eagerly, waiting for the gleaming mist to resolve into something recognizable.

None of them were prepared for the assault of unearthly screeches and moans, nor for the chilling blasts of fetid cold air. Disoriented, she could only peer through watering eyes at her alien surroundings. Everything was windswept and bare and uniformly grey, and to her horrified shock, blood oozed from cracks scattered throughout the emptiness.

Frantically, they huddled closer.

"Hermione, we've got to get out of here!" Ron shouted over the terrifying din. "His mind's turned into some kind of crazy hell!"

She was indeed quite keen to leave, for the ghastly, disembodied cries were affecting her, drawing out a crushing despair which threatened to nudge out all sound thought. As her eyes scanned the nightmarish landscape one last time, however, they were arrested by the sight of a hole a little distance away from them.

"Wait."

Pointing to the oddity which was emanating a faint beam of light, she quickly made her way towards it. If there were actually any notion of *up* or *down* in this featureless, grey scene, then she supposed she was heading for the wall, but as it were, delineations of any kind were nonexistent. Harry and Ron were close behind, curiosity inevitably trumping fear for them as well.

They all glimpsed into the hole, apprehensively now, given what they had already witnessed.

"Honeydukes!" Ron gasped.

Sure enough, they were met by the sight of the Hogsmeade candy shop, bustling with patrons.

"Look!"

They all watched as Neville strolled to the store counter and accepted an offering of chocoball samples from the clerk. Just as they excitedly packed themselves closer before the hole to see what would happen next, everything dissolved to grey again.

"Neville's last memory," Hermione said sadly.

---

She had the answer. She just didn't have Snape.

After the inconclusive trip to St. Mungo's, they had returned to Hogwarts, where she had retired to the library to think over the events of the unsettling day. As she was puzzling over the wreck that was Neville's mind and examining a half-baked idea involving phoenix tears, she suddenly hit upon the solution to the problem which had driven her out of Snape's office all those weeks ago...the method for brewing Water of Styx.

Phoenix eyes, of course, were the Potion brewer's pluripotent weapon of choice. Used correctly, they could stand in for any ingredient originally derived from a living creature, though they were so exceedingly rare and powerful that they were a definite last resort.

She had run off excitedly to the Dungeons, ready to get Snape's clearance and start work on the potion, but had come upon an empty classroom, the door uncharacteristically ajar.

She had slipped in and looked around, even tried knocking on the door to his quarters, but there had been no sign of Snape anywhere. And so she had wandered to the shelves and started gathering ingredients, deciding that the preliminary steps of the potion were harmless enough and she might as well get started...

"Enjoyed yourself?"

The harsh monotone utterance of Snape caused her to snap her head up, eyes flying to the doorway.

Snape stood there, an ugly sneer displayed prominently on his face.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, then forced herself to lift her chin high. She tossed her stirring rod onto the lab bench and doggedly approached him, the satisfaction of flagrant disobedience infusing her with confidence. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about, sir," she said, setting her jaw.

"You dare stoop to this impertinence?" he whispered dangerously. "Using the Room of Requirement to brew an illicit potion, employing a House-elf to pilfer from the headmaster, and now insulting my intelligence by posturing ignorance?"

"Well, I didn't do anything wrong! No one seems to have any better ideas of how to help out Neville! *OMalfoy*, for that matter! Why shouldn't I try? It certainly beats doing nothing at all!" she retorted.

"Stupid girl! Your amateur scheming and your invincibility complex are no match against Dark magic you know nothing about." Snape bore down upon her, his nose close to her face. "The headmaster may have turned a blind eye, permitting you and your cretinous associates to do as you please, but rest assured that I have no intentions of doing so. Expect your expulsion proceedings to begin tonight."

"You're out of your mind!" she exclaimed. "It isn't an illicit potion any more than a Cheering Draught is. It's an altered Pensieve Base, which I put to *very* good use, and perhaps if you asked me what I found out, I might even tell you!"

Snape's normally pallid color had turned an even chalkier shade with his rage.

Hermione reveled as she had never before in the soundless issuance of convulsive lips, the fury of strained tendons, the scorch of unfettered spleen.

"Get out of my sight," he finally ordered in a voice ominously steady.

"No," she breathed, riding the strange euphoria. Something burned inside her, too, a volatile mix of anger and hatred, tenderness and longing. "I'm going to finish this potion first. I'm going to brew Water of Styx." She flicked her wand. "*Accio* phoenix eyes!"

Suddenly, too many things were happening at once.

The potion turning violet just as she unscrewed the jar and reached inside.

Snape flinching in surprise, as if he had been struck, then lunging forward.

The phoenix eye, dropping from between her fingers.

His hand flying out, grazing against hers, fingers closing around empty air.

A deafening roar, the sear of scalding potion and molten metal flying in every direction.

His black eyes, always so inscrutable, widened in alarm.

Before all went black.

---

Severus scrambled to his feet, hissing in pain and not remembering how he had ended up upon the floor. His wand had somehow found its way into his hand. The caustic scent of potion permeated the room, and broken fragments of glass and metal, some still smoldering, lay everywhere.

The phoenix eyes, not properly shielded.

*Granger.*

A noise, gurgling and choking, sounded from somewhere, and with his heart pounding painfully against his ribs, he frantically looked about him.

He spotted her beneath a lab bench on all fours; she attempted to crawl forward, but instead collided headlong into a table leg and was thrown backwards to the ground. Now she sat on her haunches, tears streaming down her cheeks as she sucked in one wheezing breath after another.

"Granger!" he called, going to her at once and kneeling before her.

She turned searching, glazed eyes in his direction, cowering. "I can't see! I can't see!"

It took a moment for the words to register. Severus blinked, then took a closer look at the sightless, panicked eyes, the dilated, directionless pupils.

A chill came over him.

*Merlin. She was blind*

A heavy dread of his own threatened to overtake him, but he swiftly smothered the impulse, inhaling shakily. "Granger," he called again, in much softer tones.

She did not appear to hear him, sobbing uncontrollably as she tried to rise again without success.

Quickly, he reached beneath the table and grasped her arm.

"No!" she screamed, wrenching herself out of his hold like a terrified animal. "Stay away from me, you bastard!"

Something inside him broke as he listened to her gasping cries.

"Grange...*Hermione*," he said, haltingly, desperately, the name falling awkwardly from his lips like a foreign language.

She was startled into a brief moment of silence.

"Listen to me. Let me... help you. I am going to take both your hands in mine now." Slowly this time, he reached for her hands. He was relieved that she did not attempt to fight him again. "Come," he said, enclosing her cold, clammy palms in his and pulling her up to her feet.

Her head swung around in bewildered circles at the movement and the positional change, and she resumed her distressed sobbing, fingers immediately attaching themselves to him, locked in claw-like grips around the material of his robe.

Severus knew that he needed to take her to Poppy straight away, that he needed to summon Albus. But as he fought his own panic, watching her cling to him in helpless terror, he sighed in defeat. He reached down to his chest, where her fingers had knotted themselves into his robes, gently prised them apart, and took her fully in his arms, shuddering from the torment of long self-denial. He felt her tremble, felt the wetness of her tears. "It will be well, Granger," he whispered.

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"I've already mentioned that my knowledge of the events leading up to this incident is very limited," Severus snapped in frustration when Albus once again requested his recountal. He, Albus, and Minerva were holed up in the headmaster's office, their efforts to get to the bottom of Granger's injury so far unsuccessful. "I had just learned what she had done at St. Mungo's. She was already in the Potions lab when I arrived, and she was most of the way through with brewing a variation of Water of Styx. She was... overexcited, intractable to guidance. She summoned a jar of phoenix eyes...an entire jar, mere inches away from a volatile Nodal Potion...and before I could intervene, she had reached in without any precautionary measures in place."

Minerva treaded anxious circles about the room. "Water of Styx? I am still in disbelief! What were the both of you thinking? I never approved of this in the first place... that kind of potion being brewed within Hogwarts?"

"I'm afraid my opinions on the subject were rather disregarded as well," Severus replied stiffly.

He was in his usual location whenever these gatherings occurred, the shadowed space by the bookshelf, but at this moment, he wondered whether he ought to take a chair, instead. His limbs were leaden from potion burns he belatedly discovered upon himself...and his mind was still in the Hospital wing, where he had left Granger, crying wretchedly, begging not to be left alone, though Severus suspected she was beyond remembering who it was she clung to. He had hovered uncertainly by her bedside as Poppy rushed around and Granger lay hysterical in the bed, and he had reached out to still a blindly groping hand because it had somehow seemed reasonable...and as she desolately repeated that she couldn't see, he remembered murmuring to her...what exactly, he wasn't sure...but again, it had just seemed right.

Albus sighed and removed his glasses wearily, placing them upon his desk with *athump* which echoed throughout the room. "Those of us who have fought this war the longest are the ones who make the gravest mistakes, Severus. It was my understanding that this was beneficial to both Miss Granger and to us," he pronounced softly. "It is of course, too late, now that I see how far I have misjudged. But come, let us focus...phoenix eyes, you said? Potent, yes, but they should not have induced blindness."

"No," Severus agreed. "I have reviewed the protocol several times...as loathsome a substance it is, it has nothing in it that would cause one to go blind. And phoenix eyes are reactive but generally restorative, so they certainly would not have caused it."

"She has fully recovered from the injury to her magical core?" Albus asked absently.

Minerva, who was gazing in silence out a window, turned and said, "Miss Granger was not very conventional in her study habits. The house-elves sometimes talk to me about her, but I don't pay them much attention, one can get so absorbed in all the business around the school. But they always mention something about her sitting up late into the night..." Minerva left the window and walked to the center of the office. "Winky!" she called.

The elf materialized into existence. "Mistress Professor!" The creature looked nervously around the room.

"Winky, I want you to tell us about Miss Granger," Minerva instructed. "You remember what you have told me about her, correct?"

"Oh yes, Harry Potter's friend," Winky nodded sadly. "Poor her! Winky needs punishment for bad job stopping her! Winky punishes self now!" she howled before throwing herself repeatedly against the nearest wall.

Severus growled impatiently as Albus stood up and commanded, "Stop, Winky! You are to delay your punishment until you finish informing us of what you have seen."

The distraught elf ceased her antics and finally spoke. "Hermininny, she becomes sad after her Mum and Dad is killed by the bad wizard. When Winky and other elves go clean the Gryffindor room, she is never sleeping like other children, she stays up late! Winky does not think this is good thing, too much books is bad. I tells Mistress Professor, but Mistress Professor says Hermininny likes books!" Winky stated indignantly.

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, go on."

"But then bad things starts happening," Winky muttered, wringing her misshapen hands. "Hermininny likes magic. She is up late, and she drinks too much magic into her, Winky knows this, Winky sometimes has too much to drink, too."

Severus and Minerva glanced at one another in confusion at the elf's nonsensical babble, but Albus tipped his head back in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment before nodding to the elf. "I understand now. Thank you, that will do, Winky, you may go."

After the elf left them, Albus had an odd, repressed expression upon his face before he suddenly broke into a chuckle. "Please do excuse my poor manners, my friends," he said as Minerva looked at him aghast. "This is no time for humor, I realize. But when you live to be my age, the world will start mocking you in the most confounding ways, and you have no alternative but to laugh. You see, Miss Granger has tripped over the same stumbling block I did as a Hogwarts student. I should have known, she is very much like myself when I was younger. She has discovered Founders' Meditation."

"I beg your pardon?" Minerva asked. Severus merely shook his head.

"It is not well-known...the obscure trivia which is the providence of old wizards and aging headmasters, I'm afraid." Albus rose from his chair and went to stroke his phoenix. "As you are aware, this castle is the collective magical creation of four visionary minds, Ravenclaw, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor. What the inhabitants of this place experience on a day-to-day basis is the result of their combining, reinforcing, and inventing so many spells that the magic ceased to be the discrete charms and incantations we know, but rather, an organic, self-sustaining force that is part of the castle itself. It renews itself daily...in the dead of night."

"When Granger was studying," Severus observed.

"What does this have to do with her blindness?" said Minerva.

"Well, you see, when the spells reset themselves every night, if one were perceptive and skilled enough, then one could become part of it by allowing one's own magical core to interact with the concentrated magical presence of the castle."

"It's not Dark, however," Severus stated.

"No, the castle wouldn't permit anyone with impure intentions to leech its magic...however, there are attractive benefits, since it has a way of enhancing one's own magic."

"The core intervention," said Severus, starting to understand. "I had difficulty believing even *she* was capable of that."

"Quite right. Founders' Meditation, or what our elven friend more aptly describes as 'drinking' magic. One could very easily overdo it, unfortunately, and render oneself susceptible to sudden magical imbalances. Especially after the magical core has recently undergone stress, as in the case of Miss Granger."

"Only a Gryffindor could get intoxicated on *magic*," Severus muttered, ignoring Minerva's glower.

"Is it treatable?" she inquired.

Albus was contemplative. "In my instance, I never made it quite as far, only managing to have a fainting fit during Charms class. I expect she will heal in time...though it may require some extra thinking on our part."

Severus' heart sank.

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He had told himself that he wasn't going to see her, that he would not even approach the corridor that led to the Hospital wing. There was no good to come out of doing so. He had seen to it that she had gotten to Poppy. It was hardly justifiable to expect more. He had nothing further to offer her...no comfort or reassurances, no cure for her sight or salve for her despair.

It had been easy enough to keep himself occupied late into the evening. He had potions to prepare, and he had his never-ending supply of student essays; there were always rounds, staff meetings, detentions, and Head of House duties. But then when the last of the first years were herded back into bed and the seventh years from behind the rose bushes, and when the corridors were at last dimmed for the night and Argus safely removed, Severus somehow found himself casting a Silencing Spell on the Hospital door, then stalking quietly up the darkened aisles to the lone bed which had candles lit beside it...an ironic gesture.

She did not sleep. Her breaths were slow and even, and her wide, unfocused eyes lay uselessly open, reflecting the wavering light within their golden depths. Someone had taken the time to plait her hair, exposing the pale, vulnerable skin of her forehead.

The tears were gone now.

"I know you're there, whoever you are," she called out rather louder than necessary. "Are you waiting to be announced, perhaps?"

The tears were *definitely* gone now.

"Granger," he responded.

The color drained from her face and she suddenly appeared gaunt and tired. "What are you doing here?" she asked in a strained voice.

Severus watched her condition deteriorate, berating himself for his own foolishness.

"Routine check," he lied in miraculously calm tones. "I did not intend to disturb you."

"Rather too late," she said with a faint, sarcastic smile.

He was perversely grateful that she was unable to see him. The sight of her distress paralyzed him, as did the memory of the last terrible second, when she had directed a gaze of angry passion at him before the potion erupted in her face. He floundered in a thicket of chaotic thoughts...that it was cowardly for him to come here; that it was selfish weakness which led him to her bedside; that he had somehow brought calamity upon the life of yet another person.

"Is it true?" she said softly. "No cure?"

"Not yet," he answered.

She said nothing, only smoothed her hand over her bedclothes restlessly. In her sight-shorn eyes, he was able to observe, clear as day, a prodigious struggle to accept loss and master fear. It was too much, and he closed his own eyes.

"Tonight will be the worst," he told her quietly. "Make it through tonight."

"Of course," she said steadily, fixing her wooden stare at the ceiling. The defeated bitterness was evident in her voice, however, and it made his stomach turn.

Pacing, he racked his brain, not knowing what he was searching for. He stopped at the foot of her bed, spun toward her. "I was in pain..." he began. He broke off, unable to think of what to say next, and gritted his teeth.

Her brow furled very slightly.

He took hold of the rails at the end of her bed and bowed his head. "That night, I had undergone *Cruciatus*. The splinching accident. I was in a great deal of pain and needed access to my potions." He felt all his energy drain from him.

"Oh," she said. Her confusion was evident.

He himself wasn't entirely certain of the point he was trying to make.

"What were you doing?"

He studied her as he considered his reply. When her mind was occupied, she seemed to regain some of her vigor.

"Work for the headmaster. I'm frequently at odds with many people."

"A spy, then. I always thought so."

Severus raised his eyebrows, secure in the knowledge that he couldn't be observed. It had always been a matter of time before she would put everything together, he supposed. Still, he said nothing.

They were silent for a few moments, Severus standing an uneasy vigil over her. Then she whispered, "What now?"

His fist clenched at his side. The question he had been dreading. "You will find ways to carry on with your life. For most of the difficult tasks, magic will be able to

compensate. There will be an inevitable learning curve." He drew in a breath, watching her closely. "We.../...will be pursuing a cure."

Her eyes slowly drifted closed. "Ah, okay then."

The twisting feeling returned to Severus. "Sleep, Granger." He discreetly waved a wand at the candles, extinguishing them.

He stayed a moment in the dark, his thoughts unsettled.

*I am sorry.*

Turning, he finally departed.

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Author's Notes:

1. The chapter title may be recognized by college English students across the world: the opening lines for Dante's Inferno:

*Midway on our life's journey, I found myself*

*In dark woods, the right road lost.*

2. For anyone with a Livejournal, I'd love to friend you! I'm labrt2004 there. Also, I am on Twitter as @labrt2004

***Please leave a review, they are wonderful and much appreciated!***