Tea Cures All Ills

by delizabethl22

Summary

There was a more sinister reason for Hero's short temper in fifth year than adolescence and excess stress. When she has a seizure while gardening outside no. 4 Privet Drive, in full view of the neighbors, the Dursleys have no choice but to take her to a doctor. The devastating news will affect all that is to come.

Sorry, this isn't a great summary. And I know this sounds really depressing, but just go with me, alright?

Notes

I was once a blonde, when I was very young. Even then, though, I was not the lovely blonde who has the intellectual rights to the source material for this work. General rule, if you recognize it, it's not mine.

Additionally, I did substantial research on the subject, but I am not an oncologist. I'm sure there are things that are incorrect. There will be other things I will change in order to fit the plot. Cancer is horrible, and I'm writing this in part to show support for those who have
survived, those currently fighting the disease, and their loved ones. If this story moves you to care, as I hope it will, please donate, either your money or your time, to help cancer patients and their loved ones.
Dying. She was dying. It was like some horrible dream. Except this would be an improvement on most of her dreams. No pain, no torture, no fighting for everyone's lives. Just the scent of disinfectant, a calm, gentle voice, a lightly padded chair, and the clinical atmosphere of the doctor's office. Sorry, the oncologist's office. She had learned that specialists liked their titles. It was probably different when you earned them.

"I . . . I'm dying of cancer?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. A number of brain tumors were visible in the ct scan. Most are quite small, but you have a slow growing one, about two centimeters, pressing against your optic nerve and a glioblastoma, a fast growing, malignant tumor, right about where your scar is. You may have noticed personality changes, forgetfulness, nausea, headaches, blurred vision, sleepiness, and, of course, the seizures."

"Yeah, that . . . sounds about right." She bit her lip, brooding, then glanced back at Dr. Warren. "What kind of personality changes?"

"Increased hostility, a shorter temper, emotional outbursts, perhaps."

"So . . . what's the prognosis?"

"I have to be honest, it's pretty bad. Younger patients tend to do better, but, this far advanced, the odds are still very much against you."

"Just tell me," she sighed.

"Most patients live about six months. With emerging treatments and your age, a year, perhaps two."

Two years left at most. She wondered idly whether the cancer would kill her or Voldemort. It was ever so slightly moot. She'd seen Dudley flipping a coin with one of the members of his gang to decide who got to beat up the kid they'd cornered. "Heads I win, tails you lose." And she still had her sixth and seventh years left, not to mention a war to fight.

"Treatments?" she asked without much hope.

"Unfortunately, the tumors are positioned so we can't get at them. They're inoperable. You can go with chemo, radiation. There are some very promising drugs in trials at the moment. You're a prime candidate, I could probably get you in."

"How much more time would I have?" The big question. And how much time was enough time? How much time would she need to . . . finish things?

"It varies widely from patient to patient. Maybe an extra year, an extra month, maybe nothing. Or you may survive. The survival rate is low, but people do survive this. There's still a chance you might live."

"A very, very small chance."

"Somewhere between three and ten percent," he admitted.
"So I should probably just accept my imminent mortality, then."

"You should accept the possibility, but try to stay hopeful. Maybe you'll get lucky."

"Thank you, Dr. Warren," she said, rising with a weak smile. She didn't tell him that her luck was a chancy thing on a good day. He was a muggle. He was a good doctor, a good man, but he couldn't possibly understand.

"Feel free to call me with any problems. I'll see what I can do about the drug trials." That was why she liked Warren, no platitudes. No "Hang in there, kiddo. Don't you worry your pretty little head." Just the straight facts with a bit of compassion. She wondered if they trained oncologists to be that way, or if it was just symptomatic of his profession. Platitudes weren't going to help. They were annoying on a good day. When you were dying, they were really rather insulting.

"I'll do that."

"I don't believe you, but there's not much I can do."

"Noted."

"I want you to come in for a follow-up in six weeks."

"I not sure if I can. I attend a boarding school up in Scotland, in the Galloway Hills. It's a fair journey. And I'm not sure I want to tell anyone about my . . . condition."

"Telling people you're dying tends to be awful. But you're going to have to sooner or later. Second-hand experience tells me it's generally best to get it over with. They'll have accepted it by the end, makes the whole dying thing easier when you don't have to comfort them. You're at least going to have to inform the headmaster and the matron. It's sort of their area. I need you to promise me you'll tell them, or else I'll have to write a letter and fax it over. Your school matron will be your primary care physician, and your headmaster stands in loco parentis."

And there goes the International Statute of Secrecy. She wondered if Dumbledore had any idea what a fax machine was, let alone what was involved in its operation. "I promise," she interrupted quickly. "And I'll try to be here in six weeks."

"Good. I'll be expecting you, Hero." I'm sure you will, she thought. With a slightly sarcastic salute she left.

Since her diagnosis, she'd developed a slightly morbid sense of humor. The word oncologist, she knew, came from the Greek word oncos, meaning lump or tumor. But an oncologist, due to the nature of the specialty, is always on call. See? Funny. Or depressing. Take your pick.

When Voldemort had sent her the false vision during her History of Magic OWL, she'd had a seizure. She'd had another one while weeding the garden. Her aunt and uncle had had no choice but to take her to a doctor. People had seen. What would the neighbors think if they didn't? And so, after about a month if testing, they'd found this.

Her aunt was in the waiting room. "Well? What did Doctor Warren say about the masses?"

"Multiple inoperable brain tumors. I have about a year or two left. You'll be rid of me soon."

Her aunt was speechless for a moment. "I . . . I never wanted this."

She didn't say what she was thinking. Damn Chivalry. "Yeah, well . . ." Her aunt seemed to fold
in on herself. Hero both inwardly flinched and suppressed a sense of vindication. Petunia should feel sorry for what she'd done. Gryffindor and Slytherin warred inside her.

"I'm sorry."

Hero stared at her aunt. She actually looked like she meant it. But it was a bit late for that. Hero looked away. "Okay." She really hoped her aunt wasn't expecting forgiveness, because she wasn't going to get it. She glanced back at Petunia. Fortunately, the woman didn't look like she'd expected anything else.

"Do you need anything while we're in the city?" Aunt Petunia asked timidly.

"No, I won't need to pick up my school things for a while yet. We should just get back to Little Whinging." Petunia nodded, and they left.

The car on the journey home was filled with an awkward silence. Usually, any silence between Hero and her relatives was an ignoring one. This time, it wasn't so much ignoring Hero as avoiding the elephant in the room. What do you talk about when your niece, whom you've resented for as long as she's been alive, is dying of cancer?

Mercifully, after about ten minutes, her aunt turned on the radio. The radio was a complicated equation for the Dursleys. On one hand, not turning on the radio might be seen as abnormal. On the other hand, what to listen to? Classical music was elitist, pop was filled with new fangled nonsense and progressive ideas. Rock was worse. They usually settled on church music, though they weren't particularly religious. Today, it was a recorded church service. The minister lectured on the evils of witchcraft.

Hero flipped to a classic rock station. Her aunts hands tightened on the steering wheel. Hero glared at her, daring her to say anything. Petunia's lips thinned, but she kept her mouth shut.

When they reached no. 4 Privet Drive, Petunia went into the sitting room to talk to Vernon, and Hero went to hide in her room.

*     *     *

An hour later, there was a knock on her bedroom door. Hero rolled her eyes. It was probably her aunt ordering her down to dinner. Or maybe wanting to apologize again.

She opened the door to reveal her cousin Dudley, holding two mugs of tea. She blinked. She wondered how he'd knocked.

"What is it?"

Her cousin flushed with embarrassment. "I thought you might like a cup. I . . . I mean. Well. Wizards drink tea, right?"

"We're still British," Hero reminded him. He nodded bashfully.

"Can . . . can I come in?" Hero stood aside. Dudley set the mugs on the bedside table and looked around uncertainly. Hero nodded to the chair next to the window. He perched on the edge. She sat on the bed across from him.

"I'm sorry."
'Are you just apologizing because I'm dying, or do you mean it?'

He stared at her, eyes wide, face expressionless. "You're dying?!"

"Well, that answers that question. I thought your mother would have told you."

"No, I knew they were whispering about something, but they wouldn't let me in the room. I thought it was probably about the appointment, but . . . dying."

"That was my reaction," Hero agreed. "So, why the tea?"

"Peace offering."

"Nothing good on telly?"

Dudley looked mildly offended. "I suppose I can understand that, but . . . those things, last summer. You saved my life."

"I only saved your soul," Hero corrected, taking a mug and wrapping her hands around it.

"I think that's more important," he disagreed. "If you're dead, there's the afterlife, but if you lose your soul, you never get there."

Hero raised an eyebrow. She never would have thought her cousin had the brainpower required to be insightful. But that was cruel. Again.

"I suppose. So, you've seen the light, then?"

"I just wish I had earlier. Oh, God," he said, suddenly realizing. "You're dying. You'll always know me as your stupid prat of a cousin."

"You've finally grown up. Now I can know you as something else, at least for a little bit."

"How can you not be bothered by this?"

"Oh, I am. But I was probably going to die anyway. There's a war on. I have to kill the man who murdered my parents, though he'll probably end up killing me. It's almost reassuring, knowing I'll die either way."

"That's messed up."

Hero shot him a half smile. "Oh trust me, it's incredibly messed up. But, I don't know, maybe it's my turn. My parents are dead, my friend - you remember Cedric, don't you - my godfather. I'm next."

"Cedric's dead?"

"Mmm. There was a competition at my school. Cedric was one of the other competitors. The thing that murdered my parents . . . kidnapped us, I suppose you could say. He needed me so he could have a body again. He didn't need Cedric, so he ordered him to be killed. In an instant, he was . . . gone. Forever. They killed him right in front of me. I didn't know him very well, but we were . . . friends."

"Oh, God. I'm so sorry. Did you say your godfather died?"

"Yeah. There was a battle, at the end of last year. His cousin killed him. But it was my fault. He
wouldn't have been there if I hadn't been so bloody stupid." She started to cry, her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving with sobs she hadn't been able to give voice to until now. Hesitantly, Dudley wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against his side, rubbing her arm soothingly. She wondered when and where he'd learned it.

After a few minutes, her tears stopped. She sat up and gave Dudley a watery smile. "Sorry about that."

"No, no, I don't mind," he said, though he had been a little uncomfortable. "You're mourning. And you're not stupid. I'm sure it wasn't really your fault."

"No, it was. I made a mistake, and he got killed for it."

"Well, you said it was a war. People get killed. It happens."

"I s'pose," she sniffed, wiping her nose with her sleeve. She'd done it as a kid, and it had bothered her aunt so much, she'd never stopped. She glanced over at Dudley. "You know, if this was a real peace offering, you'd have brought biscuits."

"My hands were full!" he protested.

"How'd you knock?" she challenged, curious.

"Kicked the door." Ah. That explained it.

She decided to be less subtle in her request. "Could you bring up some chocolate digestives? Please?" Dudley shook his head, but got up.

"I think I'll be able to get into the kitchen. Mum and Dad are probably still rowing in the sitting room. God, I never thought she'd take this diet so far. I could, perhaps, be able to liberate a few chocolate bickies, though." He grinned at her as he ducked out the door.
Hero snored softly. She was curled up in the chair by the window and had been for almost four hours. She had been watching the street, bathed in orange light from the street lamps. Their light made the fog on the window from her breath glisten. They bleached her face to a ghostly glow beneath her wild black curls. One side of her face was pressed against the cold window pane, her glasses askew and her lips parted.

Her school books were stacked on the bedside table. Her robes were beneath her, hung over the chair. Several newspaper sheets lay on her desk. Headlines blared, "Hero Potter: The Chosen One," "Scrimgeour Succeeds Fudge," and "Ministry Guarantees Students' Safety."

The wizarding world had effectively been caught with its pants down. They were scrambling to make ready for war. Many were quite pleased with the appointment of Rufus Scrimgeour, the grizzled former head of the Auror Office. Hero personally thought it was a bit rich for the Ministry to be guaranteeing students' safety. They'd sent Umbridge to Hogwarts. She was rather bemused by the swift turnaround in public opinion regarding herself. And they were reporting about a prophecy that had caused the deaths of her parents, Cedric, and now Sirius. Next to the news sheets was a Ministry leaflet on protecting yourself from "dark forces."

The newspaper was partially obscured by Hedwig's cage. The beautiful owl surveyed the room imperiously, her amber eyes sharp. She glanced occasionally at her sleeping mistress. She clicked her beak impatiently, but Hero was too far gone to hear her. Her trunk lay open and mostly empty but for rubbish she hadn't gotten around to pitching.

Her face slid further down the window, but still she did not wake. Her alarm clock showed a minute to eleven. In Hero's hand was a piece of parchment in Dumbledore's thin, slanting handwriting. She had poured over it since its arrival three days before. He had said he would be coming to take her to the Burrow. He also requested her assistance with something he promised to "explain more fully" when he saw her on Friday.

She'd been keyed up since seven that evening. Waiting was all she could do. She hadn't packed her trunk because, well. . . . It wasn't that she didn't believe Dumbledore. It was just. . . she'd had enough disappointments to doubt. Any number of things could have gone wrong. They chased around her head. There was no point packing if Dumbledore ultimately didn't show. Her only concession had been to shut Hedwig in her cage.

At precisely eleven o'clock, the street lamp went out. It woke Hero as effectively as an alarm. She straightened her glasses and peered into the night. A tall figure in a long, billowing cloak strode up the garden path.

Hero leapt up from the chair and started dashing around the room, randomly throwing things into her trunk. As a set of robes and two textbooks were launched across the room, the doorbell rang.

"Who the blazes is calling at this time of night?" she heard her uncle complain. She froze, trainers and brass telescope in her hands. It had completely slipped her mind to tell them to expect Dumbledore. She felt hysteria encroaching as she felt both panic and the oddest desire to laugh. She dropped what she was holding in her trunk and crept to the top of the stairs.

"Good evening. You must be Mr. Dursley. I daresay Hero has informed you that I would be coming to collect her?" Dumbledore inquired pleasantly. Hero closed her eyes, cursing herself. She tripped down the stairs to intervene before there was bloodshed, or worse, spellfire. Long habit kept
her from going all the way to the bottom. Best to keep out of her uncle's arm's reach whenever possible.

In the doorway, as though an apparition, stood Albus Dumbledore. He wore a black traveling cloak and pointed hat, his long, silver hair and beard shining in the darkness. Vernon, standing in a puce dressing gown, stared at Dumbledore as if he didn't want to believe his tiny eyes.

"Judging by your look of stunned disbelief, your niece did not warn you of my arrival. However, let us pretend you were gracious enough to invite me inside. In these troubled times, it is unwise to linger out of doors." He stepped smartly over the threshold and closed the door behind him.

"It has been quite a while since my last visit," he said, peering down his crooked nose at Vernon. "I must say, your agapanthus are flourishing." The last time he'd visited . . . Hero puzzled over it. She finally remembered a dream she used to have, of being dropped on the Dursleys doorstep by a man by a long silver beard. She wondered if the comment on the agapanthus was simply something polite to say or if he realized Hero was the one who tended the garden. She smiled slightly, pleased at the compliment.

Her uncle said nothing, though the throbbing vein in his forehead, reaching danger point, indicated his silence wouldn't last long. Perhaps Dumbledore's shamelessly odd appearance had Vernon Dursley at a loss for words. After all, Dumbledore was barmy even by wizarding standards. Then again, perhaps even her uncle could not fail to realize that this was a person he could not intimidate. In any case, Hero relished the silence.

Dumbledore glanced over at Hero, waiting uncertainly on the stairs. "Good evening, Hero, dear girl." He smiled in satisfaction. "Splendid."

Her uncle recovered the power of speech and began sputtering and muttering angrily at the sentiment. He hauled in a breath. "I don't mean to be rude--" he began in a tone that threatened rudeness in every syllable.

"Yet, sadly, accidental rudeness is a peril of our modern society," Dumbledore finished, nodding sagely. "Yes, I quite agree, most unfortunate. You would probably be better to say nothing, my dear man. Ah, Petunia. I was wondering if I would have the privilege of seeing you this evening."

Petunia, dressed in nightgown and housecoat, her hands encased in rubber gloves for the pre-bedtime wipe-down of the kitchen, was the picture of shock.

"Albus Dumbledore," her professor introduced himself. "We have corresponded, of course." Hero wasn't entirely sure "correspond" was an appropriate term for sending someone an exploding letter, but her aunt didn't disagree. "I take it this is your son, Dudley?"

Dudley peered around the archway of the sitting room. He looked astonished and curious, rather than shocked and fearful as his parents were. He looked like he wanted to say something, but looking at his parents, seemed to decide agains it. He smiled encouragingly at Hero. Dumbledore waited a moment, looking expectantly at Hero's relatives. He smiled even as the silence stretched past awkward.

"I shall presume you wish to invite me into your sitting room." Dudley scrambled out of his way as Dumbledore strode past. He and Hero shared a glance as she followed in his wake, his parents behind them. Dumbledore in the armchair nearest the fireplace, no longer boarded up. Hero couldn't decide whether the Dursleys could look any more out of place at Hogwarts than Dumbledore did in the Dursleys' sitting room.

"Please, sir, aren't we leaving?" Hero asked, beginning to fidget amidst the tension filling the room.
"Of course. However, there are a few matters I wish to discuss first. I would prefer not to do so out in the open. We shall trespass on your aunt and uncle's hospitality only a little longer.

"Oh, you will, will you?" her uncle blustered.

Dumbledore sent him a piercing look over his half moon spectacles. "Yes. I shall."

He indicated the armchair to his left, smiling kindly. "Please, Hero, do sit." She did as she was told, Dudley flopping on the edge of the sofa closest to her. He winked at her. Vernon and Petunia reluctantly joined him at the command inherent in Dumbledore's gaze.

"Excellent. We may as well be comfortable." His eyes twinkled. He laced his fingers together and laid his hands in his lap. Hero noticed that his right hand was black and shriveled; it looked as though the flesh had been burned away.

"Professor, what happened to your--?"

"Later, Hero. Please, pay it no mind." She couldn't argue, so she settled into the armchair and glanced over at the Dursleys. Her aunt and uncle appeared stunned into silence. Dudley looked intrigued.

"I cannot quite bring myself to assume refreshments are on offer." He brought his wand out of his pocket. A flick of the wrist and a dusty bottle and five bottles appeared in midair. "Madam Rosmerta's finest oak-matured mead," Dumbledore told Hero, raising his glass to her. She caught hold of her own and sipped. It was wonderfully smooth, rich, with a faint trace of fire. She wasn't bothered about the whole issue of underage drinking. If she didn't drink now, she never would. Bottoms up.

Vernon and Petunia, after quick, scared looks at each other, tried to ignore their glasses, a difficult feat as they were nudging against the sides of their heads. Dudley plucked his out of the air and inspected it with an expression of intense fascination. Hero couldn't help but think Dumbledore was rather enjoying himself.

"Well, my dear girl, to business. We, the Order, have a difficulty we hope you can solve for us. First, however, I must tell you that Sirius's will was discovered. Of course, he left you everything. He knew Remus wouldn't take a knut." Hero nodded in agreement, smiling sadly. Lupin had been too proud to take anything even from his partner, a man he loved completely.

Uncle Vernon's head swiveled and his eyes focused on Hero. Hero refused to look at him, instead focusing on Dumbledore. "It's fairly straightforward. You inherit the contents of his Grimgotts vault, as well as the majority of his possessions, but for a few sentimental bits and pieces he left Remus. The problematic part of the legacy--"

"Her godfather's dead?" Vernon interrupted from the sofa. Dumbledore and Hero turn to look at him. The glass of mead was now knocking rather insistently against his head. He attempted to bat it away. "He's dead? Her godfather?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied in a slightly clipped tone. "Our problem," he continued to Hero as if there had been no interruption, "is that Sirius also left you number twelve, Grimmauld Place." Vernon opened his mouth, a greedy look in his piggy eyes. A sharp look from Dumbledore silenced him, however.

"You can have it," Hero murmured, sick at the thought. "Keep using it as Headquarters, whatever you like." She couldn't stand the thought of facing the memory of him in those halls, trapped in the
place he'd run away from at sixteen, imprisoned in the dusty rooms that still held the spirits of the family that had disowned him.

"That is generous. However, we have vacated the building temporarily."

"Why?"

"Well," began Dumbledore, deaf to the muttering from Vernon as his glass of mead beat him about the head, "Black family tradition being what it is, it may have been enchanted so that only a pureblood of the Black bloodline can own it. Sirius makes it quite clear he wants you to have the house, but the possibility remains." Hero remembered vividly the portrait of Walburga Black, "blood traitors, filth, defiling the house of my fathers!"

"It sounds exactly like something they would have done."

"Quite. Which would mean that the house would pass, not to you, but to the eldest of his cousins, one Bellatrix Lestrange." Hero's blood ran cold. Bellatrix, the madwoman who had killed him, inherit his house?

"No."

"Yes, I quite agree. However, the situation is by no means ideal. We are not certain our own enchantments will hold, should she inherit. She could arrive at any moment. I felt it prudent we vacate the premises posthaste."

"So . . . how do we figure it out?"

"Fortunately, there is a simple test." As he set his now empty glass down, Uncle Vernon had clearly decided enough was enough.

"Will you get these ruddy things off us?!

Hero glanced at him. He and her aunt were cowering, arms over their heads as if preparing for an air raid. The glasses had progressed far enough in their task that they were now bouncing off her relatives' skulls, contents sloshing everywhere. Dudley was watching with mild interest as he sipped his. He met Hero's eye and winked again. She suppressed a giggle.

"Terribly sorry," Dumbledore said politely. With a wave of his wand, the offending glasses vanished. "It would have been better manners to drink it, you know."

Vernon appeared to bite back any number of retorts. Petunia shrunk back into the couch cushions. Dudley watched Dumbledore's wand, curiosity lighting in his eyes.

"You see," Dumbledore continued, as if there had been no interruption, "with the house comes--" He flicked his wand again. A house elf appeared with a loud crack. His nose was squished, his eyes were bloodshot, his ears were like bat wings, and the atrocious state of his tea towel was only rivaled by the state of the rest of him. Aunt Petunia shrieked. Privately, Hero didn't blame her. Dudley carefully brought his feet off the floor and curled them under himself. Uncle Vernon bellowed a demand to know what it was. "Kreacher," Dumbledore finished.

"Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't!" the house elf croaked, just as loudly as Vernon.

"Clearly, Kreacher is displaying a certain reluctance to pass into your ownership," Dumbledore stated over the din of Kreature's denial.
Hero's lip curled in disgust. That thing had sent her godfather to his death. "I don't care. I don't want him."

"The alternative is to allow him to pass into the ownership of Bellatrix Lestrange. Please bear in mind, he has lived in the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix for the past year."

As repugnant as the thought was, she knew she had no choice. "What do I do?"

"Give him an order. He will obey if he, indeed, belongs to you."

Kreacher voice had risen to a scream. There was only one thing Hero wanted from him. "Kreacher, shut up!" He looked like he was going to choke for a moment. It passed, and then he compensated by having a violent, but completely silent tantrum.  

"Lovely. That settles that. I believe it would be prudent to send him to Hogwarts to work with the other elves," Dumbledore suggested, gazing knowingly at Hero over the tops of his spectacles.

She nodded gratefully, glad to be able to get rid of him. "Kreacher, I want you to go work with the other elves. Peacefully! Understood?"

Kreacher got up off the floor, bowed to her with a look of deepest loathing, and murmured, "Whatever Mistress wishes." With another loud crack, he disappeared.

"There is the matter of Buckbeak, but that is rather less urgent. Now, Hero, is your trunk packed?"

"Er..."

"Doubtful I would turn up?" Dumbledore guessed shrewdly. Hero blushed.

"I'll just, er, finish," she said, running up the stairs.

It took about ten minutes to find everything and pack it away. She had to force the lid of the trunk over her cauldron. She still had her fingers crossed that she'd gotten an O on her Potions OWL, though she knew it was a long shot. Trunk in one hand, Hedwig in the other, she trundled downstairs. Unfortunately, Dumbledore was still waiting in the sitting room.

No one was talking. Dudley looked like he couldn't decide what to ask first. His parents looked too terrified to say a word. Dumbledore was humming quietly, apparently at ease, but the tension was thicker than cold custard. Hero couldn't bear to look at her aunt and uncle, though Dudley grinned at her.

"Um, I'm ready, sir."

"Good, good. There is, however, one last thing I wish to discuss with your relatives." He turned to the Dursleys. "As you are no doubt aware, your niece will come of age in a year--"

"No," Petunia said, speaking for the first time since the wizard's arrival. "She's a month younger than Dudley, and Dudley turns eighteen in two years."

"Ah, but in the wizarding world, we come at age at seventeen," Dumbledore corrected pleasantly. Uncle Vernon muttered something, though everyone ignored him. Dumbledore continued, "Lord Voldemort, your sister's murderer, has returned to this country." Privately, Hero thought that was an interesting way of putting it. "The wizarding community is currently at war. Hero, who has has already survived multiple attempts on her life, is in graver danger from him now than when I left her with you fifteen years ago. With her was a letter explaining her parents' murder and expressing my
Dumbledore paused, and the room chilled, though the man showed no outward signs of anger.
Vernon and Petunia huddled closer together. "You did not. You never treated her as a daughter.
She has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands. At least she escaped the
appalling damage you inflicted on your own child. Miraculously, he seems to have recovered."
Dudley pressed himself against the arm of the sofa, as if trying to put as much distance as possible
between himself and his parents.

Uncle Vernon's mouth flopped open, closed, open. Finally he got out, "Us - mistreat Dudders?
What'd you mean?" Dumbledore raised a finger, and silence fell.

"The magic invoked fifteen years ago means that, as long as Hero calls this place home, she - and
you - have powerful protections. However miserable, unwelcome, and mistreated she has been here,
you at least provided her lodging," here he narrowed his eyes at them, "however grudgingly. The
moment she turns seventeen, those protective magics cease to function. I ask only that you allow her
back once more, before she turns seventeen." Vernon and Petunia said nothing. Vernon looked like
there was something caught in his throat. Petunia was oddly flushed. Dudley was looking at his
parents with a disappointed expression that bordered on disgust.

"I think, Hero, it is time we left." He glanced at the Dursleys. "Until we meet again." Her aunt and
uncle looked as if, should that meeting never take place, it would be too soon. Dumbledore stood,
doffed his hat, and swept from the room.

Hero looked at her aunt and uncle, at a loss for what to say. Have a nice year? If I'm still alive, I'll
see you in June? "Bye," she said hastily and followed Dumbledore. Dudley, refusing to look at his
parents, followed her.

She found Dumbledore waiting by her trunk, Hedwig's cage on top of it. "I shall be sending this to
The Burrow, if you have no objections. However, I would like you to bring your invisibility cloak,
just in case." Hero extracted her cloak, trying not to let her professor see the dog's breakfast inside.
Dumbledore tapped the trunk with his wand, and it disappeared. He looked expectantly at the
entrance to the sitting room, where Dudley was hanging back. He blushed and stepped forward.

"I'm sorry about, about them . . . and me, and . . . I'm going to miss you so much," he bit out. He
hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward and hugged her tightly. Hero stood there for a second,
stunned, before wrapping her arms around her cousin. She smiled into his shoulder.

"I'll miss you, too. I'm glad I got to know you, before. . . ." He nodded, ducking his head to avoid
her eye. He kissed the top of her head, then let her go, stepping back.

"Look after yourself, yeah? Best you can," he told her gruffly, wiping his eyes with the heels of his
hands. Seemingly unable to hold it in, he rushed up the stairs. Hero sighed. She glanced over at
Dumbledore. He smiled gently and waved toward the door.

"Now, Hero, let us venture out into the wide world and pursue that flighty temptress, adventure."
And they stepped out the front door into the cool, misty shadows of the night.
Despite the fact that she had been looking forward to seeing him for the past week, Hero felt rather awkward. The last time she had seen him face to face, she had been . . . hostile, angry, grieving, and feeling betrayed. She had never really had a real conversation with him. Even at the end of last year, there had been a desk between them. Even as she destroyed some of her teacher's most prized possessions, she was still a student and he was still her teacher. And now she had an ultimatum from her oncologist to tell him she was dying.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely relaxed. "Wand at the ready, Hero," he told her lightly.

"Sir? Won't I be breaking the law?" Again.

"If there is an attack, I give you permission to use anything that might come to mind. However, I do not think we shall have to worry about that this evening. After all," he smiled at her, a twinkle in his eye, "you are with me." They came to the end of Privet Drive. "I think this will do."

He glanced at her. "I do not believe you have passed your Apparition Test?" She shook her head.

"Right. Hold very tightly to my arm, the left, if you would be so kind." Hero gripped the proffered arm. Dumbledore smiled reassuringly. "Off we go."

He made it sound like they were off on a gentle stroll. It was not. What little light there was disappeared, and Hero felt as though she was being squeezed. There was pressure everywhere. Her eyes were forced back in their sockets, her eardrums further into her skull. Iron bands squeezed her chest, she couldn't breathe--

And then it was over. She gulped great lungfuls of air, as if reassuring herself she still could. She forced her streaming eyes open. It took a few moments for her eyes to focus enough they she realized they were no longer on Privet Drive. She wondered if the vision problems were because of what had just happened - she never wanted to do that again - or the tumor.

She and Dumbledore now stood in an apparently deserted village square, the moonlight illuminating a war memorial and a few benches. As her mind and body calmed, she realized she had just apparated for the first time. She vaguely remembered someone saying most wizards preferred brooms. She quite agreed.

"Are you alright, my dear? I'm afraid the sensation does take some getting used to," he said, looking over her solicitously.

She nodded, still slightly breathless. "I'm fine. But I'm not sure I'm willing to get used to it." Her professor smiled, drew the traveling cloak more tightly around himself, and gestured to a street leading off the square. They set off at a brisk pace past an inn and a few empty houses. According to the church clock, it was now near midnight.

"Tell me, Hero, has your scar hurt at all?"

It was a very similar question to what Dr. Warren asked. She knew Dumbledore was asking for a rather different reason, however. She rubbed her scar self-consciously. "No. I tend to get pretty bad headaches that start at the front of my head, but my scar hasn't ached or burned or anything. I thought, now Voldemort's back, it would ache all the time." She glanced at Dumbledore, who was wearing a satisfied expression.

"It is always pleasant to have one's hypothesis proved correct. I believe Lord Voldemort has finally
realized you have been accessing his thoughts and feelings, and the danger inherent. It is likely he has begun to employ Occlumency against you."

"Good," Hero commented firmly, her expression now mirroring Dumbledore's. She had enough to worry about without the insights into his mind, the dreams, the flashes of rage. She had enough of that on her own. They turned a corner, passing a blue police call box and a bus station. Hero looked sideways at her professor. "Sir?"

"Yes, Hero?"

"Er - where exactly are we?"

"We are currently promenading through the charming village of Budleigh Babberton."

"Why?"

"Ah, yes, of course, I haven't told you." Dumbledore smiled, a twinkle in his eye even in the moonlight. "I have lost count of how many times I have had to say this, but we are, once again, one member of staff short. We are here to persuade an old colleague of mine to come out of retirement and return to Hogwarts."

"What do you need me for, sir?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'll find a use for you," he replied offhandedly. "Left here, dear girl."

They continued along another silent, empty street. It was steep and narrow, lined with houses, all their windows dark. The same chill that had lain over Privet Drive for the past two weeks persisted here. Recognizing the signs of Dementors in the area, Hero suppressed a shudder and looked over her shoulders. Her fingers went to the wand in her pocket without conscious thought.

"Professor, why didn't we just apparate directly to your colleague's house?"

"Because it would be tantamount to kicking down the front door. Courtesy dictates that we offer fellow wizards the opportunity to deny us entry. In any case, he has probably set up anti-apparition wards."

"Like the ones at Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore smiled and nodded approvingly. "Very good. You've been listening to Miss Granger, I see. Ah, left again, I think."

The church clock behind them chimed midnight. Hero thought it was a little odd that Dumbledore didn't consider it rude to visit his colleague so late, but she had more important questions.

"I read that Fudge had been sacked..."

"Quite. I'm sure you also took note of his replacement, one Rufus Scrimgeour, former Head of the Auror Office."

"Do... do you think he's any good?" she asked timidly.

"An interesting question. Certainly, he is quite capable. Far more decisive and forceful than Cornelius."

"Yes, but..."
"Yes, I know what you mean. He has fought Dark Wizards for most of his career. He places more value on actions than words. He does not underestimate Lord Voldemort."

That wasn't really what she'd meant either, but she wasn't going to bring up the disagreement reported in the Prophet. Gryffindor or not, she didn't have the nerve. Instead, she changed the subject. "Sir, I . . . I saw about Madam Bones."

"Yes," Dumbledore acknowledged quietly, with a heavy sigh. "A terrible loss. She was an extraordinarily gifted witch. Just up here, I think--" his words cut off as he grunted. He had pointed with his injured hand.

Hero's brow furrowed. "Sir, what happened to your--"

Dumbledore held up his uninjured hand. "There is no time now. I assure you, Hero, it is a thrilling tale, and I wish to do it justice." He smiled reassuringly. She wasn't being scolded, she would get to the story eventually, and she could keep asking questions.

"The ministry sent me a leaflet on security precautions we should take against Death Eaters."

"Mmm, I received one myself. Did you find it useful?"

"Not really."

He chuckled. "I thought you mightn't. You have not asked me, for example, my favorite flavor of jam to ascertain that I am not an imposter."

"Er . . . ."

"For future reference, it is raspberry. Though, were I a Death Eater, I would like to think I would research my own jam preferences beforehand." She could never quite tell when he was being sarcastic.

"Er . . . right. But, it mentioned Inferi. What are they, exactly?"

"They are corpses, dead bodies bewitched to do a dark wizard's bidding. They have not been seen since Lord Voldemort was at the height of his power, before you were born. He killed enough to make an army, I suppose it was reasonable in his mind. This is it, Hero."

They were approaching a neat, stone house nestled amid carefully tended gardens. Hero, preoccupied with disturbing thoughts of Inferi, didn't look very closely. Dumbledore stopped suddenly and Hero walked into him.

The house, at first glance, appeared ransacked. The front door hung off its hinges, the furniture in the sitting room had been destroyed, a layer of feathers from the cushions lay over everything. Blood was spattered on the wall.

Dumbledore suddenly plunged his wand into an overstuffed arm chair. It turned into a large, old, bald man rubbing his belly and glaring balefully at Dumbledore. They set the room to rights, the furniture flying back together, the cushions re-stuffing themselves, the blood siphoned off the wall and back into its phial.

Slughorn glared at Dumbledore resentfully, then, with the air of someone long-suffering, went to put the kettle on. Dumbledore then set about convincing Slughorn to come back to Hogwarts. He didn't budge, too terrified of the Death Eaters. Dumbledore abandoned her for the loo. Slughorn started talking about his years of teaching.
"I was head of Slytherin." He saw the look on Hero's face. He wagged a stubby finger at her. "Oh, now, don't go holding that against me! You'll be Gryffindor like her, I suppose? Yes, it usually runs in families. Ever heard of Sirius Black? You must have done - died a few weeks ago--"

"He was my godfather. He was innocent. I loved him very much," Hero whispered, suddenly fighting tears.

"Oh. I . . . I'm terribly sorry. Well, of course you know he was in Gryffindor. Shame, he was talented. Of course, I got his brother when he came along, but I would have liked the set." He sounded like an enthusiastic collector who'd been outbid at an auction. Apparently lost on memories, he turned idly on the spot so as to evenly heat his posterior.

"Your mother was muggleborn, of course. I couldn't believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pureblood, she was so good."

"One of my best friends is muggleborn, and she's the best in our year," Hero informed him stiffly as she exercised enormous self-control.

"Mmm. Funny how that happens sometimes, isn't it?"

"No," Hero bit out icily.

Slughorn looked down at her in dismay. "You mustn't think I'm prejudiced! No, no, no. Haven't I said your mother was one of my very favorites? Dirk Cresswell was the year after her, very gifted. He's a muggleborn, and now he's head of the Goblin Liaison Office. Gives me excellent inside information on Gringotts." He smiled fondly.

He started to go around the signed photographs, pointing out former students. He went on about how his connections had helped them, and now he was reaping the rewards.

"And all these people know where to find you, to send you stuff?" Hero couldn't quite fathom how the Death Eaters could be so incompetent as to still be looking for him if hampers of sweets, Quidditch tickets, and visitors craving his advice knew where to find him.

The smile slid from his face. "Of course not. I've been out of contact for the past year." He seemed shocked at the words. He looked unsettled for a moment, then shrugged.

"It's only wise to keep my head down. All very well for him to talk, but taking a post at Hogwarts would be tantamount to declaring my allegiance to the Order of the Phoenix! I don't particularly fancy the mortality rate, he must understand--"

"You don't have to join the order to teach at Hogwart," Hero interrupted derisively. She had a hard time sympathizing when she remembered Sirius, crouching in a cave, living on rats. "Most of the teachers aren't in it, and none of them have ever died. Well, except Quirrel, and he deserved it. Anyone mad enough to share their head with Voldemort--"

Slughorn seemed the type unable to bear the name; she wasn't disappointed. Slughorn shuddered and let out a squawk of protest, which Hero ignored.

"I imagine the staff are actually safer than most people. Dumbledore's the only one he ever feared." Slughorn looked thoughtful.

"Well, yes, it's certainly true that He Who Must Not Be Named has never sought a fight with Dumbledore," he admitted grudgingly. "I have hidden rather than join, he cannot think I support his cause. Perhaps I would be safer closer to Albus. After the death of Amelia Bones. If she, such a
Dumbledore returned, a pleasant smile fixed on his face. Slughorn jumped, as if he'd forgotten the other wizard was in the house. "There you are, Albus. You've been gone a while. Upset stomach?"

"No, I was merely reading the muggle magazines. I do love knitting patterns. Hero, I believe we have trespassed on Horace's hospitality quite long enough. We really ought to be going."

Hero jumped to her feet, beyond relieved. Slughorn seemed taken aback.

"You're leaving?"

"I think I know a lost cause when I see one." Slughorn looked like he wanted to object. He fidgeted and twiddled his thumbs as Hero and Dumbledore put their outerwear back on.

"I'm sorry you don't want the job, Horace. You will, of course, always be welcome to visit. It would be lovely to see you again."

"Yes . . . well, as I say . . . very gracious . . . ."

They said their goodbyes, Hero's decidedly unenthusiastic. They reached the front door when there was a shout from behind them.

"Fine. Fine! I'll do it."

"You'll come out of retirement?"

"Yes. I'm sure I'm almost as mad as you are, but yes."

"Splendid! We'll see you the first of September."

"Yes, I daresay you will," Slughorn grunted sullenly.

As they walked through the garden gate, Slughorn's voice floated after them. "I want a raise!"

Dumbledore chuckled. The gate swung shut behind them, and they set off down the hill, into the swirling mist.

"Well done, Hero."

"Me? I didn't do anything," she protested.

"On the contrary, you showed him how much he has to gain by returning to Hogwarts. What did you think of him?"

Hero hesitated. To some, he might be pleasant enough, in his way. She hadn't liked him. He was pompous, vain, and far too surprised that a muggleborn could make a good witch. He and Dumbledore seemed to get on alright, though.

Dumbledore, mercifully, relieved her of the burden of answering. "Horace likes his comfort. He enjoys the company of the famous, the successful, and the powerful. He enjoys feeling as though he influences them. His ambition was never to occupy the throne. He prefers the backseat; more room to stretch out. He used to handpick favorites, talented students. He had an uncanny ability to pick those who would go far. He formed a kind of club, himself at the center, making connections, forging contacts. He always got some benefit from it." Hero suddenly had an image of a great, swollen spider spinning a web, catching juicy flies and drawing them in.
"I tell you this, not to put you against Horace - or rather, Professor Slughorn - but to put you on your guard. He would see you as the jewel of his collection. 'The Girl Who Lived,' the 'Chosen One.'"

Hero shivered at his words. So many terrible things had happened because of that prophecy. And they expected her to... She wondered if she even had a right to be upset. She was dying anyway. Which reminded her, Dr. Warren had given her homework.

Dumbledore had stopped walking, level with the church they had passed earlier. "This will do. If you would grasp my arm, Hero?"

Her second encounter with apparition was better because she knew what to expect. It was still terribly unpleasant, however. When she recovered enough to look around, she found herself and her professor standing in a country lane. Not far off was the silhouette of her second-favorite building in the world. Despite everything, her spirits couldn't help but lift at the sight. Ron was in there, and Ginny, and Mrs. Weasley, the best cook she knew.

"If you don't mind, Hero, I would like a few words before we part. In here, perhaps," he suggested, gesturing to the stone shed where the Weasleys kept their brooms. Confused, but trusting Dumbledore to have a reason, she followed him into the cramped space. Dumbledore lit the tip of his wand and smiled down at her.

"I hope you will forgive me for bringing up such a sore subject, but I am pleased and little proud of how you have comported yourself since the events at the Ministry. I hope I am not overstepping when I tell you that I think Sirius would have been proud as well."

Hero swallowed thickly, her voice seeming to have deserted her. It had been bad enough to hear Uncle Vernon ask if he had died. Almost worse was to hear Slughorn, someone who was actually familiar with Sirius, talk about him, about his death, so casually.

"It was cruel, that you and Sirius had so little time together. It was a brutal ending to what should have been a long and happy relationship." It struck Hero that their relationship would have been cut short by her illness anyway. It didn't help. In most cases, if she was healthy, Dumbledore would have been perfectly correct.

Dumbledore seemed to understand, might even suspect that she had refused most meals and spent most of her time lying on her bed, staring at the wall, or the ceiling, or out the window, except when she was talking to Dudley. Crying on his shoulder. She hadn't seen any Dementors, but their chill had sunk into her bones.

"It hurts, knowing he'll never write to me again. That he won't laugh. That he'll never get to live free, with Lupin, the way he deserved." She blinked furiously as tears burned her eyes. It felt weak to admit that it had been nice to have someone who cared, like a parent, who reassured her, comforted her. She would never feel that again.

"His loss is bound to be devastating," Dumbledore said gently.

She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I know... I know I have lots of work to do. I can't give in to it. I know Sirius wouldn't want me to shut myself away, no matter why I was doing it. Actually, I have to tell you something. Doctor's orders."

"Go ahead, Hero. I wish to hear anything you have to say."

"Not this. He said that, since you and Madam Pomfrey are responsible for me during the school year, you needed to know that I'm sick."
"What is it, dear girl?" he asked, brow wrinkling in concern.

She took a deep breath. "I have multiple brain tumors. Small ones, here and there. A two centimeter one pressing against my optic nerve, and a fast growing, malignant one right about here," she said softly, pointing to her scar.

Dumbledore seemed to grow hunched. Shadows on the plains of his face highlighted every line, every wrinkle. "Oh," he sighed heavily. He looked at her as if seeing into her head. "How much longer do you have?"

"A year, maybe two." His gaze grew unfocused as he thought.

"What symptoms should we watch for?"

"I'll get really bad headaches, blurry vision, sleepiness, seizures, emotional volatility, short temper. If Dr. Warren finds a drug trial that he can get me into, that'll probably have some nasty side effects."

He nodded. "Hero, it has been a rare pleasure knowing you. You will be sorely missed." Hero had to choke back tears. It sounded too much like a eulogy.

She sniffed and looked away. "Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

"Ah. Yes. Yes. I trust you have seen the Daily Prophet in the last two weeks?"

"Yes, sir," she replied apprehensively.

"Then you are aware that there is a flood of information regarding the incidents at the Ministry."

She nodded jerkily. "Now everyone knows. . . ."

"No. They may suspect, but the only two people in the world who know the full contents of that prophecy are here in this broom cupboard." He looked her in the eye, with a gaze that caught and held her until she nodded.

"Good. Now, I don't believe you've told anyone the contents of the prophecy?" She shook her head. Dumbledore nodded sagely. "A wise decision, on the whole. I think you perhaps ought to relax your policy in regards to Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger." Hero stared at him. "Yes, I think they ought to know. It's none of my business, but, as a teacher, I feel the need to advise." He looked at her inquiringly. She nodded for him to go ahead. "I think you should tell them of your diagnosis, as well. You do them a disservice by not confiding something this important to them."

"I didn't want--"

"To worry or frighten them?" Dumbledore finished knowingly, surveying her over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. "Or perhaps to confess that you yourself are worried or frightened? You need your friends Hero, now more than ever. As you so rightly said, Sirius wouldn't want you to shut yourself away."

Hero nodded reluctantly. Dumbledore nodded, satisfied. "On a note related to the prophecy, it is my wish that you take private lessons with me this year."

"Really?" she asked, surprised out of her preoccupied silence.

"Yes. Certain events, certain plans, require me to take a more active role in your education."

"What will you be teaching me, sir?"
"You will find out in due course, Hero." Hero knew to leave it at that. She decided to ask something else that had been bothering her.

"Do I still have to take Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape?"

"No, I think we may move on from that particular venture."

"Good, because they were--" she paused, not for any deficiency in vocabulary.

"I believe 'fiasco' would be appropriate under the circumstances."

Hero grinned. "I suppose that means I won't see much of Professor Snape, then. I won't have extra lessons with him, and I really doubt I got an O on my Potions Owl."

"Don't count your owls before they're delivered," Dumbledore admonished gently. "Now it comes to mind, they should be arriving later today. Now, two things, dear Hero, before we part. First, I must ask that you keep your cloak with you at all times henceforth. Second, I must ask that you not do anything rash while you stay here. The security provided by the ministry for their safety and yours has caused a certain amount of inconvenience. I do not say this to make you feel guilty, as Molly and Arthur's only concern is your safety. However, I must beg you not to do anything to compromise your safety or theirs."

"Of course not, professor."

"Very well, then," Dumbledore murmured as they exited the broom cupboard and looked toward the Burrow. "I see a light on in the kitchen. Let us not deprive Molly Weasley of an opportunity to deplore how thin you are. You would both benefit from a bit of time spent with her mothering you."
Hero and Dumbledore approached the back door of the Burrow, surrounded by the familiar clutter. Chickens clucked sleepily in the background. Dumbledore knocked three times, prompting a flurry of movement behind the kitchen curtains.

"Who's there?" Mrs. Weasley demanded tremulously. "Declare yourself!"

"It is I, Albus Dumbledore, bringing Hero." The door opened at once to reveal Mrs. Weasley in an old green dressing gown.

"Hero, dear! Goodness, I didn't expect you until morning."

"Hero was a wonder. She convinced Slughorn much sooner than I anticipated. Ah, hello, Nymphadora!" At his words, Hero noticed another witch sitting at the table, a mug wrapped in her hands. At the moment, she had a pale, heart-shaped face and mouse brown hair.

"Hello, Professor. Wotcher, Hero," she greeted them bleakly. Hero wondered if she was ill. Her smile seemed forced.

"I'd, ah, I'd better be off," she said, standing suddenly. "Thanks for the tea and the sympathetic ear, Molly."

"Any time, dear," Mrs. Weasley replied, her smile kind and sad.

"Please, don't leave on my account, I cannot stay in any case," Dumbledore said courteously.

"No, no. It's late, I really should be going," she replied, not meeting his eye. "'Night."

Tonks hurried past them, apparating a few steps out the door. Mrs. Weasley looked troubled.

Dumbledore said his goodbyes, bowed to Molly, and left as well. Mrs. Weasley closed the kitchen door and pulled Hero into the light of the oil lamp on the table to inspect her. She tutted.

"You haven't grown an inch since I saw you last, but you're still far too thin for my liking. What do your relatives feed you? I know for a fact you don't eat like a bird, not like. . . . Well, it doesn't matter who. Are you hungry, dear?"

"You know me, Mrs. Weasley," Hero replied, holding in a moan as she realized she was starving. She smiled. "You sit, I'll fix you something."

She sat at the table while Mrs. Weasley tapped her wand against the pot on the stove, causing it to
"When did Hermione get here?" Hero asked as she tickled the cat behind the ears.

"The day before yesterday. Everyone's in bed, of course, we didn't expect you for hours." She levitated the pot, pouring thick onion soup into a bowl and handing it to Hero. She nodded eagerly at the offer of bread, half just to see the knife soar through the air and start slicing the bread. The pot returned to the stove and Mrs. Weasley sat opposite her.

"So, you persuaded Horace Slughorn to come back. He taught Arthur and me. He was at the school for ages, I think he started around the same time Dumbledore did. What did you think of him?" She shrugged and gave a noncommittal jerk of her head, mouth still too full to speak.

"I know what you mean. Oh, he can be charming, but Arthur's never liked him much. He was always good at helping careers along, but he never had much time for Arthur. Well, that just shows his judgement was flawed, doesn't it? Arthur," she told him, with a glowing smile of pride, "has been promoted."

Hero swallowed a large mouthful of very hot soup. "That's wonderful," she gasped.

"You're sweet. He's head of a new department, Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects. He's got ten people reporting to him now!"

Hero sent up a silent prayer of gratitude for a topic so completely, blessedly normal. "What does that mean?"

They chatted about it for a bit, Mrs. Weasley lamenting the fact that her husband missed his toasters and spark plugs.

"Is he still at work?"

"Yes. I expected him back before you arrived, actually." She twisted round to look at the large clock with nine hands, one for each member of the family. It seemed, as it was no longer hanging on the sitting room wall, that Mrs. Weasley had taken to carrying it around the house with her. All nine hands were currently pointing to "mortal peril."

"It's been like that for a while now," Mrs. Weasley sighed. "Ever since You-Know Who came back. I suppose everyone is, not just our family."

Mr. Weasley's hand suddenly switched to "traveling." Mrs. Weasley hopped up with a cry of joy. A moment later, there was a knock at the back door. Molly hurried over. She wrapped one hand around the doorknob and pressed her face against the wood. She called softly, "Arthur, is that you?"

"Yes," came Mr. Weasley's weary voice. "But I would say that even if I were a Death Eater, dear. Ask the question!"

"Oh, honestly. . . ."

"Molly!"

"Fine. What is your dearest ambition?"

"To find out how airplanes stay up." Mrs. Weasley went to open the door, but it stayed fast shut.

"Molly! I have to ask you your question first!"
"Oh, really, this is just silly..."

"What do you like me to call you when we're alone together?"

Even in the dim light, Hero could tell Mrs. Weasley had blushed to the roots of her hair and her ears and all down her neck. Hero was embarrassed just to be in the room. She hastily gulped her soup, clattering the spoon loudly against the bowl.

"Mollywobbles," whispered a mortified Mrs. Weasley into the crack of the door.

"Right, then. Now, you can let me in."

Mrs. Weasley opened the door to reveal her husband, replete with horn-rimmed glasses and a dusty traveling cloak.

"Do we have to do it every time you come home?" Molly asked, still pink. "I mean, a Death Eater could have forced the answer out of you." Hero really doubted Mrs. Weasley would ever tell a Death Eater her answer, no matter how they tortured her.

"I know, dear, but it's Ministry policy. I have to set an example. Mmm, onion soup?" he glanced toward the table, flushing when he saw Hero. She tried not to smirk.

"Ah, Hero. We weren't expecting you until morning. Though, of course, it's lovely to see you." He patted her shoulder and dropped into the chair beside her. Mrs. Weasley set a bowl in front of him.

"Thanks, dear. Rough night. Some idiot's selling Metamorph-Medals. A hundred disguises all for just ten galleons," Mr. Weasley said in disgust.

"What does it really do?"

"Most people just turn an unpleasant shade of orange, but some have sprouted tentacle-like warts. As if St. Mungo's needed more to deal with.

"It sounds a bit like Fred and George. Are you sure--"

"Of course I am! They wouldn't do something like this now, when people need protection!"

"So, is that why you're late?"

"No, we caught wind of a nasty backfiring jinx down at Elephant and Castle. The Magical Law Enforcement Squad got there first, though."

Hero's stifled yawn didn't escape the attention of Mrs. Weasley. "Bed," she ordered. "I've got Fred and George's room all ready for you, you'll have it to yourself. I made sure it's fit for feminine habitation," she added with a wink.

"Where are they?"

"In Diagon. They're sleeping in the flat over their shop, they're so busy. I must say, I know I didn't approve at first, but they seem to have quite a flair for business! Come on, your trunk's waiting for you, dear."

"Night, Mr. Weasley."

"Good night, Hero."
As they left the kitchen, she say Mrs. Weasley glance at the clock again. All hands were once again pointing to "mortal peril."

Mrs. Weasley led her up to Fred and George's room, on the second floor. Mrs. Weasley waved her wand and the room was bathed in a pleasant, golden glow. The vase of wildflowers on the desk in front of the window, while pretty, didn't quite disguise the scent of gunpowder. There were several unmarked, sealed cardboard boxes around her trunk. It looked like a temporary warehouse. Hedwig hooted at her from atop the wardrobe, then took off through the open window.

Hero said good night to Mrs. Weasley and dressed for bed. She climbed into one of the two Mrs. Weasley had made up. She leaned over to blow out the lamp and set her glasses down when she saw a purple and orange Puking Pastille. She smiled, rolled over, and was asleep before she had another thought.

Seconds later, or so it seemed to Hero, she was awakened by the door bursting open with the sound of a cannon. The curtains were shoved apart, flooding the room with morning sunlight. Hero groaned and flung an arm over her eyes. She rolled away from the light.

"We didn't know you were here already!" came a loud, excited voice. Whoever it was was making her headache worse. She felt a weight against her legs. She levered herself up.

"Good morning, Hero," a girl's voice said in a more civilized tone.

Hero rammed her glasses on and the grinning face of Ron Weasley came into focus.

"Alright?"

And wasn't that a loaded question. Instead of giving him an actual answer, she grinned at him. "I'm hungry, but how are you?"

"Not bad. When did you get here, Mum's only just told us!"

"About one o' clock this morning."

"How'd the muggles treat you?"

"They tiptoed around me, didn't talk to me much. I like it better that way anyway. How're you Hermione?" Hero asked, turning to the girl sitting at the foot of her bed.

"I'm fine." Hermione was scrutinizing her as if looking for signs of some illness. She couldn't possibly know . . . but she was probably looking for signs of depression. Hero let the subject lie. She didn't want to talk about Sirius, or her cancer, or any other depressing subject at the moment.

"What time is it? Did I miss breakfast?"

"Mum's bringing you up a tray. Reckons you look underfed," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "So, what's been going on?"

"Not . . . not much. Been stuck in Surrey, haven't I?"

"You've just been with Dumbledore!" Ron insisted.

"It wasn't that exciting. He just brought me along to convince an old teacher to come out of retirement."
"Oh," Ron said, face falling. "We thought--"

"We thought it might be something like that," Hermione interrupted quickly.

"Oh, really?" Hero asked, amused.

"Well, it's a new year, the curse has held true. We need a new Defense Professor. So, what's he like?"

"He looks a bit like a walrus, and he used to be head of Slytherin. Something wrong, Hermione?" she asked pleasantly. The other girl had been staring as thought she expected strange symptoms to manifest at any moment. She pasted on an unconvincing smile.

"Course not! So, did he seem like he'll be a good teacher?"

Hero snorted. "Can't be worse than Umbridge."

Ginny slouched into the room. "I know someone worse than Umbridge. Hi, Hero."

It went back and forth for a while about some woman. It seemed strange to talk about Mrs. Weasley that way. Ron defended her.

"Oh, go one, then," Ginny snapped. "We all know you can't get enough of her!"

Probably not Mrs. Weasley, then. "Who are you talking about?"

Her question was answered when Fleur Delacour flounced into the room. Hero had never known quite what to make of the French witch during the tournament. It didn't matter, because she was in Hero's good books at the moment. She had, after all, come bearing breakfast. Mrs. Weasley was behind her, looking rather cross.

"I was just about to bring it up!"

"It was no trouble," Fleur said, beaming at Hero. "It is owed to my fellow champion. You remember my sister, I'm sure? Gabrielle. She never stops talking about you. She will be delighted to see you again."

"Oh, is she here, too?"

"No, no, I mean next summer, when we-- But you have not told her?" she asked reproachfully, looking askance at Mrs. Weasley.

"We hadn't gotten around to it yet," Mrs. Weasley said, as if the subject left a bad taste in her mouth.

Fleur turned to Hero, her sheet of silver hair whipping in Mrs. Weasley's face. "Bill and I are going to be married!"

"Oh, Congratulations," she said, ignoring the fact that Hermione, Ginny, and Mrs. Weasley were determinedly avoiding each other's eye.

Fleur beamed. "Bill is very busy at the moment, and I am only at Gringotts part time for my English, so he brought me here for a few days to get to know his family better. I was so happy to hear you were coming. There isn't much to do here, as I am not fond of cooking or chickens. But please enjoy your breakfast."

She swept out of the room. Mrs. Weasley sniffed disdainfully.
"Mum hates her," Ginny told her.

"I do not hate her," Mrs. Weasley protested in a cross whisper. "I just think they're rushing in without really getting to know each other."

"They've known each other a year," Ron pointed out despite his dazed expression.

"Which isn't very long! I know lots of people are rushing into things because of the war. It was the same way the last time he was powerful, people eloping left, right, and center."

"Including you and Dad," Ginny reminded her slyly.

"Yes, well, your father and I were made for each other. What was the point in waiting? But Bill and Fleur? What have they got in common? He's a hardworking, down to earth person, whereas she's--"

"A cow," Ginny agreed, nodding. "But he's not really all that down to earth. He's a curse breaker, he likes a bit of adventure, a bit of glamour. I expect that's why he's gone for Phlegm." She said it sagely, as if of course that was the real reason. Hero couldn't hold in a giggle at the nickname. Mrs. Weasley glared.

"Stop calling her that, Ginny." She sighed. "I should probably get on. Eat your eggs while they're warm, Hero, dear."

Looking careworn, she left the room. Ron shook his head experimentally like a dog trying to get water out of its ears. Hero just laughed at him.

"Don't you get used to her if she's staying in the same house?"

"Well, you do . . . until she turns up unexpectedly."

"It's pathetic," Hermione said furiously, crossing her arms.

"You can't want her around forever?" Ginny demanded incredulously.

Ron just shrugged. "Reckon Mum's going to do all she can to put a stop to it."

They started talking about Mrs. Weasley's plan to set Bill up with Tonks instead, and badmouthing Fleur.

"I'd rather have Tonks in the family. At least she's a laugh."

"She hasn't been much of a laugh lately," Rom pointed out. "She's looked more like Moaning Myrtle every time I've seen her."

"That's not fair," Hermione snapped. "You know she hasn't gotten over . . . well," she shot a furtive glance at Hero. "He was her cousin!"

Hero set about ignoring the conversation and shoveling eggs into her mouth. She'd told Dumbledore that she'd decided not to give in to the depression, but she wasn't ready to talk about it.

"She thinks it's her fault he died!"

"How does she work that one out?" Hero asked in spite of herself. If it was anyone's, it was hers.

"She thinks, if she had finished Bellatrix off, she wouldn't have killed Sirius."
"Stupid," Ron snorted.

Hermione shrugged. "It's survivor's guilt. Apparently she's even having trouble with her Metamorphosing. I think the shock and grief must be affecting her powers."

"That can happen?" Hero asked, surprised.

"Yeah, apparently if you're really depressed. . . ."

The door opened and Mrs. Weasley popped her head in. "Ginny, please come down and help me with lunch," she whispered desperately. Hero wondered if it was because she just couldn't stand to be alone with Fleur or because Fleur hated cooking because she was terrible at it.

"I'm talking to this lot!" Ginny said, outraged.

"Now!" Mrs. Weasley ordered, eyes flashing as she withdrew. Ginny grumbled and swanned out of the room in a decent imitation of Fleur.

Hero took advantage of the silence following her exit to eat more breakfast. Hermione started looking through the boxes Fred and George had left, though she occasionally shot glances at Hero. Ron told them about the twins' success. Hero asked after Percy, only to be told he was still out of contact.

"Dumbledore said people find it easier to forgive people for being wrong than being right. He was telling your mum the other day," Hermione put in.

Ron shook his head. "Sounds like the sort of mental thing he would say." Hero saw her opportunity to tell them.

"He's giving me private lessons this year," she mentioned casually. Her friends turned to stare at her.

"You kept that quiet!" Ron said indignantly.

"I only just remembered. He told me last night."

"Blimey," Ron murmured, looking impressed. "I wonder what he's. . . ?"

He trailed off. He and Hermione exchanged loaded glances. Hero laid down her knife and fork, her heart racing. She was going to do it either way, and this wasn't even the worst of the news. She fixed her gaze at her fork and sighed. She'd never be able to tell them if she looked them in the eye.

"I don't know exactly what he's planning to teach me, but I imagine it has to do with the prophecy."

Ron and Hermione froze. Hero continued, still not looking at them, "You know, the one they were trying to steal at the Ministry."

"Nobody knows what it says though, it was smashed," Hermione interjected quickly.

"Yeah, but the Prophet says--" Ron began, only to be shushed by Hermione.

Hero swallowed. "The Prophet's got it right," she said softly, looking up at them through enormous force of will. Hermione looked frightened, Ron amazed. "The glass ball was a copy of the prophecy. He was the one the prophecy was made to, and he told me. It has to be me that kills him. 'Neither can live while the other survives.'"

"Oh, Hero," Hermione said, looking close to tears.
"No, please don't say anything. There's more, and if I don't just get it all out, I don't know if I ever will." She looked to her friends for their agreement. They both nodded, pale and grim.

"I . . . do you remember, when I had the vision during the History of Magic OWLs? How I was thrashing and shaking?" They nodded again. "That wasn't part of the vision. That was a seizure. I had another one at Privet Drive, and they took me in to be looked at, tested. I found out a month ago . . . I have cancer. There are . . . brain tumors. A few of them. One is fast growing. I . . . have a year left, two if I'm lucky."

There was a sob, then Hermione launched herself across the room and hugged Hero. Hero glanced over at Ron. He was chalky white, his freckles standing out in stark relief. He looked a bit like when his wand backfired in second year and he started vomiting slugs. "You're dying?" Hero nodded over Hermione's bushy head.

"I need you two to stay strong. I need you to be there when it gets bad. Because it will. I'm going to be nauseous, forgetful. I might be angry and cruel. I'm going to have really bad headaches as the pressure gets worse. I'll probably have more seizures. And I'm going to be sleepy. I'll need to sleep more and more, and then I just won't wake up. I don't want anyone else to know. We've all got plenty to worry about. I'm sorry to burden you with this. If I had another choice. . . . I know everyone needs to focus on staying alive. I'm . . . I'm dying anyway. But it's not over. I'm dying, but I want to live to see him go first." She realized tears were tracking down her cheeks.

Hermione looked up. "Oh, Hero . . . are you scared?"

"It doesn't really feel real yet. I'm sure I'll be terrified. Well, maybe not. I'm used to dying. I got really close in second year."

"We can't abandon you. Whatever you need, we'll be there. Don't even suggest otherwise!"

A warm feeling that had nothing to do with the sunlight infused Hero's chest. It had felt like it was encased in stone. Gradually, the feeling was falling away. She knew they were more shocked than they were letting on. Just the fact that they were still beside her, comforting her instead of shrinking away as if she were contaminated or dangerous meant more than she could ever tell them.

Hermione started to talk about possible subjects that would come up in Dumbledore's lessons, but Hero wasn't really listening. It was wonderful to just know she wouldn't have to go through it alone.

Hermione sighed. "You know at least one class you're taking next year. I wonder when our OWL results will come?"

"Should be any time now. It's been over a month."

"I think Dumbledore mentioned something last time." Hero wracked her brain. "He might have said they were coming today." Hermione leaped up with a yelp.

"Today?! But why didn't you say anything? Oh my God! I'm going to see if any owls have come."

She clattered downstairs, Ron following in her wake. Hero got dressed, and went down to find Hermione had been roped into dish duty.

"No owls yet," she told Hero miserably, elbow deep in soapy water. Hero figured Mrs. Weasley had done it to distract her. In her nervous state, Hermione seemed to have forgotten the advantages of magic.

"Oh, don't fret, dear, it's only nine o' clock."
"I know I messed up Ancient Runes," she said feverishly. "I made at least one serious mistranslation. And the Defense Practical was just awful. I thought Transfiguration went fine at the time, but looking back--"

"Hermione, shut up, you're not the only one who's nervous," Ron barked. "And when you get you ten Outstanding OWLs. . . ."

"Don't, don't, don't," she wailed, flapping her hands hysterically and covering Ron in soap suds. "I know I failed everything!" It was really quite irritating until you remembered that Hermione's boggart was Professor McGonagall telling her she'd failed all her exams.

"What happens if we fail?" Hero asked curiously.

"We discuss our options with our Head of House, I asked Professor McGonagall last term," Hermione replied tightly.

Hero's stomach squirmed, mostly from nerves. She wished she'd eaten less for breakfast. Fleur started to talk about the system at Beauxbatons only to be interrupted by Hermione's scream as she pointed out the window. Three black specks were approaching.

"Definitely owls," Ron noted hoarsely.

"And there are definitely three of them," Hero added. Hermione bowed her head, mumbling what sounded like prayers. She gripped Hero and Ron's hands in her own hurriedly dried ones.

The tree handsome tawny owls were flying toward the kitchen window, each carrying a large square envelope.

"Oh, no!" Hermione moaned. Mrs. Weasley opened the window; the three owls landed on the table in a neat line and offered their post. The three untied their letters with shaking fingers. Hermione was making her whole owl tremble.

No one in the kitchen spoke. Hero finally detached the envelope and pulled out her results.

It listed the grading abbreviations, then her results.

Hero Juniper Potter has achieved:

Astronomy  A
Care of Magical Creatures  E
Charms  E
Defense Against the Dark Arts  O
Divination  P
Herbology  E
History of Magic  D
Potions  E
Transfiguration  E

Hero read through it several times, her breathing easing. Divination was a wash, and after her seizure and false vision in History of Magic, she was surprised she scored as high as Dreadful. Everything else was quite good. She was willing to bet no one bar Hermione had done very well at the Astronomy practical, with the spectacle going on in the grounds.

Mrs. Weasley was looking over Ron's, who looked delighted.
"Seven OWLs, and that's more than Fred and George got together."

Ron traded with Hero. She glanced down the grades. There were no Outstandings there. . . .

"Knew you’d be top in defense," Ron said, grinning at her.

She glanced over at Hermione, who still hadn't turned around. "How'd you do?"

"I - not bad," Hermione replied in a small voice.

Ron scoffed and whipped her results out of her hands. "Yep, nine Outstandings and one Exceeds Expectations in Defense." He looked down at her, half-amused, half-exasperated. "You're actually disappointed, aren't you?" Hermione shook her head, and Hero smiled fondly.

"We're NEWT students now," Ron crowed.

It brought Hero up short. She would be studying for tests she would probably never take. She supposed it might still be useful to the war effort, but . . . It gave her a strange feeling in her chest to be caught up in planning for something she wouldn't live to see. It was an ache, wistful and jealous. She was jealous of her best friends, of the world, for all the days she would never see. She hit her lip and blinked away tears. She might get to see Bill's wedding. Maybe.
Lady's Tea and Shopping

Hero had told Mrs. Weasley she had a healer's appointment in London. She had smiled kindly and told her that of course they would take her. Hero had felt uncomfortable calling her oncologist a healer. She lamented, she knew she lamented, the fact that he could not save or cure her. There was no healing her. But she knew the opinion of doctors held within the wizarding world.

Dr. Warren's office was in an elegant practice on Harley Street. Wealthy clients with various ailments graced the waiting room. Aunt Petunia had insisted on a doctor with offices on the prestigious street for the sake of appearances. Hero liked Dr. Warren, so she didn't see the point in complaining.

Mrs. Weasley was dressed a bit more sedately than usual, in a dark green cotton dress and a grey cardigan. She smiled kindly at Hero, told her she'd just stay in the waiting room, and took out her knitting. Hero grimaced back and waited for them to call her name.

A quarter of an hour later, she was sitting in Dr. Warren's office. "How have things been lately, Hero?"

"They're . . . alright. I'm staying with my friend's family. His mother brought me. She's . . . she's lovely."

"Does she know?" he asked, giving her a stern look.

"No. I've let my headmaster know, and I told my friends. But I'm not ready to tell anyone else. Not yet."

"I can't make you tell anyone. I think you're going to need people to support you, though. Think about it, alright?" She nodded.

"I did find a trial out of the U.S. It's a drug called temozolomide, it's shown promise in preliminary trials in treating glioblastomas. Brain tumors are rare in teenagers, so they have room for you. They're testing it orally at the moment. In recent studies, in some patients, it has slowed down tumor growth, sometimes even shrinking them. I have the first month's doses, and detailed instructions. Do you want to do this?"

She bit her lip, weighing the pros and cons. Her chin came up defiantly. "Yes."

Dr. Warren smiled briefly. "I can't just ship this to your local pharmacy. You need to come back for your refill. And, for the purposes of the trial, since I won't be there to monitor you, I need you to keep a journal. The primary purpose is to document drug reactions, side affects. But, if you find it useful to document your thoughts and feelings through your illness, feel free. No one will judge."

"Anything else?"

They discussed the documented side effects, and the dangers inherent. He gave her the mess, they said goodbye, Hero and Mrs. Weasley left, and she treated the woman who had been a mother to her to lunch.

*
The next week passed as the other two had. Hero, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny played two-a-side Quidditch, and Hero had third helpings of whatever Mrs. Weasley put in front of her. Hermione squeezed a telescope left in Fred and George's room and it punched her. Mrs. Weasley could do nothing to get rid of the bruise. Amid the quiet happiness and controlled chaos of the holidays came news of disappearances, odd accidents, and deaths in the Daily Prophet. Mr. Weasley brought home news before it reached the papers.

Hero's sixteenth birthday celebration was marred by gristly tidings brought by Remus Lupin. He looked a mess, his eyes tired, his face lines, his hair silvering, his clothes more ragged than ever. Hero wanted to cry just looking at him. His loss of Sirius was the real tragedy, not hers. He brought news of more Dementor attacks and Igor Karkaroff, his body found in a shack up north.

Mrs. Weasley tried to change the subject, only for Bill to bring up Florean Fortescue. Hero remembered that he always gave her free ice creams, especially the summer before her third year, when she ran away and ended up staying at the Leaky Cauldron, studying outside Florean's shop. He'd been dragged off by Death Eaters. Olivander was gone, too, whether taken, defected, or in hiding, no one knew.

The day after, their book lists arrived from the Hogwarts owls. With Hero's came a surprise: Quidditch captain's badge. Hero grinned, really grinned, for the first time since she'd been told she was going to die. Dr. Warren had told her that physical activity could help her with the nausea, the tiredness, and a whole host of other issues. It was one thing that didn't matter to the war effort. It could make her disease more manageable, and she actually had time to enjoy it.

Mrs. Weasley decided there was no putting off a trip to Diagon Alley anymore. Saturday was the soonest Mr. Weasley could get off work, and she refused to go into the crush without him.

Ron laughed at her paranoia. He stopped when she reminded him it wasn't paranoia when there was a very real and present danger. He stopped talking whatsoever when she threatened to leave him behind altogether, and not just from the trip to London, but attending Hogwarts.

"Blimey, you can't even make a joke around here without. . . ." But he wisely kept his mouth shut.

Bill passed Hero a bag of gold. "It's taking about five hours for the public to get their gold at the moment, the goblins have tightened security so much. Two days ago, Arkie Philpott had a Probity Probe stuck up his. . . . Well, trust me, this way's much easier." Hero thanked him, and Fleur cooed over him. Ginny mimed vomiting into her cereal, and Hero choked on her cornflakes trying not to laugh.

It was an overcast, murky day. They were driven in one of the special Ministry cars, which Hero had ridden in once before.

"It's good Dad can get us these again," Ron murmured as the four teenagers lounged on the roomy back seat.

"Don't get used to it, it's only because of Harry," Mr. Weasley warned. He and Mrs. Weasley were in the passenger seat, which was now akin to a love seat. "He's been given top-grade security status. We'll be joined up with more security at the Leaky."

Hero did not much relish the idea of a battalion of Aurors trailing after her as she did her shopping. She remembered Dumbledore asking that she go along with the security, that she not take stupid risks. Even though she had her cloak.

The driver dropped them off at Charing Cross Road. Mrs. Weasley told him they would probably be
a few hours.

"Ah, good, he's here." Hero peered into the inn, seeing not a small army of Aurors but one very familiar half-giant in a long, beaver-skin coat. He beamed at Hero, oblivious to the startled stares of passing muggles.

"Hero!" he boomed, sweeping her up in a bone crushing hug. Hero laughed breathlessly.

"We didn't realize security meant you!" she said once he set her down, grinning even as she massaged her ribs.

He winked at her. "Like old times, innit?"

Hero glanced around. The Leaky Cauldron was, for the first time in her memory, completely empty. Tom, the landlord, looked miserable as he stood behind the counter, wiping glasses. Hero could imagine that few people were in the mood for a conversation and a pint in the present climate.

They went through the back and into the alley. They stopped and stared at how much it had changed. Where before there was light and sound and color, there were now ministry posters plastered over the windows. Some were along the same lines as the leaflet sent to Harry. Others were wanted posters for Death Eaters. Bellatrix Lestrange was sneering from the nearest apothecary. Several storefronts were boarded up. Along the street, several shabby looking stalls had sprung up. The nearest one advertised amulets, purported to be effective against werewolves, Dementors, and Inferi. The seedy looking wizard hawking the merchandise offered one to Ginny.

"If I was on duty. . . ." Mr. Weasley grumbled, glaring at the seller.

"Yes, well, don't go arresting people now, dear, we're in a hurry," his wife said as she nervously consulted a list.

Mrs. Weasley wanted everyone to troop down to Madam Malkin's. Mr. Weasley suggested that Hero, Ron, and Hermione could go down with Hagrid while Ginny and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley popped into Flourish and Blotts to get the school books. Though she hated the idea of splitting up, she reluctantly agreed.

Hero noticed that many people had the same harried, anxious look as Mrs. Weasley. No one stopped to talk anymore. Shoppers stayed together in their own tightly knit groups, moving intently about their business. No one seemed to be shopping alone.

The three teens entered Madam Malkin's while Hagrid stood outside. At first glance, it appeared empty. A moment later, however, they heard a familiar voice coming from a rack of dress robes.

". . . Not a child, in case you haven't noticed, Mother. I am perfectly capable of doing my shopping alone."

Madam Malkin started in, telling him it wasn't that he was a child, no one was shopping alone.

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, woman!"

Malloy walked out and inspected the robes in the mirror. He glanced at Hermione and informed his mother that a mudblood had just walked in. Hero and Ron drew their wands, Madam Malkin
protesting every bit of the situation.

"Don't, really, don't. It's not worth it," Hermione pleaded.

"As if you would dare do magic outside of school," he sneered. "Who blacked your eye, Granger? I want to send them flowers."

"Madam, please!" Madam Malkin cried, turning to Narcissa.

"Put those away," she ordered coldly. "If you attack my son again, I assure you, it is the last thing you will ever do."

Hero found that, if she had ever had a sense of self-preservation, it had quite vanished. She wondered if this was what Dumbledore had meant by "reckless." She still had to crane her neck to look Narcissa Black Malfoy in the eye.

"Really?" She asked, taking a step forward. "Going to get a few Death Eater pals to do us in?"

Madal Malkin let out another horrified sound. She looked like she was about to faint.

"Perhaps being Dumbledore's favorite has given you a false sense of security, Miss Potter. But he won't always be there."

Hero looked around the shop mockingly. "Would you look at that? He's not here! So why not have a go? Maybe they can find you a double cell in Azkaban with your loser husband!"

Malfoy made a move toward her, but his mother's white fingers in his shoulder held him back.

"It's alright, Draco. You know better than to attack females. Besides, I'm sure she'll be reunited with her darling godfather before I am reunited with Lucius." Ice swept through Hero's veins. She raised her wand higher.

"Hero, no! You mustn't, you'll be in such trouble!"

Madam Malkin dithered, then appeared to decide to ignore events as if doing so would make them go away. She bent toward Malfoy, still glaring daggers at Hero. "I think this sleeve could come up a little more, dear, let me just--"

"Ouch!" he cried, slapping her hand away. "Watch where you're putting your pins, woman! Mother, I don't think I want these anymore." He pulled the robes off and dropped them at Madam Malkin's feet.

"You're right, Draco," Narcissa said with a contemptuous glance at Hermione. "Now I know the kind of scum that shops here . . . I think we'll do better at Twilfitt and Tatting's."

"Well, really," exclaimed Madam Malkin as she spelled the dust off the discarded set of robes. She was quite distracted while she did their fittings, trying to sell Hermione wizard's dress robes instead of witch's. When she finally bowed them out of her shop, it was with an air of someone glad to see the back of them.

Hagrid assured them that the Malfoys wouldn't dare make trouble in the middle of Diagon Alley. Hero, Ron, and Hermione exchanged glances. Before they could correct their friend, Ginny and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley appeared, laden with books.

They stopped by the apothecary, where Hero and Ron, who weren't taking Potions, didn't buy
anything, and Eeylops Owl Emporium. Their next destination was Fred and George's shop, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"We haven't much time," Mrs. Weasley warned them. "Just a quick look around, then back to the car. It can't be much further now. Let's see, ninety-two . . . ninety-four . . ."

"Whoa," Ron said, stopping in his tracks.

Against the dim, dull shopfronts that now occupied much of the alley, Fred and George's shop was like a fireworks display. Casual passersby kept glancing back at it over their shoulders. Some people had even come to a halt, transfixed. The left-hand window displayed their wares in eye-watering colors. The right-hand window had an enormous poster, the same purple as the Ministry ones, but emblazoned with yellow letters:

WHY ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT YOU-KNOW-WHO? YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING ABOUT U-NO-POO - THE CONSTIPATION SENSATION THAT'S GRIPPING THE NATION!

Hero started to laugh. She heard a weak moan from beside him. She looked around to see Mrs. Weasley staring up at the poster, mouthing the name "U-No-Poo."

"They'll be murdered in their beds!" she whispered. Hero and Ron begged to differ.

The shop was packed to the rafters. They couldn't even get near the shelves. There were Skiving Snackboxes, trick wands, enchanted quills, even a reusable hangman game that a gaggle of ten year-olds were watching intently.

"Patented Daydream Charms?" Hermione murmured curiously, having managed to squeeze through to a large display on the counter. She was reading the information on the back of the box intently. Also on the back of the box was a highly colored picture of a handsome youth and a swooning girl standing atop a pirate ship.

Hermione read the description aloud. She looked up at Hero. "You know, this is really extraordinary magic!"

"For that, Hermione, you can have one for free." A beaming Fred stood behind them in magenta robes that clashed magnificently with his flaming hair.

"Hero, dear, how are you?" he asked, pulling her into a hug. "Hermione, what happened to your eye?"

"Your punching telescope," she replied resentfully.

"Oh, blimey, I forgot about those! Here--" he pulled a tub out of his pocket and handed it to her. She unscrewed it gingerly to reveal a thick, yellow paste.

"Just dab it on, the bruise'll be gone within an hour. We had to find a decent bruise remover," he explained. "We're testing most of our products on ourselves. It's perfectly safe," he added, seeing she was still looking at it like it might bite her.

"Come on, Hero, I'll give you the grand tour."

He was practically bouncing with enthusiasm as he showed her muggle magic tricks - "for freaks like Dad, you know, who love muggle stuff." They met up with George as he caught a kid trying to nick a few edible dark marks.
George pushed back a curtain behind the muggle magic tricks to reveal a less crowded room with yet more products. The packaging on these was more subdued

"We figured Shield Hats would be a bit of a laugh. You know, challenge your mate to jinx you while you're wearing it and watch his face when it just slides off. But apparently, a lot of people can't do a decent Shield Charm, even at the Ministry. Course, they didn't have you teaching them."

Hero bowed. "Anyway, the Ministry ordered 500 of them and we're still getting massive orders," George said.

"We've expanded to cloaks, gloves . . ." Fred added. "Not much use against the Unforgiveables, but for moderate hexes and curses, they work quite well."

"And then it turned out Defense was a great money spinner!" George continued enthusiastically. He pulled a box off the shelf. "This is cool. Instant darkness powder, imported from Peru. Handy if you want to make a quick escape."

"Our decoy detonators are just walking off the shelves," Fred told her, waggling his eyebrows as he nodded to a group of strange, horn-like objects that were, indeed, attempting to scurry off the shelves. "You drop it, and it runs off to make a nice, loud noise out of sight. Good way to create a diversion." Fred threw her a few as a blonde witch in magenta staff robes poked her head around the curtain.

"There's a customer looking for a joke cauldron, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley." Hero couldn't quite get over how odd it was to head Fred and George addressed that way, but they seemed to take it in stride. Hero smiled wistfully; they were growing up.

"Right you are, Verity. Help yourself to anything you like, Hero. No charge."

Hero had already pulled out her money bag. "I can't do that!"

"You gave us our start-up capital. You're our silent partner. Take what you like and just make sure to tell people where you got it."

George went off to help the customer and Fred led Hero back to the Daydream Charms. Hermione and Ginny were still poring over them.

"What if I don't want to be a damsel in distress on a pirate ship? What if I don't want that fellow rescuing me?"

Fred smiled slyly back at her. "Magic reacts to intent. The charm just . . . facilitates the intent. Happy daydreaming."

He continued on to his sister and Hermione, Hero following. "Haven't you found our WonderWitch products yet? Follow me, ladies."

Near the window was a garish (at least in Hero's opinion) pink product display. Hero, Hermione, and Ginny hung back, looking wary.

"Best range of love potions you'll find on the market," Fred announced proudly.

"Do they work?" Ginny asked skeptically.

"Oh, ye of little faith. Twenty-four hours at a time, depending on the weight of the boy in question--"
"And the attractiveness of the girl," George finished, reappearing suddenly next to his brother. "But we're not selling them to our sister," he said, suddenly stern. "Especially not when she's already got five boys on the go from what we've heard--"

Ginny snorted and returned coolly, "whatever Ron's said is a big, fat lie. Now, what's this?" She reached for a small, pink pot.

"Guaranteed ten second pimple vanisher. Don't change the subject. Are you or are you not currently going out with a boy named Dean Thomas?"

"Yes, and the last time I checked, he was one boy, not five. Besides, I was just looking. What are those?" She pointed to a number of small, round balls of puff in shades of pink and purple, all rolling around the bottom of a cage and emitting high-pitched shrieks. Hero wrinkled her nose. Where was the head?

"Pygmy Puffs. Miniature Puffskeins, can't breed them fast enough. What about Michael Corner, then?"

"Dumped him, he was a sore loser," she shrugged. She stuck a finger through the bars and giggled as the Pygmy Puffs crowded round it. "They're so cute!"

"They're fairly cuddly, yes," Fred conceded. "But don't you think you're going through boyfriends a bit fast?"

Ginny turned around, hands on her hips and a glare so much like her mother's, Hero was surprised Fred didn't recoil. "None of your business. And you--" she turned her glare on Ron, who had just reappeared by George's elbow, arms laden with merchandise, "not another word about my private life! Not to these two, not to anyone!"

Fred glanced over at Ron, eyeing the many boxes in his arms. "Three galleons, nine sickles, and a knut. Cough up."

"I'm your brother!"

"And it's our stuff you're nicking. And Hero's, I suppose. Three galleons, nine sickles. I'll be nice and knock of the knut."

"But I haven't got three galleons, nine sickles!"

"Best put it back, then. And mind it gets to the right shelves!"

Ron turned around, grumbling. He made a rude hand gesture in Fred's direction, which was unfortunately witnessed by Mrs. Weasley. She threatened to jinx his fingers together if she saw him do it again.

Ginny got Mrs. Weasley cooing over the Pygmy Puffs, giving Hero, Ron, and Hermione a clear view out the window. Draco Malfoy was hurrying down the street, alone. As he passed Wheezes, he threw a glance over his shoulder.

"Looks like he's given his mummy the slip," Ron whispered.

"Mmm. I wonder why," Hermione murmured.

From all she knew of Narcissa Malfoy, she was sure the woman wouldn't have let her baby boy out of her sight. He would have had to make a concentrated effort to get away from her. Whatever his
reason was, it probably meant nothing good for anyone else. Even so, Hero was tempted for a moment to just let him go. She was enjoying herself, why not just let Malfoy hare off into trouble? But she knew, if her suspicions were correct, that it was probably worse than just a spot of trouble. And she should live while there was still breath in her body. At the moment, that meant going out and following Malfoy.

She glanced around. Everyone was busy with something or other. Hagrid was outside, facing the street. She pulled her Cloak out of her purse.

"Get under, quick," she whispered. Ron did; Hermione pursed her lips, then conceded.

Nobody saw them vanish, preoccupied with the wonders in the shop. They squeezed out he door as quickly as they could, but by the time they got to the street, Malfoy had disappeared as successfully as they had.

They went in the same direction he had and caught him sliding into Knockturn Alley and out of sight. They hurried after him, praying no one noticed their feet under the flapping cloak.

Knockturn Alley, devoted to the Dark Arts as far as Hero had ever been able to tell, was deserted. They peered in the windows, but saw no one, certainly not the blonde teenager they were tailing. Hero supposed it was just a bit stupid to be seen buying dark artifacts in the current climate.

They had just drawn level with Borgin and Burkes when Hermione pinched Hero's arm. Hero turned to tell her off when she saw Hermione pointing urgently inside the shop. Standing amid cases of skulls and dusty bottles was Draco Malfoy, his back to them. He was partially obscured by the black cabinet Hero had once hidden in to avoid Malfoy and his father. Funny how things change.

Malfoy was gesturing wildly, likely speaking animatedly. Mr. Borgin stood facing them, his expression intermingled resentment and fear. Ron passed them extendable ears from one of the boxes he was still clutching.

"Oh, I hope the door isn't Imperturbable," Hermione fretted.

"No," Ron said gleefully. "Listen!"

"...you know how to fix it?"

"Possibly," Borgin replied reluctantly. "I would, of course, have to see it. Why don't you bring it into the shop?"

"I can't. It can't be moved. Just tell me what I need to do."

"I-I couldn't possibly guarantee... without seeing it, it will be difficult, perhaps impossible!"

Malfoy moved closer to Borgin and was blocked from view by the cabinet. "Perhaps this will make you more confident." They shuffled sideways, trying to keep him in sight, but all they saw was the terrified expression on Borgin's face.

Malfoy threatened Borgin with Greyback and told him to "keep that one safe."

"Perhaps you'd like to take it with you now?"

"Of course not, idiot. How do you think I'd look carrying that down the street? Just don't sell it."

"Of course not... sir." Hero saw him bow as he had to Malfoy's father.
Malfoy warned him not to breathe a word to anyone, including his mother, and stalked out of the shop looking quite satisfied. He passed so close to the three of them they felt the Cloak flutter again. They glanced back at Borgin. His unctuous smile had wilted into a worried frown.

Hero and Ron started wondering about what had just happened while Hermione ducked out from under the cloak, checked her hair in the reflection from the window, and swanned into the shop.

She greeted Borgin brightly and pointed to a necklace on a faded velvet display.

"This is quite pretty."

"Got fifteen hundred galleons?" Borgin asked coldly.

"No, ah, I haven't got quite that much," Hermione replied, laughing nervously. Hero swore under her breath. Whatever her friend was doing, she wasn't selling it well. "And how about this lovely . . . erm . . . skull?"

"Sixteen galleons."

"Not being . . . kept for someone, then?" Borgin squinted at her. Hero got the nasty feeling he knew what Hermione was up to. Hermione, it seemed, felt the same thing. She threw caution to the winds.

"The boy who was just in, Draco Malfoy, is a friend of mine. I was going to get him a birthday present, but if he's already reserved something. . . ."

It was the worst story Hero had ever heard. Borgin apparently agreed. Smart and talented she might be, but Hermione wasn't a very creative or convincing liar. There wasn't a drop of Slytherin to her.

"Out," Borgin bellowed, stepping toward Hermione and pointing to the door. "Get out!"

Hermione didn't need to be told twice. She fled the shop, Borgin at her heels. He slammed he door behind her and flipped the sign to closed.

"Worth a try, but . . . you were a tad obvious," Ron said apologetically as he threw the Cloak over her.

"You can do it next time, O Master of Mystery!" she snapped back.

They bickered all the way back to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, only shutting up when they had to duck around an anxious Mrs. Weasley and Hagrid. Clearly, they had been missed. They took the Cloak off and made their way back to Mrs. Weasley. They insisted they'd been in the back room all along, that she just hadn't looked properly.
Paltry Refreshments Amidst a Den of Wolves

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry it's a week and a day late. I've been very busy and away from my computer a lot, but I should have done it yesterday. And can you believe we lost Alan Rickman to pancreatic cancer? Remember, there's all sorts of ways to help people fighting cancer. Wigs, hats, blankets, volunteer time, monetary and bone marrow donations. We can beat it. I will also be posting two chapters today. Yay!

Temozolomide was a mixed bag. On the one hand, more time. On the other hand, the list of side effects was . . . extensive. She was really sick of wanting to be sick. The headaches and the tiredness didn't change, really. She was waiting for another seizure. At least she wasn't losing her hair. It had all grown back overnight when Aunt Petunia shaved it all off except for her fringe. It was impossible to tame. Maybe it really was magic.

To take her mind off her physical ill health, she focused - Hermione would say obsessed - over Malfoy. Ron and Hermione got bored of the subject after a few days. They didn't really listen to her as she pressed her points. Hermione had her nose in her copy of Advanced Rune Translation. Ron was looking after his broomstick. When Hero suggested that Malfoy was doing . . . whatever he was doing . . . for revenge for his father's imprisonment, Ron finally looked up.

"What can he do about it?"

Hero groaned in frustration. "I don't know! But he's obviously up to something, and his father's a Death Eater--" She broke off, staring out the window behind Hermione. A startling thought had just occurred to her.

"Hero?" Hermione asked anxiously? "What's wrong?"

"Is your headache getting bad again?" Ron asked in concern.

"He's a Death Eater," Harry said slowly. "He's replaced his father as a Death Eater."

There was a moment of silence, then Ron erupted into peals of laughter. "Malfoy, a Death Eater? He's sixteen! You really think You-Know-Who would let him join?"

"It, it seems very unlikely, Hero," Hermione agreed with Ron, her tone meant to repress Hero's outlandish ideas. "What makes you think so?"

"In Madam Malkin's, he freaked out when she went to touch his left arm. He showed something to Borgin, something that terrified him. He's been branded with the dark mark."

"I just really don't think You-Know-Who would let him join," Hermione insisted, with the air of someone talking a person off a ledge

"Maybe . . . maybe he didn't let him. Maybe he forced him." Ron and Hermione exchanged glances, as if this was just one step farther than they could allow.

"No, listen! His dad's in prison. Voldemort's probably not too happy about that. His Dad failed.
Maybe this is the punishment.

"Hero," Hermione said gently, "I'm not sure you're thinking rationally. Maybe just . . . take some time to cool down. Work on something else. Think about something else." Anything else. Hero heard it, even if Hermione hadn't verbalized it.

"You mean like the fact that I'm dying?" Hero snapped. Hermione flinched. Hero felt a twinge of guilt, but she plowed on. "Because that's my other option. Which would you prefer? You know what . . ." she snatched up a pile of dirty robes and left the room.

She bumped into Ginny on the stairs, who was carrying a basket of freshly laundered clothes to her room.

"I wouldn't linger in the kitchen at the moment," she warned. "There's a lot of Phlegm around."

Hero gave her a small smile. "I'll be careful not to slip in it.

Sure enough, when she got to the kitchen, Fleur and Mrs. Weasley were knee-deep in wedding planning. Or rather, Fleur was dictating and Mrs. Weasley was her unwilling sounding board. When Hero came in, Mrs. Weasley looked like a shipwrecked sailor who'd just spotted land.

"Hero, dear, there are a few things I need to discuss with you. About the security arrangements for the journey to Hogwarts tomorrow?" she said, cutting Fleur off mid-sentence. "We'll be taking the cars again, and there will be Aurors waiting for us at the station--" everything Hero had dreaded for the trip to Diagon

"Is Tonks going to be there?" Hero asked hopefully as she handed over her robes.

"No, I think Arthur said she was being stationed somewhere else.

Fleur declared that Tonks had let herself go while checking her reflection in the back of a teaspoon. Mrs. Weasley interrupted her by telling Hero that she wanted the trunks ready that night to avoid the morning scramble.

Their departure the following morning was, in fact, smoother than usual. They were waiting out front, trunks packed when the cars arrived. The owls and Ginny's new purple Pygmy Puff, Arnold, were in their cages. Crookshanks was safely enclosed in his traveling basket. Fleur waved and blew kisses as they got in the car. Ron developed a dreamy expression. Ginny just rolled her eyes.

They were met, not by Hagrid, but by two grim faced, bearded Aurors in muggle suits. They flanked the party and marched them into the station without speaking.

As they approached the barrier, Hero heard someone calling her name. She turned to look and saw Dudley coming toward her. The Aurors stepped between them, shooting Dudley death glares. Hero patted them on the arms.

"No, no, he's my cousin," she explained, pushing past them. "Just wait a second, all right?"

They clearly didn't like it, but they stood back and let Dudley approach. He beamed at her

"Dud, how'd you get here? Where are your parents?"

"Back home in Little Whinging. I convinced them I wanted to come down and see London with one of my ickle friends before we have to go back to Smeltings."
"Which friend?"

"Piers came with me. Apart from seeing you off, this is a date. He's waiting in the café down the street."

"I still can't believe your parents haven't realized you two are together. You've been dating for years!"

"Yeah, well, they see what they want to see. You know that. So. How are you?"

"I'm well enough, all things considered. Tired, headache, and sick to my stomach a bit, but I expect that, anymore. How are you?"

"Good, good. Well, mostly. Dad has this smug expression most of the time, like he's seeing justice. Mum's been a bit weepy. She cries a bit when she looks at the garden. The rest of the time, she seems like she's just trying to ignore your existence."

"How's Piers?"

"He's wonderful." She wondered what it would be like to have whatever it was that put that soft, tender, adoring look in his eyes.

"So, are you really as fascinated with magic as you seemed the night I left?"

"Course. I mean, I got a pig tale when I was eleven. I now realize I completely deserved it. Seeing your headmaster do all that stuff..." He shook his head in wonder. "It was wicked.

"So... do you want to see the platform?"

Dudley stared at her for a moment. "You... you mean it?"

"Sure. You left before I figured out how to get on the first time. Haven't you been just a little bit curious?" Dudley's expression turned hungry. He met her eyes dead on, totally serious.

"I would love to see it."

She took him by the elbow and led him to the barrier between platforms nine and ten. He didn't look wholly convinced. She leaned over and whispered, "Close your eyes." She ignored the Aurors on either side of them and guided her cousin through the concealed archway. Once they were through, she nudged him.

He opened his eyes to the bustling platform for the Hogwarts Express. His jaw dropped. His head whipped from side to side as he tried to look at everything at once. She led him over to the Weasleys.

"So this is your cousin?" Hermione asked, pursing her lips as she looked him over.

"Yes, this is Dudley. He's improved."

Ron was glaring at him fiercely. "Good." Dudley had the grace to flush and duck his head in shame. Hero patted his arm. She'd forgiven him.

"He's here in London with his boyfriend. My aunt and uncle have no idea."

Hermione seemed to soften. She smiled at Dudley tentatively. Ron assessed him for a moment, then offered his hand to shake. Dudley pumped it, grinning. Hero laughed when she saw Ron flex his
hand after he got it back.

"He's a boxing champion," she explained. Ron nodded gratefully.

The warning whistle blew. Hero looked at Dudley uncertainly. He lifted her off her feet in a bear hug. "Same orders as before," he whispered. She blinked back tears. She remembered their goodbye in the front hall back at Privet Drive. And then he was gone, and people were boarding the train.

She went to follow Ron and Hermione, but a Hermione explained apologetically that they had to go to the prefects' compartment first.

Mrs. Weasley was saying goodbye even as she ushered Ron, Hermione, and Ginny onto the train. Hero thought about telling Mr. Weasley her suspicions, but dismissed the idea. Better to tell him in a letter, so he couldn't interrupt. She didn't have much time, anyway.

Then Mrs. Weasley was calling her onto the train. She and Mr. Weasley helped her get her trunk onto the train. "Now, dear, you're coming home to us for Christmas, it's all fixed with Dumbledore." She continued to speak to Hero through the window even as the train began to pull out of the station. "Look after yourself! Be good! Stay safe!" she ordered, finally jogging to keep up. Hero waved until the train turned a corner and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were lost to view. She turned around, looking for a friend. Hermione and Ron had taken themselves off to the prefects' carriage, but Hero spotted Ginny a little ways down the corridor, chatting to some friends. Hero made her way over, dragging her trunk behind her.

People stared shamelessly as she passed. Some even pressed their faces against the windows of the compartments. She'd expected it to a certain extent since the publication of the article, but her skin still prickled unpleasantly under so many stares.

"Fancy trying to find a compartment?" she asked Ginny, pulling her gaze away from her audience.

Ginny smiled brightly at her. "Sorry, Hero, I said I'd meet Dean. I'll see you later!"

Hero felt a pang as she walked away. They'd spent so much time together over the summer, she'd forgotten Ginny didn't spend time with them during school. She blinked as she was suddenly surrounded by an adoring crowd.

"Hi, Hero!" came a familiar voice behind her.

"Neville," Hero said with great relief, turning to the round-faced boy struggling toward her.

"Hello, Hero," said the misty-eyed blonde beside him.

"Hi, Luna, how are you?"

"Very well, thank you," she replied, clutching a magazine to her chest. It advertised a free pair of Spectrespecs inside.

"Quibbler still going strong, then?" She had a certain fondness for the magazine; they were the only ones who had been willing to print the truth about her last year.

"Oh, yes, circulation's well up."

They waded through the hordes of mesmerized students to find an empty compartment. Hero hurried inside gratefully.
"They're even staring at us!" Neville said, indicating himself and Luna. "Because we're with you!"

"Nah, they're staring because you were at the Ministry, too," Hero corrected as she and Neville hoisted her trunk into the luggage rack. "Our little adventure was all over the papers, you must have seen it."

"Yeah, I thought Gran would be upset about the publicity, but she was really pleased. Said I'm finally starting to live up to my parents. She bought me a new wand, look!" He pulled it out and showed it to them. "Cherry and unicorn. We think it might be one of the last Ollivander ever sold. He vanished the next day. Oi, Trevor!"

He ducked under the seat to look for his toad, and Hero and Luna talked a bit about the DA. After a bit, a group of girls, led by a boy showed up at their compartment. The boy, who had dark eyes, dark curls, and a determined chin, stepped forward.

"Hello, Hero. I'm Roland, Roland Vain," he introduced suavely. "Why don't you join us in our compartment? You don't have to stay with them," he said in a stage whisper, glancing at Neville as he emerged from under the seat clutching Trevor and Luna, looking a demented, multicolored owl in her Spectrespecs.

"Actually, they're friends of mine," Hero told him coldly.

Roland blinked. "Oh. Oh, okay." He withdrew, sliding the door closed behind him.

"People expect you to have cooler friends than us," Luna said with embarrassing honesty.

"You're cool, way cooler than those guys. You fought with me, you were there."

"Very kind of you to say," Luna told her with a smile.

"You faced Voldemort, though," Neville said as he flopped on the seat. "You should here my gran talk about you." He put on an old woman's voice, "'That Hero Potter's got more backbone than the whole Ministry of Magic put together!' She'd love to have you as her granddaughter." Hero laughed uncomfortably and quickly changed the subject to OWL results. Neville told her proudly that he'd gotten an O in Herbology (as expected) and wondered aloud whether McGonagall would let him continue on to NEWT Transfiguration with only an A.

Hero wasn't really listening. She looked at Neville, realizing that his childhood had been quite unpleasant, though his relatives didn't hate him as hers did. It was because of Voldemort, just as hers was. He had no idea how close he had come to her destiny. For some misbegotten reason, Voldemort had chosen her.

What would have happened if it was the other way around? Would Lily Potter have waved her off, wept over her diagnosis? Would Hero even have cancer? Would Neville be the orphan with the lightning scar? Would his mother have sacrificed herself? Would she have had the opportunity? There was no way of knowing.

"You alright, Hero?" Neville asked.

"Oh, I . . ."

"You're . . . you're sick, aren't you?" Luna said, in one of her moments of startling perception. "You don't have to tell us if you don't want to."

Hero just looked at her for a long moment, biting her lip as she deliberated. They were her friends.
She didn't have to tell them about the prophecy, not yet at least. But they had been there for her. They deserved to know. But did they deserve the burden? A voice whispered that they would rather know and have the chance to say goodbye than be blindsided. But could she just keep it to herself for a while? She pictured Dr. Warren, giving her a look.

She started to speak, not looking at them. "I have cancer. I'm dying. I don't have much time left. I... I found out this summer." She felt a large, warm hand cover hers. She looked up to see Neville's warm, understanding brown eyes. She remembered seeing Alice Longbottom in St. Mungo's the previous Christmas. He had his mother's eyes.

"We'll be with you until the end," he promised. "However you need us." Hero nodded, too choked up to speak. Luna put down her magazine and wrapped an arm around her. Outside, the weather alternated between stretches of the chilling mist and patches of weak, clear sunlight.

About an hour into the journey, Ron and Hermione found them. Ron collapsed on the seat next to Neville, Hermione settled next to Luna.

"I wish the lunch trolley would hurry up, I'm starving" Ron complained, rubbing his stomach. "Hey, Neville, Luna. Guess what?" he said, turning to Hero. "Malfoy's not doing prefect duty. He's just sitting in the compartment with the other Slytherins, we saw him when we passed."

Hero cocked her head. Malfoy had quite happily abused his power the year before. Why would he pass up the opportunity to exercise it a little more?

"What did he do when he saw you?"

"The usual," Ron said, shrugging. "Flipped us off. Not like him, though, is it? Well, the flipping us off is. But why isn't he out bullying firsties?"

"Hmm." Perhaps Malfoy had more important things on his mind than bullying the younger students.

"Maybe this seems a bit tame after the Inquisitorial Squad," Hermione suggested.

"I don't think so," Hero disagreed, shaking her head. "I think he's--"

Before she could finish, the compartment door slid open and a breathless third year stepped in.

"I'm supposed to deliver these Neville Longbottom and Hero P-Potter," she faltered, turning scarlet when she glanced at Hero. She held out two scrolls tied with violet ribbon. Perplexed, Hero and Neville took theirs. The girl stumbled out.

"What is it?" Ron asked as Hero unrolled hers.

"It's an invitation." It was from Slughorn, inviting them to lunch in his compartment.

"Who's Professor Slughorn?" Neville asked, bewildered.

"New teacher," Hero explained. "I suppose we should go see what he wants," Hero said, sighing and getting up.

"What does he want me for?" Neville asked as if expecting detention, though Hero was sure it was phrased similarly to hers

"Er, no idea," Hero said, which was not quite true. From what Slughorn had said and Dumbledore had told her, she had a fair idea, but no proof her hunch was correct. "Ooh, I know! We can wear
the cloak, get a look at Malfoy on the way." And avoid the stares, she thought but did not say.

Unfortunately, the idea came to nothing. The corridor was too crowded with people on the lookout for the lunch trolley. It was impossible to maneuver through the swaths of people, and a body you couldn't see shoving against you was a bit of a giveaway. The staring was worse even than the last time she'd walked through the train. Some people came out of their compartments to get a look at her. She saw Cho supposedly deep in discussion with Marietta Edgecomb, whose makeup could not completely obscure Hermione's handiwork. Smirking slightly, Hero pressed on.

As they saw when they reached Slughorn's compartment, they were not the only ones invited, though, judging by Slughorn's enthusiasm, Hero was the most hotly anticipated.

"Hero, dear girl!" he crowed, jumping up. His velvet-clad belly seemed to fill the remaining space. His bald plate, silver mustache, and gold buttons shone brightly. "Good to see you, good to see you! And you must be Mr. Longbottom!"

Neville nodded, looking wary. There was a black Slytherin in their year, two seventh years, and, looking uncertain how she'd gotten there, Ginny.

Slughorn began introducing the other students. The Slytherin was named Blaise Zabini. They ignored each other, honoring the hatred on principle between their houses. The seventh years were Cormac McLaggen and Marcus Belby.

"--And this charming young lady tells me that she knows you!" Ginny grimaced at them from behind Slughorn's back.

Slughorn started passing around the lunch he'd brought. Belby, as it turned out, was the nephew of the man who invented the Wolfsbane Potion. Unfortunately, at least from Slughorn's point of view, he and his uncle weren't close. McLaggen, on the other hand, was close with his famous uncle and regularly went hunting with the new Minister for Magic. Slughorn passed round a tray of small pies. Somehow, Belby was missed.

It was as Hero had suspected. Everyone seemed to be connected to someone influential - except Ginny. Zabini was apparently the son of a very beautiful black widow, currently in her seventh husband. It was Neville's turn next, which made for an uncomfortable ten minutes, considering his family history. Hero got the impression Slughorn was reserving judgement.

"And now," Slughorn said, shifting forward in his seat with the air of a ringmaster introducing his star act, "Hero Potter! Where to begin? I felt I barely scratched the surface when we met over the summer!" He contemplated her as if she was a juicy cut of meat. Hero shifted uncomfortably. "Why, they're even calling you the Chosen One now!"

Hero said nothing. Belby, Zabini, and McLaggen were all staring at her. Then Slughorn started talking about her parents murder, how some people thought she had "powers beyond the ordinary." Blaise snorted skeptically.

"Yeah, Zabini, because you're so talented - at posing!"

"Oh, dear!" chuckled Slughorn, glancing at Ginny, who was glaring at Zabini. "I wouldn't cross this young lady if I were you! I saw her cast the most marvelous bat-bogey hex when I passed her carriage." Zabini merely looked contemptuous.

Slughorn rambled a bit on the rumors circulating and the disturbance at the military. Hero couldn't see a way out without flatly lying, so she just nodded. Slughorn beamed at her.
"So modest, so modest! No wonder Dumbledore is so fond - but you were there, then? But the rest of the stories - so sensational, of course, one doesn't know quite what to believe - this fabled prophecy, for instance--"

"We never heard a prophecy," Neville said, promptly turning geranium pink.

"That's right," Ginny added firmly. "We were there with her, and this Chosen One rubbish is just the Prophet making things up as usual."

"You were there?" Slughorn asked with great interest. Neither said a word. Hero felt her heart swell as she saw the steely resistance in their eyes.

Slughorn expressed his disappointment, then launched into a story about his friend Gwenog (Gwenog Jones, of course, captain of the Holyhead Harpies.)

He launched into a long-winded reminiscence. Hero knew he wasn't finished with her. She didn't think he had been convinced by Ginny and Neville, either.

He babbled on about other famous witches and wizards he'd taught, all of whom had apparently only been too happy to join his "Slug Club." Hero couldn't wait to leave, but she couldn't see how to do it politely. It went on for hours. Finally, the train emerged from yet another stretch into a red sunset. Slughorn looked around, blinking in the twilight.

"Goodness, look at the time! You'd best toddle off to change into your robes. Stop by any time, all of you. Well, off you go, off you go, off you go!"

Hero and Zabini glared daggers at each other as they exited into the corridor. They started to make their way back to the compartment.

"Godric, I'm glad that's over," Neville muttered. "He's a . . . strange fellow, isn't he?"

"Bit," Hero agreed, her eyes on Zabini. "How come you ended up in there, Ginny?"

"He saw me hex Zacharias Smith. You know, that idiot from Hufflepuff who was in the DA? He kept at me, asking me about what happened at the Ministry. In the end, he annoyed me so much I hexed him," she shrugged. "Slughorn came in and I thought I was going to get a detention, but he just complimented my hex and invited me to lunch. I wasn't about to argue. Mad, eh?"

"Better than being invited because your mother's a rich, beautiful serial monogamist," Hero remarked, her eyes still on Zabini. An idea occurred to her. Zabini was probably going back to the rest of the Slytherins in their year. If she snuck close enough to hear, with an extendable ear, say . . .

She patted her pockets and swore under her breath. They were all back in her trunk, and, judging by the wild scenery, they were within a half hour of Hogsmead station. She didn't have time to go back and listen. Malfoy was an idiot, but he was bound to realize eventually that he was in over his head, and he might hurt people first. There was nothing else for it . . .

"Look, I'll see you two later," she murmured, pulling out the Cloak and throwing it over herself.

"But what're you--"

"Later!" Hero whispered, darting after Zabini as quietly as possible, though the rattling of the train made it almost a waste of time. The corridors were almost empty, everyone back in their compartments to change and pack up.

She wasn't quite able to get into the compartment before Zabini went to slide the door shut. She
stuck her foot in, biting her lip to keep from swearing as he repeatedly tried to slam the door shut. She shoved it open, hard. Zabini toppled into Goyle's lap. In the midst of the ensuing chaos, she hauled herself onto the luggage rack. It was a good thing Goyle and Zabini were snarling at each other, because she was quite sure her feet had been visible for a moment. She thought she saw Malfoy's eyes follow her trainer as it seemed to hover and disappear. Then everyone sorted it out and Malfoy went back to laying across two seats, his head in Pansy Parkinson's lap.

Malfoy had Zabini tell him about the meeting with Slughorn. He seemed outraged at the inclusion of Ginny and Neville. Worse, though he tried to hide it, was the fact that he himself had been snubbed. Zabini told him he didn't think Slughorn was interested in Death Eater families, considering Nott had been excluded as well. Malfoy dismissed him as "just some stupid teacher" and yawned ostentatiously. Personally, Hero thought he was overdoing it a bit. Then he said something very interesting.

"I mean, I might not even be at Hogwarts next year. What's it matter to me if some fat old has-been likes me or not?"

Pansy stopped combing her fingers through his hair. "What do you mean, you might not be at Hogwarts next year?"

"Well, you never know," he hinted with the ghost of a smirk. "I might have - er - moved onto bigger and better things." Hero's heart began to race. It supported her theory, though the idiot clearly still thought his new position was a coup. Malfoy's followers had varied expressions of shock.

"Do you mean . . . Him?"

Malfoy shrugged with a secretive smile. "The Dark Lord's taking over. I doubt he'll care about my exam results."

"You think he'll want you for something? Sixteen and not even fully qualified?" Zabini asked scathingly

Malfoy wasn't fazed. "Maybe he doesn't need me to be fully qualified. Maybe the job he wants me for isn't something you need to have your qualifications for." Pansy, Crabbe, and Goyle were looking at him in awe.

"I can see Hogwarts," Malfoy commented, clearly enjoying the effect he was having. "We'd best change into our robes."

They changed and everyone filtered out of the compartment. Everyone but Malfoy. He closed the blinds, blocking out the people filing past. Malfoy reached up for his trunk

And dragged Hero down instead. He snatched the Cloak off her, shoved her onto the seat, conjured ropes around her, from shoulder to ankle, and cast a Silencing Charm on her. He pulled down his trunk, then stood gazing at her.

"Hello, Potter. I saw your trainers when you hopped up," he told her, smirking. "You didn't hear anything I care about. But I think, for my father's sake, I'll just leave you here. I'll give this back to you," he said, holding up the Cloak, "and they might find you by the time you get back to London. There is one parting gift I think I'll leave you with. I know Mother says I shouldn't hit ladies, but you're not a lady, are you? And chivalry is your house, not mine. So . . ." he trailed off and swung his fist into her nose. He shoved her off the seat onto the floor, threw the cloak over her, and left.
She couldn't move her hand enough to reach her wand. If she could, she could have Vanished the ropes. As it was, she lay on the floor of the compartment, invisible, the blood from her nose flowing all over her face.

After fifteen minutes, it was still coming. She thought it really should have stopped. She remembered, then, that easy bleeding was one of the possible side effects of the temozolomide. It seemed a rather anticlimactic end, death by nosebleed. She would have laughed if it wasn't for the fact that she didn't want to get blood in her mouth. And no sound would come out anyway.

This is what happens when I try to be nice, she thought sullenly.

No, a different part of her corrected, this is what happens when you get nosy. You're dying. So what? Surely you have better things to do with what time you have left than stalking Malfoy. She sighed, more blood coming as she exhaled. She wondered if anyone would come to check the compartments. It wouldn't matter, she realized. No one could see her. No one could hear her scream. But even if they could, no one was coming.

Ron and Hermione would probably think she'd just gotten off the train without them. They wouldn't realize she was missing until she didn't show up at the feast. She listened to the rustling of the trees, the occasional hoot of an owl. There was no hint of a search, no one frantically calling her name. Really, everyone had been staring at her the length of the train and no one noticed she was nowhere to be found? What was the point? She had to admit, it felt slightly hopeless. She was bleeding out of her nose because of a drug that was supposed to give her more time. And perhaps it might have if Draco Malfoy hadn't punched her in the nose.

Suddenly, she felt the engines rumble to life and the train jerk, causing her to roll into her side. It was leaving. It was leaving, and no one knew she was still onboard. And now the blood was dripping from her cheek onto the floor, into her hair. Lovely.

Then she felt the Invisibility Cloak being lifted off her and heard a voice above saying, "Wotcher, Hero."

A flash of light banished the ropes and a hand was offered to help her up. She was offered a handkerchief to clean off the blood. She looked up to see Tonks, Cloak in hand.

"We need to get off quickly," she told Hero as the train windows were obscured with steam. "We'd better jump." They hurried into the corridor, opened the train door and leaped onto the platform. She staggered a little on the landing and straightened in time to see the scarlet steam engine pick up speed, round the corner, and disappear from view.

The cool evening air felt nice on her nose. She avoided Tonks' eye. Tonks handed her back the Cloak.
"So, who was it?"

"Draco Malfoy. Thanks for the..."

"No problem," Tonks murmured, not smiling. From what Hero could tell in the darkness, she was as mousy-haired and miserable as she'd been at the Burrow. She glanced over at Hero.

"I'll fix your nose if you stand still."

Hero hesitated. She'd been planning to visit Madam Pomfrey. But she'd rather not bleed to death before she got there. She stood stock-still and closed her eyes.

"Episkey." Hero felt her nose get very hot, then cold. She reached a hand up to feel it gingerly; it seemed mended. She grinned at Tonks.

"Thanks, Tonks."

"You'd better put your Cloak on, I'll take you up to the school." Still, she did not smile. As Hero pulled the Cloak over herself, she saw Tonks send off her Patronus, a lithe, furry, four-legged creature, into the darkness.

"I've sent word to the castle that I've got you, else they'll worry. Come on, we'd better it dawdle." They set off on the lane leading up to the castle.

"How'd you find me?"

"I noticed you hadn't left the train, so I decided to check. The closed blinds were a bit of a give away."

"Why are you here, anyway?"

"I'm stationed in Hogsmead now, to give the school better protection."

"Just you?"

"No, three others. Proudfoot, Savage, and Dawlish."

"Isn't Dawlish the one Dumbledore attacked last year?"

"Yes."

Hero was actually quite worried now. The year before, Tonks had been inquisitive, almost to the point of being a nuisance. She had laughed easily, cracked jokes. She seemed older now, more serious and purposeful. Less friendly. Was it all because of what happened at the Ministry? This is the part where Hermione probably would have told her to say something consoling about Sirius to her, that it wasn't her fault. She opened her mouth to tell her.

She couldn't do it. It wasn't that she blamed Tonks, no more than she blamed anyone else. Certainly less than she blamed herself. But she didn't like talking about him if she didn't have to. It hurt too much. And so they continued on in silence, the whispering of Tonks' cloak audible behind them.

She felt a bit faint from the blood loss. Her headache was getting worse. The lane seemed to stretch on forever. Having always traveled it by carriage, Hero had had no idea just how far Hogwarts was from Hogsmeade Station. She took the pillars of the gates, each topped with a winged boar, with great relief. She was cold, hungry, and quite ready to say goodbye to this Tonks she didn't know what to say to. Only the gate was chained shut.
"No use trying to get in. Security's been tightened a hundredfold." If the Ministry cars and Auror escorts were anything to go by, it was at least partly for their precious Chosen One. And she was on the other side of the gates, kept out by the new security.

"Well, I suppose I'll just have to sleep here tonight." She wondered what Dr. Warren would tell her when she missed a dose. She wondered how she would explain it.

"Someone's coming down for you," Tonks noted, pointing. "Look."

A lantern was visible, just coming out of the castle. She was so relieved, she almost wouldn't mind enduring Filch's rants and criticisms. When the lantern was ten feet away, she pulled off the Cloak. Her vision clear, she now recognized her rescuer. She sighed in resignation. Of course. Because it couldn't be easy. Before her stood Severus Snape.

"Well, well, well," he sneered, tapping his wand against the padlock. The chains snaked back and the gates creaked open. "How kind of you to turn up, Potter. Evidently, you decided the wearing of your school robes would detract from your appearance." Hero opened her mouth to explain, knowing he wouldn't listen, but he cut across her. "There is no need to wait, Nymphadora. Miss Potter will be perfectly safe with me."

"Hagrid was supposed to get the message," Tonks said, frowning. Well, at least she wasn't to blame for Snape's presence.

"Hagrid was late to the start of term feast, just like Miss Potter here. I received it instead." He stood aside to allow Hero to walk through the gates and stand beside him. "I was interested to see your new Patronus. Should I offer my congratulations?"

As Snape swung the lantern, Hero caught a fleeting glimpse of pain on the Auror's face before she was left in darkness again. "Goodnight!" Hero called. "Thanks for . . . everything."

"See you, Hero."

Snape placed a hand on her back to propel her towards the castle. It burned through her t-shirt. She suppressed a shiver of awareness. She tried to ignore it, as she always did. Bastard. He was a bastard. He was cruel, he hated her, he had really loathed Sirius. But still that hand burned.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor, I think," he told her, not looking at her. She cursed herself, cursed him. She ignored the funny feeling in her tummy she got when he spoke in his smooth baritone. "And another twenty for improper attire. I don't believe any house has ever been in negative figures this early in the term: we haven't even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter." A smirk curved his lips.

Hero was too proud to breathe a word about why she was late. It might be satisfying, but it wouldn't last. Her friends thought she was mental, why shouldn't Snape? Her head was throbbing.

"In the face of your silence, I shall simply extrapolate. Deprived of a flying car for your grand entrance, you decided that bursting into the Great Hall halfway through the feast would create a satisfactory dramatic effect. The evidence supports my hypothesis."

Normally, she would have been bursting to tell him what she really thought. Now, she was just tired. What was the point? He would believe what he wanted to, and they would fight a war, and she would die. She didn't have time for childish bickering. She knew he had come down because he couldn't pass up the opportunity to needle and torment her without witnesses. She tried to focus on what a terrible person he was, on how childish his behavior was. Not on that hand.
They reached the castle at last. The great oaken front doors swung open, and they stepped into the entrance hall. Hero could hear talking and laughter and tinkling plates and glasses coming from the Great Hall. She thought about pulling out her Cloak, sneaking into the Great Hall, and slipping in beside Hermione.

"No Cloak. You will get exactly what I'm sure you wanted. Everyone will see you." She repressed the urge to glare at him resentfully. Her chin came up defiantly. She moved toward the door. Then everything went black.

*     *     *

He watched her march toward the door, her posture stiff. Arrogance was in every line of her expression. She had her Cloak in hand, likely intending to put it on to get out of the first bit of punishment he had planned for her. She wouldn't escape so easily.

One foot into the Great Hall, she collapsed. At first, he thought it was another vision sent by the Dark Lord. He took a cautious step forward. But the shaking strengthened, becoming convulsions. He strode over, robes billowing behind him. This wasn't a vision, at least not an ordinary one. Potter was having a seizure. He could see her eyes rolling back in her skull.

He took off her glasses and rolled her onto her side. Her skin was so pale it looked grey, sweat streaming down. A twinge of . . . something went through him. In the light, he noticed dried blood, hastily wiped, on her face. All over her face. He hadn't noticed in the lantern light or the dimness of the entrance hall. Nymphadora had likely healed it. He spared a thought to wonder how it happened. Potter being Potter seemed the obvious answer. He looked up and glanced around the hall. No one seemed to have noticed yet. He cast a Silencing Charm and Disillusioned her. He didn't want to wrap her in fabric.

After two and a half minutes, the convulsions stopped. He picked her up, carrying her out of the line of sight of those in the Great Hall. He laid her on her side, took the spell off, and waited, kneeling down beside her. She blinked dazedly, struggling to sit up, only for Severus to force her back down. He lit the lantern and held it up to her face.

She looked up at him, not quite recognizing him. "Professor?"

"Do you know who you are?"

"I'm . . . I'm Hero Potter."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Er . . . I'm at Hogwarts, I think."

"Do you know what just happened?"

"I think I just had another seizure."

Severus paused. But questions could wait until she had recovered. Hero tried to sit up again. He forced her back down again.

"Miss Potter, I'm afraid you will miss the feast. You are to *stay here* until you have recovered sufficiently." She blinked up at him. He realized that lying on the floor probably wasn't conducive to recovery. Not wanting to move her again, he cast a Cushioning Charm. She didn't look away, her expression just became more confused.
"Try not to strain yourself, Miss Potter." She blushed, her gaze finally flicking away.

After a few minutes, her confusion began to clear. He handed her back her glasses.

"I was not aware you had epilepsy." He wondered how she got through duels, the flashes of spellfire. Not that he cared, particularly.

"I don't."

"Yet this is not your first attack. Have you been tested for other causes?" Through it all, his tone was cold, assessing. Not kind. Never kind. She was strangely grateful that what had happened hadn't changed his opinion of her. She realized she was terrified of being coddled, or worse, pitied.

"They've tested me. I know exactly what I have," she told him as firmly as she could so soon after an attack. She tried to project the air of a closed subject. Severus squinted at her for a moment, then seemed to accept it.

"I will alert Madam Pomfrey, and she will take you to the hospital wing. Don't move." Hero watched him warily as he strode into the Great Hall. He did not return. About a minute later, Madam Pomfrey emerged

"Are you alright to stand, Miss Potter?" Hero nodded shakily. The matron offered her a hand up.

"Well, come along, then, dear. Professor Dumbledore has informed me of your condition. I have your seizure medication up in the infirmary, as well as your trial meds. When do you take it, dear?"

Madam Pomfrey asked as they made their way up the main staircase to the first floor, where the Hospital Wing was located.

"Usually at half past ten. Do you think the seizure was caused by the tumors, or the temozolomide?"

"I couldn't say, it could be either. Your, ah, doctor will need to be informed, of course. I'm not entirely certain how we'll manage it, but I'm sure the headmaster will think of something. Now, miss, how exactly did you bloody your nose?"

Hero turned her gaze to the stairs. "I, er, got into a tiff with Malfoy." There, that was sort of the truth.

Madam Pomfrey stopped her and gripped her chin, titling her face toward the light. She tutted, letting go. "That boy should know better. Of course, so should you. It took a while to stop bleeding?" Hero nodded. "You're lucky, under the circumstances. I'll get you a blood replenisher. Do try not to get into any tiffs in future. You might not stop bleeding next time." They were up the stairs and going down the corridor to the Hospital Wing.

"You realize that, if you injure yourself playing Quidditch this year, I'll be forced to take you off the team? Exercise is excellent, of course, but not if you're going to be injured. In your condition . . . it would be inadvisable," the matron sniffed. Hero sighed.

Once they arrived at the infirmary, Madam Pomfrey made her charge sit on one of the beds while she looked her over.

"You take valproic acid for the seizures, yes? When do you take it?"

"At breakfast."

"I'll discuss raising your dose with Dr. Warren. I think it would help. Oh, you don't need to stay with your face all bloody. Tergeo," she said, siphoning the dried blood off Hero's face. "Now, I
don't think you were injured during your attack, but it's probably best I check you over just in case."

"* * *"

"Hero! Where have you been!" Hermione demanded when she got up to the dorm and found her friend already there and almost finished unpacking.

"I decided to spy on Malfoy. He knew I was there. He let me listen, then tied me up and punched me in the nose."

"How could you do something so stupid?! But . . . wait, you would have been able to come in before the feast ended."

"I had another seizure."

Hermione's fury instantly vanished. She sat on the bed, watching as Hero sorted through her textbooks. "What happened?"

"Snape was going to make me go into the a Great Hall with everyone staring at me. I was going to. But then as I walked in, I . . . well."

"You had a seizure." It wasn't a question, but Hero nodded. "How come I didn't see you? I mean, I know we're against the wall, away from the door, but I would have expected to notice. . . ."

"I think Snape Disillusioned me. I felt him take the charm off after he moved me back into the entrance hall after the attack."

"Moved you? I wouldn't think you would be steady enough to walk after a seizure."

"Not really," Hero said, refusing to elaborate. She was not about to share that with Hermione. Probably ever. "So, erm, how was the feast?"

"The sorting hat sang about school unity. The food was good. People seemed quite depressed, it's to be expected, really."

"Snape mentioned Hagrid was late."

Hermione shrugged. "Only by a few minutes. I thought it was strange that Trelawney was there. I don't think I've ever seen her at a start-of-term feast before." Hero shivered, glad she hadn't been there now. It had been a nasty shock to find out that her ridiculous, usually fraudulent Divination teacher had been the one to make the prophecy that had turned Voldemort on the path to killing her parents. She would never have to set foot in her classroom again, at least. She wouldn't have Snape as a teacher, either. Mixed feelings there.

Which reminded her. "How was Slughorn's reception?" she asked, sitting beside Hermione on the scarlet coverlet.

"Oh! I almost forgot. It turns out you were wrong about Slughorn."

Hero glanced over at her. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, he's a Potions professor. Snape's taking over Defense."

Hero fell back. "Really?! He's wanted it for years. Why do you think Dumbledore's letting him have it now?"
"Hmm. Dumbledore's probably planning something. You should have heard what Lavender Brown said."

"What did *dear* Miss Brown say?"

"That Snape finally got down on his knees and begged, and then Dumbledore sent him to work."

It took Hero a second. "You can't honestly mean . . . She can't actually be implying . . . ." Lavender Brown was a terrible person.

"It's Lavender, of course she can."

"Where is she, anyway?"

"She's down in the common room, flirting. You know how she is." Hero rolled her eyes.

"I wonder why Dumbledore is giving it to him now. He'll only last the year."

"Ron thinks Slughorn might just be temporary and Snape will go back to Potions next year." Hero nodded. It sounded reasonable.

"Did he say anything in his speech about Voldemort?"

"Not really. It was mostly about the security precautions and not being out of bed past curfew. I think that one was directed to you, but you weren't there."

"I'm sure he trusted you to relay the message." Hermione smiled at the distinct possibility.

Ginny popped her head in. "Himself is downstairs looking for you. Thought you might like to know." Hero glanced at her trunk. It was about as unpacked as it was likely to get. She glanced at Hermione.

"We can make him sweat later. We have news."

Ron was, indeed, waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He grinned when he saw Hero and Hermione. Hero wondered if it was her imagination that Ron's eyes seemed to linger on Hermione. She hoped not.

Then sank into the deep red and gold armchairs amid the babble of conversation. They talked a bit and quickly realized none of them were taking Hagrid's class. They wondered how badly he would react. Then Ron brought up Malfoy. Apparently, he had been miming something to do with a nose. Hero's lips twisted.

"I went to spy on him. He conjured ropes, tied me up, Silenced me, and punched me in the nose. It took about twenty minutes to stop." Hermione and Ron looked concerned. Of course they knew how long a nose bleed was supposed to last. Hermione read anything she could get her hands on and Ron had brothers.

"How did you get off the train?" Hermione asked, brow furrowed, bottom lip between her teeth

"Tonks found me. Malfoy left the blinds down," Hero explained. "She sent a Patronus. It was supposed to get to Hagrid, but Snape got it instead."

"Snape??" Ron said, whipping his head around to stare at her. "You were with Snape when you couldn't come to the feast?? What did he do to you?" he demanded.
"Nothing, Ron. I just had a seizure. He made sure I was alright, then sent me to the Hospital Wing with Madam Pomfrey."

"Just?! Are you feeling better?"

Hero sighed. "As well as can be expected. It's only going to get worse, really. Madam Pomfrey said something about adjusting my seizure meds," she told them as softly as she could amidst the hum of chatter. She didn't need it getting out. "But don't you want to hear about Malfoy?" she asked hopefully. Hermione's smile grew pained, but she nodded.

Hero explained what had seen and heard in the Slytherin compartment. Ron looked skeptical, Hermione uncertain.

"But he was probably showing off for Parkinson, wasn't he?" Ron put in before Hermione could say anything.

"I don't know. It would be like him to make them think he's more important than he really is. But that's a big lie to tell," Hermione mused, worry creasing her forehead.

"Exactly," Hero said, though she didn't press her point with all the listening ears around. Several younger students were pointing at her and whispering to their friends. At least on the train, she could hide in her compartment. She changed the subject. They chatted about nothing for a bit, then wandered up to their dorms.

*     *     *

Severus contemplated his glass of firewhiskey. The look on her face... There had been no arrogance in it. You probably wouldn't have been able to knock him down with a feather, but you might have managed it with Potter. She had looked up at him out of enormous emerald eyes, her expression lost. At first, it had been as if she was looking right through him, as if he wasn't even there.

She'd weighed next to nothing when he picked her up. He wondered about that even as he wondered what stupidity she'd gotten herself into to end up with her face covered in blood. Typical Potter hijinks, most likely.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Really, really, really sorry. Life has been crazy right now. In fact, in twenty-five minutes, I have to go present my senior project. Tiny bit terrified. Anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They were downstairs in the common room chatting the following morning. The stares and whispers were more pronounced.

"It's rude to point," Ron snapped to a particularly minuscule first year boy who was whispering to a friend behind his hand and whose eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his head. He promptly turned scarlet and fell off the chair arm he'd been perched on. Ron sniggered.

"I love being a sixth year. And we get free time this year! Whole periods where we can just sit up here and relax."

"We have to use the time to study, Ron!" Hermione scolded as they got up to head down to breakfast.

"Well, probably," he admitted. "But not today! It's going to be a real doss, I reckon.

Hermione stopped a fourth year with a fanged frisbee, confiscating the banned item. As soon as the fourth year was out of sight, Ron took it. "Excellent, I've always wanted one of these."

Lavender Brown came up behind them. She had apparently found Ron's remark spectacularly funny, because she kept letting off her high pitched giggle. Even after she passed them, she kept glancing over her shoulder and playing with her hair. Hermione rolled her eyes. Ron looked quite pleased with himself. Hero had to cough to hide her laugh. Lavender was one of the most annoying girls she'd ever met. But it would be amusing from an objective standpoint. Like the spectacular wreck of a train loaded with fireworks. She would just make sure to watch from a distance when Hermione finally exploded.

They reminisced about the DA on their way to the Hospital Wing where Hero took her seizure meds. They continued talking as they went down to breakfast.

After they'd eaten, they stayed at the tables and waited for McGonagall to come down to discuss scheduling. It was more complicated this year, as they had to be cleared to take their classes according to their OWL grades. Hermione was immediately cleared to continue us on with Defense, Transfiguration, Herbology, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Potions. She shot off to her first period Ancient Runes class without another word.

Neville was a more difficult case. With an O in Herbology, he was perfectly fine to continue on with the subject. Defense was fine as well. Hero felt a bit proud of his E, considering she had been his instructor. Transfiguration, however, was out of the question. Neville seemed quite upset.

McGonagall surveyed him over the tops of her spectacles. "Why do you want to continue with Transfiguration, anyway? I never got the impression that you particularly enjoyed it." Neville,
looking miserable, muttered something about his grandmother.

"It's time your grandmother learned to appreciate the grandson she's got, not who she thinks she ought to have - particularly after what happened at the Ministry."

Neville turned bright pink and blinked in confusion; his Head of House had never paid him a compliment before. McGonagall advised him to take Charms and promised to remind his grandmother that her failure in Charms didn't make the subject useless. Neville looked delighted as she handed him his schedule. McGonagall turned to Parvati, then Hero.

"Let me see . . . ." she murmured, looking over her notes. "Yes, Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Transfiguration, all fine. I must say, I was pleased with your Transfiguration marks, Potter, very pleased. Now, why haven't you applied to continue so Potions? I believe you wanted to, due to your ambition to become an Auror?"

"I thought I needed an 'Outstanding' to continue to NEWT level?"

"With Professor Snape, yes. Professor Slughorn, however, is perfectly happy to accept students with 'Exceeds Expectations.' Do you wish to proceed with Potions?"

"I suppose, but I don't have any books or ingredients . . . ."

"I'm sure Professor Slughorn will be able to lend you some. Your schedule, Miss Potter. Oh, and twenty hopefuls have already out their names down to join the Quidditch team. I'll hand the list over in due course and you can schedule trials at your leisure."

A few minutes later, Ron was cleared for the same subjects as Hero. They left the table together. Ron excitedly pointed out their free periods. They returned to the common room, having first period free, to find it empty but for half a dozen seventh years, including Katy Bell, the only player left from when Hero had joined her first year.

She admired the captain's badge and warned her not to just stick to familiar faces. Ron looked uncomfortable and started playing with the fanged frisbee Hermione had confiscated.

Hero wondered what would happen if she had a seizure in the air. She'd fainted during third year, and Dumbledore had saved her. But what if it happened during practice? It was something to bring up with Madam Pomfrey before she practiced next. Maybe if they increased the anti-convulsants, the seizures would stop for a while. But, no matter what they gave her, she was running out of time.

But she had a job to do. She had a prophecy to fulfill. She had a purpose. If she focused enough on that, maybe everything would fade away. It was like her obsession with saving Malfoy, with saving everyone. She would pay attention in her classes because she couldn't know what she would need to defeat Voldemort. She couldn't die until she'd accomplished it.

Free periods, she realized, were a bad idea. The thoughts were like vultures, sensing the weakness of an idle mind, circling, closing in: it's going to hurt. You're going to suffer. You're dying. You will die without ever being truly happy. And it won't matter. She tried to wrestle the thoughts away, into a chained, padlocked box from which they couldn't escape.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, shaking her. She jumped slightly, looking up to see Ron's concerned face. She blinked.

"Hero? You were staring off into space. Are you alright?"
"Yes, I'm fine. Don't worry, it wasn't another one. Just . . . thinking." She smiled weakly.

"Do you . . . do you want to talk about it?" he asked uncertainly, sitting down next to her on the sofa.

"Yes. And no. I'm just . . . I don't know if I can talk about it yet, with anyone." Ron looked at her like he was going to say something, then nodded and levered himself up. He offered her a hand.

"Come on. We need to get to Defense." She took his hand, and he pulled her out of the deep sofa. They left the quiet, sunlit common room, neither one speaking. Hero rushed, eager to leave the common room and her morbid thoughts. Ron followed in her wake.

Hermione was already waiting outside the Defense classroom when they got there, her arms full of heavy books.

"I have to read these by Wednesday! And we have a fifteen inch essay, and - What's wrong, Hero?"

"I'm--" it was on the tip of her tongue to say "fine." She changed her mind, not least because she knew Hermione wouldn't buy it. She sighed. "Later."

The classroom door opened as she spoke. Snape stepped into the corridor, pale as ever, his black hair to his shoulders. Silence fell immediately.

"Inside," he ordered.

The room was gloomier than usual, the curtains drawn over the windows, lit by candles. New pictures were on the walls, depicting people in pain, sporting grisly injuries or strangely contorted body parts. Nobody spoke as they filed in and took their seats, eyeing the shadowy, gruesome pictures.

"You will not need your books," he told them coldly, shutting the door and striding to stand behind his desk, facing the students. "I wish to speak to you, and I want your fullest attention." Hero sat up and leaned forward. It wasn't just whatever she felt about him; he was, in a way, her successor. Umbridge hadn't really taught them anything related to the subject. Not to say she hadn't been an education.

His black eyes roamed over their upturned faces. They seemed to linger on Hero's more than anyone else's. She suppressed a shiver.

"In five years, you have had five professors. They have all had their own methods and priorities. Frankly, I am surprised so many of you scraped an OWL. I will be even more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the NEWT work, which will be far more advanced."

Snape set off around the edges of the room, students craning their necks to keep him in view. His voice was softer as he continued. "The Dark Arts are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, every time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before." His gaze was in her general direction, but unfocused.

"What I am teaching you to fight is constantly in flux, mutating, evolving, and, ultimately, cannot be eradicated." He almost seemed to be talking to a single person, rather than the whole class. Hero shifted uncomfortably. She could respect the Dark Arts as a formidable foe, but Snape's voice had a loving caress in it. Surely it was ridiculous to be jealous of a subject?

"Your defenses," he said, slightly louder, his gaze sharpening, "must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo. These pictures--" he indicated a few of them as he went past--"give a fair representation of the effects of the Cruciatitus Curse, a Dementor's Kiss, or the aggression of an Inferius." The last was simply a bloody mass.
"Has an Inferius been sighted, then?" Parvati Patil asked in a high, tremulous voice. "Is it definite that he's using them?"

Snape's gaze flicked over to her. "The Dark Lord has used them in the past, which means you would be well-advised to assume he will do so again. Now . . ." He set off back to his desk, robes billowing. " . . . you do not, I believe, have any experience with the use of nonverbal spells. What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?"

No one but Hermione raised their hand. Snape waited a moment before conceding. "Very well. Miss Granger?"

"Your opponent has no warning of the spell you're about to perform, giving you a split-second advantage."

"Copied almost word for word from the Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6," he sneered. "But correct in essentials. Yes, those who are able to cast without shouting their spells gain an element of surprise. Not all wizards have the ability, of course. It is a question of concentration and power, which some--" his eyes met Hero's, "lack."

She knew he was thinking of their disastrous Occlumency lessons the year before. She refused to drop her gaze. Instead, she raised an eyebrow and stared until he looked away.

"You will pair off, with one partner attempting to jinx the other without speaking while the other will attempt to repel the jinx in equal silence. Carry on."

Snape might be ignorant of the fact, but Hero had taught at least half the class how to perform a Shield Charm. She wasn't sure if any of them could cast the charm without speaking, however. Apparently, neither were they, and a reasonable amount of cheating ensued, with many whispering the incantation under their breath. Ten minutes into the lesson, Hermione managed to repel Neville's Jelly-Legs Jinx without a word. Instead of awarding her the twenty points she deserved, Snape ignored her. He swept between them, looking as much like a bat as ever, even outside his dungeon. He lingered by Hero and Ron, who were struggling.

Ron, attacking, was purple in the face. Hero had her lips tightly pressed together to keep from speaking aloud. Her wand was raised as she waited to repel an attack that seemed unlikely to materialize.

At last, Snape intervened. "Pathetic, Weasley. "Let me show you--" He turned his wand on Hero.

She was used to fighting for her life when people turned their wands on her unexpectedly. It was one thing when she was practicing dueling with the DA, people she trusted. She didn't trust Snape. When he pointed his wand at her, she reacted instinctively, yelling "Protego!" The Shield Charm was strong enough to knock her teacher off-balance and into a desk. He righted himself, scowling.

"Do you remember that you were told to practice nonverbal spells, Potter?"

She glared but did not speak. It wouldn't help, and, considering the things that had a tendency to pop out of her mouth, it would likely make things a great deal worse.

"I asked you a question, Potter!" he snapped.

"Yes. Professor," she almost spat.

"For your insubordination and disrespect, you will have detention Saturday evening, my office." He seemed . . . satisfied. Almost smug. She realized he'd baited her and she'd fallen hook, line, and
Hermione turned to her with a frown once they were safely beyond Snape's gaze. "You really shouldn't have done it," she chastised. "What on earth made you?"

"You were at the Ministry, you saw what I was like after fourth year. I reacted instinctively. It's what's saved my life in the past. Besides, I had quite enough of him pointing a wand at me last year, thank you very much. And his speech..."

"I thought he sounded a bit like you, actually," Hermione remarked.

"What are you on about?"

"Last year, when you were telling us what it was like to face Voldemort. You told us that there was no one there to keep you from getting hurt, getting killed. That it's just you and whatever you could use to stay alive. Isn't that sort of what Snape was saying, that you have to be brave and quick-witted and inventive?"

Hero was caught off-guard. Rephrased, she supposed they had said essentially the same thing. She and Snape felt the same way about something? And it wasn't some meaningless opinion. Gosh, he likes Chocolate Frogs, too! Defense was something she cared deeply about. Judging by the speech he'd given, so did he.

She was brought out of her reverie by Jack Sloper, one of the beaters on the team last year, calling her name. He jogged up to her and presented her with a scroll, then asked about Quidditch try-outs. Hero waffled a bit, thinking privately that Sloper probably wouldn't make it back on the team. Sloper went on for a bit, but she'd stopped listening. She unrolled the scroll to reveal familiar thin, slanting handwriting. It was to inform her of her lesson Saturday evening at 8 p.m.

"He enjoys Acid Pops?" Ron asked, perplexed, as he read over Hero's shoulder.

"It's the password up to his office," she told him in an undertone.

They began to speculate about what Dumbledore would be teaching her. Ron thought it would be spectacular jinxes and hexes, like the Death Eaters would know. Hermione pointed out such things were illegal, and espoused the belief that he would teach Hero advanced defensive magic. Hero didn't doubt he would teach her things that she could use to fight. She wondered, though, whether he would use some of the time for grief counseling.

After break, Hermione swanned off to Arithmancy, and Hero and Ron went back up the common room to start on the homework Snape had assigned. It wasn't as troubling, with something to do, something to distract her. The homework was even complex enough that they weren't finished by the time Hermione rejoined them, though her presence certainly sped up the process. As they were finishing, the bell rang, signaling their double Potions. They made the familiar trek to the dungeons, so long Snape's territory.

They arrived to find they were three of only a dozen people progressing to NEWT level. Crabbe and Goyle, not unexpectedly, had not achieved the necessary OWL scores. Four Slytherins had made it, including Malfoy, as well as four Ravenclaws and a Hufflepuff, Ernie MacMillan. He was quite pompous, but Hero liked him despite it. He was almost a caricature.

"Hero, dear girl! Didn't get the chance to speak to you after Defense this morning. Good lesson, I thought, though Shield Charms are no trouble for us, thanks to you. And how are you, Ron, Hermione?"
Before they could reply, Slughorn emerged from the classroom. He beamed at them, Hero and Zabini in particular, as they filed inside.

They found the room already filled with vapors and odd smells. Hero, Ron, and Hermione sniffed curiously as they passed large, bubbling cauldrons. The four Slytherins sat on one table, the four Ravenclaws at another, leaving Hero, Ron, Hermione, and Ernie to share a table. Theirs was nearest to a good cauldron emitting one of the most alluring scents Hero had ever experienced. It was all at once summer rain on dry earth, a vaguely woody smell, mint, and artemisia, also known as wormwood. They shouldn't have gone well together, but the scent filled her like hot, strong tea. It fortified her, made her feel whole. It was wonderful, but simultaneously so terribly sad, because she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt whole.

Slughorn told them to take out their materials, only to find out that Hero and Ron didn't have any. He told them they were welcome to borrow ingredients, scales, and textbooks until their own arrived from Diagon Alley. He handed them each a battered copy of Advanced Potion Making and a tarnished set of scales.

Slughorn returned to his presentation, explaining that the cauldrons contained potions he had brewed for them to see in person, as it were. They would be expected to know how to make them by the completion of their NEWTs.

He indicated the potion nearest the Slytherin table. Hero stood to get a better look and saw what looked like boiling water. "Anyone know what this one is?" Hermione's hand shot into the air.

"It's Veritaserum, a colorless, odorless potion that forces the drinker to tell the truth." Hero remembered Snape threatening her with it fourth year. Colorless, odorless, and having her spilling her darkest secrets like she was watering the garden.

"Excellent! This one," he gestured to the one nearest the Ravenclaws, "should be quite familiar, featured in a few ministry leaflets, I believe. Who can--" Hermione's hand shot into the air again. Hero recognized it, too, but she let Hermione answer. She was the one who had brewed it, after all.

"It's Polyjuice Potion, sir."

"Very good, my dear." He waved toward their cauldron. Hermione's hand shot into the air again. Slughorn pointed to her, looking bemused.

"It's Amortentia!"

"It is, indeed. It seems almost foolish to ask," he said, looking quite impressed, "but I assume you know what it does?"

"It's the most powerful love potion in the world," she replied slightly breathlessly.

"Yes, I suppose you recognized it by the signature mother of pearl sheen?"

"And the steam rising in spirals. And it's supposed to smell different to each of us, according to what attracts us. For instance, I can smell freshly mowed grass and fresh parchment and--" but she stopped there, turning slightly pink. Hero wondered what it meant, what she had smelled. Summer rain, wood, mint, and wormwood.

"May I ask your name, my dear?" Slughorn inquired, ignoring her embarrassment.

"Hermione Granger, sir."
He asked if she was related to someone who had founded something called the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers. Hero wondered if it was related to the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen.

"No, I don't think so, sir, I'm a muggleborn you see." At first, it seemed an innocent comment. Then Hero looked in Hermione's eyes, saw the steel in them. She was testing him, seeing how the new Slytherin Potions Professor would react. Hero wanted to applaud.

Malfoy and Nott were whispering to each other and snickering. Slughorn, however, didn't seem at all dismayed. On the contrary, he looked between Hero and Hermione, sitting next to each other, and beamed.

"Oho! 'One of my best friends is a muggleborn, and she's the best in our year.' I assume this is the friend of whom you spoke, Hero?"

"None other, sir," she replied, fluttering her eyelashes.

"Well, take twenty points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger," Slughorn said genially.

Hero smiled sweetly at Malfoy, who looked like Hermione had once again punched him in the face. Well, tit for tat. Hermione turned to Hero, her expression incandescent. "You really told him I'm the best in our year?" she whispered. "My Hero!" It was an old joke between the three of them. A Gryffindor who, in Hermione's words, had a "saving people thing," named Hero. You could either laugh or you could cry.

"I would have told him the same if he asked me. You <i>are</i> the best in our year!" Ron whispered indignantly. Hermione smiled and shushed him. Ron looked slightly disgruntled.

Slughorn went on to explain that Amortentia did not actually create love, but a powerful obsession. He told them it might well be the most powerful potion in the room, and that obsessive love was not to be underestimated. He told them to get to work, only for Ernie to ask about the other cauldron on the room. It was small and black, standing on Slughorn's desk. It was splashing about merrily, large drops the color of molten gold leaped like goldfish, though not a drop spilled.

"Ah, yes," Slughorn said, smiling smugly. Hero got the impression he had been waiting for someone to ask about it, to draw attention to it. "That one, ladies and gents, is a most curious potion known as Felix Felicis. I assume you know what it does, Miss Granger?" he asked with a smile at Hermione, who had gasped.

"It's liquid luck!" she breathed.

The whole class seemed to sit a little straighter. Malfoy was at last giving Slughorn his full, undivided attention.

"Precisely. Take another ten points for Gryffindor. It's a funny little potion, desperately tricky to make, disastrous to get wrong. However, if brewed correctly, one finds that all your endeavors tend to succeed, at least while the effects last.

"Why don't people take it all the time?" Michael Corner asked excitedly, as if he couldn't comprehend why a person wouldn't want such a thing constantly.

"Taken in excess, it causes giddiness, recklessness, and dangerous overconfidence. Too much of a good thing, you know. It's highly toxic in large quantities. But, taken sparingly, and very occasionally..."

Michael then asked if Slughorn had ever taken it. Hero didn't think he would answer. The last time
she had asked a teacher a similar question, what Dumbledore saw in the Mirror of Erised, she was almost certain he'd lied. Slughorn, however, told them he'd taken it twice, once at the age of twenty-four, once at fifty-seven. Two teaspoons with breakfast, two perfect days. He stared dreamily off into space. Hero thought he might be play acting again, but, either way, the effect was good. Hero sighed softly. She knew she was being cynical.

Slughorn seemed to shake himself out of the memories. "That is what I will be offering as a prize at the end of the lesson." The bubbling and gurgling of the potion seemed to amplify in the sudden silence. Slughorn brought a minuscule, corked glass bottle out of his waistcoat pocket. "Enough for twelve hours luck. From dawn to dusk, you'll be lucky in all you attempt. I must warn you, however, that Felix Felicis is banned in competitive events, such as organized sports, elections, and examinations.

"Now," he continued, his tone becoming more businesslike, "turn to page ten of Advanced Potion Making, where you find the Draught of Living Death. We have about an hour, so you should be able to make a decent attempt. This is more complicated than anything you will have attempted before, so I don't by any means expect perfection. However, whoever gets closest will receive a little liquid luck. Off you go!"

The students began in a flurry of activity. Hero saw Malfoy reaching feverishly for his copy of Advanced Potion Making. He clearly wanted that lucky day. Which meant he was worried. About his mission from Voldemort? Good. He'd be a fool not to be. And maybe she could reach him.

Hero opened her book to find the previous owner had scribbled all over it. The margins were as black as the printed portions. She squinted at the ingredient list, though even there the owner had made annotations and crossed things out. She slid off her stool, then paused. The handwriting was awfully familiar. Spidery, narrow, sort of small and cramped. She couldn't put her finger on who it might have been. But she trusted whoever it was enough to get their ingredient list instead of what was listed.

Malfoy was cutting up his valerian root as though it would disappear. People were glancing at other people's work even as the room filled with blue steam. Hermione was at the "smooth, black currant-like liquid" described in the book as the ideal halfway stage.

The previous owner apparently thought crushing the sopophorous bean released the juices better than cutting. Well, they weren't her ingredients, so it wouldn't hurt to try it, she rationalized.

She heard Malfoy try to engage Slughorn in conversation about his grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy. He likely expected to be treated like a member of Slughorn's favorites, or even the way Snape had in previous years. Instead, he was brushed off.

Hero turned to Hermione. "Can I borrow your silver knife?" Hermione thrust it across the table impatiently. Her potion, which ought to have been lilac by now, remained stubbornly deep purple.

Hero crushed the bean with the dagger. It let out more juice than she would have thought the shriveled bean would hold. She poured it in the cauldron, and the potion turned exactly the lilac shade described. Any resentment she felt at having an old, scribbled in book vanished.

The next change was to add a clockwise stir after every seventh counterclockwise stir. She did so, hoping the annotations could be right twice, and the potion turned palest pink. Hermione noticed, her own potion still dark purple, and demanded to know how she'd done it. When Hero tried to explain, Hermione rejected the suggestion. Hero kept at it.

Across the table, Ron was cursing creatively under his breath. His potion looked like liquid licorice.
No one's potion was as pale as Hero's. She felt like cheering.

Slughorn called time and began to move among the tables. At last he reached their table. Ron's potion looked like tar. Ernie's was navy. He nodded approvingly at Hermione's. When he saw Hero's, however, he got a look of incredulous delight.

"The clear winner. You've certainly inherited your mother's skill at Potions. A dab hand, Lily was. Well, here you are. Use it well," he said with a wink as he handed the bottle over. Hero felt at once delighted to have done it right for once and guilty at the disappointment on Hermione's face, a stark contrast to the radiance Hero had helped put there at the beginning of the lesson. Ron, dumbfounded, demanded to know how she'd done it.

"I guess I just got lucky. Maybe the universe decided I deserved something nice for once." It was sort of the truth. It was complete luck that she had gotten that particular book. And maybe some higher power had decided that her life needed to suck just a little less.

When they got back to Gryffindor, she told them about the book. Hermione looked disgruntled. Ginny, having heard, looked concerned.

"You're taking orders from a book?" Hero was quick to reassure her. Hermione, never one to take chances, cast a revealing charm on it. The book just lay there.

"Are you finished, or were you expecting it to do backflips?" Hero snapped.

"It seems alright," Hermione concluded, though she still looked at the book suspiciously. "I mean, it really does seem to be . . . just a textbook."

"I'll have it back, then," Hero said, snatching it up, only to drop it. She bent to pick it up and saw something scribbled at the bottom of the back cover. In the same spidery, cramped handwriting was written: This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince. Hero tried to suppress the shiver that went up her spine as she read the words in that achingly familiar handwriting.

Chapter End Notes

It's mostly stuff you already know, but it's important stuff.
Hero continued to use the Prince's instructions, and soon Slughorn was raving about her abilities. Hermione kept using the "official" instructions. Ron couldn't make out the handwriting.

Hero remembered (having been taking notes) Snape's speech from their first Potions class. He had called it a subtle science and an exact art. Hermione understood the science part. Hero understood what the Prince was doing. His experimentation showed inspired judgements, calculated risks, artistry. Hermione was the top of the class because she was an autodidact with stunning research capabilities. She didn't operate on instinct, but Hero always had. Well, this time she was borrowing someone else's instincts, but it was almost the same. Besides, a lot of the advice made sense from what she knew about cooking.

There was barely a page without notes, some of the scribbles about spells rather than potions. The Prince seemed to have made them up himself. Hermione had tried to argue that it could be a girl, but Hero at least remembered that the writer had been male. And, judging by the date inside the cover, older. She had no idea whether someone had owned it before the Prince, so exactly how old she couldn't say.

The end of the week and Dumbledore's lesson finally came. Ron and Hermione wished her luck before she set off for the Headmaster's office. She hid behind a statue when she saw Trelawney in the halls, muttering to herself as she shuffled a grimy deck of playing cards.

"Two of spades, conflict. Seven of spades, an ill omen. Ten of spades, violence. Knave of spades, a dark young person, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner--" She stopped dead, right on the other side of Hero's statue. Hero held her breath.

"Well, that can't be right," she muttered, irritated, and began reshuffling. She set off again, and Hero breathed, unfortunately inhaling the scent of cooking sherry. She made her way to the gargoyle on the seventh floor corridor that guarded the head's office. Hero gave the password and took the moving spiral staircase.

She knocked and Dumbledore invited her in. "Ah, Hero! I hope your week back at Hogwarts has been pleasant?" he asked as she sat in the chair before his desk.

"Er. . . ."

"You must have been busy, to have a detention already." He didn't look particularly upset. "I have arranged for you take your detention with Professor Snape next Saturday instead."

"Right," she replied distractedly, looking around the office for signs of what Dumbledore had planned. However, the office looked the same as ever. There didn't even seem to be a space for dueling practice.
"I'm sure you've been curious. I am aware that we have not much time, neither of us. I have decided that you should now be told certain things, now that you know of the prophecy."

"I thought... I thought you told me everything you knew."

"Indeed I did. We will now be moving into the murky marshes of memory and thickets of wildest guesswork. These, ah, lessons, will be a practice in deduction and speculation."

"But you think you're right?"

"Well, of course. But I have made mistakes as anyone else does. In point of fact, my cleverness and schemes tend to make my mistakes rather disastrous."

"Is this going to help me beat him? Surviving, there's not much point in hoping for. But if I can kill him first, I'll die happy."

"It has a great deal to do with the prophecy, and I certainly hope it will help you beat him." He crossed the room to collect the Penseive and laid it on the desk.

"This is a memory from one Bob Ogden, dead for some years now, but once employed by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We will be accompanying him on a visit he made in the course of his duties." Dumbledore was struggling to open the crystal bottle with his charred looking hand. After a moment, he spelled the stopper out.

"Sir... what exactly happened to your hand?"

"Later, Hero. You need to see this."

They dove into the memory. Bob Ogden led them to a shack, a town visible in the distance. A man warned Ogden off in Parseltongue. His father came out, then grudgingly invited Ogden inside. Apparently, the son, Morfin, had attacked a muggle and Ogden had come to inform him of his hearing, as their owls went unanswered.

A sudden movement drew Hero's attention to a girl whose ragged grey dress matched the filthy walls and floor. Hero had never seen a more defeated person in all her life. She dropped a pot on the floor and scrambled to pick it up. Her father screamed at her for acting like a filthy muggle rather than using her wand.

He then showed Ogden a stone ring on his middle finger. He called Ogden a filthy mudblood and claimed the ring had been in the family for centuries, pureblood all the way. He claimed the scratches on it made up the Peverell coat of arms. He grabbed hold of the locket around his daughter, Merope's, neck and shook it in Ogden's face, claiming it came from Salazar Slytherin, that they were his last living descendants. Merope gasped and spluttered for breath, retreating back to her corner when he released her.

Ogden pressed on. Apparently, Morfin had jinxed or hexed a muggle, causing him to break out in hives. He would attend a disciplinary hearing on the fourteenth of September.

A horse's bridle, covered in bells, could be heard approaching the shack. Two muggles, a man and a woman, could be heard to converse on the state of the place and the Gaunt family. The woman laughed and the horses continued.

Then the girl spoke again. "Tom, I might be wrong, but has somebody nailed a snake to be door?"

"Good Lord, you're right! That'll be the son, I told you he's not right in the head. Don't look at it,
Cecilia, darling.” The horses moved off again. Morfin taunted his sister about her feelings for the muggle.

Their father jumped in at that point. Morfin told him about how she was always mooning after him, waiting in the garden when he went by. Their father called her a squib and a blood traitor before attacking her. Ogden used a spell to get him off of Merope, but then Morfin pulled a knife and started firing off hexes, and Ogden ran for his life. Hero and Dumbledore followed, Merope's screams echoing in their ears.

Ogden bumped into the muggles on his way out. They laughed at his awkwardness. The man looked oddly familiar. Dumbledore grasped her arm and they exited the memory.

"What happened to the girl?"

"Ogden returned within fifteen minutes with reinforcements. Morfin got three years, his father's Marvolo, as he had attacked several Ministry employees, received six months."

"Marvolo? He was--"

"Voldemort's grandfather, yes. The Guants were known for violence and instability, cemented by their tendency for marrying their own cousins. The family gold was squandered several generations before Marvolo, leaving him with a nasty temper, an excess of arrogance and pride, and a few heirlooms amid the squalor they lived in. He treasured the few things passed down the family as much as his son and rather more than his daughter."

"If he was Voldemort's grandfather... she was his mother?"

"Yes. You also got a glimpse of his father, did you notice?"

"He muggle on the horse?"

"Indeed, Tom Riddle Senior, a handsome muggle whom Merope secretly fancied herself in love with."

"And they got married? He fell in love with her?" Hero tried to keep from sounding incredulous, without much success.

"You forget that Merope was a witch."

"You think she used the Imperius Curse or gave him a love potion?"

"Quite, though I suspect the love potion would have appealed to her sense of romance. I imagine it wouldn't have been difficult to convince him to accept a glass of water as he rode by some hot day. In any case, a few months after the scene we just witnessed, there was a tremendous scandal as the squire's son ran off with the tramp's daughter.

"Marvolo returned to find the shack abandoned instead of, as he expected, his daughter waiting with a hot meal on the table. He did not survive to see Morfin return home."

"Merope died not long after, didn't she, sir? Voldemort grew up in an orphanage."

"Indeed. The facts are that, a few months after their wedding, Tom Riddle Senior showed up at the manor without his wife. Rumors flew around the village that he said he had been 'hoodwinked.' I suspect he meant he had been enchanted but didn't like to use those words. Villagers got the impression that she had pretended to be carrying his child. Lord Voldemort wasn't born until a year


after they married. Riddle Senior left her while she was still pregnant."

"Why did the love potion stop working?"

"Ah. This is where we must hazard a guess. I believe she, so deeply in love with him, stopped giving him the potion. Perhaps she simply didn't want to enslave him any longer. Perhaps she believed he would love her in return. Perhaps she thought he would stay for the child. In any case, he left, never saw her again, and never bothered to discover what became of his son."

"I know he's Voldemort, and he wouldn't appreciate it, and he doesn't deserve it. . . . But that's awful."

"Yes, it is rather. I believe that's enough for tonight, Hero."

"Yes, sir. Is it important to know about Voldemort's past?"

"I think so."

Hero found herself at once confused and reassured. She turned to leave, then another question occurred to her. "Am I allowed to tell Ron and Hermione?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I think they've proven themselves trustworthy. I would, however, advise against further disclosure. I don't want it getting out how much I know, or rather suspect, about Voldemort's secrets."

"I understand, sir. Good night." As she turned to leave again, she saw an ugly black ring with a cracked black stone sitting on one of the tables with silver instruments. Dumbledore had been wearing it the night they'd gone to see Slughorn.

"Sir, isn't that the ring Marvolo Gaunt was wearing in the memory?"

"Yes, I acquired it over the summer, a few days before I fetched you from your aunt and uncle, in fact."

"Around the time you injured your hand?"

"Around that time, yes."

Hero decided to stop dancing around. "Sir, how exactly--?"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "It is late, Hero. Another time, I promise. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

As she approached the door, there was a sharp knock. She opened it to reveal Severus Snape.

"Evening, Professor." He stood aside to let her past and swept into the office. The door clicked shut.

* 

"What was Potter doing here?" Severus demanded. "I suppose this is why my detention was rescheduled?"

"I am preparing Hero for what she must do. We have not much time."
"Yes, I have your potion with me."

"Leave it on the desk," Dumbledore told him, waving dismissively. "I have things I wish to discuss with you. Sit. Tea?" Severus took the phial from his robes, laid it on the table, and sat, feeling as though he was being x-rayed as the headmaster surveyed him over the tops of his half-moon spectacles.

"Please." Dumbledore called a house elf and ordered a pit of earl grey. He scrutinized Severus for a moment.

"You witnessed Miss Potter's . . . episode."

"Yes. I would have appreciated being informed prior to the experience."

"You, Pomfrey, and myself are the only members of staff who are aware. Miss Potter wishes to keep it that way."

"Indeed? Is that everything?"

"No. What you witnessed may well happen again. It is a symptom of her condition."

"What condition?"

"I am forbidden from disclosing it without her express permission. However, she is being medicated and will have doctor's appointments throughout the school year. The side effects and the symptoms may cause problems in and out of class. The subject I wish to discuss with you is the matter of her appointments. She can neither floo nor Apparate. Both are Ministry regulated, and the Ministry may fall at any moment, never mind the Death Eaters already within its ranks. Even so, she could not Apparate, as I suspect it would exacerbate her condition."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"I take it you can drive?"

"You cannot actually expect me to drive six and a half hours to London and six and a half hours back because Miss Potter is ill!"

"I can, and you will. Her specialist is on Harley Street. Discuss it with her during her detention. When you take her . . . try to be cordial with her. She's going through a difficult time."

"Really? Is it difficult for precious Potter?" he sneered.

"She will tell you if she desires. But yes, the next year or two will be terribly unpleasant for the girl. She does not need you adding to her burden. Nor does she want your pity."

"Pity?" Severus spat. "Pity?! If you think anything could move me to pity the girl, perhaps you are as mad as everyone thinks." He took a deep breath. "Be that as it may, I will . . . attempt to be less antagonistic." He smirked. "If I was pleasant, she might go into cardiac arrest."

"Severus, all I ask is that you be . . . a different version of yourself. You may not believe you can be good, or kind, or compassionate, but I know it. Lily knew it."

Severus froze and glared at the headmaster for a moment. He rose stiffly. "If that's everything, Albus, I have things to do." He swept out without waiting for a reply.

It was a low blow. All part of an old man's machinations. And the girl? Perhaps she really was ill.
She'd had a seizure. He tried to remember if she'd looked different to how he recalled her last year, different from her classmates. Tired, perhaps. But they were at war. It was exhausting. Paler? Thinner? He hated not knowing things.

He'd watch. He might even ask Potter. He'd have to spend thirteen hours with her for every appointment. He swore. He would be furthering his acquaintance with hell. He was sure of it.
The stack of books Hermione had been carrying on Monday to be read by Wednesday had only been the first sign of what was to come. They had mountains of homework, and their professors were acting as though they had exams every day. Their free periods (the worst joke Ron had ever been told) were spent attempting to keep up with all they were assigned. Hero wasn't sure how Hermione kept up, since she had more classes and fewer free periods. Fortunately, she was too busy for dark thoughts to intrude.

The professors seemed to be speaking a different language. Hero only understood about half of what they said. Even Hermione had to ask them to repeat themselves. Hermione was more than a little miffed that Hero was now top in Potions in addition to her aptitude for Defense.

After a few days of it, Hero had snapped at her. It was in the morning, when the other girls were doing their makeup in the bathroom. "I just don't think it's quite fair that you have a book with better instructions while the rest of us have the official book and Professor Slughorn."

Hero had turned to stare at her incredulously. "Fair? Bloody hell, Hermione! I'm an orphan, I'm dying of cancer, and the entire wizarding world expects me to kill someone! You have the benefit of being enormously intelligent. How is that fair? Complain if you like, but don't come whinging to me because it's not fair!" With that, she clattered down the stairs to the Common Room, but not before she saw the tears shining in Hermione's eyes. She felt the guilt and shame sink in her stomach like a stone. Her potions book was in her hand.

She took a seat by the window and tried to practice nonverbal summoning spells. They were expected in Charms and Transfiguration, now, as well as Defense. She'd seen students purple in the face at lunch, looking like they'd overdosed on U-No-Poo. She knew they were working on silent spells; she felt their pain.

They had Herbology on Tuesdays. It was an enormous relief to be out in the greenhouses. The plants were more dangerous than ever, but they were still permitted to swear loudly if the Venomous Tentacula grabbed them from behind.

She apologized at breakfast, after seeing Pomfrey. Hermione smiled weakly.

"I'm sorry, too. You have a point. But I worry. And I just... I really wish that was the worst thing we had to worry about. I forgot that you have... the thing that begins with c," Hermione said awkwardly. Hero hugged her.

"I wish I could."

* 

While the exhausting course-load distracted Hero from morbid thoughts, it also meant they hadn't
gotten down to see Hagrid. He wasn't at meals in the Great Hall anymore, a bad sign, though worse was that he ignored their greetings in the halls.

"He has to be ignoring us. We're not exactly quiet. And we wave to him. It's not like he doesn't see. He's head and shoulders above everyone else. Other people notice and give us weird looks," Hero pointed out.

Hermione looked away from the staff table and Hagrid's empty chair. "I really think we'll have to go and explain," Hermione agreed unhappily.

"We have Quidditch try-outs Saturday morning," Ron told her firmly. "And we have to practice that Aguamenti Charm for Flitwick! Besides, what's there to explain? I love Hagrid, but, frankly, I'm terrified of his subject."

"At least I had experience with the Skrewts when I had to face them in the Third Task," Hero defended, though she, too, had hated them.

"I hate not talking to Hagrid," Hermione sighed. In the end, they all agreed to visit after Quidditch try-outs. Hero had no intentions of taking the entire morning. She was well aware that most people had only signed up to gawk.

She was surprised when Hedwig flew in to deliver mail, Pigwidgeon behind her, as she hadn't received any yet. Sirius had been the only person to write regularly. She had hoped Lupin might, but he was undoubtedly still deep in mourning. It turned out to be their new copies of Advanced Potion-Making. Hermione didn't say a word. She did look scandalized when Hero swapped the covers, however.

"I'll give Slughorn back the new one. He can't complain, it cost nine Galleons."

Hermione didn't meet her eye. She was saved by the arrival of the Daily Prophet.

"Anyone we know dead?" Ron asked in a measured tone, as he did every time a Hermione got the paper.

"No, but there have been some more Dementor attacks. And an arrest."

"Excellent, who?" Hero asked, crossing her fingers for Bellatrix Lestrange as she spread marmalade over her toast.

"Stan Shunpike."

"What?" Hero asked, startled, looking up from her breakfast.

"He's been arrested on suspicion of Death Eater activity. They took him into custody last night after they raided his house."

"Him, a Death Eater?" Hero scoffed, thinking of the pimple-faced boy she'd met three years before. "There's no way."

"Anyone could have gotten on the Knight Bus and Imperiused him," Ron pointed out.

"I don't think that's it. It says here he was arrested after talking about the Death Eaters secret plans in a pub. If he was Imperiused, he'd hardly be in a pub, gossiping about their plans, would he?"

"Oh, come off it. Isn't he the one who claimed he was going to be Minister for Magic when he was
"trying to chat up those veela?" Hero nodded. "He's probably just trying to impress his mates."

"Even arresting someone like Stan Shunpike is better than doing nothing, at least where the Ministry is concerned," Hermione argued. "The Patil twins’ parents want them to come home, and Eloise Midgeon was picked up last night."

"But Hogwarts has Dumbledore, and those new protective enchantments. It's bound to be safer!" Ron protested.

"Haven't you noticed? Dumbledore's chair has been empty as much as Hagrid's has this week." They glanced up at the staff table to find Dumbledore's chair, indeed, empty. Come to that, Hero hadn't seen him since their lesson a week ago.

"It's . . . it's probably for the Order, isn't it? Things are really getting serious," Hermione said in an undertone. They all remembered that a few days ago in Herbology, when Hannah Abbot had been taken aside and told her mother had been found dead. They hadn't seen Hannah since.

They went down to the Quidditch pitch, passing Parvati and Lavender. If their parents really did want to pull the Patil twins, that explained why Parvati and Lavender had been taking so long in the bathroom. They were best friends, they'd probably been crying, then fixing it with makeup. They were now whispering together, unsurprisingly.

What was odd was that Parvati nudged Lavender as Ron approached, and Lavender beamed at him. Ron smiled uncertainly back, his walk becoming more of a strut. Hero resisted the temptation to laugh, as Ron hadn't laughed at her when she told him about Malfoy. Hermione just rolled her eyes.

She went to find a seat in the stands without wishing Ron luck.

As Hero had anticipated, there was quite a crowd. There was everyone from giggling first years to coolly assured seventh years to . . . Cormac McLaggen.

"We met on the train, old Sluggy's compartment," he said smoothly, taking her hand and going to kiss it. She pulled it from his grasp and pursed her lips as she scrutinized him.

"You didn't try out last year. Why?"

"I was in the hospital wing for try-outs last year. Ate a pound of doxy eggs for a bet," he told her, grinning like it was the coolest thing anyone has ever done. Wrong move.

"Did you indeed? Well, if you would wait over there," she said, pointing to the edge of the pitch, close to where Hermione was sitting. Annoyance flickered across his face for a moment. Perhaps he'd expected preferential treatment because they were both "old Sluggy's" favorites. Arrogant arse.

"Right," she yelled, and silence fell. "For try-outs and practices, this pitch is mine. And, if you are a first year, you will get off my pitch. You're not allowed, go join the gobstones club or something."

About ten giddy eleven year-olds flocked off the pitch into the stands.

The third group had a pileup halfway down the pitch. The fourth group hadn't brought brooms. The fifth group was made up of Hufflepuffs.

"Anyone not from Gryffindor can bloody well get off my pitch!" There was a pause, and a group of
Ravenclaws left, snorting with laughter.

Two hours later, after complaints, tantrums, a crashed Comet Two Sixty, and several broken teeth, she had: Katie Bell, after an excellent trial; Demelza Robins, a new find particularly good at dodging bludgers; and Ginny Weasley, who had outflown the competition and scored seventeen goals to boot. Pleased as she was with her choices, she was very glad Hermione had come onto the pitch to perform the amplifying charm on her throat. She'd probably be hoarse otherwise.

"Keepers are next. If you don't get off my pitch, I'll hex you," she bellowed at the grumbling rejects.

The new beaters were no match for the Weasley twins, but she hadn't been expecting that. Oliver Wood had been right when he said they were like a pair of bludgers themselves. Her picks were decent though. Jimmy Peaks was a short, broad chested third year who had raised a lump the size of an egg on the back of her head. It didn't improve her persistent headache, but it was an excellent quality in a beater. The other one, Ritchie Coote, looked weedy but he had great aim. They joined the rest of the hopefuls in the stands.

Hero had hoped that the pitch would have emptied as the morning wore on, which was why she had scheduled the keepers last, so they wouldn't be under as much pressure. Unfortunately, not only had the entire crowd who had shown up settled in the stands, more people had arrived. As the prospective keepers flew up to the goal hoops, they were cheered and jeered in equal measure.

Ron had always had a problem with nerves. She had hoped their resounding victory the previous term would have cured him, but apparently not. He was a delicate shade of green. Pale pea green, perhaps? Spring leaf? Light moss?

None of the first five saved more than two apiece. Cormac, to Hero's enormous disappointment, saved four penalties out of five. On the last one, he flew in completely the wrong direction. He landed to the boos of the crowd, grinding his teeth. Hero felt like cheering.

Ron looked rather faint by this point. Lavender Brown continued her trend of odd behavior by wishing Ron luck. Hero really hoped that particular flame would peter out quickly. She stared resolutely at Ron. She needn't have worried, Ron saved all five. Hero found it hard to keep herself from cheering with the crowd. Hermione came over to take off the amplification charm.

It was with what she hoped was adequately disguised glee that she turned to inform McLaggen that Ron had made the team instead. His very red face was mere inches from her own. She blinked, and stepped back.

"His sister didn't really try," McLaggen said menacingly. "She gave him an easy save." He had a vein pulsing in his temple that bore more than a passing resemblance to the one in Vernon's, so active in Hero's presence. She wasn't impressed.

"That was the one he nearly missed," she pointed out coldly, hand on her hip. McLaggen stepped closer, but this time Hero stood her ground, twirling her wand. McLaggen missed the sparks singeing the grass.

"You're going to give me another go."

"I don't think you quite understand the situation. I am Quidditch captain. This is my team. At the moment, it's my Quidditch pitch. You don't tell me what to do." She stepped closer, turning frozen emerald eyes on him, half a dozen curses coming to mind. "Do we understand each other, McLaggen?" she asked softly. It took him a moment for him to get his fury under control. She briefly wondered if she was going to get punched for the second time in a week.
"Yes," he snapped.

"That's all fine, then. I'll send you a message if we need a relief keeper. Do have a pleasant day," she told him, smiling sweetly as she turned away. Twat.

Her new team was beaming at her. A genuine smile came onto her face. "Well done, everyone, you flew brilliantly--" She was interrupted by Hermione hugging Ron and congratulating him. Ron looked quite pleased with himself.

They fixed the first real practice for the following Thursday and the three of them set off for Hagrid's. A weak sun was trying to break through the clouds, and it had stopped drizzling. Hero had worked up an appetite and was, for once, hungry as well as nauseous. She'd only eaten a slice of toast with marmalade and a few kippers for breakfast, after all.

Hero wasn't really listening as Ron described his exemplary trial. Her ears pricked up when he started in on McLaggen.

"... Looked like he'd been Confunded," he snorted, of McLaggen's failed save. Hero noticed Hermione turn a deep shade of pink. Ron did not, continuing to relate his saves in loving detail.

"Did you...?" Hero whispered to her. Hermione looked away. Hero giggled.

They found Buckbeak in front of Hagrid's hut. They bowed and went to say hello.

"Git away from him, he'll have yer fingers--! Oh. It's you lot." With that, Hagrid retreated into his hut and slammed the door.

Hero and Hermione exchanged glances. "Oh, dear."

"Don't worry about it," Hero told her and went over to pound on the door. "Hagrid! We want to talk!"

"If you don't open the door, we'll only blast it off its hinges!" she yelled, making no move to reach for her wand.

The door flew open again to reveal Hagrid in a flowery apron, glowering at them. It was somehow more terrifying with the apron than without.

"I'm a teacher! A teacher, Potter!" he roared. "How dare yeh threaten ter break down my door!"

"I'm terribly sorry, sir," she said, her empty hands clasped in front of her.

Hagrid looked stunned. "Since when have you called me 'sir'?"

Hero snorted. "Since when have you called me Potter?"

"Oh, very clever. Real amusin'. That's me outsmarted, innit? Oh, come in, then, yeh ungrateful little..." Mumbling darkly, he stood back to let them pass. Hermione followed Hero, eyeing him warily.

"Well?" he demanded with a glare once they were all seated around his enormous table. "Feelin' sorry for me? Reckon I'm lonely or summat?"

"No, of course not," Hero hurried to reassure him. "We wanted to see you."

"We missed you!" Hermione added.
"Yeah. Right," he muttered, filling the kettle and putting it on. Finally, he slammed three bucket-sized mugs in front of them and a plate of his rock cakes. Hero's hunger receded, leaving her with nausea again. As ever, she took one to be polite.

"Hagrid," Hermione began timidly as he sat down and began vigorously peeling potatoes. "We really wanted to take your subject, you know." Hagrid snorted. "We did! But none of us could fit it in our schedules."

"Oh, of course," Hagrid muttered sarcastically, not looking up from the potatoes.

A squelching sound came from a barrel in the corner. Ron jumped out of his seat and edged away from it. Hermione shrieked. The barrel was full of things that looked like foot long maggots.

"Oh, er, what are they, Hagrid?" Hero asked, aiming for interest.

"Giant grubs. For Aragog." With that, he burst into tears. Hero and Hermione went over, making sure to avoid the grubs, to comfort him.

"He's . . . he's . . . I think he's dyin'. He got sick over the summer . . . and he's not getting better. I don't know what I'll do. . . . We've been together so long. . . ." Hero had been planning on telling him about her cancer, but now she wasn't sure he could cope. Aragog was one of the more incomprehensible of his monster fancies, but love was love.

"Is there anything we can do?" Hermione asked, though Ron made frantic gestures for her to shut up.

"Nah, I don't think it's safe for anyone to go near the colony at the mo'. But thanks for offering, Hermione. It means a lot." He proceeded to blow his nose in his apron.

The atmosphere listened considerably, as Hagrid seemed to take it for granted that Hero and Ron would have been happy to feed grubs to a gargantuan, murderous spider. The mugs were promptly filled with tea and not permitted to empty.

He refused to go into detail when they asked about his summer, stating Order business as the reason. He did mention that he'd spent rather a lot of time with Madame Maxine. He asked about their summers, Ron and Hermione answering on detail, seeing panic on Hero's face. It turned out Hermione had sandwiches in her bag, which she shared with Hero around lunch. It was with his usual cheer that Hagrid waved them off to supper.

Hero was hungry again. She groaned as she remembered the detention with Snape. "I'll have almost no time to eat!"

They saw McLaggen entering the Great Hall. It took him here tries, since he kept walking into the frame. Ron guffawed, but Hero held Hermione back.

"He still looks Confunded!" she hissed. "What if someone realizes he was standing in front of where you were sitting?"

"Oh, you should have heard him talking about Ron and Ginny! Besides, you saw the way he reacted when he didn't make the team. Do you really want to have to deal with someone like that?"

"No, I don't. But you, a prefect?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and swept past her into the Great Hall. Hero followed, delighted to see roast beef waiting for her. The smell made her nauseous again, however.
Horace Slughorn approached them almost as soon as they had set foot in the Great Hall.

"Ah, just the witches I wanted to see! I was wondering if you'd join me for a little party I'm hosting--"

"I'm afraid I don't feel very well, Professor," Hero gasped out before clapping her hand over her mouth and running for the nearest bathroom.

She sat with her back against the stall door. No dinner, and detention with Snape. Yippee. She made a note to ask for her meds to be adjusted. There had to be something that would help.

She knew dinner was a wash, so she went up to the common room to do some of her neglected homework. A grumpy Ron and a snappish Hermione came up not long after.

"You could come with me if you wanted!"

"Oh, no. I wasn't invited," he shot back petulantly.

Hermione reached for the newspaper, then paused. "Your dad's in the paper again." The color drained out of Ron's face. "No, no, he's fine! He conducted a raid on the Malfoys' place. Apparently he didn't find anything."

This led to a short, heated discussion on groundless suspicions and how Malfoy couldn't get dark objects into Hogwarts. Then it came time for her detention.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter is another that is totally original. You know, except for the characters and the setting and everything. This one was fun.

Snape looked up from his marking. "Potter. Start scrubbing." He jerked his head to the collection of dirty cauldrons, next to the sinks.

"Yes, sir," she muttered, hiding her relief. She'd been worried she'd have to . . . sort through rotten flobberworms without gloves. She probably would have if Slughorn had tried to get her out of detention for his party. As it was, she was well used to dishes.

Since Snape wasn't the Potions Professor anymore, either these were from his personal brewing or Slughorn had donated them for detentions.

As she got soap and water, she inspected the potion residue, trying to see what it was. One was a blood replenisher. Another was thick and white, like sunblock. Sensitivity to sunlight was one of the rarer side-effects of her chemotherapy. Were they . . . for her? He couldn't know that. But it was just a bit ironic. A nice kind of irony.

"Potter, stop dilly dallying! You're here until you finish with those."

"Yes, sir," she replied, moving faster with the steel wool.

It passed like that for three quarters of an hour. She was on the last of them when Snape spoke again.

"The headmaster has ordered me to escort you to your appointment. When is it?"

"You're . . . ? But, I thought Madam Pomfrey. . . ."

"The matron has other patients. She cannot simply abandon them for you. When is your appointment?"

"Two o' clock on Saturday the twenty-first, then again every month."

"Every month? That's rather frequent. Is it related to the seizures?"

Her chin came up defiantly. "I don't see how it's any of your business. But yes."

"Don't worry, I don't care enough to pry. Finish that one up and you may go."

* 

A week later, on Saturday at seven in the morning, Hero was waiting in the entrance hall, trial journal in hand. She'd had a bit of breakfast in the kitchens, pancakes and a few slices of bacon, then gone to Pomfrey for her anti-convulsant.

Snape swept up the stairs. It lost something without his robes billowing behind him. Hero couldn't
help but stare. Her professor was wearing a black leather jacket over a black sweater and his usual trousers. He looked younger in muggle clothes, a bit more human. Almost handsome. His glare was pure Snape, though, with the extra zest of early morning bad temper.

"There is a carriage waiting. There is a car waiting at the foot of the hill. We have a six and a half hour trip to London. You will have your appointment. We will drive back to Hogwarts. You will not talk." Hero nodded, and they left the castle.

Snape's lips twisted as he helped her into the carriage. She scooted over and he climbed in beside her, her expression stony. She folded her hands in her lap and stared straight ahead, because it would not be a good idea to stare at Snape.

The thestral-drawn carriage wound down the drive. She was almost surprised they didn't look clearer. She'd wept over a second loss. Her own end was fast approaching. But the thestrals were as just as concrete as they'd been a year before, just as unnerving and otherworldly.

The car, a black sedan, was waiting as promised. Hogsmead was bathed in mist and almost empty in the early hour. The world seemed bleak, empty.

Snape finally glanced over at her. "You may as well sleep. There's precious little else to do."

She was quite tired. No teenager really got enough sleep, and she got fatigued more easily. Sure, it was a way to ward off conversation, but it was almost considerate. She reclined the seat and curled up.

She woke around ten, blinking blearily as the motorway whipped past.

"Where are we?" Snape kept his gaze on the road.

"Past Lancaster."

She yawned and stretched, blinking blearily. "Can I put on the radio?"

"No."

"What can I do?" she demanded plaintively.

"Go back to sleep."

"I already did that."

Snape pointedly did not look at her, instead staring out the windshield. His lips twisted. "Fine."

Hero wondered whether he'd hate what she picked. She inwardly shrugged. He'd make his disapproval known. She flipped through, settling for classic rock. Snape scowled at her, but didn't change the station. She decided to count it as a win.

After fifteen minutes of that, she began to realize just how long the journey was going to be. She glared at her professor. "I would like to engage in conversation."

"I wouldn't."

"You're bound to be as bored as I am, at least eventually." He rolled his eyes and did not comment.

"What's your favorite color?" she asked, half-sarcastically.
"Black," he replied, completely sarcastically.

"Shocker," she muttered.

"Potter, you've already violated my privacy. I fail to see why I should tell you anything."

"Because you control the flow of information." A glint came into his dark eyes, and the right corner of his mouth, unseen by Hero, quirked.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked, beaming at him.

"None of your business."

"Fair enough. Where do you live?"

"Hogwarts."

Hero rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean."

Silence. Then, "Cokeworth. In the Midlands."

"Oh, I've been there. We stayed in the Railview Hotel when the Dursleys were running from my Hogwarts letters." Snape's eyes flicked over to her suspiciously. She looked innocently back. "You could ask me a question. That's generally how this works."

"Why should I?"

"Control of the flow of information," she repeated.

"Fine. What is your appointment for?"

Hero's eyes flicked to the monotonous view out the window. "Pass."

"I have answered your questions."

"Ask something else."

"When did your illness start?"

"Last year. I wasn't diagnosed until the tail end of last June."

"You'll answer that but you won't say what it is?"

"When it happened doesn't matter."

"And whatever is wrong with you does?" She resolutely stared out the window. He sighed.

"How much longer must I chauffeur you to these appointments?"

"They tell me it'll only last another year or two," she said carelessly, picking at the sole of one of her trainers.

"I suppose I'll survive." Hero fought the urge to laugh hysterically.

Bohemian Rhapsody came on. Hero sang along softly. The corners of Snape's mouth tightened at "Mama, just killed a man."
"... He's just a poor boy, nobody loves him. Spare him his life from this monstrosity." Snape turned the radio off. Hero glared. Snape glared back. Hero looked away.

"You'll have to talk to me now."

"It has obviously escaped your notice, but I don't have to do a damn thing except get you to London and back."

Hero rolled her eyes. "Tell me about the war."

"Certainly not. You are not kept abreast of the activities of the Order for good reason."

She let out a sigh of frustration. "That's not what I meant! Hermione skims the paper and tells us bits and pieces, but I know it's not the whole picture, not really."

"Ask your Head of House."

"I would, but you're here. Besides, you have a view of both sides. You understand the war as a whole in a way Professor McGonagall simply can't."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Potter."

"Please?"

His lips twisted. "Very well. Dementors are swarming. Death Eaters are raiding. People are dying. Those left alive are panicking. The worst is yet to come. Is that what you wanted?"

"Could have figured that out for myself, thanks."

"Excellent, you're learning. Now you know not to ask again."

Hero sighed. She started playing I spy.

It turned out I spy was only fun with a plurality of players. The Dursleys always seemed to have fun playing it. Although, now she thought about it, that had really only been Aunt Petunia. Dudley had played on his Gameboy. Uncle Vernon had grumbled about the state of the country, and Aunt Petunia had desperately tried to bring them together. At least, that's what happened when they drove her to London on the first of September.

It was the same problem as with the free periods at the beginning of the week. The thoughts crept in if given half a chance. A long car ride along the motorway without distractions was far more than half a chance. She started humming, to concentrate on something else. Anything else. She stared at the dashboard, her eyes unseeing. She did not notice Snape's irritation.

"Would you desist?!"

She stopped humming, glancing at him in surprise. "Sorry. What kind of music do you like? I could put the radio on again."

"You may not."

"Why do you hate me this much? What have I really done to you?"

"You violated my privacy, for one."

"I'm very terribly sorry. I know a secret about you, now you know one about me."
"What the devil are you talking about?"

"You know I'm ill. Not many people do. Just my relatives, Ron and Hermione, you, Dumbledore, and Pomfrey."

"You don't know any of my secrets."

"I was under the impression that the memory I saw wasn't common knowledge."

"It might have been a secret at one point. Before you saw it."

"And you think I blabbed it all over the school," she accused, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't see why you wouldn't," he snorted.

"I'm not a bully! I would never!"

"Oh? Gryffindor chivalry and all the rest?" he asked scathingly.

"No. Just a miserable childhood."

"Pardon me if I don't believe you," he sneered.

"Believe whatever you like. But you know as well as I do that not all muggles are innocent and good and kind."

"I suppose you think you know everything?"

"No. I'll leave that up to you."

"Next time, I suggest you bring a book or some other method of amusing yourself."

"I don't have one now," she pointed out acidly, then paused. "We could pretend we're capable of sharing a civil conversation."

"And where would you like to start? The weather?" he suggested, his velvet voice dripping with sarcasm. Hero snorted.

"Are you happy to have the Defense position?"

"Ecstatic."

"Oh, really? The temptation to quote you is almost unbearable."

"I'm eminently quotable."

"Unfortunately, you are. I still remember your speech from my first day."

"I very much doubt that."

"Let's see. Er, 'As there is little foolish wand waving in this class, many of you will scarcely believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses. However, for the select few, I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even put a stopper in death.'" She grinned, proud of herself. Severus, for his part, was speechless. "I wrote it down, you see."
"Did you indeed," he muttered. He glanced at her. "Turn the radio back on." She obliged. They didn't exchange another word until they reached the city.

London traffic was mad. They fought their way to Harley Street, Snape swearing creatively all the way. He stopped in front of Dr. Warren's practice.

"I have ingredients to buy on Diagon. I trust you can take the Tube over to the Leaky Cauldron? Do you have muggle money?" She nodded and got out. Snape drove away.

A doorman bowed her through the elegant door, through the foyer, up the stairs. The waiting room was just as lavish for the cancer patients as for the people in other offices for plastic surgery consultations. Leather couches, chandeliers. It was still a doctor's office, though. And she was still dying.

Hero picked up a glossy fashion magazine, flicking past moody, anorexic women in odd clothes. She tossed it aside, eyeing the other patients, all in various stages of illness, all members of the well-heeled crowd. She glanced down at her clothes, grey tights, charcoal pleated skirt, Gryffindor sweater, tie, and white blouse. She scrunched her toes in her black and white converse sneakers.

Some of those around her looked either recovered or not very far progressed. Others had breathing machines, prosthetics, wigs. A blonde woman who looked about fifty was sitting closest to her. She glanced askance at Hero, sniffed, and returned to her journal. Hero rolled her eyes. Even among sick people, there existed the haves and the have nots. Which was, quite frankly, ridiculous. Most of the people in the room were at least facing the possibility of death. Anyway, she wasn't inferior even by their measures. And death was all around.

Did it ever get comfortable, death? It was like an itch from a new shirt that was too tight, uncomfortable no matter how much you wriggled. But maybe if you put up with it long enough, it faded away. She felt like cackling. Oh, it faded, she thought to herself, and you along with it.

She was brought out of her reverie by the receptionist calling her name. Doctor Warren was waiting next to the desk. He led her back to his office, their feet silent on the thick carpet.

"How's school?"

"Okay, I guess. It's more interesting now that it's only subjects I picked."

"And your sport, what was it?"

"Lacrosse. It's going quite well. I'm team captain this year, and we had try-outs two weeks ago. I'm quite pleased with my choices."

"Good, good. As long as it's not too strenuous or dangerous, I encourage it." He held the door of his office open. She went through and sat in the chair across the desk.

"I heard you had a seizure your first night back."

"Yes. No damage, though."

"That's what we like to hear. Your medication is working?"

"None since, so I assume so."

"Any other complaints?"
"Nausea."

"The meds for that aren't working? We've adjusted them twice already. Hmm. I'll prescribe you something else, but you may just have to endure it. You have your journal?" Hero handed it over. He paged through it.

"You've documented your physiological symptoms very well. And I know the idea might be repugnant for what's essentially a homework assignment for the drug trial, but . . . have you thought about using it as a more typical journal?"

"What do you mean?"

"As a diary to work through your thoughts and feelings. It can be a place where you can be completely honest. I imagine there may be things you hesitate to tell your friends, either because you don't want to burden them or because it's simply too private. You don't have to worry about what you write. Some of my other patients have found it therapeutic, though it's entirely up to you, of course."

"I'll think about it."

"Excellent. Where's the nearest hospital to your school? One that would have a CT machine?"

"Erm, probably Glasgow."

"I will make an appointment for you to go in for a scan and some blood tests in two weeks. How should I contact you about the details?"

"I don't have a mobile, but I have a bird that carries letters, like a carrier pigeon. She's a snowy owl."

"Really? That's . . . novel. Well, I'll have the appointment made by Monday. So, how are things?"

"I'm sure you've noticed the bleak weather, the general depression, the strange deaths."

"It's been on the news."

"A girl got pulled out of . . . out of botany class. She . . . her mother was killed. No one's seen her since."

"God. I'm . . . I'm so sorry. Is she a friend?"

"We're friendly enough, not really close. She's dating a friend of mine. Or was last I heard, anyway. People are frightened. I suppose I should probably be frightened, too."

"You're not?"

"There's not much left to be scared of. I don't want anything to happen to my friends, but I'm not worried for me. I'm . . . spoken for, in a way."

"Bit morbid."

Hero shot him a crooked grin. "What can I say?"

"Right. Emotional state? Hostility?"

"During try-outs, I may have gotten a bit hostile."
"What do you mean?"

"Loads of people were there for a laugh, which was annoying. There was one girl who refused to accept that someone else was better than her, she tried to intimidate me. I told her I was captain, it was my field, and she'd get off it if she knew what was good for her."

"That sounds harmless enough." It wasn't when Hero had lived through it. She'd wanted to curse his nose off, like Eloise Midgeon had done trying to get rid of her acne. She'd wanted to know what he'd look like with his nose off-center. She'd felt like Bellatrix Lestrange later, twirling her wand, a curse on her lips. Dr. Warren didn't know what she was capable of. In point of fact, neither did she. She was beginning to discover that it was far more than she might have thought, and it terrified her.

"I have awful, cruel thoughts. I wanted to hurt the girl. I hate this, that I'm this person."

"That's going to happen. You haven't had the surgery or the radiation, so you don't have that to worry about. On the other hand, you're in pain, your brain is deteriorating, and you're dying. Personality changes are a symptom of your cancer, and death is upsetting. I can prescribe you antidepressants to help with the pain. They might also help with the mood swings. I'll look for other possibilities."

"Thanks," she muttered. They chatted a bit more, about treatment options, what the next few months would be like, and her timeline. He gave her the dosages for the next month. Then they scheduled the next appointment, and she left. It was just a stroll down Harley Street to the tiny Regent's Park station, three stops down the line to Charing Cross Road, where the Leaky Cauldron stood, ignored by the muggles passing by. Despite herself, Hero grinned. Particularly in such dark and uncertain times, it was nice to see a haven.

She stepped inside to find it empty, Tom the Landlord morosely wiping tables. He looked up hopefully. She remembered Hagrid bustling them out when they'd been in a month before, telling him they didn't have time for a drink.

"I'd love a butterbeer." He looked at her like she was his saving grace and hurried to get her one. Snape could wait.

After her second butterbeer, she really did have to leave. Tom thanked her profusely, bowing her out the back. She tapped the brick with her wand, and they reformed into the archway leading into Diagon. It was quieter than she'd ever seen it. Before, people had been buying school supplies. Not so now. It wasn't as empty as Hogsmead had been that morning, but there wasn't anything you could describe as a crowd.

She saw Flourish and Blott's and wandered inside. He'd told her to read something. And the attempts at conversation had been godawful. Better than the silence, at times amusing, but unbelievably awkward. Well, that wasn't quite true. It wasn't really any more or less than she'd expected.

She browsed the shelves, not really having any idea where to start. There were classic novels that were apparently just as popular in the wizarding world. She picked up a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. Hermione's copy was falling apart by this point. She found an analysis of the relationship between Merlin and Arthur, a treatise on the defamation of Morgan le Faye, and a book of limericks. After that, she went to look through the Defense Against the Dark Arts section. Many of the books had been available in the Room of Requirement. She picked out a few new titles that looked interesting as well as useful.

Then she moved to the Potions section. Working with the Prince's book was helping her to see how
potions could be fascinating. Snape's words in her first potions class came back with new meaning. When it was as effortless as it had been recently, she could understand. Snape had spoken about the dark arts the same way. She'd been jealous of the lover-like caress in his voice.

She slid a volume off the shelf. It was green with gold embossed text, the green of healers' robes. Fitting, since it was on healing potions. She selected another, this one on potions for fun and profit. It looked like something Fred and George might have written, if they'd decided to pursue fame as brilliant potioneers as opposed to entrepreneurs. No matter their career, there would have been that streak of mischief. She smiled, wondering whether she would have time to visit their shop.

She carried them to the counter, where a young blonde witch was sitting, blowing bubble gum and flicking through *Witch Weekly*. She looked bored out of her mind. She glanced up, grumbling half-heartedly as she rang Hero up. She bagged the books, slid them towards Hero, and went straight back to her magazine without another word. Hero paused to wonder how many people patronized Flourish and Blott's in a day. She couldn't believe it was like that all the time. But with murderers potentially around every corner. . . .

Hero glanced at her watch. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes was a fair ways off. Slug and Jiggers Apothecary, on the other hand, was just down the street. Her books in her arms, she meandered towards the shop, wondering if Snape could really still be looking at potions supplies.

When she asked the man in charge of the shop if Snape had been in, he nodded towards the back as he polished cauldrons and crystal phials. Hero strolled past, eyeing the displays, the pickled bits and dried plants. The ingredients got rarer the deeper she ventured, unicorn tail hairs and dragon scales, aconite and orchids. She got to what seemed like the back of the shop, and still she hadn't seen hide nor hair of her professor. She looked around in confusion.

She heard the sound of clinking glass and noticed an open door. She stepped forward and peered inside. Snape was scowling as he compared bouquets of herbs. Hero coughed to get his attention. Snape started, glancing up, his expression for once free of rancor. His lips twisted as he recognized her.

"Potter. I wasn't expecting you for another twenty minutes. Sit over there until I've finished," he ordered, waving vaguely toward the corner of the room. Hero saw a wooden chair tucked between shelves and cabinets. She scurried over, Snape's attention already back on the ingredients, and balanced her stack of books on her knees. She picked up the one about Arthur and Merlin and started to read.

"Potter. Potter!" She glanced up from her book, blinking as she came back to reality. She glanced at Snape. "I've finished. Come along."

She followed silently as he stalked through the shop. He bought whatever it was he'd been inspecting and led her up the street and into the Leaky Cauldron. Tom glanced up hopefully again. If Hero wasn't mistaken, he was wiping down the same table as when she'd been there. Snape swept past, not glancing at him. Hero grimaced sympathetically at him.

Once they were outside, Snape spoke. "The car is in a parking garage down the street. Is there anything further you require before we leave?"

"Lunch?"

His lips twisted. "I suppose. Would you prefer fish and chips or McDonald's?"

Hero blinked. "Fish and chips."
"Fine. Car first."

Lunch, if that was what it was at three in the afternoon, was as awkward as their other interactions. He still made her weak at the knees, though. His voice filled her chest and made her heart flutter even when the words cut like scalpels. And when did they not? His voice, formed into carefully enunciated syllables, caressed her even as the words sliced her every which way. Why in the name of sanity had she fallen for a man like that?

They got back on the road. The car was silent. Hero read until it got too dark to see the words. At that point, she shot a glare towards her companion before curling up and falling asleep.

Snape shook her awake when they reached the gates. A carriage was waiting to take them up the drive. They drove up to the castle and parted ways. Hero trudged up to Gryffindor Tower, her books in her arms. Once she reached her dorm, she collapsed forward onto the bed and groaned. She set the books on the floor and crawled under the covers, not bothering to get undressed.
Sometimes, a Hot Cuppa isn't Enough

Chapter Notes

My mum was away at a sewing retreat Friday to Sunday. One of the women there with her had heard of this very fanfiction. That's never happened to me before. To my faithful readers, thank you so much.

Severus sat in the armchair before his fire and thought. Books. Potter had gone and bought herself books. Because he'd told her to. She'd remembered his speech from her first year. She'd written it down.

And what was she ill with that caused seizures? She'd had her appointment in Harley Street, he reflected, sneering at the thought. The physicians of the wealthy. He was reasonably certain she wasn't there for a tummy tuck, however. Really, what was there to tuck? And besides, for a Potter, though she was arrogant, she wasn't particularly vain. She certainly wasn't spackled with cosmetics as some of her peers were. Not to say she was hideous. He'd never thought about it, but she was pretty enough, he supposed. If one could get past her personality.

And begging him to talk to her because she couldn't bear to keep her mouth shut. The question and answer game had been interesting, he had to admit. It was almost worthy of a Slytherin.

He chuckled at the thought. A Potter in Slytherin? James would have been spinning in his grave. But then he would have had to deal with her far more often. An unpleasant prospect, to say the least. But she wouldn't be the same annoying Gryffindor if she'd been sorted into Slytherin, belonged in Slytherin, now would she? A Slytherin Hero Potter. He smiled at the fanciful thought and poured himself a glass of the scotch McGonagall had given him the previous Christmas.

* 

The new anti-nausea meds helped. Hero was eating more and had gotten some of her color back. The increased dose of her anti-convulsants seemed to be working. Every morning, now, Madam Pomfrey gave her a potion for her headaches. And every morning, Dumbledore wasn't at the staff table. Hero began to wonder if he'd forgotten about their lessons completely. She'd had a small measure of hope, a belief that she could really do something. Now she felt empty.

The books she'd bought were interesting, but, more than any of them, she found herself reading her second-hand copy of Advanced Potion-Making. It wasn't so much a textbook as... a window into the mind of the previous owner. For the life of her, she still couldn't remember whose writing it was. Hermione had backed off a bit once she'd gotten Ginny to verify that it wasn't Tom Riddle's handwriting. Hero had allowed it, though she couldn't imagine Dumbledore would have permitted anything of the kind to remain even before the diary.

The spells written into the margins were ingenious and, judging by the revisions, the Prince's own inventions. Dean and Seamus had volunteered to test them as Hermione was rather wary about the effects. One made toenails grow at an extremely accelerated rate. Another glued the tongue to the roof of the mouth. Hero had tried that one on Peeves the other day when he'd started taunting her about being the Chosen One. She had no reason to feel guilty about jinxing him.
Those ones were entertaining, but not particularly useful. Her favorite was *muffliato*, which created a buzzing in other people's ears to keep one's conversations from being heard. Even Hermione had to concede it was useful, though she insisted it be kept for occasions when it was truly warranted. Hero could accept the compromise.

She found a new one as she was flipping through it one evening. It looked like it had given enough the Prince some trouble, she reasoned as she peered at the slashed-through older versions, the many revisions. She resolved to try it the next morning. This time, Ron agreed to be the test subject. The only problem was, it was nonverbal.

Ron stood in front of one of the sofas, eyeing her warily. The tables had been dragged out of the way. She tried to smile reassuringly, but was afraid it came out as more of a grimace.

Right. Nonverbal. Okay. She gave an upward flick of her wand at him and thought, without much hope of success, *Levicorpus!* Ron yelped as he was dragged upside down to hang by his ankle. The color drained out of Hero's face. He looked like the muggles from the Quidditch World Cup. She scrambled for the book and scanned the page where the spell had been scribbled. It took her a moment, but she found something she prayed was the counter-curse. *Liberacorpus!* she almost screamed in her mind.

Ron collapsed in a heap on the sofa. Hero fell into the armchair next to him. She slumped into the cushions, still chalky. She glanced up to find everyone in the common room staring at her.

She scowled. "Oh, piss off." They scurried away, except for Hermione. Ron lifted his head from the cushion, dazed but grinning.

"I think I'm awake now. Tomorrow, though, I'd prefer a cup of tea." Hero's racing heart started to calm. She glanced at Hermione, who was just as pale as she was. Ron pulled himself upright and Hermione collapsed beside him, looking as if her knees simply gave out.

"Hero, was that spell what I think it was?" she whispered tremulously. Hero nodded, not trusting her voice.

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked curiously.

"The - the Quidditch World Cup. The Death Eaters were using it on the muggles who owned the campground," Hero got out. Ron blanched.

"You . . . you think? But . . . what does that mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Hermione asked waspishly, folding her arms and crossing her legs so tightly, she looked like a pretzel. "That book belonged to a Death Eater!" Ron's head whipped back and forth as he tried to watch both girls at once.

"We don't know that for sure! There's a spell that was originally used to bandage wounds sustained in battle that can be used to blindfold opponents. Its original purpose isn't just harmless, it's beneficial! Why couldn't the Death Eaters have known about this and adapted it?" A sudden thought occurred to her. "I saw a memory of my parents' school days. My dad used it." And wasn't that a sick thought? Whether it had been invented by a Death Eater or not, the association stuck in her mind. That her own father had used it, had used it on *Snape* . . .

Hermione's expression softened. "I suppose it can't have been that bad. Maybe that's when it was invented. I don't like it--"

"Neither do I," Hero rushed to assure her.
"I don't think I like this 'Prince' of yours, either. Some of these spells just seem deliberately malicious. They're almost certainly not Ministry approved," Hero rolled her eyes, "and you had no idea what that incantation would even do! It's beyond idiotic!"

"You don't think I know? I know! I feel terrible. But I just won't use it again. Okay?" Grudgingly, Hermione nodded.

"Of course, this doesn't necessarily mean the Half-Blood Prince wasn't a Death Eater," she insisted. Hero exhaled in a gust, exasperated.

"If he'd been a budding Death Eater, I really doubt he'd have been advertising the fact that he was a half-blood."

"Oh, come on! The Death Eaters can't all be pure-bloods, there aren't enough of them left, thank God. I imagine a fair few of them are lying. It's just muggleborns they hate. They'd be perfectly happy to let you and Ron join up!" Hero and Ron looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Please. My whole family is the biggest bunch of blood traitors in Great Britain! We're on the same level as muggleborns to them!"

"And they'd love to have me," Hero put in sarcastically. "We'd be best pals if they didn't keep trying to do me in." Even Hermione laughed at that.

They levered themselves out of the deep, squishy chairs and headed down to the hospital wing, then to breakfast. The Gryffindors who had been in the common room avoided her eye. Ginny, however, came up to her with a parchment scroll, tied with ribbon and addressed to Hero in a familiar, slanting hand.

"Thanks, Ginny. . . . Finally! I was beginning to think he'd forgotten about me," she said, trying to pretend she was joking. She read further. "Excellent, it's Monday evening." It was such a weight off her shoulders, she felt like she might float away. She grinned at Ginny. "Do you want to join us for the trip to Hogsmead?"

"Nah, I'm going with Dean. I might see you there." With that, she disappeared.

Hero watched her go, feeling a little wistful. Of course Ginny had other people to be with, a boyfriend, no less. Hero couldn't help but wonder what it would be like. She doubted Ginny and Dean were deeply in love, at least not yet. But even that, that sweet beginning, was denied her. Her every step was plotted. She would learn all she could, get sicker, do what she was told, fight Voldemort, and die. One way or another. And it would be selfish to make someone suffer with her. She knew Ron and Hermione wouldn't have it any other way, but she had moments when she was wracked with guilt. They would know the rush of oncoming death with her, and if they'd never even met her, they'd never have known that suffering.

She blinked, coming out of her reverie when Ron waved a hand in front of her face. He offered her a fork already speared with a sausage. She looked at it like she wasn't sure what it was. Ron raised an eyebrow. She ate the sausage.

"A bit of oatmeal, at least, Hero? Please?" Hermione asked, a tremulous smile on her face. Hero nodded and started ladling it into a bowl. She had to keep her strength up.

They left the castle, heading out into the wind and sleet, though not before Filch had triple checked them with his Secrecy Sensor. Ron got a few extra jabs with it when he asked why it mattered what they were smuggling out of the castle.
The walk to the village was miserable. Even with a scarf wrapped around her face, it felt simultaneously raw and numb. Around them, people were bent double against the bitter, gale-force winds. Hero couldn't have stayed in the common room after what had happened, but she fervently wished she'd stayed in the castle.

They found Zonko's Joke Shop boarded up. Honeydukes was, mercifully, open. It shone like a beacon in the freezing, grey world. The three of them staggered inside.

They stayed a bit, ducking back out when Hero spotted Slughorn buying crystallized pineapple. She'd been scheduling Quidditch practice every time she got an invitation to one of his dinners. Ginny had an excuse, then, and Ron didn't feel left out.

They mustered up their courage to head over to the Three Broomsticks, where at least it would be warm and they could have a nice butterbeer. Just outside the pub, however, they saw two men talking, unusual amidst the people hurrying to their destinations. One was tall and thin. Hero squinted, recognizing the barman at the Hog's Head after a moment. The barman walked away, leaving the shorter man fumbling with something. A few feet from the pair, Hero realized the shorter man was Mundungus Fletcher.

She called his name. He started, dropping the suitcase he'd been holding. It popped open to reveal what looked like the contents of a junk shop window. Except it looked familiar. Dung bent down to pick it all up. Ron snatched up a piece first, frowning at it thoughtfully.

"Oi, that's mine, that is!"

"I've seen this before. This, this is--"

"A black family heirloom!" Hero snapped, grabbing Dung by the collar and pressing the tip of her wand to his throat. "Sirius's things! What are you doing with something that has the Black family crest on it?!" Dung spluttered and stammered. Hero's eyes blazed.

"Was he even dead an hour when you nicked it? Don't answer, I already know. You're going to put it all back. Now. Down to the last button!" Dung Disapparated. Hero screamed in frustration.

"It's no use. He's doubtless hared off to London," Tonks remarked, having appeared out of nowhere, her mouse brown hair wet with sleet.

"But--!"

"No use talking about it out here. Go in where it's warm." Tonks watched them enter.

Hero opened her mouth to complain again, only for Hermione to clap her hand over Hero's mouth. "Not here," she hissed. "Look, go find a table, I'll get us butterbeers."

"Cheers," Hero muttered, trudging off to find an empty table, Ron with her.

She loved Sirius, though they hadn't had much time. It was . . . disconcerting to realize that other people didn't feel the same. That the things he'd left behind held no value other than monetary. Never mind that Sirius had hated those goblets. He'd thought them ugly and overdone, the heavy goblin silver overbearingly extravagant. Hero had agreed. That right there was a large part of why she was so upset.

He'd given her a tour of Grimmauld the summer before fifth year, and they'd laughed over the heirlooms, all of which seemed to suffocate anyone who viewed them in a sense of pureblood entitlement. So they'd laughed. They'd fallen against each other, barely able to stand up because
they’d been laughing so hard at Sirius the runaway getting the house and all its contents. When she saw those goblets, it came flooding back in intricate detail. It was like having him beside her, a joke ready on his lips. And the aptly named Dung had been selling that.

She was still fuming when Hermione returned with the drinks. Ron looked at her like she was glowing with heavenly radiance, such was his relief. Hero looked up, her face set in a scowl as her eyes blazed.

"No wonder we seem to be losing the war," Hero hissed once Hermione had sat down. "The Order can't even control a petty criminal like Mundungus Fletcher, who we all know will steal anything that isn't nailed down. Or do they just not care?"

Hermione flinched at the acid in her friend's voice, but she wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing. "Hero, I know you're upset. You have every right to be. If someone was stealing my things, I'd be upset, too. But maybe don't mention the—um, word that begins with o." She glanced around nervously even alluding to it so vaguely.

Hero had forgotten that Sirius had left her all his possessions, but for a few trinkets. "God, you're right. No wonder he wasn't pleased to see me. I s'pose I'll have to mention it to Dumbledore. Lord knows he's the only one who can control the little... ."

"Good idea," Hermione said, clearly relieved Hero was calming down. She and Ron had a waspish exchange that Hero found suspiciously similar to flirting. It certainly reminded her of Fred and Angelina.

Once they'd finished their butterbeers, they decided to call it a day. It hadn't been fun, and the weather was only getting worse. They wrapped themselves in their layers and trudged back out onto the High Street, following Katie Bell and a friend.

Hero thought of Ginny, who hadn't met up with them. She imagined her and Dean curled up in the sickening sweetness of Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop. She remembered Dudley and Piers, taking a day for themselves in London, the adoring look she often saw on his face when it came to his boyfriend. She'd die a virgin, never loved, never really loving. Her pathetic crush on Snape was, was a nothing. Inconsequential. But it would be nice. . . . She shook her head to clear it. It was worse than useless to think that way.

She looked out into the swirling sleet and snow to see Katie and her friend. Their voices reached her, loud and shrill. An argument. Katie seemed to be holding something in her hand. "It's nothing to do with you, Leanne!"

They rounded a corner in the lane, the sleet coming down hard and fast, covering Hero's glasses. She reached up to wipe them, making a note to ask Hermione to spell them Impervious again, when Leanne reached over to pull the package out of Katie's hands. Katie tugged it back, and the package fell to the muddy ground.

Katie rose into the air, gracefully, her arms outstretched, as if she was about to fly. Her hair was a wild thing, whipped about by the unrelenting, unforgiving wind. Her eyes, however, were closed, and her face was as blank of expression as a fresh sheet of parchment.

Once she was six feet off the ground, she let out a terrible scream. Her eyes flew open, but they did not seem to see the country lane. She was obviously in agony, whether from what she saw or what she felt, it was impossible to say. Hero, Ron and Hermione rushed forward. As they grabbed for her ankle, she fell. They caught her, but she was writhing too much for her to stay in their arms. On the ground, she continued to thrash and scream, no recognition on her face.
Hero glanced around for help, but the lane seemed deserted. She wasn't sure even a Sonorous Charm would work in the howling wind. Someone could be nearby who could help. But they didn't have time if there wasn't. She sent a Patronus off with a message to the first person she thought of: Severus Snape.

The minutes it took him to arrive, Hagrid with him, felt like an eternity. Katie's screams had cut off not long after Hero had sent her Patronus. They shivered, lone figures against the sleet, the raging gales.

When Snape did arrive, he had to bellow over the sound of it. "What's wrong, Potter?! You said it was an emergency!"

"It's Katie, sir! I think she's been cursed!" Hero yelled back. He nodded, gesturing towards Katie. Hagrid picked her up, and Snape started working over her with his wand, his brow furrowed and eyes seeing nothing but his subject. After a few moments, he spun around and asked Leanne what had happened. She pointed to the package on the ground. He picked it up, flexing his fingers in his black leather gloves. They proceeded to the castle in silence. A funeral dirge played in Hero's head.

Once in the warmth of the castle, they felt better physically, but they were still uneasy and anxious. No one spoke until they reached the hospital wing.

"Miss Jones, do you know where Miss Bell obtained this?"

"I-I . . . I think she had it when she came back from the loo," Leanne replied tremulously.

Snape carefully took the wrapping off to reveal an opal necklace. Hero thought it looked vaguely familiar. She squinted at it, then it came to her.

"That . . . I saw that in Borgin and Burke's, years ago. It was labeled cursed. Wait . . . Malfoy was looking at it!"

Snape glanced sharply at her. "What, precisely, are you implying, Miss Potter?"

She smiled innocently. "Merely stating a fact. I mean, obviously, many people have seen that necklace. It isn't illegal to wander down Knockturn Alley and into Borgin and Burke's. I have my suspicions, though."

"Do you indeed? And does your suspicion extend to how it ended up in the hands of Miss Bell in the ladies' room of the Three Broomsticks? Unless I have been very grievously mistaken these last sixteen years, Mr. Malfoy is in fact Mr. Malfoy."

"Leanne said she had it when she came back. That doesn't mean she got it in the loo," Hero pointed out.

Leanne spoke into the silence of Snape's hesitation. "She . . . she said it was for someone at Hogwarts, a surprise, and she was to deliver it. She looked funny when she said it . . ." A look of horror crossed her face like a shadow. Her hand went up to cover her mouth. "Oh, God. She must have been Imperiused and . . . and I didn't realize. I should have . . . ." With that, she started to cry. Hermione patted her shoulder gently.

"What happened then, Leanne?" Hero prodded, trying to be kind. Leanne took a deep, shuddering breath before replying.

"Well, she wouldn't tell me who'd given it to her. I told her . . . I told her she was being stupid, that she shouldn't take it up to the school. She wouldn't listen. I tried to grab it from her. And then . . ."
"Do you recognize the curse, Professor?" Hero asked, glancing over at Snape.

"There are a few distinct possibilities. I, however, will not be making the diagnosis. Neither, I suspect, will Madam Pomfrey. Once Miss Bell's condition has stabilized, she will be taken to St. Mungo's, to the spell damage ward." Hero's eyes widened as she recalled the ward. "I don't imagine her stay will be permanent. It is unlikely such brief, limited contact was enough to discharge the full power of the curse into Miss Bell." Hero blinked at the reassurance.

"What happened to Miss Bell, specifically?" Snape continued.

"She bent to pick it up. I think she touched it through a rip in the wrapping. There must have been a hole in her glove or something. She . . . she rose into the air and she started to scream. She came down, but she kept screaming. That's when I sent you the message, sir," Hero murmured.

"Right, then. I will keep this until someone from St. Mungo's arrives to collect it and Miss Bell." He glanced at Hero. "I assure you, Miss Potter, Mr. Malfoy will be watched, if only for your peace of mind. I believe your next appointment is scheduled for the twenty-sixth?"

Hero made note of what he'd said about Malfoy, said "Yes, sir," and went up to Gryffindor Tower with Ron and Hermione. She kept quiet as she thought.

"Hero, what do you think?" came Hermione's voice.

"Hmm?"

"What's got you so distracted?"

"Did you notice what he said before we left?"

"That he'll hand the necklace off to a healer? What does that matter?" Ron asked, confused.

"No, no, after that." They looked confused. Hero sighed impatiently. "He told me he was watching Malfoy. He doesn't think it's mad."

"So what? It's Snape. And none of that changes the fact that Malfoy's a sixteen year-old who's only just got his OWLs," Ron scoffed.

"Wouldn't Snape, as a spy, know whether Malfoy needs to be watched? Besides, saying he's only sixteen means nothing! Terrorists and tyrants use child soldiers all the time. It's been on the news. Some of them are as young as eight! Do you really think Voldemort has issues with giving tasks to a sixteen year-old and waiting for him to fail? Because I think it's right up his alley." She turned her gaze on Hermione, who looked uncertain.

"But . . . it doesn't make any sense!"

"I've been in his head, Hermione. This is just the kind of sick, twisted logic he loves. And you know he's a sadistic prick. He's Voldemort!"

"I . . . maybe. I'll give you that, but no more! Besides, we should be fine as long as Snape's keeping an eye on him. Malfoy likes him, he might even listen. If he's doing anything. Which I'm still not sure I believe," Hermione sniffed.

"More important is who that necklace was meant for," Ron interrupted. "Forget who's responsible.
It could have been for loads of people. Dumbledore, for instance.

"Or Slughorn, I suppose," Hermione mused. "You said the Death Eaters were after him. Actually, it could be . . . well, you, Hero."

Hero thought about it. "Nah, couldn't be me. If it was, Katie would have just turned around and given it to me. It's a shame it's cursed, it was quite pretty. Opals, wasn't it?"

"I think so. You know, it wasn't exactly foolproof. I mean, whoever's behind it, the curse didn't even make it to the castle," Ron mused.

"That's true. It really wasn't very well thought out," Hermione agreed thoughtfully.

"Another piece of evidence in my favor!" Hero proclaimed triumphantly. Ron and Hermione shared despairing glances.
Hi! You guys are great. Even though this has been the worst week in years, I can come here and see your support. It's kept me going. And look, there's even a new chapter! Yay! Anyway, on with the show.

Katie was taken to St. Mungo's the next day. It seemed everyone knew about the curse by then, though only those who had actually witnessed it knew Katie wasn't the intended recipient. They were all perfectly happy not to correct the misconceptions. Nothing good could come of people panicking. They might be confused as to why Katie had been targeted, but they let it be.

Snape drove her to the hospital in Glasgow for her appointment with the radiology department. She was silent, absorbed with thoughts of Katie and Malfoy. She wanted to question Snape further, but she really doubted she'd achieve anything more than irritating the man. He seemed off-kilter when she didn't force conversation. She tucked the observation away for later use.

Though Dumbledore was still being elusive, Hero went to his office as scheduled on Monday night, not expecting much. She was pleasantly surprised, therefore, when she knocked on the door to the head's office and was invited inside.

Dumbledore looked exhausted, and his hand as black as before, but he smiled as he waved her into a chair. The Pensieve sat on his desk, throwing light onto the ceiling, like water reflecting sunlight into a ship's interior.

“I understand your weekend has been quite eventful. Fortunately, as I believe Professor Snape has already explained, Miss Bell's exposure was quite limited; she came into contact with the necklace through a hole in her glove. If she had had fuller contact, she likely would have perished immediately. Fortunately, Professor Snape was able to limit the spread of the curse, and I'm told she is expected to make a full recovery.”

“That's fantastic! So, er . . . where were you this weekend?” Hero asked, unable to think of a less ham-handed way of changing the subject. She didn't expect an answer. From Phineas Nigellus's exasperated sigh from his portrait, even as he pretended to sleep, he didn't either. Dumbledore, however, smiled.

“Daring and nerve, Hero, are part of what make you a Gryffindor. I quite expected you to ask. I'd have been rather disappointed, in fact, had you not. Be that as it may, there is something I have planned for this evening. But rest assured, I shall tell you in due course.” In due course. Whatever that meant. She felt so impatient, itching to simply be told.

“Really?!” Hero asked, aloud, not bothering to mask her shock. Phineas spluttered in outrage, raising his head from his arms, giving up on his pretense of sleep.

“Oh, quite. It concerns my wishes for you in the months to come.” He withdrew a bottle of fresh memories and spelled the cork out.

“There's something else, sir. When we were in Hogsmead, we met Mundungus Fletcher outside the
“Yes, I've already heard. He's gone to ground, though we'll keep an eye out, I assure you. I further promise that steps will be taken to ensure he does not make free with any other Black heirlooms.”

“What's he done?” Phineas asked in a dangerous tone, actually rising from his chair. “No mangy, half-blood cur will steal from the House of Black!” With that, he exited his portrait and disappeared, off to inspect Grimmauld.

“Did Professor Snape tell you my suspicions about what happened to Katie?”

“Yes, and, as I believe he informed you, Mr. Malfoy is being watched very carefully. He does nothing I am not aware of.”

“So, just to be clear, my suspicions are not ridiculous flights of fancy that are easily dismissed?”

“No, Hero, they are not.” Her heart leaped. “But you may rest assured it is being taken care of. Now, we do, in fact, have a lesson.”

Hero ducked her head in embarrassed acquiescence, though she was a little resentful. If the lessons were so important, why weren't they having more of them? Dumbledore smiled in satisfaction and poured the memory into the Pensieve.

“Now, when we left, Merope had been abandoned by Tom Riddle and left Little Hangleton for London, expecting the child who would become Lord Voldemort.”

“How do you know she was in London, sir?”

“The testimony of one Caractacus Burke, one of the founders of Borgin and Burke's.” Dumbledore swilled the contents of the Pensieve. A small, silver man rose up, more solid than a ghost, and with a thatch of hair completely covering his eyes.

The figure spoke. He told of a witch who'd come in around Christmas, dressed in rags, heavily pregnant, and desperately in need of gold. She'd brought a locket she claimed was Slytherin's. A few spells confirmed the tale, which made it priceless. The witch went away with ten galleons.

Dumbledore shook the basin again and the figure of Burke disappeared. Hero scowled up at the headmaster. “He sent a woman in desperate straits away with ten galleons?!”

“Indeed. We know she was in London, fairly far along, and desperate enough to sell the only thing she had of worth, a prized family heirloom, for ten galleons?”

“But . . . she was a witch! She had magic!”

“Ah, but I believe - and, again, this is a guess, but I'm quite confident - that after her husband left her, she did not wish to be a witch, to use magic. It's also possible her despair sapped her powers, which can sometimes happen. In any case, she refused to raise her wand even to save her own life.”

“That's . . . that's horrible,” Hero whispered. “She refused to live even for her son?”

“Are you, perhaps, pitying Lord Voldemort?”

“I . . . maybe? It's just . . . It's an awful thing to do to a kid. Maybe if she'd stayed alive, he wouldn't have become, you know . . . a functionally immortal, genocidal psychopath.”

“Perhaps not. However, children conceived of a love potion, which is essentially rape, are often
born psychopaths, unable to feel love.”

“But he might not have felt such disdain for muggles,” Hero argued. “Merope obviously didn't have issues with them.”

“Ultimately, however, we can never know. And Merope was greatly weakened by long suffering. She had neither the courage nor the strength to continue. Now, if you will stand. . . .”

“Where are we going?” Hero asked as Dumbledore came to join her at the front of the desk.

“One of my memories, this time. Ladies first, Hero.”

Hero bent over, letting her face break the cool surface of the memory, neither liquid nor gas. She fell through darkness, then landed in 1930s London. They followed a younger Dumbledore to the orphanage inhabited by Tom Riddle.

Dumbledore had an appointment with the matron, a Mrs. Cole. She told him of Tom's birth at the orphanage and, once he'd assured her Tom definitely had a place at Hogwarts, his bullying, how he scared the other children. Dumbledore listened intently, none of his thoughts showing on his face. She then took him to see Tom.

He was tall for his age, pale, and dark-haired. Merope's wish came true: he was his handsome, muggle father in miniature. He assumed Dumbledore was doctor Mrs. Cole had asked to “have a look” at him. He ordered Dumbledore to tell the truth, a ringing command that he had obviously given before. When Dumbledore mentioned Hogwarts, Tom accused him of coming to take him to an insane asylum.

He gradually came around to the idea, almost falling over himself at the mention of magic. Hero remembered her own induction into the wizarding world, when Hagrid came to collect her. She'd been all innocent wonder and delight. Tom Riddle was overjoyed as well, but his seemed more like satisfaction and the realization of what he could do with it. His joyful expression twisted his handsome face into something bestial and animalistic.

When he confirmed that he wished to attend Hogwarts, Dumbledore ordered Tom to call him “sir” or “Professor.” With that, Tom's face hardened fleetingly before becoming almost unrecognizable. In a polite voice quite unlike the one he had been using, he apologized and asked Dumbledore to show him magic.

He found Dumbledore would not be swayed so easily. With a casual flick of his wand, he lit the wardrobe on fire. Riddle jumped to his feet in shock and cried out in shock and rage. Hero couldn't quite bring herself to blame him; if it had been her trunk on fire, everything she cared about inside. . . . Moments later, however, the flames vanished, leaving the wardrobe untouched. Tom had rounded in Dumbledore to scream at him. Now, however, his eyes were shining with joy, his expression greedy.

“Where can I get one of them?” he demanded, pointing to the wand.

“We'll have time for that later. I do believe there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe.” A faint rattling emerged from within the wardrobe. Riddle actually looked frightened. Dumbledore ordered him to open the door.

Riddle hesitated, then went to retrieve the cardboard box, set above his threadbare clothes, which was shaking frantically. Riddle followed Dumbledore's orders and dumped the contents on the bed, at which point they stilled. They turned out to be a thoroughly ordinary collection of objects, stolen
from their rightful owners.

Dumbledore proceeded to order to return the items and apologize and warn him off stealing at Hogwarts. He further warned him that using his powers as he had been - “inadvertently, I am sure” - would lead to his expulsion and potentially intervention by the Ministry of Magic.

He gave Riddle a sack of money from a fund for those who could not afford their school things. Riddle took it without thanks and rejected the offer of guidance through Diagon Alley. Before he left, he dismissed his mother as distinctly unmagical and announced his ability to speak to snakes. After that, they returned to his office.

“So, that was the young Voldemort. He believed it much more quickly than I did,” Hero commented.

“Yes, he was quite ready to believe he was ‘special.’ I made sure to keep an eye on him, for the sake of others as much as for his own. By the time I met him, he had already begun to use his magic consciously and deliberately, almost entirely against others, to frighten, to punish, to control. The seeds of what he would become were there if anyone cared to look past his charm.

“Now, there are three things I hope you noticed. The first, how much he hated to be called ‘Tom,’ hated anything that tied him to other people and made him ordinary. The second, when I met him at the age of eleven, he was already independent, secretive, and apparently had no wish for companionship. He did not want assistance. Then, as now, he prefers to operate alone. Those of his inner circle may claim to be his friends, but they are deluded. He does not have friends, and he has never wanted them. The last, which is perhaps most pertinent, is the fact that he liked to collect trophies. Bits and pieces from his victims, things to remind him of what he perhaps regarded as triumphs. As with the other points, this is as true now as it was then. Any questions?”

“Sir . . . I know you said you'd tell me about your arm when the time was right, but . . . . I'm not altogether sure how much time I have left.” Dumbledore's expression crumpled.

“Ah. Yes, I . . . yes. Soon, Hero. Just know that it will be soon.”

“Sir . . . I'm worried that I'm not dealing well with . . . with everything. I want to forget, and I'm angry at the world because I can't. And even then . . . I feel like nothing matters anymore.”

“Hero . . . perhaps you might remember that the world will continue on without us, but we might leave behind memorials of our own making. And perhaps you could talk to those who know what you're going through.”

“I don't want to dump it on them. They put up with enough already. It won't last much longer anyway. No point bothering them.”

“I think perhaps they are stronger than you think. And . . . well, a man my age spends a certain amount of time contemplating the end. I think perhaps the best thing you can do is to live while you may, to make the most of the time you have left. Make time to let go of your worries. And now I believe it is time for bed. Sweet dreams, dear girl.”

Hero left the office, not even trying to make sense of the maelstrom of emotions within her. His words had been understanding and compassionate, but she felt adrift. His timeline, not hers. A promise broken because she died was still a broken promise. She wanted to be useful, even if it killed her, because what did that matter? At least there was no such thing as living with disappointment.
Mindful of listening ears at breakfast, she told Ron and Hermione about the lesson during the walk to the greenhouse. The frigidly cold weather had blown over, but the weird fog was back, and they stepped carefully through the vegetable patch.

“Bloody hell, Hero. That's too creepy this early. A boy You-Know-Who?” He shuddered. “But why d'you think he showed it to you? I mean, it's fascinating, sure -“

“I thought you were supposed to be the strategist, Ron,” Hermione despaired. “Sun Tzu said that if you know your enemy, you know yourself. The more we find out about You-Know-Who, the more weapons we have against him.”

“And who the bloody hell is this Sunny Zoo bloke?” Ron predictably asked. Hero rolled her eyes. At least she'd heard of him.

“Ron, sometimes your lack of culture causes me physical pain. He was a Chinese general and military strategist who lived about two and a half thousand years ago. He wrote a book, The Art of War.” Ron blinked at her. She sighed in exasperation. “Never mind.”

They entered the greenhouse to prepare to deal with Snargaluff pods, their project for the term. They started pulling on protective gloves and goggles and inserting their gum shields.

“Hurry up, you three! Neville's already got his first pod!” Professor Sprout barked. They looked over to see Neville with scratches, a bloody lip, and a triumphant expression as he clutched a pod. Hero, Ron, and Hermione glanced at each other, gathered their courage, and attacked the seemingly harmless stump.

It sprang to life, vines flying from it like tentacles. They twined in Hero's and Hermione's hair. Hero and Ron held them off as Hermione plunged her arm into the hole that had appeared with the vines. It sucked her arm in to the elbow. Hero managed to tie the vines in a knot as Ron tried to cut them out of the girls' hair. The hole opened again, and Hermione's hand reappeared, clutching a pod.

The Snargaluff turned back into an apparently innocent stump. Ron glared at it distrustfully as he handed Hermione the bowl for the pod. She glanced at Hero. “Look, I know you hate it, but Slughorn's having a Christmas party, and I really doubt you'll be able to get out of it this time.”

“Oh, for the love of . . . Can't I just have another seizure?” Hero muttered. She'd been scheduling Quidditch practice whenever Slughorn had a gathering. Hermione threw the bowl down with a clatter and glared at Hero.

“Don't make jokes like that! Look, I know it's hard for you, and you need to be able to make fun of it, but I have to watch my best friend die! So, could you just . . . not?” Hermione whispered fiercely.

“I-I'm sorry, I just. . . . I'll try not to upset you.” Hermione snorted. Her nose in the air, she flipped through the textbook to look up how to juice the pod.

“And what do you expect me to do while you two swan off for the evening?” Ron demanded petulantly.

“I was going to ask you, but if you'd prefer not to come. . . .” Hermione said, still scanning through the book. Hero grinned. There you go, put him in his place.

“Really?! I'd love to, Hermione.” Ron was looking at Hermione with an expression not unlike the one he developed around Fleur. Hermione glanced up and blushed.
“Yes, well, there you go. Happy?”

The smile slid off Hero's face. What if they got together only to break up? It wasn't that she expected it, precisely, but . . . Ron often said stupid, offensive things without meaning to. How much worse would it be for Hermione as his girlfriend rather than just his friend, and how much could she stand? But she was getting ahead of herself. It was just one date.

Oh, come on, Hero, you know that's just the jealousy talking. It was always inevitable. You just can't stand the fact that they'll fall in love, get married, have children, and grow old together. And you won't. You're so pathetic. You can't even be completely happy for them because you're so self-absorbed. Look at you, just wallowing in your misery. My God, who cares?

She blinked away tears and looked over at Ron and Hermione, who had managed to open the first pod and get a second. The bowl was filled with wriggling green tubers. Hero wondered what they were useful for. Maybe she could ask Snape later that week, when he drove her to London. Or perhaps Sprout would tell them.

The rest of the class passed uneventfully. Ron and Hermione's behavior towards each other was not terribly different. They were simply politer to each other than usual, which could either be good or bad. And which was which, anyway?

By Friday, Hero was beginning to come to terms with the reality that Katie Bell was still in St. Mungo's and would be for the foreseeable future. The thought of another full-house try-out set her teeth on edge, so Hero firmly decided to put it off as long as possible. The Quidditch game was scheduled, as always, for the middle of November. She'd need to make a decision one way or another by the eighth, at the very latest.
Chapter Notes

It's late. It's very late. In my defense, as far as that goes, I've been very sick, as well as busy being the only full time crew member for a production of Diary of Anne Frank. The first performance is tomorrow. So. Forgive me? I think you'll like what follows.

Saturday, as before, Hero was waiting in the Entrance Hall. Snape stormed up the stairs, greatcoat making up for his lack of billowing robes. He really did make for a striking figure, Hero reflected idly. He wasn't handsome. He could never be something so common and ordinary as handsome.

At first, it seemed he was going to be just as reticent as before. However, when he reached her, he paused a moment, then said, as if the words were being dragged from him by wild horses, “Good morning, Miss Potter.” She stared at him for a moment before replying in kind. He nodded, and they proceeded out the door. On the steps, he glanced back at her suddenly.

“You are without reading material.”

“I can't focus enough to read, not with everything that's happened in the last week,” she admitted. “I can't stop thinking. About Katie, about what Dumbledore showed me, about. . . .” There, she refused to complete the sentence and fell silent. I can't stop thinking about cancer, about dying, or about you. She kept dreaming of him: his black velvet voice, his lips on hers, on her throat, on her. . . And his hands. Everywhere. It was little wonder she had trouble focusing on nonverbal spells in Defense. Certainly, everywhere else, she was fine. Even when her head throbbed from the pressure of her tumors, she was alright. Except around him.

“I hope you have come to better terms with silence since September, in that case. We're not going back just so you can find a diversion, and I shan't indulge you today as I did then.”

“Fine.”

He eyed her suspiciously, but helped her into the carriage anyway. She was quite foolish if she thought to challenge him. But then, he knew that already, did he not?

She went to sleep not long after they started driving. He wondered if she dreamed. She murmured a little, bits of nonsense now and again. They weren't nightmares, that much was apparent, for she did not scream.

She sighed softly, stretching out a little. He didn't mind her so much when she wasn't talking. He remembered thinking a month before that she was almost pretty, so long as you didn't know her. But she sometimes said the oddest things. “I wrote it down, you see.” “The temptation to quote you is almost unbearable.” And he'd retorted almost teasingly. Certainly without his customary sharpness. A month after the fact, it still occupied his thoughts, netting him when he relaxed his guard enough for it to creep in.

His eyes flicked down briefly to light on her face, then back to the road. A soft smile graced her lips. Carefree. A word he had never applied to Potter before. She was arrogant, self-centered, reckless, so clearly spoiled. But never so utterly carefree. Even laughing with her friends or
celebrating a win at Quidditch, it occurred to him now that she held back. Worry, always worry, at the bottom of her eyes.

But as she slept beside him, there was not a trace of it. Why did she trust him? She could fall asleep in front of him, utterly letting her guard down. That spoke of deep trust in a man whose loyalties she had reason to doubt. And so she had, repeatedly. Despite Dumbledore assuring her, time and again, that she should trust him, she never had. It was damned inconvenient, and it caused her to leap at shadows rather than true villains, but he had almost respected her for it.

She had trusted her instincts, had not simply believed without what she felt to be convincing evidence. Despite the trouble it caused, he'd always thought it remarkably sensible of her. So what had changed? Why now? He glanced back down at the girl, curled up in the passenger seat, and accepted that he would not receive answers at any point in the near future.

She murmured something and sighed again. Something that began and ended with s. Parseltongue, perhaps? He wondered what she dreamt of. He shook himself. It shouldn't matter. It didn't.

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Hero woke suddenly, opening her eyes to a view of the motorway. That would certainly explain why she was so stiff. A smirk touched her lips. She had just had a most pleasant dream about a certain tall, dark Potions Master. She rolled onto her side and blanched. Of course. The same Potions Master now scowling through the windscreen. God, that was embarrassing.

She sat up. Snape's hands tightened on the steering wheel. Hero blushed. Her dreams had always been rather vivid. At least she wasn't thinking of morbid things anymore. In that sense, it was an improvement. But being so close to him made her want to giggle, and sigh, and cry, and scream, and hit him, and kiss him. It was maddening. He was maddening. Perfectly, exquisitely, deliciously maddening. And she was just a little bit hopeless.

The first Quidditch practice she'd ever had, one on one with Oliver, he'd told her the Weasley twins were such excellent beaters because they were like a pair of bludgers themselves. She thought Snape was sort of like that. Like the potions he brewed. Caustic. She'd looked it up in a dictionary once. Two of the three definitions fit him to a tee: the first, capable of destroying or eating away by chemical action, corrosive; the second, marked by incisive sarcasm.

Potions, in her experience, were complex, tricky to deal with, disastrous if mishandled. They were bitter, but capable of so much. Mysterious unless you dedicated a lifetime to the study of them. They did not forgive mistakes easily in those who dealt with them. You had to work quickly and cleverly to fix it when you did something wrong. But there was beauty in them, he was right about that. Not everyone could understand, but she thought perhaps her mother might have, the way Slughorn talked about her, the moments Hero had seen. She had seen beauty in a softly simmering cauldron. And in Severus Snape. Maybe.

Not many people could be so adequately described in a single word. Oh, she was sure there was more to him than that. He kept saving her, over and over. He'd tried to teach her Occlumency, miserable failure though it had been. He was miserable. And bitter and caustic.

She'd fallen for him anyway. Slowly, then all at once. She wasn't so deluded as to see in him qualities that did not exist. He could never be so ordinary as handsome. He could never be so simple as good. He was, but in him there was not simply black or white, for all he hid in it. The world was not made of absolutes. And neither was Severus Snape.

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She appeared deep in thought. Her emerald eyes were focused somewhere in the distance. She was gnawing at her bottom lip. If he called her name, would she hear? He wondered. He wondered what had her so utterly absorbed.

He glanced at the clock in the dashboard. It had been a long while since breakfast. Would she care for lunch? She hardly ate, recently, though she'd been doing better since her last appointment. He wondered again what was the matter with her. The lack of appetite, particularly at breakfast, now passing, had certain diagnostic relevance. He'd heard Slughorn telling another member of staff about how he'd been about to invite her to one of his dinners when she'd smelled the roast beef and gone running for the loo. And she was tired, as the last few hours clearly indicated. Obviously, if his hypothesis was correct, there would be other symptoms, symptoms he couldn't observe, others that had yet to appear.

“Potter.” Nothing. “Potter!” Still. He brushed her shoulder with the tips of his fingers, and she jumped a mile. “Miss Potter. Would you care for lunch?”

“Don't we have to make the appointment?” she asked, brow wrinkling in confusion.

“We're making good time. Are you hungry?”

“Oh. I suppose.”

They stopped in a little town a few hours north of London and ate at the fast food place just off the motorway. It was a miserable little restaurant, empty but for them and the staff, who, to a man, looked like they'd rather be anywhere else. The food was cold and subpar. Snape scowled around the grotty place, the grease on the tables, the dirty floor tiles.

“See if we ever come here again,” he muttered. The kid wiping off tables behind him gave him the finger. Hero snorted. Snape glared at her. “Something funny, Potter?”

Hero smothered laughter. “It's a fast food place, Professor. There's something to be said for low expectations. I will agree that the food, service, and atmosphere are honestly execrable. On the other hand, it meets the standard it's held to. We could have gone to a nice cafe.”

His lips twisted. “The coffee certainly would have been a damn sight better.” He glared down his nose at the grey liquid in his cup as if it had personally done him grievous wrong. Not far off the mark, actually.

They stayed as long as they dared before fleeing back to the motorway.

“Please tell me muggles don't actually derive enjoyment from eating at such a place.”

Hero wrinkled her nose and smiled ruefully. “It was pretty awful, wasn't it? I shouldn't complain, really. It was food.”

“You're stretching the definition.”

Hero chuckled. “Perhaps. I can't imagine they're all like that.”

“You're muggle-raised. You've never been?”

“No. I haven't,” she replied coldly, smile gone.

“Mmm.” He let it rest there for a long moment. “Why?”
Hero looked out her window as she answered. “I was generally locked in my cupboard. If they weren’t going to feed me at home, why take me with them when they went out to eat?”

Snape didn’t look at her either. “What are you talking about, Potter?”

She looked at him then, with eyes that were old, and weary, and sad. “You’re quite intelligent, Professor. I’m sure you understand perfectly well.”

“Certainly, I understand what your words imply, but it cannot possibly be true. You cannot have actually meant that you live in a cupboard and are starved by your relatives.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s preposterous,” he told her flatly. “The very idea is . . . preposterous.”

“I never would have taken you for a blind fool. Sir.”

“You little--”

“I know. After all these years, I should know. After all these years, so should you.”

“You act as if it should have been obvious.”

“Wasn’t it? Old, worn out clothes always too big for me? Always too thin? When I first came, the way I flinched at everything? The dog chasing me up a tree and my relatives laughing? You didn’t have a clue? You’re a spy. You don’t simply see, you observe. Tell me honestly. When it came to me, the Girl Who Lived, daughter of a man you loathed, you never observed?” She stared at him hard. His jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed as he watched the road. “I don’t believe you.”

“Believe whatever you like, Potter. Who am I shatter your childish beliefs?”

She smiled bitterly. “I always thought you were the man for the job.”

There was silence, after that. It prickled along the skin like a watchful gaze. It was almost a physical entity between them, tangible, settling into the emptiness, the absence. The drive to London stretched into eternity.

Fortunately, the universe was kind, and eternity eventually ended. The car idled in front of the doctor’s office.

Hero glanced at the man beside her. “You’ll be in Diagon, I suppose?” He nodded once, sharply. “Right, then.” With that, she swanned off. Snape rolled his eyes and drove away.

She nodded to the doorman, who tipped his hat to her. Up the stairs, to wait and flip through outdated magazines. Finally, she was called to Dr. Warren’s office.

He rose to greet her with a kind smile. “Has it been a good month?”

Hero grimaced as she took her seat. “My team won the first game of the season. One of the girls in my team was attacked. She’s here in London at the moment, recovering.”

“My god! What happened?” The good doctor sat back down heavily.

“Clumsy terrorism, while we were visiting the village near the school. I have my suspicions. But I don’t suppose it matters. Um, I haven’t had any seizures?” she said, smiling tentatively.
“That's what we like to hear. The nausea's improved?” She nodded. “Excellent. The mood swings?”

“A bit better. I feel a bit more in control, but mostly because I've been so distracted. When I'm focused, the spikes fall into the background.”

“There's quite a bit of research into the subject, because it's so strongly affects quality of life. Unfortunately, no one's found much of anything. Hormone treatments can help, but as cognitive function declines. . . .”

“Of course.”

“Your scans show no major growth, which I think we should take as a promising sign.”

They talked a bit more about how they would proceed and what she should expect. She gave him the diary entries, and he gave her the next month's dosages. He let her go with a directive to call him if anything came up.

She walked to the tube station, headed for Diagon Alley by way of Charing Cross station. It gave her a strong sense of deja vu. A month before, she'd done exactly the same. Today, she was determined to stop and see the twins.

She bought a bottle of butterbeer at the Leaky Cauldron and left, a tight smile on her face masking her discomfort at his words as he bowed her out, “Bless you, miss, bless you.”

She wandered down the alley, sipping her butterbeer until she got to number 96. It was at least slightly fuller than most other shops. That is to say, it wasn't completely empty. Hero supposed that could be counted a success. She slipped inside. George (she thought it was George) glanced over at the sound of the bell.

His face lit up. He leapt up and came to greet her, seizing her hand and pumping it enthusiastically. “Oi, George, Hero's here!” She resigned herself to never getting it right.

Fred emerged from the curtained off back room, grinning as widely as his brother. “And what is the esteemed Chosen One doing in London?”

“Appointment with a . . . Healer. Well, it's a doctor, but your mother doesn't like that term much, I don't think.”

“Not a bit,” Fred agreed good-naturedly. “Remember when she went ballistic when she found out Dad had tried stitches last year?”

“I'll not soon forget. How can you be so cheerful when you've got enough customers that you can count them on your fingers?”

“Now, Hero, dear girl. You forget Owl Order. We've still got the Ministry contracts, and the students of Hogwarts have not lost their appetite for our breed of entertainment.”

“They think they can be the next us. It's adorable,” George put in.

“What they fail to realize is that, if they use our products, we get part of the credit.”

They’re terribly unoriginal, really. So, tell us about life back at the castle.”

They chatted a bit, then Fred and George led her around the shop suggesting things. George slapped
her hand when she went for her dwindling supply of galleons.

“We told you before, no charge for you.” Hero rolled her eyes but conceded.

“Have you got any nondescript bags for this stuff? I'm with Snape.”

“Well, you've got jeans, haven't you?”

“Yeah.”

“And those jeans have pockets?”

“Yeah.”

Fred tapped her pockets with his wand. “There you go. They're bigger on the inside now.”

“Undetectable extension charm. We learned it ages ago to hide stuff from Mum.”

“How can two people as brilliant as you have failed your OWLs so miserably?” Hero asked as she started stuffing her pockets.

“The answer's simple, old girl. We didn't care.”

“At all,” George put in.

“And we wanted to see how everyone would react.”

“We were aiming for this anyway. If we'd done well, Mum would have had more ammunition to force us into respectable jobs. Can you imagine us working with Dad and our traitorous older brother at the Ministry?”

Hero tried. It made her brain hurt. They laughed at the expression on her face.

“Exactly! Now, you be careful with those daydream charms.”

“They're best if you save them for in-class writing assignments. You bite on your quill and stare off into space, it looks like you're being Hermione-ish.”

Hero grinned. “Will do.” She saluted and left, pockets not even weighed down due to the feather-light charms on everything. There was even enough room to stick her hands in as she strolled.

She found Snape in Flourish and Blott's, of all places. He was looking through the medical section.

“Miss Potter,” he greeted her, not looking away from the bookshelf in front of him. “I suggest you find some way to occupy yourself until I am ready to depart.”

“Yes, Professor.”

She wandered through the maze of shelves. Raising Carnivorous Plants for Fun and Profit, Muggle Slang for the Contemporary Wizard, the collected works of Enid Blyton (together in an impossibly slim hardcover), The Magizoologist's Guide to the Orient.

Her fingers trailed over the spines. So much knowledge, available to anyone who cared to look. She wondered if there were any lending libraries in the wizarding world. She'd never seen one in Hogsmead, at any rate. She liked libraries. She'd hid from Dudley and his gang there as a kid.
Plenty of people were ready to tell her she still was, to leave the troubles to the adults to solve. But she didn't think anyone who had been through what she had qualified as a child. She might die a minor, but not a child. And all the king's horses and all the king's men wouldn't be able to put Hero together again. She smiled darkly, eyeing the books around her. Nothing worse than an ambiguous ending.

Someone lightly tapped her shoulder. She spun with a start to face Severus Snape. He glowered at her, arms full of books. It hit her then, like it sometimes did, and she felt caught between heartbeats, like she couldn't breathe.

“Come along. We're leaving after I pay for these.” Hero ducked her head to hide red cheeks that glowed like hot coals. Snape eyed her suspiciously but spun on his heel and proceeded toward the checkout, Hero following.

If it was possible, the witch at the counter looked even more bored than she had a month before. Hero wondered how many appointments it would take before they came in and found the poor girl dozing. She glanced surreptitiously around the shop. There was an elderly witch accompanied by a brawny lad, perhaps her grandson, looking at the books on magical pests and a young man she vaguely recognized as a Hufflepuff from a few years ago buying books for his mastery. Voldemort had certainly succeeded in terrifying the witches and wizards of Great Britain.

Once Snape had paid, he marched down the alley in the direction of the Leaky Cauldron, Hero struggling to keep up. He didn't even acknowledge Tom the barman. Hero grimaced at him as she hurried after the Potions Master. He stopped suddenly once they were outside. Hero ran into him. He scowled at her as she came to stand next to him.

“Sir?”

“The car is that way,” he said, jerking his chin to the right. “Shall we risk another meal on the motorway?”

“Oh, er, I suppose. Bit early for dinner, isn't it?”

“Mmm. But can we risk another gastronomic disaster?”

“I shouldn't think they're all like that.”

“But you don't really know?” he asked silkily.

She sent a quelling glance before going back to staring out at the traffic. ”'Fraid not.”

“Because your relatives left you locked in a cupboard to starve,” he stated, sounding like he was trying very hard not to sound as skeptical as a twelve year-old questioned on the existence of Santa Clause. Hero's head whipped around, and she pinned him with a glare.

“I thought we were finished. End of discussion. Why are you bringing this up again?”

“The discussion was not over. Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Two hours. We were together in a car for two hours, and we didn't exchange one word! Two hours of silence! That was the end of that conversation!”

“The end of that conversation. This is a new conversation on the same subject. Keep up, Potter.”

She growled in frustration. “I've said my bit. Leave well enough alone!”
"'Leave well enough alone'?” he repeated, outraged. “You're asking me to simply ignore your 'revelations' of this morning?! What the hell is the matter with you?!”

“I thought we'd covered that sufficiently!” she yelled back, her weight on the balls of her feet as she leaned toward him. His eyes blazed. People skirted around them as they passed, shooting them strange looks. Some were beginning to stop and watch. Snape noticed. He seized her wrist and towed her in the direction of the carpark. She had to run to stay with him and avoid being dragged.

“We will discuss this in the car.”

“Why do you care?!”

He stopped and turned to her but didn't let go of her wrist. “I don't know.”

With that, he was off again, striding down the sidewalk with those long legs of his. Hero glared at his back. Why did he insist on treating her like a child? She was used to him thinking she was an idiot, not that she was an obstinate toddler who needed to be dragged lest she throw a tantrum. She jerked her wrist out of his grip.

“I can clearly look after myself! Are you afraid I'll run away, is that it? I don't run away, remember?”

Snape contemplated her for a moment, then raised an eyebrow and gestured ahead of him. Head high, she brushed past him.

*

They didn't speak until they were on their way out of London.

“Tell me.”

“No. Leave me alone.” A pause. “It doesn't matter.”

There. In the words, in the body language, beneath the prevarication, there was truth. Intelligence was the currency with which he bought time and paid for his life. It came in three types: truth, lies, and misinformation. He knew them all, could recognize them, could read and dissect them. In Potter, he saw not lies or even that tenuous, tricky article called belief. He observed truth and knowledge, gained through endless repetition, carved into her like rocks carved by the deathless pounding of the waves. Her truth was a geographic formation, long since part of her landscape.

With that, he let it lie. If she wouldn't talk (and why should she?), that was that. Besides, his experience had taught him that it was when one stopped asking questions that truth spilled from the subject's lips like rain in an English spring.
Hello again! It's been a while. Sorry 'bout that *tugs collar nervously*. After this will be the beginning of a series of totally original chapters. This one has a fair bit of canon twisted out of all J.K. Rowling's good intentions. For those of who have been waiting progressively less patiently, here we are. "From this point forward, we shall be leaving the firm foundation of fact and journeying together through the murky marshes of [my imagination] into thickets of wildest [invention]." So I paraphrased. "Couldn't resist, mate."

Bloody Snape. A shared experience and a bit of conversation, and she'd told him about her childhood. Which, really, had been a spectacularly bad idea. Now he knew, and he could do with that knowledge whatever he liked. She trusted him now, but not that much. And she knew how much he hated not knowing things. No matter what she wished, it was not the end of the matter. Not if he had anything to say about it.

* 

The Quidditch game was approaching, and Hero still had neither Katie Bell back nor a replacement for her. After deliberating for a while more, Hero picked the second best from the beginning of the year as Katie's replacement: Dean Thomas. It was about time, and it gave her more reason to avoid thinking about Snape whenever possible.

When she went to tell him the news, he and Seamus were arguing in hushed voices. She was a little uncomfortable with Seamus there, but she gave Dean the good news anyway. Seamus threw his friend a dirty look and stalked off. Hero blinked. She hadn't realized making the team mattered so much to him. Dean grinned at her and ran off to tell Ginny.

She didn't regret her choice a bit once they got into the air, despite the mutterings the past week about her appointing another friend from her year. Dean flew quite well, certainly enough to keep up with the rest of the team. He wasn't the one she was worried about. Ron, on the other hand. . . .

From the beginning, she'd known that his performance was inconsistent. He suffered from nerves and lacked self-confidence, which she'd thought had died and been eulogized the previous year. Unfortunately, it seemed to have been exhumed by the pressures of the opening game of the season. He let in six goals, mostly from Ginny. His swings grew wilder until he eventually punched Demelza Robins in the mouth. Everyone landed as soon as they realized what happened, Ron apologizing profusely.

Ginny came over to look at her lip, then glared at Ron over her shoulder. “Dammit, Ron, you great bloody prat, what's the matter with you?” It was, Hero had to admit, a question she would like to ask. No answer seemed to be forthcoming, however.

“Ginny, you're not the captain, you can't call him a prat—” she began wearily, more to keep the peace than because she actually minded.

“You seemed busy, I thought I'd do it for you,” Ginny interrupted carelessly, turning back to tut over
Demelza again. Hero smothered a laugh, knowing it would be disloyal. Even if it was just a bit funny.

“Move over, anyway, I can heal her.” She fumbled for her wand and pointed it at Demelza's swollen lip. “Episkey. There, you're fine.” She conjured up a brief smile. “Back into the air, everyone.”

They finished, slogged back to the locker rooms to clean up, and gathered for Hero's speech.

“Right. Well. That was bloody awful. I'd be hard pressed to imagine it going worse, and no that's not a challenge. Don't you dare. Are you proud of what you accomplished today? You ready to face Slytherin in front of the whole school in the first game of the season? I don't like to be humiliated. Do you? Because if you play like you did today, that's exactly what's going to happen. Is that what you want? To be a laughingstock? Well, here you go, merry Christmas,” was what she wanted to say. She knew it wouldn't help anything, though.

“Slytherin doesn't stand a chance! Good practice everyone. All term, you've been fantastic. This is ours.” They left looking better. Well. Less defeated, at least. Ron stayed on the bench, shoulders hunched.

“I played like a sack of dragon dung.”

“No, you didn't. You were the best at try-outs, remember? You're just nervous. I know you can do it, course you can.” She clapped him on the back, and they headed back to the castle.

Hero kept up a steady stream of encouragement, trying not to sound as desperate as she felt. It seemed to work, though; by the time they reached the second floor, he was looking a bit more hopeful. When they rounded a corner, however, they were met with Ginny and Dean engaged in the sort of behavior not intended for an audience.

“I'm not going to go back to the Common Room and sit with my head on your shoulder and your arms around me when your Mr. Finnegan will only give me dirty looks!”

“How many times do I have to tell you, he's not mine! We're . . . mates, that's all! Why do you always have to blow everything out of proportion? You're always reading into things that are totally innocent!”

“I've seen the way he looks at me and the way he looks at you. More importantly, I've seen you looking back!” With that, she whirled away, clearly intending to flounce off. Dean caught hold of her wrist.

“Gin, would you listen, I never. . . ! For Pete's sake, woman, I'm with you, aren't I?!”

“I don't know, are you? Let go,” she ordered coldly. Dean dropped her wrist as if he'd been burned. She sashayed down the corridor and out of sight. Dean swore and shook his head. It was then that he noticed Hero and Ron.

Hero was shocked speechless. Ron was shaking in wordless, white-lipped fury, his hands curled into fists at his sides.

“How . . . how much did you see?”

Hero swallowed through the lump in her throat and spoke. “Enough. We heard her from when she first insinuated that you and Seamus. . . .”
Dean let out a bitter laugh. “Oh, believe me, it's not the first time.” He rolled his eyes. “It's happened before, I'm sure it'll happen again. Unless she's well and truly fed up, now. I never know with her.” Ron took a step forward, glaring unblinkingly at Dean, who took a step backward. Hero grabbed hold of his elbow, though he showed no sign of noticing.

She flashed Dean a pasted on smile. “I think it might be wise if you found somewhere else to be at present.” He nodded and hurried off in the same direction as Ginny. Hero looked up at Ron and maneuvered him against the wall. He went willingly, still white-lipped and shaking.

“Ron. Ron, calm down. Come on, use your words.”

“THAT TOSSEr! THAT . . . WANKER!”

Well, those were words. “Yes, finish the thought.”

“I'M GONNA KILL HIM!”

“Right. Can you possibly wait until after the match on Saturday?” A lesser mortal would have quailed under the filthy look he gave her. She figured she probably deserved it.

“Look, your sister is entirely capable of looking after herself. And anyway, it's not really any of your business.”

“She's my sister!”

“Yes, I realize, I just said that. So what? You can stick your nose in if and when you're invited. Did she look frightened or vulnerable just now?” Ron reluctantly shook his head. “No. She didn't. Leave be.”

They trekked back to Gryffindor Tower, Ron muttering darkly the whole way. She was a little leery of letting him within arm's reach of Dean, but they parted and went to their respective dormitories.

So. That had been quite a revelation. If Ginny had been implying what Hero thought she was implying. . . . She didn't need this. She wouldn't have asked Dean to fill in if she'd had any idea. Course, she wouldn't have asked Seamus, either. It was such a bloody nightmare. She let out a soft, bitter laugh as she punched her pillow into shape. At least she wasn't jealous of Ginny and Dean anymore.

Ron was worse the next morning, prickly and prone to lashing out on the wrong people. Hermione gave Hero a questioning look at breakfast. Hero just shook her head, mouthing, “don't ask.”

Hermione nodded and shot an apprehensive glance at Ron. He was shoveling food into his mouth, but his dark expression remained unchanged. His mood didn't improve much over the next few days. Never had Hero wished more for a magical solution.

The practice before Saturday's match was even worse than the last one. He didn't save a single goal, and what's more, he bellowed at the rest of the team, driving Demelza to tears. Hero called a stop. She tried to comfort Demelza, since she really was a decent player, and she certainly didn't deserve what Ron had said to her.

Once everyone was off the pitch, she turned to Ron. When she threatened to kick him off the team, he tried to resign. Hero refused, point blank. All her attempts to cheer him up during dinner came to nothing. Getting angry, she found, wasn't much better; Ron went to bed as dejected and hopeless as ever.

Hero lay awake, staring up at the canopy, too frustrated to sleep. Just because she was dying, the
world wouldn't roll out to greet her. Anything worth doing required dedicated effort. She remembered Bellatrix Lestrange at the Ministry, “You have to mean them, Potter!” A win with Slytherin would not just be handed to her by a version of Ron Weasley with confidence to match his inconsistently superb goal-tending.

The thought froze her, eyes wide. The team was fine as a whole, more than fine. The only thing she needed was a goal-keeper who was sure he couldn't fail. She knew just the thing. She cared about winning, perhaps more than was reasonable, but it was hers. And it would be worth it. Eventually, memories would be the only things she had left. Her course decided, Hero drifted off into an uncommonly easy night's sleep.

Breakfast the next morning took place under a clear, azure sky. Hero smiled up at it, ignoring the cheering Gryffindors and jeering Slytherins. Today would be a good day. Today would be a fantastic, brilliant, superlative day.

Her sunny smile couldn't penetrate Ron's black mood. Lavender wished him luck. Fortunately, Ron ignored her.


Ron stared mournfully at his toast. “Doesn't matter. I don't care.”

Hero noticed Hermione approaching the Gryffindor table as she poured Ron a glass of pumpkin juice. “Morning,” Hero greeted her, grinning as she handed Ron the glass. “There you are, drink up.”

Hermione gasped. “Don't drink that, Ron!”

He looked up, his lips on the rim. “Why not?”

“Hero, if I hadn't seen it, I never would have believed it. You put something in his drink! The bottle's in your hand right now!”

Hero shoved the bottle in the pocket of her robes as she shook her head at her friend, wide-eyed. “Hermione, you're being ridiculous.”

Ron picked his glass up again. “Ron!” Hermione cried in alarm. He rolled his eyes.

“You worry too much Hermione. Don't you trust Hero?” He downed it in one gulp. Hermione waited a few moments, staring at him with wide, worried eyes. “See? There's nothing wrong. In fact, I feel brilliant.” He got up, stretched, and swaggered out of the great hall.

Hermione turned to Hero with accusing eyes. Hero scoffed. “Oh, please. Even if I did - and I'm not saying I did, mind - what's it to you?” She leaned in and whispered, “Confunded anyone lately?” She left Hermione spluttering and jogged to catch up with Ron, frosty grass crunching underfoot.

“We're lucky the weather's so good, don't you think?” Ron grunted, looking nervous again. Hero swore under her breath. Not nerves. Please, not nerves.

Ginny told them the Slytherin chaser couldn't play due to a bludger to the head in practice. Not just that, Malfoy had cried off as well, claiming to be sick.

“Oh, did he?” Hero murmured, more to herself than anyone else. The last time he couldn't play, that
time due to injury, he'd pitched a fit until he'd gotten the match rescheduled. Not so now?

“Gosh, that is a bit of luck! Vaisey's their best scorer. I know you probably think Malfoy's up to something, but it's dead lucky for us— Wait. You... my pumpkin juice this morning. You didn't, did you?”

“Do what? Look, we should get dressed, it won't be much longer now.”

Five minutes later, they walked onto the pitch, brooms in hand, to be greeted by a stadium full of color, half red and gold, half green and silver. The new Slytherin captain, Urquhart, crushed her fingers when they shook hands. They took off to the commentary of Zacharias Smith, a complete prat from Hufflepuff. The Slytherins cheered his suggestion that Ron was only on the team because of his friendship with Hero, though Smith didn't seem to think it ended there.

“Oh, and here comes Slytherin's first attempt at a goal, and it's Urquhart streaking down the pitch, and—” It felt like her heart stuttered, paused, for a second that seemed to last forever--

“Weasley saves it. Well, he's bound to get lucky sometimes, I suppose.” A satisfied smile spread across her face as she scanned the air for the elusive golden ball. Thank you, Mr. Smith.

Half an hour in, Gryffindor was leading 60-0, in large part due to Ron's seemingly impossible saves and Ginny's scoring, helped by Dean and Demelza. It certainly shut Zacharias Smith up. As the game progressed, it seemed Gryffindor could do no wrong. They scored goal after goal unchallenged. Ron started conducting the Gryffindors in “Weasley Is Our King” from on high. It reminded Hero of something, something distinctly unpleasant.

Harper, the replacement seeker, crashed into Hero when Madam Hooch wasn't looking, threw her a nasty grin, and took off upwards.

“Harper seems to be chasing after the snitch! At any rate, he's certainly seen something Potter hasn't.” She turned to glare at Harper, only for her heart to leap into her throat and her stomach to drop down somewhere among the blades of frosted grass. She raced after him, but he was miles ahead. Even on a faster broom, she might not make it in time. If Harper caught the snitch with Gryffindor only a hundred points up... .

He was about to close his fingers around it—“Oi, Harper, how much did Malfoy pay you to sub in for him? Because it can't possibly be enough for a seeker as good as you.”

She had no idea what made her say it. She only knew that it worked. Harper fumbled, grabbing air as he flew past. Hero whipped a hand out and caught the fluttering thing. She shot a smug smile at Harper, who was staring at her in bewilderment. “Then again, perhaps not.”

She flew back to the cheering crowd, snitch held high. The team swarmed her, but Ginny flew in the other direction. Had one of the Slytherins unwittingly taken a page out of Hermione's book and Confunded her? Her question was answered when Ginny crashed into the commentator's podium.

“Gosh, Professor, I'm so sorry. I forgot to brake,” Ginny said, playing innocent. Zacharias Smith stirred feebly under the wreckage. Hero laughed breathlessly and slung and arm around Ginny's shoulders when she flew to meet the rest of the team.

Dean announced a party in the common room, organized by Seamus. He missed Ginny's glare. Hero, on the other hand, couldn't fail to see Hermione's when she stormed into the changing room, a whirlwind of righteous fury.

“Christ, Hero! You heard Slughorn, it's illegal.”
That's only a problem if we're caught. You going to turn us in?” Ron asked dismissively.

“No, of course not. But, Hero--!”

“Hermione, do you really think I'd give Ron Felix Felicis, an illegal, performance enhancing substance?”

Hermione spluttered. “I didn't until today!”

“Oh, ye of little faith.” She reached into the pocket of her school robes and brought out the tiny bottle of golden potion, still stoppered and sealed. “It was a placebo. I just needed him to believe. He's spectacular when he's on form. I needed him to be spectacular.” She shrugged. “Now he knows what he's capable of.”

“I did it all myself?” he asked wonderingly.

“Yes. So if you get lousy again, I won't be nearly so forgiving. So, Hermione, am I forgiven?”

Hermione pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose. “It was just such a Slytherin thing to do. It was so manipulative!” She paused and thought for a moment. “I . . . suppose it wasn't as awful as I thought. I mean, I don't understand why you care about a game so much—”

Ron grinned and wrapped an arm around her. “And you never will.” He looked at Hero. “Shall we go join the party?” Hermione gave Hero a small smile and made no move to step away from Ron. They trekked up to the castle, Ron's arm still around Hermione, both of them acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

She was mobbed by the Creevey brothers, who wanted the equivalent of a doctoral thesis on the match. She was waylaid by Roland Vane and his bevy of giggling fangirls, Roland mentioning something about Slughorn's Christmas party. She fought her way through them, trying to find Ron and Hermione.

She found them in a corner just as Hermione kissed Ron, tentatively at first, then fiercely, passionately. Hero felt like she was intruding on something intensely private, for all they were standing in full view of a crowd. Ron slid his arms around her waist and pulled her closer.

The kiss didn't last long, however. Ginny and Dean saw to that. It was almost glorious. It was a row, but it wasn't just a row. It was a screaming match, a tear down the trees, no holds barred, screaming match. The whole common room fell silent to play audience to the detonation of their relationship.

“Just admit it!”

“Will you please keep your voice down?” Dean hissed at her.

“No, I will not! You're ashamed of me? Fuck you, I'm disgusted with you! You led me on! Don't deny it!”

“Aw, Ginny, for the love of--”

“Love of who, Dean? Because it's certainly not me! I don't have the rights bits, do I?”

“You're going to believe him over me?! Gin, we've been together for months!”

“Don't you dare call me that! I believe what I've seen. You have never once looked at me the way
you look at him!” She laughed bitterly. “It's no wonder he keeps giving me dirty looks. He's right! Why are you with me when you're so clearly in love with him?”

“I'm not...” Dean protested desperately. Ginny just looked at him sadly. When she spoke, her voice was at a more normal level.

“Well, he's in love with you. You're being cruel.” She shook her head. “I didn't know you could be so cruel. Or so cowardly. Pretending I'm what you want won't do any of us a bit of good. We're through, Dean. I'll start speaking to you again when you can act like a bloody Gryffindor!” She turned to head up to her dorm. It was only then that she noticed everyone staring at her. “Well, what are all of you looking at? Haven't you got lives?”

Dean watched her go, knowing he couldn't follow, looking miserable. Hero picked Seamus out in the front row, a picture of shock. He knew enough not to go near Dean, not now. She glanced over her shoulder at Ron and Hermione, who were conversing in hushed tones. Hermione stood on tiptoe to peck him on the lips before going up, likely in search of Ginny.

Ron looked around idly and spotted Hero. She walked over so they could hold a conversation over the amplified music from someone's wizarding wireless.

“So.”

“Yeah.”

“You're... together?”

“I guess,” Ron replied, shrugging.

“You're not worried?” Or perhaps experiencing nightmarish visions of what would happen if they didn't work out, as Hero had been?

He looked down at her in amusement. “Of course I'm worried. Why do you think this is only happening now?”

That brought her up short. She blinked as she tried to wrap her head around the thought, that Ron and Hermione might have been Ron & Hermione much sooner. That the same fears she had started entertaining recently might have been haunting her friends for years.

She grinned up at him. “I'm sure you'll be fine.”

“Great. Could you get Ginny to come down so we can all go someplace and talk?”

Hero patted his arm and went to find Hermione and Ginny.
Confessions and a Cuppa

Chapter Notes

I keep saying this, but I am sorry it's been so long. I'm in Ireland, staying with friends and relatives, and wifi isn't always a sure thing. Anyway. I hope you enjoy the fruits of my labors. It took two months to get it the way I wanted it.

The news spread over the entire school within days. Dean avoided Seamus whenever possible. Seamus was miserable. So was Dean. Ginny was trying to hold her head up high amid the whispers. Hero respected her all the more for that; she knew perfectly well what it was like. Ginny was going through her OWL year, trying to hold onto her dignity while malicious rumors swirled though the student body. To be honest, she was handling it better than Hero had.

She'd sobbed and screamed and cursed Dean's name with Hero and Hermione besides her on her bed. It had been what she'd needed to begin to move past it. Once she'd cried herself out, she'd confessed she'd been expecting it for the past month.

"I meant what I said, downstairs." She sat, hugging her knees to her chest, staring at nothing. "I may not be Severus Snape, double agent for the Order, but I'm not blind, either. I knew. I just didn't want to admit it. Michael Corner was a sore loser." She sniffed. "Dean's so deep in the closet, he can't even admit it to himself. I'm... sure he has his reasons. But I am not someone's excuse. I never want to be someone's excuse. I think maybe I just have no idea how to pick a good man."

"Oh, come on, you went to the Yule Ball with Neville," Hermione protested.

Ginny shrugged. "We were just friends. He's nice, more than nice, but he only asked me because the girl he really wanted to go with already had a date. And last I knew, he was dating Hannah Abbot, anyway. I think I should just stay single a while, figure things out. There's no rush. I think I need to grow up a little." She conjured up a watery smile. "You two are such good friends."

So, Ginny was coping as well as could be expected. The other two... They hadn't been able to figure out how not to get themselves into the mess, they could hardly be expected to extricate themselves from it quickly or easily. Life was not so forgiving, or so kind. That much was perfectly obvious.

Hero watched events unfold on Sunday. It was a bit odd to be completely uninvolved in the latest tale of woe. And not exactly an unpleasant sort of odd. She felt guilty at that, but not quite enough to take it back. Guilty enough to try to help, though.

*

It was very nearly time for another jaunt to London. Potter avoided his eye in class, kept her head down, and was usually the first one out the door. Her expression was usually brooding. If Severus indulged in such things, he would have smiled wryly. He spent a fair bit of time brooding, himself. He had no idea of the subject of Potter's contemplations. His were at turns on the revelations a month previous and on the mysterious illness that plagued Miss Potter.

He'd bought medical texts he thought would help in narrowing down potentialities. Certainly, he'd
narrowed it down, but he was still left with far too many possibilities. Ultimately, he didn't know enough of her symptoms. Albus was keeping mum as usual, humming to himself with that infuriating twinkle in his eye. Poppy was a staunch defendant of patient-physician confidentiality. They'd both yield before Potter would, Lord knew.

He'd thought that letting the subject lie would encourage her to talk. Obviously, it hadn't. Should he then press harder? Except she had never responded well to intimidation. It sort of . . . slid off her. He paused to wonder if there was a reason for that. If he ever got her to talk about her family, he might find out. And pigs might fly, he reflected dryly.

It occurred to him that of course there was a way to get Potter to interact with him. Why, give her detention, of course. It wasn't like he would have to invent something to punish her for.

* 

Potter, it seemed, had finally figured out how to behave. Just in time to inconvenience Severus Snape. Of course, because what better incentive was there for her to do anything? He wondered if following her while Disillusioned would qualify him as very mad. Certainly, when it came to Potter, his interest was beginning to border on obsession. The muggles had a word for it, didn't they? Ah, yes. Stalking. His lips twisted at the thought. He preferred to think of it as shadowing her, like a guardian. It was slightly more palatable, at least.

He took patrol every night. It didn't pay off until the week before they were next due in London.

* 

She waited outside for Seamus after their last class on Wednesday, Defense, and tapped him on the shoulder when he came out. He raised an eyebrow. Hero hoped her smile was innocuous and understanding.

“Do you need someone to talk to?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Maybe . . . maybe it'll help.”

“I don't see how it can hurt. Come on.”

“Not the common room. Is there somewhere else—anywhere else—we can talk?”

“Of course. Come with me.” Confused but willing, he followed her to the painting of the bowl of fruit.

“Hero?”

She grinned at him as she reached out to tickle the pear, which giggled and turned into a doorknob. She pushed the painting, which swung inward to reveal a hive of activity. It was a large room of immaculate white tile, brimming with house elves, steam, and mouthwatering aromas. Hero watched Seamus's face as he took it all in. Finally, he turned to her with an air of wonderment.

“You know where the kitchens are?”

“Now, what kind of troublemaker would I be if I didn't? Come on in, the elves love visitors. As you can see, they're a bit busy with dinner, but I'm sure someone will be more than happy to make us tea.”

“You're sure?” He stepped inside, beginning to beam despite himself.
“If no one else, it'll be Dobby or Kreacher. Dobby's a bit odd, but he's a dear friend. Kreacher, I inherited from my godfather,” she told him in an undertone. “I'm hoping it's Dobby. Kreacher hates me.”

"Er . . . right."

Dobby and Kreacher came up to her, scowling at each other. They both bowed low.

“Has Mistress come to request something of Kreacher?” the old elf muttered. “She comes with a different wizard, Kreacher does not know him, he is likely as filthy as the rest of the company Mistress keeps.”

“I'm Seamus Finnegan. I'm a half-blood, actually.”

“And the half-blood brat is Irish, what would poor Mistress Black say, the shame, the disgrace.” The grin slid off Seamus's face.

Dobby glared at the other elf. “Hero Potter is a great witch, and Miss Potter's friends are well chosen. Even if Miss Potter's friends were not as honorable as is she, no self-respecting house elf would say a word about it!” Hero blinked, unsure how to react to such a staunch defense.

“No self-respecting house elf would allow himself to be sacked and then rejoice in it.” Dobby looked like he was about to punch the old elf. Hero laid a hand on his shoulder.

“He's had no family to look after for many years. I'm sure you understand he's not quite . . . with it. Now, Dobby, we'd love a pot of tea, if it's not too much trouble.” The elf nodded eagerly and scurried off. She turned reluctantly to Kreacher, who was eyeing her with loathing. How terribly original. “I would like a selection of biscuits for myself and my guest, please. And I have matters to discuss with you.”

He bowed low, murmuring, “As mistress wishes.”

A few other elves brought them chairs and a table. Hero turned what she hoped was a disarming smile on Seamus.

“Tell me the story from the beginning.” Dobby and Kreacher came back with the tea and biscuits. Seamus took one and dunked it.

“Well, my dad's a muggle, you know. His family is Catholic, like most people in Ireland, but they’re fairly zealous. They barely tolerate Mam being a witch and me a wizard. They like us as people, but it . . . well, it bothers them. I realized years ago that girls didn't do it for me, but Dean. . . .” He trailed off, a faraway look in his eyes. After he moment, he blinked and continued. "Dean does.

“He told me back in fourth year that he couldn't date someone who wasn't honest in who he was. So . . . I came out to my family. Which is part of why—not that it's any excuse—but it's part of why I acted the way I did last year. It didn't go well, and I didn't want my mam and dad to have done with me entirely. My gran still won't talk to me. It's probably a good thing my grandda's dead. I think it might have killed him, and then they could hate me for that, too.”

“And then Dean was dating Ginny.”

“Exactly. I'm sorry I bothered her, but I suppose I thought if he wasn't with her, he'd be with me. Clearly, that didn't happen.”

“Why, though? What's the matter with Dean?”
“He's a dirty coward. He can't bear to face people who can't deal with him being gay. His family seemed nice enough though, the times I was with them. They're not the problem. The problem is, he can't deal with not being what he considers normal. Well, he's a wizard, I don't think he can help being not normal. And then he took your side, and I wasn't on it, and. . . .”

“He loves you, though.”

“Love's grand, but I need more than that. If he can't admit it, what's the feckin' point? After what I faced for him?”

“I'll talk to him. Try and make him see reason. Don't give up just yet.”

“I'm not sure I could if I tried. It's just, he's always there. We sleep in the same room, we share most of our classes, we will for another year and a half. Unless we're all killed by Death Eaters, I suppose,” he muttered dismally.

“Don't think like that,” Hero scolded. “We'll get through this, if only because we don't have any other choice. If we start to believe losing is inevitable, it will be.”

“Admirable sentiments, Miss Potter. Why they needed to be expressed in the middle of the Hogwarts kitchen when the elves are in the thick of the dinner rush, I must confess I am uncertain. Perhaps you can provide me with an equally eloquent answer.”

Hero and Seamus jumped in shock and turned to face the speaker. There, utterly incongruous in the gleaming white kitchen stood Severus Snape, resplendent in his characteristic head to toe black.

They leapt to their feet, still holding their teacups. Hero glanced at Seamus. He appeared frozen.

“Good afternoon, Professor.”

“Is it, Miss Potter? It begs the question of why you've chosen to spend these free moments of a pleasant afternoon . . . underground.”

“I didn't want to be disturbed, and I had things I wanted to discuss with Kreacher.”

“Indeed? Because in such a tiny place as the castle and grounds of Hogwarts, the only possible place for a private discussion was the kitchen, off-limits to students as it is. And, of course, you would be quite unable to summon your elf to you at a moment's notice.” Hero felt like swearing. “Would you like me to give you another chance to come up with a better lie? No? Well, then. Mr. Finnegan, detention with Mr. Filch. Miss Potter, you will serve your detention with myself. Do you understand?” They muttered their assent. A smirk curved his lips.

“I would like to discuss your detention with you, Potter. Run along, Mr. Finnegan.” Seamus scurried away, relief suffusing across his face. Hero glared at the Potions Master.

“Something tells me you don't really want to talk about my detention.”

“How very astute. We may as well sit in the chairs the elves took the pains to set out.” Hero sat. Snape went to sit in the chair recently vacated by Seamus, but paused at the sight of the teapot. “Is this Earl Grey?”

“Er . . . I don't know. The elves made it.”

He sniffed it and poured himself a cup. He eased into the armchair, his long fingers wrapped around the delicate china cup. Hero blinked at him. Perhaps there were hallucinogens in the tea? Or the
painting of fruit led to Wonderland on alternate Wednesdays? At least that would make sense.

“I won't ask what you were discussing with Mr. Finnegan. I won't ask why you were discussing it here. Quite frankly, I don't care.”

“You gave me detention because you didn't care?” Hero inquired, deadpan.

Snape's black eyes caught her gaze and held it. “You know perfectly what I wish to discuss with you, Potter.”

“Why do you care so much?” she snapped, adding petulantly, “Sir.”

He set the cup aside. He crossed his ankles, steepled his fingers, and leaned toward her, focusing in like a lens; the kind of lens that might divine the secrets of faraway galaxies or burn her to a crisp. Hero couldn't even move enough to fidget.

“I'm curious. Riddles are my area, Miss Potter.” Hero fought the urge to laugh hysterically, but it came out as a snort anyway. Snape raised an eyebrow.

“I-I'm sorry. I can't believe you just said that.” She put a hand over her mouth to keep in the giggles. Her professor was beginning to look slightly alarmed.

“What the devil is the matter with you?”

Her eyes were tearing up. “You said . . . Riddle!” she gasped out, letting out whoops of laughter. Snape was eyeing her like a strange, potentially dangerous wild thing. He waited until she had calmed down to speak again.

“You cannot avoid the discussion forever.”

Her expression sobered. “Of course I can. And I will. Because there is no earthly reason for me to discuss it with you. Ever.”

“But you haven't discussed it with anyone, have you?” She stared at him. How could he possibly know?

“Please. You wouldn't be quite so defensive if you'd previously cleared the air. Friends may have put some of the pieces together, but you don't talk about it.”

“They aren't my bloody therapists! And neither are you.”

“I'm the closest thing you've got. Start talking.”

“No! What are you going to do? Hold me down and pour Veritaserum down my throat?! It's my life, not your amusement to poke at and pry into. Forget it, alright?” she warned, trying to sound threatening. She just sounded afraid.

“I will wear you down eventually. Wouldn't you rather skip the interrogation and just get it over with? In the end, this is a battle you will lose. Wouldn't you prefer to clear the air?” he coaxed.

Her chin came up. “I . . . I can't.” Snape scowled and opened his mouth, probably to castigate her. She held up her hands and jumped in before he had a chance. “I've never talked about it. I don't know how to start. I don't know if I can just . . . admit to it. Most of the time while I'm here, I pretend it happened to someone else.”

“Then do so.”
“Eh?”

“Tell it as if it happened to someone else.”

*

She stared at her lap for a moment. When she glanced up, she looked at him like he'd thrown her a life preserver in the midst of a storm-tossed sea, desperate hope and gratitude in her eyes. Severus resisted the urge to squirm. He gestured for her to begin. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Once upon a time in Surrey . . . there lived an upper-middleclass family called the Dursleys. Mr. Dursley was a businessman, while his wife stayed home with their son. He was a horrible, spoiled child. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley were happy to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. But they had a secret, and they lived in fear that someone would discover it.

Her voice became bitter. “You see, Mrs. Dursley had a sister. Lily Evans Potter and her husband were, in the Dursleys’ decided opinion, as far from normal as one could be. In fact, they were a witch and a wizard.” Hero's lips twisted. “The Dursleys, thank God, hadn't seen them in years, though they'd received an announcement of a little Potter, a girl, not long after their Diddykins was born.

Hero paused. When she spoke again, her gaze was focused on something far off in the distance. “And then, on Halloween, the year the little Potter turned one, a horrible, psychotic wizard named Tom Riddle killed the girl's father. And when the girl's mother refused to stand aside, he killed the girl's mother. And then he tried to kill the little girl, but his plan backfired. He would later say that she made him less than the meanest ghost. But that doesn't matter. What matters is what happened because the dark wizard came to visit.

“She had to go somewhere. Her house was destroyed, and her parents were lying lifeless on the floor. The Great Wizard Dumbledore knew she had to be protected. The best place he could think to put her where bad wizards couldn't get her was with the Dursleys, in Surrey.

“The Potter girl grew up safe from dark magic, that much is true. But that didn't mean she was safe from harm.” Her pause didn't seem to be one of hesitation. Rather, that she was trying to force the words out of her mouth. She finally took a sip of tea and, keeping her eyes resolutely on her cup, continued. “From the time she was two to when she was almost eleven, she lived in the cupboard under the stairs. She cooked and cleaned and did the gardening. They fed her as little as possible. She sometimes went hungry for days at a time.

“Th-they didn't hit her, or slap her, or . . . anything like that. Well, not much. They usually left that to Dudley, who would go on to become a junior heavyweight boxing champion. When he and the Potter girl were young, his favorite sport was one of his own invention. He called it Hero Hunting. The girl didn't mind it so much because they had to catch her first, and she was very fast.

“And then, one morning not long before her eleventh birthday, a letter arrived for her, which could perhaps be said to be a miracle in and of itself. As her uncle said, cruelly but not entirely incorrectly, who would be writing to her? She had no friends. If she had any relative outside of the Dursleys, she surely wouldn't have been left with them. She was alone in all the world.

“But the letter was even addressed to her cupboard. Her aunt and uncle were frightened by it, and got rid of it without letting her see it. They moved her to her cousin's second bedroom, where he kept all the toys he'd broken or lost interest in. Maybe they were ashamed. Maybe they thought the letters would stop if they moved her.
“But the letters kept coming. Inside each of the eggs that were delivered, several through the letterbox every day until Mr. Dursley nailed it shut. Then, the Sunday after the first letter, thousands of them down the chimney. Mr. Dursley decided that there was no option but to take them on the run. They stayed at a hotel in Cokeworth, but still the letters found them. They found a hut on a rock in the middle of the North Sea and rowed out, to stay for as long as it took.” A hint of a smile curled at the corners of her mouth.

“And then a giant named Hagrid came, knocking the door off its hinges. The girl got up from her place in the dirt. He gave Dudley a pig’s tail, and he gave the Potter girl her first ever birthday cake and her Hogwarts letter. He then took her away from her horrible relatives to London to buy her school things. He bought her an owl for her birthday. Before, she'd only ever gotten things like coat hangers, and dog biscuits, and her uncle's old socks.

“Her relatives took her to London because they also had to get Dudley's tail removed. She got on the train and found friends for the first time in her life. She thought she was free. But then people hated her there, too,” she finished softly.

They sat in silence. Severus was digesting all he had heard. It was . . . horrible. Even if - or perhaps because - she told it like a fairy tale. He got the feeling it hadn't been him who she had been telling the story to; he'd simply happened to occupy space within earshot. He also got the feeling that there was a lot she had alluded to but left unsaid.

“Did they ever give you a reason?” She started at the sound of his voice, flinched when he said "you."

“They . . . they called me freak. My aunt thinks my name is pretentious, so if I was called by name, it was Potter, never Hero. They hate magic. They revile it. And me. Every little bit of accidental magic I did, I was punished. I ran away the summer I turned thirteen because I blew up Uncle Vernon's sister. She . . . called Mum a bitch,” Hero related bleakly. Severus felt a gust of fury blow through him like winter wind.

“All my school things get locked in my cupboard during the summer. I had to sneak downstairs in the middle of the night to pick the lock. I did my essays at night. I hid everything under the floorboards in Dudley's second bedroom.”

It was a wonder her essays had been as good as he remembered, then. It was a wonder that she trusted him, that she trusted at all.

Hero was the one to break the silence this time. “So, do the rules of the confessional apply?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, when Catholics go to a priest and confess their sins. Whatever is said stays confidential. I tried Catholicism, but if I really tried to talk to a priest about all the things I've done, I'd be institutionalized. I think it's better that my sins stay between me and God. He's the only One who knows the whole story.”

“I didn't realize you were religious,” Severus commented, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, well, I tend to not wait to say grace before I eat,” she muttered sarcastically.

Severus ignored the comment and pressed his point. “You still believe in the existence of an all-powerful being watching over us?”

“I'm still alive. You should know what a miracle that is. And, no, it's not always easy to hang onto
my beliefs. But He obviously exists, and I know He's looked after me. Religion is not a fair weather friend. It can't be, because otherwise what's the point?"

He couldn't decide if it was admirable or absurd. It was a recurring question on the subject of Hero Potter.

"If you say so. Friday?"

"Right. Er . . . how's the tea?" she asked, suddenly shy.

"It's acceptable. Did you say you had to discuss something with your elf?"

"Oh. Right. Um, when's my detention?"

"Saturday, I think. Well, off you go."

*

She got to her feet and approached the elves. Snape stayed seated, sipping his tea.

"Kreacher?" she called. He came out of the melee and bowed.

"What does Kreacher's mistress wish of him?" he asked bitterly.

"Do you remember Mundungus Fletcher?"

"Kreacher does. The mangy excuse for a wizard deserves no place in my lady's house," he muttered.

"You're absolutely right." Kreacher's head snapped up at that. He glared at her suspiciously.

"No, really. He's been stealing Black family heirlooms. I have something I need you to do for me." Kreacher's gaze was hungry now. "I need you to track down everything he's taken. I don't care if other people have them by now. They can never own property belonging to the noble and most ancient House of Black. I know I can trust you to get back every last piece. And to make sure Mundungus Fletcher can never touch any of it ever again."

A fire of determination was in the old elf's eyes. "Oh, yes, mistress. It will be Kreacher's pleasure." He bowed low and disappeared with a soft crack of displaced air. A few of the elves glared at her, disappointed at losing a pair of hands during dinner prep. Others heaved sighs of relief.

Hero paused, a little at loose ends. She turned back to the Potions Master, who was looking at her with a peculiar expression.

"Rather Slytherin way of handling it, wouldn't you say?"

Hero shrugged. "I figured I should deal with him in a way he would understand."

"Through manipulation. Cunning. Your godfather—"

"Look, I know Sirius wasn't perfect. But I . . . Just don't go there, okay? He's dead. Your grudge should have died with him. Why can't you just let it go?"

He simply looked at her for a long moment. "I'll consider it." Hero rolled her eyes.

"Right. Well. Bye." She turned tail and scampered back through the portrait hole.
Spilling

She'd told him it was obvious. Looking back, there were hints, here and there. But he really didn't
think he could have missed something obvious. He paused to consider that. He probably wouldn't
have missed the obvious, but it was possible he could have overlooked things that were strongly
indicative. Damn.

There was a way to rectify the situation and return it to proper balance. It would be unpleasant. It
would be ghastly. But he had quite enough debts on his shoulders already. That's what it would be.
He had asked, she had given. Now it fell to him to . . . reciprocate. And suddenly he realized what
Potter had been feeling. He resisted the urge to shudder at the sensation.

But, all the same, when Friday morning came, he woke to the knowledge that he would confess.
Because, like it or not, he respected her. He'd tried not to, but it simply hadn't worked.

He was silent during the carriage ride to the gates, silent as he drove through Hogsmead. As he
turned onto the motorway, he found himself wondering where to begin. He turned on the radio and
thought. Finally, he spoke.

“You are not the only one to suffer an abusive childhood.”

He could feel her bristle. “If you think you can trivialize what I've been through—”

“No, that's not what I meant! I meant . . .” he exhaled in a gust, his grip on the steering wheel
tightening. “You're not alone. If you ever wanted to talk to someone who would . . . understand. I
do.”

Her nose wrinkled in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I grew up knowing your mother and your aunt, but we came from distinctly different backgrounds.
Her parents, your grandparents, were . . . some of the kindest people I have ever had the fortune to
meet. My upbringing meant I had little experience with kindness. My own idiocy has ensured that I
have had the barest acquaintance with it since.” His eyes were focused on the road, but it was clear
his thoughts were miles away. Hero watched him intently.

“My parents fought like cats and dogs. My mother didn't tell my father she was a witch until after
they were married. He never forgave her, never forgot it, and never let her forget it, either. It was
obvious from when I was young that I was a wizard. My mother a witch, what else would I be? But
she didn't tell my father. When he realized it, he beat me within an inch of my life.” His lips twisted
and his eyes hardened. “I was six. My mother stepped in. He broke her arm.

“I became friends with your mother when I was nine. She knew she could do things, but nothing
else. I explained to her about our world. We were thick as thieves. She deduced certain things about
my home life, though I never actually told her.

“My father worked as a welder, and we lived in Spinner's end, in one gray house in a row of them.
He didn't make much money, and my mother's family, not particularly wealthy by that point in any
case, disowned my mother when she married. When my father was at home, he was invariably drunk
and mean. Consequently, I spent most of my time at your mother's house. I can't imagine it was
terribly difficult to figure out from there.” Hero felt a rush of affection and admiration for the mother
she had never known.

Snape cleared his throat and went on. “When she was sorted into Gryffindor with your father and his
friends, and I into Slytherin, I must confess, I thought it was the end. But she stayed friends with me. She didn't particularly like your father, so his hatred of me didn't change that. If anything . . . it was reason for her to hang on longer, past the point when all her other friends told her I was a lost cause.”

He paused, seeming to search for the next part. “I arrived at Hogwarts in second-hand robes, with second-hand books, many of them my mother's from her years at Hogwarts. The Gryffindors, particularly your father and Black, thought I arrived an initiate of the Dark Arts. The Slytherins mostly disdained me because I was a penniless mongrel. However, I excelled at Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts, and people took notice. And then came the day in fifth year, in the middle of OWLs, when I threw away everything that mattered.” If his tone hadn't been bitter before, it certainly was now. Bitter, and self-loathing, and something else. Something terribly human.

He glanced at her, then back to the road. “You know this part. It was the memory you saw last year. My worst memory. It was after that that everything . . . fell apart.” He barked out a laugh. “So utterly. My mother died the following year, killed by my father in a drunken rage just like all the others. I joined the Death Eaters. Because of me, Lily was dead at the age of 21. And here I am, left to make reparations to her ghost,” he finished, bleak as a Scottish December.

Hero had been silent throughout his tale. “I'm not sure which part is the worst,” she admitted softly. “There shouldn't be any question. For you, surely the worst part should be how my actions led directly to your parents' murders.”

Hero shrugged. “Maybe. But I think you've just told me more about my mother than anyone except maybe Slughorn. Most people just tell me I have her eyes. So, you know, that's pretty decently disturbing.” She tilted her head. “And I understand your history, probably better than most. Which, in and of itself, is something I understand perfectly. I've never explicitly told Ron and Hermione. We don't talk about it. They know what they've seen. If I could take that much back, I would.”

The song on the radio changed from the Beatles’ “Come Together” to Queen’s “We Will Rock You”. Hero scrutinized the man. “How do you cope with it?”

“As I believe I have just explained in some detail, I don't. Do I seem to you a person who has conquered his demons?”

“You're functioning. That's something, at least.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I have spent the last fifteen years mostly alone in a castle in rural Scotland, bullying children. Is that how you would define ‘functional’?”

Hero shrugged. “You get by.”

“And so do you. But it's not the same thing.”

“Not really, no.” Hero fell into contemplative silence.

After a few minutes, she looked back at him. “Is my mother the only reason you left the Death Eaters?”

Snape pursed his lips as he considered the question. “You mean, if the Dark Lord hunting her was the sole reason for my defection?”

“Yes.”

“It was a large part of it,” he admitted. “But I was beginning to see past his charismatic exterior. I
was still grieving for my mother, and I saw my father as the example of all muggles. I forgot your mother's parents. But he killed the witches and wizards who married muggles as well as the muggles themselves. He killed the children. He hunted muggleborns. I didn't go out on raids; the Dark Lord preferred to use me for my brewing skills. But I heard stories from other Death Eaters. I did not want to believe.

“Then, in Diagon Alley one day, I met a girl who'd been in my year, Sarah Williams. She was a half-blood who had married a muggle. He was killed before they'd been married a year. I think it had only been a week or so before I met her. She recognized me and, such was the relief of a familiar face, she fell into my arms sobbing. I guided her to the leaky cauldron, and she told me the entire story. She'd barely escaped with her life. I might have dismissed it as a tragedy perpetrated by others, but for one thing.” Hero glanced up at him. His eyes briefly met hers. “I remembered them boasting of it.

“They had attacked a pair of newlyweds with a child on the way. And I could not find a way to excuse that. I realized all the other sickening stories were probably true as well. And then, when I, I, told him an incomplete scrap of a prophecy from a woman who had never told a true prophecy in her life, he . . . went after you, and my worst enemy, and my best friend. And I left.”

It was a lot to take in. It was a lot to forgive, though he hadn't asked for it. She didn't know if he would disdain the very idea. She felt sorry for him, for all she knew he would despise her pity. She couldn't really blame him; so did she. The trouble was, she respected him for it, too.

There was a small part of her, a part she only now realized existed, that had hoped that learning more about him would kill her affections stone dead. It was one thing to know he had a Death Eater who was now a spy for the Light. It was quite another to be told that he had directed Voldemort towards her family, even if he had brewed potions instead of going on raids. . . . But it was no use. It was still there, a phantom ache. She was beginning to think it would only die when she did. She flinched away from the thought. There were all kinds of things she was avoiding tied up in that thought.

It was rather like a weed. Nothing could kill it, and it would simply proliferate. Aunt Petunia had hated the sight of them, but Hero had been powerless to get rid of them. Maybe it was because she identified with them. Even without an abundance of food, or water, or light, facing the possibility of death on a regular basis, disliked by the general populace, they remained. How could she possibly bring herself to actually try to kill them?

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She was quiet after he finished speaking. She just gazed, unseeing, out the windshield. Her mind, Severus supposed, was focused inward. He had, after all, given her a lot to think about. He wondered what she would do with the knowledge. He'd received the impression from Albus that he would have been expected to give her a portion of his history, but almost certainly not so soon. Quite possibly not so much. Severus was not sorry.

Albus Dumbledore had sacrificed much to the fight against the Dark Lord, including other people. A leader in war who does not acknowledge that sacrifices are inevitable is one that is both stupid and quickly and easily replaced with someone better. His focus was, as it should be, on the greater good.

As a consequence, however, he sometimes forgot to take into account the individual. One person could be more of an enigma, filled with facets and flaws and hopes and dreams and loves, than all the world. One person might tip the scales to the cause of right; one person might spell disaster. A coin, flipped into the air, coming down to pirouette on its edge. Heads or tails; uncontrollable,
unforeseeable. Albus Dumbledore could be counted on to forget to factor the unknown variable into his calculations. Most of the time, the unknown variable was one of the two people in the black sedan approaching London. This time, it was both.

Her story, he reflected, was not, on the surface, as bad as his own. But of note were the things he'd had that she hadn't: love, more than anything. His mother had loved him, as hers had, enough to step in the way of harm. His mother had done it repeatedly, and he'd grown up surrounded by that love. Lily had only been able to do it once. Hero's relatives had not loved her; they had, it seemed, barely tolerated her. A child knows. Severus had known it when his father barely tolerated him.

Children also know that they are supposed to be loved. It does something when they're not. Did she risk her life so frequently because she thought it was worth less? Well, that wouldn't do. He'd sacrificed time and energy to the task, to the cause, of keeping her alive. If she was willing to simply throw her life away, it made a mockery of every moment he gave in service to his cause.

Dumbledore had plans for her, Severus knew. He could not fail to know it. If, however, Albus thought that Severus had made it his mission to save Potter because of a prophecy, he was sorely mistaken. If he assumed it was because of the mad, convoluted plots running through his mind, that was hardly much better.

He was invested in her welfare, he realized then. He cared. Damn. It was a weakness he didn't need. He almost wondered how it had happened, except he knew perfectly well. He'd hated her, especially after she'd invaded his privacy the previous year, a crime he had, at the time, considered unforgivable. Now, it seemed to him as though another person entirely had been responsible for the transgression. Certainly, his perception of who she was had been turned on its head. He wasn't used to being wrong. After five years, he thought, a little bitterly, he ought to be used to it.

By noon, they were coming up on Nottingham. Severus pulled off the motorway to look for a café. After several minutes of driving through the town, Hero finally surfaced from her thoughts enough to recognize that they were no longer on the motorway.

"Where are we? And why?"

"We're in Nottingham. I'm looking for somewhere to eat."

"I'm not really hungry." The corners of Severus's mouth tightened. A lie.

"Too bad."

She huffed out an exasperated sigh. "What are you looking for?"

"A café or a tearoom."

"Nothing like Madam Puddifoot's!" She sat bolt upright, eyes wide in alarm.

"Of course not. Who do you think I am?" he scoffed. She visibly relaxed.

"Well, whatever you like, then."

"Magnanimous of you, I'm sure." Hero rolled her eyes. In doing so, she noticed a possibility.

"What about over there? Umm . . ." she squinted. "The Apothecary?"

Severus glanced where she had indicated and raised an eyebrow. "That will do, I suppose."
They found a parking space with a little trouble and made their way over to the tearoom. The inside was earthy; trellises of climbing plants obscured the walls, ivy pots were placed on tabletops of polished stone, and the floor was flagstones. It seemed fairly popular, with two-thirds of the seating area full. A friendly waitress in a canvas apron came over to seat them.

"You're lucky. This place is one of Nottingham's best kept secrets. You should see it in summer. Flowers all over the walls, it looks a right treat."

"Flowers indoors? I can't imagine they'd last long."

"The trellises are covering floor to ceiling windows."

"It doesn't look terribly like an apothecary," he sniffed. "Most of these plants are not medicinal."

"Well, it is winter, sir. And we keep the herb garden out back. Here we are. Will this do?"

"It is adequate," Severus replied, his expression impassive.

The waitress beamed at him almost rebelliously. "Someone will be over in a few minutes to take your orders. Here are your menus. Have a lovely day."

"I think she won," Hero quipped as she pulled out the cushioned wrought iron chair. Severus glared at her.

"Now you choose to tell the truth?"

She stuck her nose in the air. "I resent that."

"'Just a spare bit of parchment'? 'I haven't stolen anything'?"

"Alright, the first one was a lie, but the second one wasn't. Not as such."

"Oh?"

"Hermione stole the boomslang skin in second year. Dobby was the one who brought me the gillyweed, on fake Moody's instructions. I suppose he got used to helping himself to your stores."

"Well, clearly. And the parchment?"

"Well, obviously, it's more than that."

"Obviously," he drawled. "What is it?"

She snorted, looking insulted. "Not telling."

Severus rolled his eyes, unsurprised. "Just look at the menu, would you?"

She barely glanced at it before setting it aside. He stared at her. "You cannot have looked over the entire list already."

"They have Barry's gold blend. I don't need to look any further."

"Don't let your curiosity fail you now. Certainly, it's been the bane of my life for the past five and a half years."

"I'm not a huge fan of herbal teas. And it's not like you'll order anything except Earl Grey."
picked the menu back up. "I'm not sure what I want to eat yet, though."

Severus neglected to point out that she had said she wasn't hungry. If she ate of her own free will, it was more than he had hoped for. If she'd forgotten her lie, who was he to remind her?

They soon thereafter ordered tea and "nibbles," as Hero insisted on calling them. They spoke, only slightly awkwardly, about the books she'd bought recently. Severus seemed remarkably reluctant to talk about the medical books he'd bought. He said something vague about keeping up to date for the infirmary. Hero let it pass. It was, after all, none of her business.

Afterward, they were back on the motorway. Severus let her turn on the radio, and the silence between them was companionable. After about ten minutes, he spoke.

"Do you sing in the choir?"

She smiled. "Yes. Every chance I get. I sing during my chores. Aunt Petunia doesn't mind, and it makes the work go faster."

"You don't sing in the school choir."

She threw him a scornful look. "I tend to be busy during the school year. Too busy to show up for regularly scheduled practices. Though it might have been funny last year. Can you imagine Umbridge trying to find a legitimate reason to keep the choir from reforming because I was in it?"

"All too easily. Do you sing to this type of music?"

"Classic rock? Sure. Why?"

"Sing the next song."

She bit her lip, frowning as she thought about it. "Only . . . only if you sing with me."

He mulled it over. He nodded once, sharply. They were silent as the last bars of "Long and Winding Road" petered out. The next song was Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence". Hero's eyes drifted shut. Her voice and Severus's wove together, alto and bass. His voice was warm and rich, if somewhat hesitant.

"Hello darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again . . . "
Hero woke up early on Sunday. She blinked at the watery sunshine filtering through the tower's leaded glass. Had it actually happened? It didn't seem quite real. It didn't seem like it could be real. But even as early as it was, she'd have been gone by now if it was Saturday. There was also his . . . testimony for want of a better word. His confession.

She wondered now what had motivated him to tell her. She'd have bet every coin in her vaults that that kind of story would need to be dragged out of him by wild horses. If anyone had suggested he'd tell her of all people, she'd have laughed until she cried. Of course, she'd given him her confession. A truth for a truth.

It had been more than that, though. They'd had lunch at a quaint little tearoom and had a perfectly normal conversation that might even be described as pleasant. They'd sung together. That was one of the most difficult things to process. No one would believe her. Not that she was inclined to tell anyone; it struck Hero as an intensely private thing. She felt a bit like a squirrel, collecting moments with Snape and hoarding them away, never to be shared by light of day or dark of night.

With that odd image floating in her mind, she got up, mindful of her still-sleeping roommates. She padded to the bathroom, brushed her teeth, showered, and dressed. No one was in the Common Room when she descended. She checked her watch, and found it was only a little after eight.

The halls, too, were empty. It was eerie. It was as if everyone had simply left: the castle still standing, unscathed, but devoid of life. Dust motes swirled in the sunlit corridors, undisturbed by artificial air currents.

The Great Hall, at least, had a few Ravenclaws scattered along the length of their house table. They had towers of books surrounding them, but they were there. They reminded her ever so slightly of Hermione. But Hermione understood there was more to life than studying. Hero remembered what she'd said in first year. "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things - friendship and bravery." Hero thought she probably got on better with Gryffindor Hermione than she ever would have with Ravenclaw Hermione.

The Ravenclaws hardly counted when it came to who was first down to breakfast. There were several of them, particularly the older years, who counted any minute not studying lost, even if it was lost to sleep. Sleeping in on weekends seemed almost a foreign concept to them. So, they didn't count, and Hero was the only one from any other house. She glanced up at the Head Table, empty so early on a Sunday. The oddest mixture of relief and disappointment washed through her.

She quickly found herself lonely and bored; chewing morosely on her toast, taking forlorn bites of oatmeal, cheerlessly sipping her pumpkin juice. As a consequence, she ate even quicker than usual, and left the Great Hall as if she had somewhere to be. She stopped, however, at the enormous doors in the Entrance Hall. Sunday . . .

She wondered where the Fat Friar might be. Perhaps Binns would know. Or maybe Moaning Myrtle? Why did the ghosts have to be either absent or unpleasant? It was, of course, as this frustrated question crossed her mind that the Fat Friar himself drifted up through the floor from the Hufflepuff common room.

"Er, sir? Could I have a moment?"

"Can I be of service, miss?" he asked kindly, floating closer.
"Yes. I was hoping that, as a man of God, you might know if Hogwarts has a chapel?"

"Indeed, there is one. Regrettably, few venture there, at least as far as I am aware. You'll find it on the first floor, along the same corridor as the library. A very pretty chamber, you may be certain, though I fear it is likely quite dusty."

Hero smiled at him. "Thank you for your help, sir."

"Certainly. It is a pleasure to discover another adherent to the Faith. God bless you, child." With that, he glided off into the Great Hall.

Hero shook her head. How many times had they passed the library, gone into the library, ransacked the library in the dead of night? Too many to count. And the Hogwarts chapel was right there.

For someone who had a reputation for being far more curious than was good for her, she had been remarkably incurious about the castle she lived in. She had a magical map of the castle for pity's sake, but she hadn't exactly used it to go spelunking. Her nose had a marked tendency to be where it shouldn't, but there was a distinction between other people's business and hidden places, and she preferred the former. She contemplated all this on the way to the chapel, a path that, though she hadn't realized it, she knew by heart and had often walked in the dead of night. She remembered Ron talking about Hermione, "She needs to get her priorities straight."

You think you have all the time in the world. Years and years to get around to all those little things that can wait until tomorrow, she reflected. It was hitting her, all at once, that she very much didn't have all the time in the world. Compared to some random girl a world away who'd live long enough to become a great-grandmother, she hardly had any time at all. And damn it, she wasn't ready. Dumbledore had said at the end of first year that the Flamels had enough of the elixir of life set aside to put their affairs in order. How much elixir, how much time, was that? Maybe they could die satisfied with the living they'd done. Well, fine, they'd been over 650 years old; Hero was only sixteen.

She soon found herself at an archway that, as the Friar had said, was not far from the library. She stepped through into a chamber of absolute peace, bathed in sunlight. It wasn't even particularly dusty. The house elves, she supposed, had been in somewhat recently. There was a faint smell of beeswax, probably from the polished woodwork. There was an air of expectant quiet and the weight of a watchful presence.

Hero sank down on one of the pews, with its faded purple velvet cushion. She bowed her head and closed her eyes to pray – and found she did not know what to say. Perhaps more accurately, she knew she would probably say things she'd regret. Even growing up as she had, she'd never been the type to rage against the heavens. She had never blamed God for how the Dursleys had treated her. Cancer, on the other hand, seemed an accident of fate. In other words, as if God had been careless.

Rationally, she knew it was probably caused by exposure to any of a number of substances, or genetics, or what have you. Beneath rational thought, in the parts of her that were suspicious and cynical and cantankerous, other notions festered. Hero had been born under a particularly unlucky star; Trelawney had that much right. Her death would be nothing more than the period at the end of the sentence that was her short, miserable life. Whatever happiness she'd wrung from it was all there would ever be, because life and all its possibilities were shortly due to be truncated. Amputated at the knees. The God she believed in was all-knowing, all-powerful, and he loved her. If that was true, how could she be dying?

Something cold and wet hit her hands, clasped in her lap. She reached up to find angry, bitter,
anguished tears trailing down her cheeks. Hero dashed them away fiercely. She took a deep breath. And another, heaving, shuddering, before she sighed. In a throwback to her days exploring Catholicism, she knelt and crossed herself.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our deaths."

*

Dean was in one of the sofas by the fire, studying. People had been avoiding him all week. Not to say he didn't understand why. But it didn't leave much to do except . . . well, study.

Hero, seeing him by the fire, lost all thought of her own troubles. She marched toward him, her hands curled into fists, her eyes steely. Anyone in her way quickly got out of it. She didn't bother with ultimatums when she reached Dean. She just reached out a hand and grabbed his ear.

"Ah! Hero?!” he cried, dropping his book.

She bent down to whisper in the ear she had hold of. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Now, you can follow me out, or I can Stun you and levitate you out. What's it going to be?"

He got up, bending slightly to accommodate her grip on his ear, and allowed her to lead him out of the common room.

She let go once they were past the portrait hole. She didn't turn to look at him, but instead headed to the Room of Requirement. He followed.

They stepped into an elegant sitting room that looked like something out of an Austen novel. Hero finally looked at Dean. She nodded towards the sofa. "Sit." He did so, looking cowed. She really hoped not. She sat across from him.

"I've heard from Seamus. Now it's your turn. I'll hear you out. All I ask is that you're completely honest."

"O-okay. Er . . . where did you want to start?"

"Seamus seems to think you love him back. Do you? Remember, no lies."

"I . . . Seamus is my best mate."

"Hasn't exactly seemed like it recently," Hero remarked.

"I . . . Seamus is my best mate."

"Hasn't exactly seemed like it recently," Hero remarked.

"No, I suppose it hasn't. But I . . . ."

"We'll come back to that one. Tell me the story from the beginning." She tried to sound softer, more understanding. She wasn't altogether sure she succeeded.

"My parents were pleased when I got my Hogwarts letter, but these days, it seems more of a curse than a blessing. I don't quite fit in, here or there. My family is . . . very close. But I don't feel like I'm part of it anymore, or not in the same way. I'm different, when I never wanted to be. And it's not even just that. I only see them during the summer. That's, what, about 12 months in the past five years?

"And it's not like I've got much chance of getting a job in the Muggle world. Not when I've been in a magical boarding school instead of secondary school. And let's say You-Know-Who does take
control of the Wizarding World. What place will muggleborns have then? I'm in No Man's Land! And if I'm gay... it's just one more thing, innit? I love my family, but it's just one more reason for me to be the son they don't talk about."

"Do your family... are they... opposed to it?"

"I don't think so. They've never said. But it's different when you see two blokes holding hands in public rather than having your son bring home a nice boy for the holidays," Dean said sarcastically.

"I do know what you mean. My cousin's gay. He's been with his boyfriend for years. My aunt and uncle have no idea. Unlike your parents, my aunt and uncle, or at least my uncle, are against it. He hasn't exactly been subtle about it, but they seem willfully blind. The thing is, though, he has Piers. Do you love Seamus?"

"I-I..." he stuttered, looking paralyzed with fear.

"Look, you've always been a wizard, right? You didn't just start being one when your Hogwarts letter came." He nodded, confused. "Well, I sort of doubt you started being gay the moment you started fancying Seamus. You are a wizard. And, assuming for the moment that you do love Seamus, you are gay. No matter what you wanted, it's who you are, and no power of Heaven or Earth will change that. So?"

He swallowed. "I do love him. But it's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"After everything, it's not like he'll just let it go and forgive me."

"I think you might be surprised. He just wants you to actually admit it and give it a go. He loves you, too, remember?" She patted him on the shoulder and left him to his thoughts.

She looked around the empty corridor, thinking of everything she should be doing: homework, talking to Ginny, chatting with Ron and Hermione. She thought of the things everyone else was doing, like homework, and avoiding homework, and writing letters, and reading magazines, and playing exploding snap, and talking with friends, and drawing, and dreaming of all the things that might come but probably wouldn't. She felt a little like swearing, but she felt more like crying.

She wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her arms, suddenly feeling the chill. A Scottish November was plenty bleak enough, particularly in a drafty castle. Ron and Hermione had each other to keep warm. Here she was, trying to get Dean and Seamus together so they could keep each other warm. Even Draco Malfoy could probably have Parkinson for the asking. She snorted. Parkinson, Crabbe, and Goyle for the asking, probably.

_The wind's howling, the world looks bleak, and I am alone_, she mused. _As ever._ But that wasn’t fair. She could hardly begrudge them what scraps of joy they could scrounge in the face of war. She wasn’t in any kind of mood to be fair. She glanced at her watch; lunch wasn’t for another couple hours. It wasn’t even that she wanted time alone. She’d have her thoughts for company, and that was intolerable. She’d rather exhaust herself pretending to be the most cheerful person in the common room than dedicate any real time to introspection.

She went back to her dorm and collected her materials for the essays they’d been set. She considered the common room for a split second. But one look at her boisterous peers had her heading for the portrait hole. Why not use the library for its intended purpose, if only for the novelty of it? She very pointedly ignored the little chapel when she passed. Perhaps she was sulking, a petulant child
refusing to talk to God. Fucking fine.

She laid out her parchment and contemplated the essays. Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, and Defense. Charms, then. She resolutely ignored the small voice that reminded her that ignoring her problems wouldn’t make them go away. Facing them at the moment wouldn’t do her a shred of good, either. At half past noon, she screwed the top on her bottle of ink and rolled up her parchment. She then placed everything in her bag and went to lunch.

She sensed a presence at her elbow as she was about to take her first bite of shepherd’s pie. She glanced up to see Snape standing next to her, a shadow in the bright afternoon.

“I should probably say something about how I hope your detention yesterday reformed you and how I have no doubt there will be no further transgressions. But after six years, I expect such sentiments would be nothing more than a foolish waste of breath.”

It took Hero a second to catch on. “Right. I really despair of learning my lesson, sir.”

“Perhaps. We’ll keep trying, Miss Potter, I assure you. Would you care to give it another go this evening?”

“I really think I ought to do my best to earn a detention first. Sir.”

“I’m quite sure that’s not something you need to strive for. But if you’re sure.” He turned on his heel and strode up the aisle to the head table. Hero watched him go, robes billowing behind him. She had to duck her head to hide her blush. Her crush, which showed no signs of abating, could be such a nuisance. *I should not find him attractive. I should not,* she told herself firmly. But she did. She couldn’t help it. Some things simply were. Hero shoveled her shepherd’s pie into her mouth. Essays. She had essays to work on. She didn’t have time to think about anything else.

*Right,* a voice whispered. *Because, as you get closer to dying, you’re going to have plenty of time to think about the fact that you’re dying.*

*Who says I have to think about it at all,* she thought back furiously. *Any of it? It’ll happen either way, why should I waste time brooding over it? And the rest . . . I would at least like to bow out with dignity.*

*But you’re not,* a voice that sounded rather like Hermione’s pointed out. *Not really. Dignity means acknowledging your fate and accepting it. You’re just ignoring it, like a stubborn child. Aren’t you better than that? You’re still in denial. You think about it so that you can face down the end with calm and a clear head, not sheer bloody panic. Ignoring it won’t make it go away.*

Hero cursed, ashamed at herself. The part of her nurtured by her friendship with Hermione could always be relied upon to give her a dressing-down. Even if the real Hermione was probably snuggled up somewhere with Ron, her nose in a book. And had no idea of what was bothering Hero because Hero hadn’t told her. Hero generally felt that Hermione had quite enough to worry about on any given day.

Setting her thoughts aside, she returned to the library. Having finished her Charms essay, she turned to Transfiguration, then Potions. She pulled out the Prince’s text carefully, brushing a hand over the cover fondly. It didn’t write back (probably for the best, that), but it was like having a friend, all the same. She’d sworn to Hermione she wouldn’t use any of the spells without a clear understanding of their results. It was a good promise.

Now, she simply enjoyed the commentary. It was still deliciously sarcastic, even if she’d read it so
often she’d memorized parts. She wished she could remember where she’d seen the handwriting before. She shook herself from her reverie before flipping through to the relevant section and starting her outline.

She returned to the Great Hall for dinner a bit late, her Potions essay completed. She was so tired, she could barely keep her eyes open as she made her way through the castle. She slid in next to Hermione and helped herself to roast pork, potatoes, and veg. Ron was over talking to Ginny, who was trying to convince him that she was perfectly fine, thank you very much.

Hermione gave her a sunny smile. “Where’ve you been all day?”

“Writing my essays,” Hero replied shortly, focusing on eating as much as possible before, as she was almost certain to do, falling asleep, face first, in her dinner.

“Oh! That’s... good, I suppose. Did you get much done?” Hero simply nodded, her mouth full and another forkful on standby. Hermione faltered. “Right. Er... is everything alright?”

Hero looked at her and swallowed. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“You seem, well, not quite yourself.”

“Long day,” she bit out before jamming the fork in her mouth.

“I noticed you were gone when I woke up. You’re sure you’re alright?”

Hero laid her silverware on her plate and twisted in her seat to better talk to Hermione. “Not really, but there’s not much anyone can do, so I don’t see why I should bother mentioning it.”

“Oh.” Hermione looked down. “I see. I just... you’ve been... a bit distant recently. I thought it might because Ron and I got together,” she bit out. Her words began to come in a rush, as if it had been stewing for a while. “I mean, you went to the Yule Ball together, and, and, I thought you seemed happy for us when we got together, but then I realized you might sacrifice your own happiness, because that’s just what you do, and this is the first time I’ve seen you all day, and you have, you have been distant and sort or aloof recently, and I can’t help feeling that it’s because you’re lonely and broken, and I feel like that’s my fault, and I feel guilty for being happy. But then I think that that’s not it at all and you’re depressed because you’re, you’re,” Hermione seemed to choke back a sob, then whispered, “dying, which obviously makes sense because who wouldn’t be, and it’s stupid for me to think it’s because of something so stupid and shallow as a teenage romance – but then I wonder...” she trailed off, her eyes shining with tears, blinking furiously.

Hero hugged her round the middle, startling a choked sob out of the other girl. “Hermione, I promise you, I don’t love Ron, at least not any differently than the way Ginny does. Certainly nothing like you do. Look, the Yule Ball was a laugh. He was all moody, you were already taken. It was the only way to shut him up. And even if I did fancy him then, which I assure you I did not, do you still have a crush on Krum? Because if you do, that merits talking about.

“And, fine, I am a little lonely. But more because you and Ron are going through new couple tunnel vision. Only got eyes for each other, you know? And it really, really is not because I wish I were the one he was snogging instead of you. I want someone of my own to snog, thank you very much. And there’s the fact that there is someone I like, but it’s utterly impossible, and I will die without ever having been so much as kissed.

“And yes, yes, I am dying. And it’s always in the back of my mind, a rot that eats away at me, but I ignore it, because I can’t handle acknowledging it. I couldn’t bear it. Except I have to. So yes, I am
lonely and miserable, and just a little bit brokenhearted, but not for quite the reasons you think. Not because of you. And to round out the theme, honestly, I wish you’d tell me these things as they occur to you instead of letting them fester. Because it’s never as bad as you convince yourself that it is. I don’t want you worrying yourself sick over nothing. You have a lot worse to worry about.”

“How am I supposed to talk to you if I don’t know where you are?” Hermione asked, exasperated.

Hero smiled despite herself. “Honestly, Hermione, Hogwarts is not big enough for you to lose me irretrievably. Here we are, eating dinner. We have Defense, and Potions, and Transfiguration, and Charms, and Herbology together. I’m right here.” Words drifted between them, unspoken, but weighing upon them like lead: for now.

Hermione nodded, dashing her tears out of her eyes. “Right. You’re right. Of course. I just . . . I feel like I’m losing you. I know I’m losing you. I guess I feel like I already have.”

Hero placed her hand over Hermione’s and squeezed it. “I’m right here,” she repeated. “I’m not gone yet.”
Chapter Notes

Here you are, at long last. I say that because parts of this chapter have been written since, oh, December. Anyway.

Hero fell asleep the moment she threw herself on her bed after dinner. When she woke, the first rays of the sun were making themselves known in the world. She threw off the covers and crept to the window. Almost of their own volition, her fingers went to the glass.

It reminded her of seeing the baby unicorn in Care of Magical Creatures the year before. The sort of moment that would never again happen in the same way. The light fell over the castle, a roiling sea in the heavens. It was breathtaking, its beauty so fierce, it was almost painful to look at. The light, like fire, seemed at war with the darkness, a war that would be won with the day, lost with the night.

All battles are lost eventually, she thought. All battles are lost by someone. But then, that was the point. She remembered thinking her cancer was a civil war raging inside of her. The cancer, part of her, killing the rest of her. When both sides ended up dead, who won?

The battle for day up in the sky was cleaner. Darkness gave way to light. It was without casualties, without pain and loss. A place where there was no death. There was something about that in the Bible: “God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will be no more death; there will be no more pain or suffering.” But here she was, dying, and there, indeed, was the sky, like the face of God, and there was nothing but a mess of suffering.

But still, there was the sky. The sun emerged, like an operatic diva, waiting until the chorus had warmed up the audience before making her appearance. These cynical thoughts crossed Hero’s mind, but in that moment, it truly seemed as though the whole world was alight with glory, and heaven came upon the earth. Then the sun cleared the horizon, and day broke, the spell along with it.

Hero sighed and turned away. It was Monday. It was the third week of November. She would go down to breakfast and endure the free period she had first. Her eyes slid shut. Damn. She only had Snape’s essay to finish for Defense, and it wasn’t due until the end of the week. She still remembered back in September, allowing herself the sin of not being busy. But maybe it was for the best. She was not a coward, would not permit herself to behave as a coward.

* My life is nearly over. I should have decades ahead of me. Everyone else does. For them, the sun is still rising. Mine is setting. Soon enough, I will be knee-deep in the mists of twilight, as the day ends. *

All poetry aside, Hero thought, it was a difficult idea to wrap your head around. Here she was, sitting in the common room, waiting to go off to Defense, perfectly alive. It was all she’d ever known; could you blame her for not being able to begin to imagine being not-alive?

She thought of her parents’, their bones buried in Godric’s Hollow, dead fifteen years. How much of even the bones was left? How much was simply dust? She thought of her parents, now simply a collection of dust particles, or soon to be dust particles, in a wooden box in the ground. But their
remains were not *them*. They’d . . . gone on. To the hereafter, where Sirius was, beyond the Veil.

She missed Sirius. She didn’t really miss her parents, more the idea of them. They’d seemed nice during the duel with Voldemort. But that was perhaps not the best of encounters upon which to base an opinion.

Six months, a year. A blink of an eye. Dumbledore was over a hundred. How short a time might that seem to him? It seemed plenty short to her, far too little time to be ready to stare down mortality. Every moment was incalculably precious, and each one seemed to slip through her fingers like water.

She felt like she was in a boat that had drifted from the shore when she hadn’t been paying attention, and now it was too far for her to row back. And worse, even, than the despair, and the anger, was the loneliness. Because there was Ron, across the coffee table from her, working on one of the essays she’d finished the day before. Close enough to touch, but worlds away. And only getting farther.

She was bitter about it, about all of it. She was bitter even though she knew it didn’t help. She was bitter even though she knew it made her sour, too. She was bitter even though it did the tumor’s work for it, turning her into the kind of person she didn’t want to be. She was bitter even though she knew it only made things harder.

But maybe . . . you could choose to be better. Bitterness became a habit, a habit that felt like an inalienable right. But maybe, even more exhausting than pretending to be cheerful, you could actually *try*. You could put genuine effort into being kinder and more compassionate and understanding, reaching out into the rest of the world. She could try to live her last months as if she was actually alive, not dead already.

It wouldn’t be easy. Effort was the antithesis of ease. That didn’t mean it wouldn’t be worth it. It wouldn’t always work. Some days would be better than others. But it would be better. It had to be better. It could hardly be much worse.

Severus, having been summoned Monday evening, returned to the castle in the wee hours of Tuesday morning. The headmaster had, very obligingly, removed the apparition wards on the tower where his personal quarters could be found. It was as Severus was striding through the seventh floor, intent on a few hours of sleep before facing the day’s classes, that he noticed that the door to the Astronomy Tower was ajar.

He was instantly suspicious. His exhaustion, for the moment, forgotten, he swept up the stairs to the observation platform, a diatribe ready on his tongue for whatever idiots he was about to come across. Instead, he found Hero Potter.

“Miss Potter, what are you doing out of bed?”

“Professor. It's morning.” She refused to look away from the view. She sat against the wall, watching the sky, hugging her knees to her chest. The only concession she'd made to the frozen December morning was a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

“The sun has not yet risen. How long have you been here?”

“Couldn't sleep. And I wanted to watch the sunrise. It won't be much longer now, then I'll be too busy. We all will. And I would like to enjoy the ones I have left.” She still didn't look at him, but her chin came up to match the firmness in her voice.
“Oh, don’t be so bloody melodramatic, Potter. With your luck, you’ll probably survive with barely a scratch.”

She laughed bitterly. “I’m sick. You know that. Monthly doctor's appointments in London? What did you think was wrong with me?”

“Due to your nausea, I thought perhaps you were pregnant. Due to the seizures, I assumed it was a difficult one. That is not the case?” She cackled, a wicked grin spreading across her face.

“No. But wouldn't that be a thing? Immaculate conception. The Prophet would have a field day.”

He tucked away that particular revelation for later inspection. “So what is the matter with you?”

Now she looked over at him. Her grin was gone, but she didn't look upset. She looked... serene. Not something he typically associated with Potter. Carefree when she slept, but not truly at peace. “I’m dying. I have terminal brain cancer. I’m going to die, maybe this summer, maybe next winter.” Her expression became slightly lost, and her eyes unfocused. She shrugged helplessly. “Not much longer, anyway.”

There were no words. None he could give her; none he could put to what he was feeling. They were all the wrong ones, awkward and ill-fitted.

She glanced back at him, at the expression on his face. She wondered if she'd looked like that the first time she'd heard. It felt forever ago.

“So, you see. Are you going to permit me to watch the sunrise?”

“That's really, honestly, all you're doing? No contraband substances?”

“I've got a thermos of tea. I think I'm good. Unless that's been banned since the last time I checked?”

Severus contemplated her for a moment. “Move over.”

Hero obligingly scooted over, and he sat next to her, bending one long leg and drawing it up against his chest. Not looking at her, he held out a hand for the thermos. She handed it to him, eyes on the steadily brightening twilight sky. A shy smile slid across her face.

They sat in silence as the first rays of the sun appeared over the horizon, trading the thermos back and forth. Pale, peach gold stole across the sky. Hero sighed contentedly.

Severus glanced over at her. Her face, bathed in the dawn light, was nothing like Potter's. It wasn't much like Lily's, either. Wonder brightened her face in a different way than the rising sun. Her eyes glowed, and her lips were parted, a wistful smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. In that moment, he realized that she was beautiful, so very beautiful. And she was dying. Christ. He wondered if Albus knew, if he knew and was still planning to use her to destroy the Dark Lord.

When had he started caring? It had bothered him when he'd first heard. The sacrifice of her innocence, however, had been a lesser concern next to her capability. The Chosen One. Now, it was so much more of a blow. And it almost didn't matter. Almost. Because she was dying. Why should it matter to him how she lost her life? The losing of it was inevitable.

He looked back at the sunrise. Rose was threaded through the gold now, like ink in water. He could better understand her wanting to see it now. If he was a more fanciful man, it might have made him believe in God. But after everything he'd seen, one sunrise couldn't do that. If God did exist, he had
a lot of explaining to do.

Slowly, the day unfurled and the colors of the dawn faded. Hero sighed, got up, and approached the door to the stairs. The door open, she turned and contemplated him.

“Two things. As far as anyone else is concerned, this never happened. If you mention it to anyone, I swear I’ll deny it. And if you find yourself coming this way again tomorrow, you’re welcome to.” With that, she turned tail and disappeared down the winding staircase. Once again, Severus was speechless. He would have been even had she stayed.

* *

Hero didn’t stop until she reached the foot of the tower. There, she finally allowed herself to think about what had just happened. She bit her lip and wrapped her arms around herself, still reeling. She had to get her things and get down to breakfast. But not yet.

How could she have told him? How could she have just opened her mouth and told him?

Because it was time, another part of her pointed out. It was past time he knew. And you do trust him, whether you like it or not. He had a right to know.

He had no right! It’s none of his business!

Dumbledore made it his business. At that point, telling him became inevitable. Even before everything else. Why tell him that and not this? Never mind the fact that you like him. That doesn’t matter. It can’t. Because it. Won’t. Happen! He’s a professor, first of all. He’s hated me for six years, so there’s that. I’m dying, which kind of makes time a distinctly limited resource. We both have a war to fight. And I might say it’s because I’m not stupid, but in this, I am a coward.

Hero, realizing Snape could come down at any moment, quickly made her way to Gryffindor Tower. She tried to convince herself she was wisely giving him space to deal with everything he’d been told.

* *

The following hours were torture. It was a more inventive torture than he was usually subjected to. The Crucius Curse was inelegant, uninspired. Yes, it could be relied upon to set his every nerve ending alight with agony, but didn’t that get boring after casting it a few thousand times? What was the point of a boring eternity? Surely variety was the spice of life, even an immortal one.

It was almost refreshing to be subjected to an entirely different kind of sheer bloody torture. Almost. He had the effects of his meeting with the Dark Lord to contend with, as well as a sleepless night. And then there was the knowledge imparted by one Hero Potter. Surviving the Killing Curse only to die young from cancer: she certainly knew how to make an exit. Parting words, too. All the dramatic flair of a Gryffindor. He snorted, then sighed.

Not old enough to love as yet, but old enough to die, indeed. He frowned. Her peers seemed to take to loving like there was no tomorrow. She, for whom tomorrows where rather thin on the ground, was— well, perhaps she’d been busy. She had a standing date with Severus once a month; it was only one component of her packed schedule.

He considered the situation – her situation – while he conducted classes. The students were all walking on eggshells around him, wary of his black mood. They were showing uncommon wisdom; never mind guts for garters, he felt like taking the next first year who squeaked and using them for potions ingredients. Even the Slytherins knew better than to take a chance on his temper today.
For the first time since getting the position he had so long coveted, he wished he hadn’t. If he was still covering Potions, he would simply have to turn the corner to reach his rooms. As it was, it was a fair walk from the Defense classroom on the third floor. Fortunately, no one stopped him in the halls. The older students held the younger ones at bay; like seasoned sailors, they could smell a storm brewing.

Once in his rooms, he made a beeline for his recently purchased medical texts. He was frustrated to discover that none were specifically about cancer. Then again, he hadn’t been looking. The best he could find was in one of the texts on seizures, where it was one of the causes given an overview. It wasn’t promising.

After the medical texts proved less than helpful, he turned to his resources on medicinal potions. He retained all his books from his mastery, and medicines were a large part of any respectable education in potions. However, he found, again, almost nothing. There was slightly more, however, than there had been in his more recently acquired books.

He did manage to locate recipes for potions to treat the symptoms. Seizures, nausea, headaches, cognitive decline, and the changes in personality. Some of them would likely prove challenging even to someone of Severus’s skill. Nowhere, not anywhere, was there the barest reference to a cure.

Severus thought he perhaps understood why. Cancer, as he understood it, was a highly individualized condition. No two people would present or react to treatment in quite the same way. The patient’s body was no help, as it itself was helpless against the mutated, uncontrollable growth of its own cells.

And potions, as with chemotherapy and radiation, affected the whole of a person when ingested. A boil reducing solution might be applied topically. Skin cancer could be removed with a scalpel. A person’s entire physicality changed with the consumption of Polyjuice. A person with a cold was given Pepper-up Potion. The potion affected their entire body. Not an issue with the flu; rather problematic when excising a tumor.

The possibility existed, but each person would need their own unique formula, done to extremely exact specifications. Each person’s cure would undoubtedly take years. People dying of cancer didn’t have years. Thus, the lack of any helpful research; bad luck, old chap, but thanks for playing. Severus threw his book against the wall.

At that point, it occurred to him to wonder why he was making such a bother. He’d sworn to Albus he would protect her, but this wasn’t the same. Keeping the Dark Lord – or anyone else, for that matter – from killing her was not the same as caring for her through her illness.

Caring brought to mind images of tenderness, and not just tenderness, but emotional involvement. The last, worst thing he could do would be to become emotionally invested in the welfare of Hero Potter. As he glanced down at the obscenely expensive book lying open, face-down where he’d thrown it, he realized he already was. It was not sudden.

The next morning found him up before dawn and on his way to the Astronomy Tower. His lips twisted at the realization that if most of his associates knew, they would call him weak. What was possibly worse was that if Albus knew, he would call it strength and subject Severus to a sermon on the power of love. Still, he ascended the stairs to the impossible girl sitting beneath the stars.

Together, they bore witness to the birth of a new day. After the spectacle had faded a little, he spoke. “There isn’t a cure.”

“No.”
“You don’t seem surprised.”

“I thought, if there was the vaguest possibility, Madam Pomfrey would have mentioned it.”

“There is a vague possibility, but you would die before it could be of any use to you.” He paused a moment, then spoke. “I can give you potions to help with your symptoms.”

She turned her head to look at him, but did not speak for a long moment. Her expression was inscrutable. Finally, she said, “What symptoms?”

“Headaches, nausea, changes in personality. I can also substantially slow the decline in cognitive function.” She nodded and looked away.

“Thank you for telling me. Are you mentioning it because you’re offering to help?”

“I am not opposed to brewing them for you.”

“Why are you telling me? Why don’t you just go through Madam Pomfrey? And why are you bothering?”

“Poppy would almost certainly be suspicious if I told her and not you because the only way I would have learned of your condition would be through you. And I don’t know.”

“Liar. But I’ll give you that one.” A chill went up his spine that was entirely unrelated to the season. After another few minutes of companionable silence, they parted ways and greeted the day.
Don't Drink the Punch

It continued in that vein for several weeks. Unspoken, it became a part of their daily routine. Severus set to brewing the potions, which she took without argument. They did not speak on the observation deck most days, simply sitting in silence. Hero both loved and hated it, she found. It was at once closer than she had ever expected to get and so far from what she wished.

They journeyed to London on the 14th. It was a bit easier, without confessions hanging over them like storm clouds. They talked, about Defense mostly. It was surreal in its utter normalcy.

Hagrid brought the twelve enormous Christmas trees for the Great Hall, which McGonagall and Flitwick then decorated. Garlands and tinsel were strewn across the castle, presumably by house elves; Hermione threw them dirty looks. Everlasting candles were placed inside the helmets of the suits of armor. Ghosts floated through the castle, running through their repertoire of carols.

Love was in the air in addition to the music of a ghostly choir. Ron and Hermione had cooled down a little in that they were not quite such sickening sweethearts anymore. Hero found that, since she’d started watching the sunrise, her envy had died down. There was no use analyzing it; she knew precisely why. Of course, the new potions probably helped, too.

There was a fair bit of mistletoe in the halls, and a fair number of boys eyeing Hero standing under them. Fortunately, she was still quite fast, and she had an extensive knowledge of the school’s secret passageways. Hermione rolled her eyes when Hero caught up with them near the Fat Lady’s Portrait.

“It’s your own fault, you know.” Hero blinked at her, surprised. Hermione sighed. “They know you have an invitation to Slughorn’s Christmas party. Just ask someone as your plus one, and they’ll leave you alone. You might want to hurry; I heard someone mention love potions.”

Hero pulled her into an alcove, unable to believe what she was hearing. Hermione waved Ron on. “Where are they getting them? Most people don’t have the skill level required to brew love potions.”

“Fred and George. Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes’ mail-order,” Hermione told her, shrugging.

“But Filch has banned all Weasley products.”

“What’s your point?”

“They’re getting love potions into the castle disguised as something else, despite Filch, despite secrecy sensors. . . .”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “This is about Malfoy, isn’t it? Look, secrecy sensors detect anything dangerous. Curses and poisons, yes, love potions, no.”

“Oh, don’t try and pretend love potions are harmless. I doubt you’d be saying it if you were the one having to worry about your drink getting spiked. And here’s a bit of food for thought. Dumbledore thinks that Voldemort turned out the way he did because he was conceived under the influence of a love potion.”

Hermione drew back slightly, mouth open in shock. “That’s . . . that’s terrifying. But . . . but the fact remains that secrecy sensors don’t recognize them. If you put a potion in a different bottle, it’ll pass unnoticed. Poisons or curses wouldn’t get through.”
“Why can’t they just leave me alone?” Hero asked hopelessly, knowing she was wasting her breath. She’d been asking the same question all her life and had yet to receive a satisfactory answer.

Hermione grimaced sympathetically. Together, they made their way to the Fat Lady’s Portrait.

“Baubles,” Hero said tiredly, the new festive password.

“Same to you, dear,” the Fat Lady returned cheerfully as she swung forward to admit them.

Seeming to appear out of thin air the moment they stepped into the Common Room was none other than Roland Vane. Suave and charming as ever, he reached for her hand and kissed it before she could snatch it back.

“Hero, I’ve been hoping to run into you for ages. Would you like to go for a Gillywater?”

Hermione shot her a look. Hero pasted on a smile and pried her hand out of his grasp. “Sorry, can’t stand the stuff.”

“Ah. Perhaps another time then, with something you like better. Please accept these, in any case. Chocolate cauldrons, fire whiskey in them. Happy Christmas.” He shoved a box into her hands and turned tail.

“Look, the sooner you ask someone, the sooner this ends. Do yourself a favor, and put them out of their misery.” She became rather distracted after that, as Ron came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Hero, not exactly having a burning desire to watch her two best friends snog, went off in search of other entertainment.

She came across Ginny, who was in an armchair on the fringes of the Common Room. She conjured up a smile as Hero sat next to her and set her book aside.

“They’re making a bit of a spectacle of themselves, aren’t they?” Ginny observed.

“A bit. They’ve been avoiding the issue long enough, maybe they’re entitled to make a spectacle for a while.”

“Mmm. Perhaps. Not exactly fun for you.”

“That’s not really the point. Actually, I came over to ask a favor.”

“Knowing you, I should probably ask what it is before agreeing.”

Hero ducked her head, embarrassed. “Well, I just need someone to take to Slughorn’s party, and I thought you might like to join me.”

“Oh. Not battling a dragon, then. But I think I’ll have to decline, all the same. I don’t exactly feel like partying lately. Thanks for asking me, though.”

“I thought I’d give you first rejection.”

“You know, you could ask Luna. I think she could use a friend at the moment.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, yesterday some idiots were calling her Loony again. I know she really liked the DA because people got to know her instead of just seeing her as an oddity who was just there for their amusement.”
“That’s terrible. Thanks for the tip, Ginny.”

“Anytime. So, you’ve heard Hermione’s not going to be with her boyfriend at the Burrow?” Ginny asked slyly.

Hero grinned. “Can’t say I blame her. I think she’s worried your mother will start in on wedding plans.”

“Well, Mum would probably be overjoyed at the prospect of a daughter-in-law she actually likes.”

Hero winced. “Ouch. Ouch. It’s not like there’s anything she can do to stop it, is there?”

“Ah, but that’s just because she hasn’t tried hard enough yet.”

“You don’t think Bill loves her?”

“He’s not the one I’m worried about.” Hero let it pass and changed the subject to the Holyhead Harpies, the all-female Quidditch team Ginny supported.

* *

“Luna!” Hero called, having caught sight of the blonde girl on her way to lunch the next day.

“Oh, hello, Hero.”

“Hi. Do you want to come to Slughorn’s party with me? I need a friend for moral support.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. Nobody’s ever asked me to a party before.”

“Oh, that’s . . . er, anyway, I’ll meet you in the Entrance Hall at eight this evening, then.”

Luna showed up in a pair of glittering silver robes that drew a few stares. Thankfully, there was no sign of her radish earrings, butterbeer-cork necklace, or spectrespecs.

“Hello, Luna. Shall we get going, then?”

“Where is it again?”

“Slughorn’s office,” Hero replied as they left the muttering, staring crowd behind. “Honestly, it’s not my first choice of entertainment this evening, but I don’t exactly have a choice. There’s a rumor there’s a vampire coming, so that might be interesting.”

“Oh, do you think it’s Rufus Scrimgeour?”

Hero blinked, trying to make sense of what she’d just heard. “You . . . you mean the Minister for Magic? Wouldn’t that make it a bit difficult for him to have been an auror? But then, I suppose that might have been why they promoted him to head of the department. If he got infected in the line of duty, they might have made provisions for him,” Hero speculated.

“That’s certainly a possibility. Father wrote a rather lengthy article on the subject when Scrimgeour first took over from Fudge. Obviously, it still isn’t known to the public at large. He was forced not to publish by someone at the Ministry.”

“Well, I think anyone with sense can agree that censorship is wrong. Best say no more about it.”

They were now approaching Slughorn’s office, the sound of people enjoying themselves growing
more pronounced with every step they took.

Rather like the tents they’d used for the World Cup, Slughorn’s office was larger than outside appearances would indicate it had any right to be. In fact, the ceiling and walls had been draped with silk, in emerald, crimson, and gold, so that one did feel as if one were in a vast tent. Fairies in lanterns illuminated the gathering while house elves wound their way through a thicket of knees, bearing silver serving platters. A string quartet had been enchanted to play (rather loudly) in one corner.

Slughorn seemed to have been lying in wait, since he greeted them the moment they squeezed through the door. “Dear girl, I so hoped you’d be here! Come along, so many people I’d like you to meet!” He seized Hero’s elbow with the clear intention of dragging her into the melee; Hero grabbed Luna’s hand and pulled her along, lest she be left behind.

First on the list of introductions, was, indeed, the by that point legendary vampire, accompanied by his minder, an old student of Slughorn’s. The vampire, Sanguini, was tall and hungry-looking, and wearing a rather bored expression. The former student, Eldred Worple, was a small, bespectacled man who seemed to have all the enthusiasm his charge lacked.

It was when he started to go off about the possibility of writing her biography that she really started to get on edge. Fortunately, Mr. Worple was soon distracted by Sanguini, who was staring hungrily at the bevy of giggling girls who had gathered nearby to ogle him.

“Here, have a pasty,” he said, plucking one from an elf’s tray and stuffing it into Sanguini’s hand. He then, to Hero’s dismay, turned back to her. “Dear girl, the gold you could make, you have no idea—”

“Wouldn’t it be better to wait until after I’m dead?” she asked bluntly. “I mean, to have a complete story.” The guilty expression on Worple’s face told her he quite agreed. “Unequivocally not interested. I’ve just seen friends of mine. If you’ll excuse me,” she murmured, brushing past, Luna following.

She hadn’t been lying; she’d seen Hermione and Ron talking to two members of the Weird Sisters. By the time she got there, they had disappeared.

“Hermione! Ron!” she called after them; she finally caught up to them by the drinks table.

“Hero! Hello, Luna. Oh, thank God you’re here!”

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“We’re avoiding Cormac. Honestly, I think he had a bit too much to drink before he arrived, and someone spiked the punch. We got the autographs of two of the Weird Sisters for Ginny, though. You know she’s a fan.”

“Right. I hope she’s not too upset she missed that.”

Ron shook his head. “I think she’s just happy to have a bit of peace and quiet for the moment.” Hero grimaced sympathetically.

Hermione looked around the four of them. “Do you want to see if it’s a bit less crowded on the other side?” They shrugged; with nothing better to do, they fought their way through the crowd, scooping up drinks and nibbles on their way. Too late, they realized Trelawney was standing there alone. She smelled of cooking sherry again.
She conversed for a while with Luna, who was taking Firenze’s classes that year instead of Trelawney’s. Trelawney, a loose tongued drunk, had a few choice words on the subject of her colleague. It was altogether rather uncomfortable. Hermione dragged Ron away when she noticed McLaggen coming nearby. Trelawney finally seemed to take notice of Hero.

“Oh, hello,” Hero said, trying her best to discourage conversation.

“My dear girl!” Trelawney said in a misty, carrying stage whisper. “The rumors! The stories! The Chosen One! Of course, I have known for a very long time . . . the omens were never good, Hero . . . but why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance!”

Slughorn, about as tipsy as Trelawney, showed up at that point. “Ah, Sybill, we all think our subject’s the most important! I don’t think I’ve ever known such a natural at Potions! A natural, instinctual, like her mother! I can count on one hand the number of students I’ve taught with this kind of ability – here’s one right now!” Hero watched, gobsmacked, as he reached into the crowd and scooped up Severus.

“Don’t look so much like you want to kill the party, friend! I was just talking about Hero’s gift with potions. Some of the credit must go to you, of course, her instructor for five years.”

“Really?” She shot him a pleading look. He didn’t break eye contact as he spoke: “I feel I cannot take credit. Her achievements have always been entirely her own.” Hero tried to thank him silently. He looked away.

“Ah, yes, natural ability, quite so. Remind me what other subjects you’re taking this year, Hero?”

“Er, Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, and Herbology.”

“The makings of an auror, eh, Hero?” Slughorn asked, winking at her.

“Well, I mean, I was also thinking about training as a healer. My course load fulfills the requirements for either,” Hero interjected quickly, her eyes flicking to Severus.

“I don’t think you should be an auror, Hero,” Luna said, out of the blue. To her credit, she didn’t quail as everyone turned their eyes on her. “The aurors are part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They’re working from within to bring down the Ministry of Magic using a combination of Dark magic and gum disease.” Hero blinked at the non sequitur, then almost choked trying not to laugh. Her evening was suddenly a hundred times better. Double when she noticed Filch dragging Malfoy into the room by his ear.

“Professor Slughorn!” Filch wheezed, a maniacal gleam in his bulging eyes. “I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him an invitation?” You could tell he was just dying to hear Slughorn say no.

Malfoy wrenched himself free, looking furious. “Fine! I wasn’t invited. I wanted to gatecrash, happy?”

“Not a bit,” Filch cried gleefully. “You’re in it now. As I recall, the headmaster curtailed your midnight wanderings. Unless you’ve got permission?”

“Quite all right, Argus, quite all right. It’s Christmas, and it’s not a crime to want to come to a party. I think this once, we can let it pass. Please, Draco, feel free to enjoy the festivities.”
Filch looked like he’d lost all his Christmases and birthdays at once. Malfoy, strangely enough for someone who’d confessed to gatecrashing, looked almost as unhappy. Severus was angry, but Hero saw something what almost looked like fear in his eyes.

In an instant, Filch had turned for the door, Malfoy had a charming smile on and was thanking Slughorn, and Severus’s face looked like a slate wiped clean. If Hero didn’t know better, she’d have thought she’d imagined it.

Hero watched dispassionately as Malfoy started sucking up to Slughorn. That, in and of itself, was not interesting. Hero, and everyone else in their year, had seen him do it to Severus every day for five years. Rather more curious was the fact that Malfoy looked ill. She hadn’t seen much of him recently, but now she noticed the grey tinge to his skin and the deep shadows under his eyes.

“I’d like a word with you, Draco,” Severus said softly, menacingly.

“Oh, come now, Severus. It’s Christmas, you mustn’t be too hard on the boy—”

“I am his Head of House, and I believe the decision of how hard to be on him rests with me,” Severus returned curtly. “Draco, come.”

Hero watched them go. I am going to behave and enjoy the party. I’m going to turn away and forget this except as a joke to tell later in the Gryffindor Common Room. Oh, screw that. She turned to Luna. “I’ll be back in a minute. I don’t think those mince pies agreed with me.”

“Right you are, Hero. It’s probably best someone goes after him.” Hero shot her a brief, tense smile at her blithe, too-insightful comment.

She fought her way through the crowd, out the room into the corridor. Once there, she pulled her Invisibility Cloak out of her purse and threw it over herself, thankful that the corridor was empty. Now she had only to find where Severus and Malfoy had disappeared to. The Common Room? His office? But then, wonder of wonders, she heard voices emanating from the last classroom in the corridor. She pressed her ear to the door.

“. . . cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled—”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it, alright?”

“I certainly hope that’s true, because it was clumsy and foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it.”

“Who suspects me?” Malfoy demanded, angry, afraid. “For the last time, I didn’t do it, okay? That Bell girl must’ve had an enemy no one knows about – don’t look at me like that! I know what you’re doing, I’m not stupid, but it won’t work – I can stop you!”

“Ah . . . Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?”

“I’m not trying to conceal anything from him, I just don’t want you butting in!”

Hero pressed her ear closer to the door. This was unprecedented. She’d never expected him to take her suspicions so seriously. And what had happened to Malfoy? Severus had always been his favorite professor, a friend of the family. There were rumors Severus was his godfather. And now, for Malfoy to speak to him like this?
“Oh, I see. This is why you’ve made yourself scarce? Because you feared my interference? You realize that, were it anyone else who failed to come to my office when called there repeatedly—”

“Go ahead and put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!”

There was a pause. “You know I do not wish to do either of those things.”

“I suppose you should stop telling me to come to your office, then.”

“You idiotic child, I’m trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco—”

“Well, I suppose you’ll just have to break it, then. I don’t need your protection! It’s my job, he gave it to me, and I’m getting on with it. I’ve got a plan, it’s going to work. It’s just . . . taking a little longer than I thought it would.”

“And what is your plan?”

“None of your business.”

“If you tell me your plan, I can assist you—”

“I’ve got all the assistance I need, thanks, I’m not alone!”

“You were certainly alone tonight, which was foolish in the extreme, wandering the corridors without lookouts or backup. These are elementary mistakes—”

“I would’ve had Crabbe and Goyle with me if you hadn’t put them in detention!”

“Keep your voice down!” Severus hissed. “If your accomplices intend to pass their Defense OWL this time around, they’re going to need to work a little harder than they do at pres—”

“Oh, please. Defense is a joke! It’s an act!” Malfoy scoffed. “Like any of us need protecting against the dark arts—”

“It is an act, one which is crucial to success. I’d be in a shallow grave somewhere if I didn’t know how to act. How can you believe your task is going well when you’re stupid enough to wander at night and get caught, let alone relying on the assistance of Crabbe and Goyle—”

“You just want me to confide in you so you can steal my glory!”

“Do attempt not to sound so utterly childish. I understand your father’s capture and imprisonment has upset you, but—”

Hero barely had time to dash to the side as she heard the scuffle of feet. Malfoy flung the door open, striding down the corridor, past the party, and out of sight. Severus did not follow. Hero slipped inside the classroom and pulled off the Cloak. She stopped a few feet away from him.

Severus looked up. He did not seem entirely surprised to see her.

Before he could get a word in, she demanded, “What’s an Unbreakable Vow?”

“What it sounds like.”

“Dumbledore’s dying, isn’t he?” Severus nodded. “Malfoy doesn’t know.” He shook his head.
“No one does,” Severus confessed, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Don’t worry, I won’t go blabbing.”

“Somehow, I don’t expect you will.” He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Why are you here?”

“I thought you might appreciate the company. Moral support and all that.”

“Yes, but why? Why would you bother? I’m sure you have suspicions. And yet, here you stand.”

It flashed through her mind, now or never. She stepped forward, went up on her toes, and pressed her lips to his.

He stood stock-still in shock. Seizing the opportunity provided, she twined her arms around his neck and pressed herself closer. For a brief moment, his lips moved with hers, and he kissed her back. It was like a sunrise, heaven on earth.

Then he pulled away. He looked down at her, seeing bruised lips and wide eyes, dilated and starry. Guilt flooded him. She was sixteen, his student, and dying. Regardless of who had initiated it, the fault lay with him. He certainly should never have kissed her back.

“Please forgive me,” he rasped. “What I’ve done is inexcusable.”

“Don’t you dare say sorry. Don’t you dare. You wanted to know why I’m here. This is why.”

“Then you’re a fool,” he told her, his tone harsh. She didn’t flinch; five years, nearly six, as his student had desensitized her. Even if the circumstances were night and day.

“Fool is mild coming from you,” she pointed out coolly.

He only grew more frustrated. “So why? In the name of sanity, why?”

She shrugged helplessly. “I tried not to, I swear. You’re just . . . it’s all your fault!”

“How is this my fault?!”

She rolled her eyes in fond exasperation. “Oh, please. Look at you. Tall, and dark, with eyes you could drown in, and a voice that’s like a shiver down my spine. I rather like your nose, too,” she added. “I have no idea why. And you’re probably one of the most intelligent people I know. And terribly witty. I do mean terribly. And the thing that is the most your fault is the fact that you keep saving me. You hated me from the moment you laid eyes on me. But over and over again, there you were, between me and certain doom. Do you know what that does to a girl?”

His eyes flicked over her, her arms still around him, those kiss-bruised lips. The evidence stood before him of just what it did to a girl.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You should return to the party. People will be wondering where you are.” She opened her mouth to retort hotly. He covered her mouth with his hand. Her eyes were furious above his fingers. “We will discuss this later.” Then, as if the words were being dragged from him by wild horses, “I promise.”

Hero deflated a little; she nodded, and Severus removed his hand. “Fine.” She stretched up and pecked him on the lips before drawing away. She swirled her Cloak around her and disappeared. The door opened.

“You might want a bit of ice. Just a thought.” He could picture her throwing an impish grin over
her shoulder. He waited five minutes before following her.
The next morning marked the beginning of the Christmas holidays. Hermione was going back to London to spend it with her parents. The words to tell Ron and Hermione all that had happened the night before were burning on her tongue. They were surrounded by people, though, busy with last minute packing or farewells between friends.

Hero, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny shared a compartment for the trip to London. Hermione had a mountain of homework to finish over the holidays. Hero had a sneaking suspicion that at least a third of it was extra-credit. She, Ron, and Ginny chatted. They would have played Exploding Snap, but, in deference to Hermione, they refrained.

She might have told them on the train, but she was far too aware of how very not private it was. At any moment, someone could barge into their compartment. Not only that, Fred and George clearly didn’t discriminate when it came to their customers. Extendable ears could be anywhere. Perhaps she was being paranoid, but was it really paranoia when people actually are out to get you? And it wasn’t the sort of information she fancied taking chances with.

Ron and Hermione shared a passionate farewell on the train, away from Mrs. Weasley’s prying eyes. Hero wasn’t without sympathy, but it was still funny.

Hero got a hug from Hermione on the platform before she hurried off to meet her parents. Mrs. Weasley hugged the three of them tightly, then hurried them outside to the Ministry cars. Ron stretched out, enjoying the extra space. Mrs. Weasley just looked worried.

When they got to the Burrow, she set Ginny to making beds and Ron and Hero to peeling sprouts. Ron scowled, but Hero was grateful. It would give them a perfect opportunity to talk without interruptions or listening ears. She just wasn’t sure where to start.

“Spit it out,” Ron said, not looking up from his task. Hero jumped as she was abruptly brought out of her reverie.

“What?”

“You’ve been dying to say it all day. Go on.”

“Well . . . I’m not sure where to start,” she admitted.

Ron smiled slightly. “I generally find that the best place is at the beginning.”

Hero flushed. “That makes sense. Alright. Dumbledore’s hand is black. It has been all year. It was black when he collected me from the Dursleys over the summer.” Ron nodded. “Dumbledore’s been showing me memories in our lessons, yeah? In one, Voldemort’s mother’s family had a ring. That ring is now on Dumbledore’s hand. I’ve asked him, but he won’t talk about what happened to his hand. And, I mean, it’s still black. Say what you will about Snape, he’s one of the best Potions Masters in the world. I figure, if all that’s true, it must be really bad. And seeing as he keeps avoiding the subject, it must be really, really bad. And these lessons, why now? I asked Snape yesterday. He confirmed it.”

“And?”

Hero looked at him, her expression bleak. “He’s dying.”
“Oh. Well, Bollocks.” The words were callous, but Ron looked heartbroken.

“Yeah,” Hero sighed.

“Wait, when did you talk to Snape last night?”

“I snuck out of Slughorn’s party when he dragged Malfoy off.”

“Of course you did. When are you going to admit there’s no point?”

“Never, since what I heard last night proves there is one,” she retorted, casting a side-long glance at the redhead.

“Just because Dumbledore’s . . . you know, doesn’t mean anything about Malfoy.”

Hero rolled her eyes. “I realize that. Voldemort’s punishing his family because his father got arrested. He’s given him a job. Killing Dumbledore. I’m pretty sure Dumbledore knows.”

“What?! And he’s letting that little slime keep trying?!”

“Yes. Snape swore an Unbreakable Vow to Malfoy’s mother that he would help him.”

“Hero . . . what if he’s not on our side? That . . . that sounds like something a Death Eater would do, not someone who’s in the Order.”

“He’s not a Death Eater. I think Dumbledore has a plan.”

It was Ron’s turn to roll his eyes. “When is that not true? And since when do you defend Snape? You hate Snape. And he hates you.”

“I don’t hate Snape!”

“You did. You hated his guts! You despised him, and he loathed you. That’s suddenly not true anymore?”

“No. It’s not. It hasn’t been true for a while.”

Ron was quiet for a moment as he digested this. Then: “Where was I?”

Hero threw him a tight smile. “Busy. And I didn’t want to tell you anyway, remember?”

“Did something happen? Something else you didn’t want to tell me?”

“Don’t. Something else I don’t want to tell you.”

“Which means you’re not going to tell me.”

“I shouldn’t think so, no.”

“Right.”

They worked in a silence that was mostly companionable, until Hero spoke again. “What happens when you break an Unbreakable Vow?”

Ron looked at her, and it was almost like he already knew what she was sure she would eventually tell him; his eyes seemed full of understanding and sympathy. “You die.”
Hero bit her lip and nodded slowly. “What . . . what do you know about them?”

“Well, most people who are wizard-raised would have heard of them, but Fred and George tried to get me to make one when I was about five. And, I mean, I was five, so of course I didn’t see a problem with that. I was holding hands with Fred and everything when Dad found us.” Ron’s eyes were focused on the memory, a slight smile curving his lips as he stared, unseeing, out the window. “He went mental. Only time I’ve ever seen Dad as angry as Mum. Fred reckons his left buttock’s never been the same since.”

Hero giggled at this observation. “Well, passing over Fred’s left buttock—”

Fred strode into the kitchen, hands in his pockets and grinning. “My ears are burning. Ah, George, bless them. Still using knives and everything.”

“All the better to draw blood,” Hero drawled.

“Ooh, not very nice. Maybe I should do it for you, if only to get that blade out of your hand,” Fred said teasingly.

“And what about me?” Ron demanded.

“I don’t believe you could actually do enough damage for it to be worth the bother,” George retorted.

“Is there a reason Hermione couldn’t make it for Christmas this year? I bet there is, George.”

“I do believe you’re right, Fred. Now, going off the intelligence I’ve gathered, I’m going to guess . . .” he closed his eyes and put his finger to his nose, stabbing it into the air as he cried, “Confundus Charm!”

“Oh, piss off!”

“Are we correct, Hero? Was there spellwork involved?” Fred inquired.

“No spells to the best of my knowledge. Although, it might be partially because of his wandwork. I really couldn’t say, though. I generally do my best to avoid that part of proceedings.”

Fred and George were guffawing and Ron was glaring at her, his knife held in a rather threatening grip. Sorry, she mouthed.

“It must be something. I don’t know if she’s lost her heart, but I must say, I rather think she’s lost her head—” Mrs. Weasley came in just in time to see Ron throw his paring knife at George, who turned it into a paper airplane with a lazy flick of his wand.

“Ronald Weasley! Don’t you ever let me see you throwing knives again!”

“I won’t,” he swore, finishing under his breath as he turned back to Mt. Sprout, “let you see.”

“Where was I . . .? Oh, right. Fred, George, I’m terribly sorry, but Bill will need to bunk in with you, Remus is arriving tonight. And then, let’s see . . . Hero, I’ve had to put you in the attic with Ron, don’t worry, there’s a sheet up to divide it. Then that leaves Fleur to share with Ginny—”

“That’ll make Ginny’s Christmas,” Fred muttered.

“And everyone will be comfortable. Well, they’ll have a bed, at any rate,” Mrs. Weasley finished, looking flustered and rather like she could just see her to-do list start to roll through the garden. She hurried out with a brief smile for them before her worried frown was back.
“Couldn’t you just do a bit of magic to help us out? Please?” Ron begged.

“No, I don’t think we can do that,” Fred said seriously. “It’s very good for your character, learning to peel sprouts, as must the squibs and muggles.”

“How do you expect to become worthy of Hermione otherwise? Besides, bit of friendly advice, if you want people to help you,” George tossed the paper airplane at Ron, “I’d avoid chucking knives at them. Makes them worlds more amenable. But, in any case, we’re off to the village. There’s a very pretty girl working in the paper shop who thinks my card tricks are something marvelous . . . almost like real magic.”

“Gits,” Ron muttered darkly as he watched them leave out the kitchen window. “They could have been done in ten seconds, then we could have gone.”

“Maybe you could’ve, I promised Dumbledore I wouldn’t wander off. And I’m not quite sure I understand your burning desire to watch your brother flirt with some poor girl, anyway.”

Ron grimaced. “You’re probably right.

* *

The next few days were hectic, all the way up to Christmas eve, which was rather more relaxed. The house had been decorated by Ginny, who seemed to have drowned her numerous sorrows in the task; it looked like a paper-chain explosion. She was currently playing Exploding Snap with Fred and George. They were probably the only ones who knew that the angel tree-topper was in fact a garden gnome that had bitten Fred on the ankle when he and George had gone out to pull carrots for Christmas dinner. The poor dear glowered down at them all from his lofty position, immobilized, painted gold, stuffed in a miniature tutu and pair of wings. It had a bald head, hair everywhere else, and was, without a doubt, the ugliest angel Hero had ever seen.

They were all supposed to be listening to a Christmas broadcast over the wizarding wireless from Mrs. Weasley’s favorite singer, Celestina Warbeck. Fleur, who, it seemed, did not like Celestina Warbeck in the slightest, had declared war. She sat in a corner, talking to Bill, loud enough to drown out the strains of “A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love.” Only, as Fleur spoke louder, Mrs. Weasley kept pointing her wand at the volume dial, so they all suffered.

Remus was by the fire, staring into it with a wistful expression. Hero was glad the Weasleys had invited him for Christmas. Not only was it nice to see him, she’d been worried about him. With Sirius gone, his lover as well as his best friends, her parents, she’d feared he might drink himself to death over the holidays. Or worse, he might kill himself on purpose rather than by accident. Celestina hit a particularly painful note, and Hero wandered who had cursed him that he had to tolerate such an appalling love song on top of everything else.

“I’m sorry about this,” Mr. Weasley told her softly, jerking his head toward the wireless as he peeled a satsuma. “There’s no use arguing with her when it comes to Celestina Warbeck.”

“I understand. Peace in our times, and all that.”

“Not much hope of that, I’m afraid,” he said, grimacing as he looked over at the wordless but certainly not silent battle between Fleur and Mrs. Weasley. “At home or abroad.”

“How have things been going at the Ministry?” Hero asked, taking in Mr. Weasley’s exhausted face.

“Not terribly well, I’m afraid. There have been three arrests, but I sincerely doubt there’s a genuine Death Eater among them.”
“Has Stan Shunpike been released?”

“No. Dumbledore’s tried, and no one who’s interviewed him actually thinks he is one, but the higher ups aren’t letting him out. I suppose they figure three arrests sounds like they’ve accomplished something. Three mistaken arrests and releases…” he shrugged.

“Yeah. Thanks for taking the time to look into the Malfoys, even if it did end up being a waste of time.”

“I know you meant well.” He smiled at her and went to placate his wife, who was by this point rather waspish.

Remus smiled weakly at her. “Has it been a good year, Hero?”

“Good and bad. Snape and I have been trying to set aside our differences. I know you don’t like him—”

“I neither like nor dislike Severus. We will never be friends; after everything that happened at Hogwarts, between him and Sirius and James, there’s too much bitterness. But I cannot forget that, while I taught at Hogwarts, he made me the Wolfsbane Potion every month, and made it perfectly, so that I did not have to suffer as I usually do at the full moon. I am proud of you for setting aside your prejudices. He is a good man, whatever our own personal feelings and failings.”

Well, that was enormously reassuring. It was as near to getting his blessing as she would get without telling him how she really felt about Severus. Ignoring the question of whether he actually would if he knew what he was sanctioning.

A moment later, Celestina finished her set with a note that was very loud, very long, and very high-pitched. There was applause over the wireless, enthusiastically echoed by Mrs. Weasley.

“Is it over? Oh, thank goodness, what a horrible—”

“Shall we have a nightcap, then?” Mr. Weasley quickly interrupted, leaping to his feet. “Who wants egg-nog?”

“How’ve you been holding up?” Hero asked Remus. Mr. Weasley disappeared to the kitchen as everyone else stretched and started conversations.

“Getting through it a day at a time,” Remus said, sighing. “It helps to feel useful, to get out of the house.” At Hero’s inquiring look, he explained, “Dumbledore wanted someone to try to bring the werewolves to our side. I was perfect for the job. It’s not easy, though. They have plenty of reason to mistrust wizards, and they don’t think much of me. They disdain werewolves who try to survive among wizards. But I’d like to think I’m making headway.”

“Why do they support Voldemort?”

“They believe that, under his rule, they would have a better life. With the way we have all been treated by the contemporary government, it is a difficult stance to argue against. And Greyback certainly doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Who’s Greyback?”

“Sometime I forget how much of recent wizarding history you are ignorant. Greyback is probably the most savage werewolf alive today. He has made it his goal in life to spread the infection, contaminating as many people as possible. He hopes to overwhelm the wizarding population. He
believes strongly in biting children and turning them against their parents and normal wizards. Voldemort has threatened to unleash him on people’s sons and daughters unless they cooperate in some instances. It generally produces good results, as you can imagine.”

He hesitated, then admitted, “It was Greyback who bit me. My father had said something to make him angry, and he made sure he was close to me when the moon was full. This is the man I’m arguing against. Reason has little traction against his insistence that we deserve blood and vengeance against those who have shunned us, the normal wizarding population.”

“That’s stupid! You are normal! You just have a . . . a problem—”

Lupin burst out laughing. “Your father used to refer to it as my ‘furry little problem’ in company. I think most people were under the impression that I had a badly behaved rabbit. Ah, thank you, Arthur,” he said, accepting a glass of egg-nog from Mr. Weasley.

The mention of her father reminded Hero of something she had been meaning to discuss.

“I found a spell in one of my textbooks. Levicorpus.”

“Oh, yes. That one was quite popular while we were in school. There were a few months when you couldn’t move without being hoisted into the air by your ankle.”

“I saw a Pensieve memory of Dad using it on Snape.” She tried to keep the complex cocktail of emotions out of her voice. She probably was not entirely successful.

“Yes. Yes, I remember. As I said, everyone was using it,” Remus said cautiously.

Hero swallowed down words that were like acid. She got out, “It was wrong. It was horrible to watch. It . . .” she choked back a sob. “How could you? Any of you?”

Remus stared at her in growing horror. Finally, he said, because he could think of nothing else, “Why does it bother you so much?”

“For as long as I can remember, my family has made humiliating me their sport. Tell me how what I saw was any different.”

“The . . . animosity between Severus Snape and James and Sirius was . . . vast. I don’t remember anymore who started it, though it may have had something to do with Lily.” Remus looked at her measuringly. “She was friends with Snape and wouldn’t give your father the time of day for several years. I don’t imagine that improved relations between them on James’s end. And I stood by and watched because I was a coward. There’s not really any excuse. I won’t pretend there is, or can be. But I’m still not quite sure I understand the . . . depth of your reaction.”

She looked up at him with a helpless expression and confessed, “I’m in love with him.” She wiped her running nose with her hand. “You wouldn’t remember, but, at the end of third year, that horrible night, when you were transformed, Snape stood between us and you. He’s kept standing between me and peril. And last year I realized . . . not that it did me any good, because I hated him, too. But I don’t anymore. I don’t hate him. But I still . . .”

“Oh, sweetheart—”

It was at that point that Fleur, who seemed more than a little tipsy by this juncture, decided to do an imitation of Celestina Warbeck for Bill’s edification. Upon glimpsing Mrs. Weasley’s expression, they all trounced off to bed. It seemed wise, if there was murder to be done, to have plausible deniability.
Hero and Ron climbed all the way up to Ron’s attic bedroom. There, as Mrs. Weasley had promised, was a camp bed for Hero and a sheet strung across the space as a curtain. Ron was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, but Hero was awake a long time, thinking of that memory, and others of her own besides. She dreamt of the Quidditch World Cup and her father using Levicorpus on Snape, while, in the distance, the screams of children could be heard as they were bitten by werewolves.

* 

Hero was woken the next morning by Ron’s exclamation at the sight of presents. She glanced around, noting a bulging stocking at the foot of her own bed. She rammed her glasses on and pulled back the curtain.

She found Ron pulling from his own stocking . . . a calendar. She spotted a note stuck to the back in Hermione’s handwriting and wondered if it was a homework planning calendar like Hermione had gotten Hero one year. Ron held it up and started flipping through the months; Hero realized Hermione knew Ron better than that. It was a pinup calendar, with moving wizard photographs, and all the months were Hermione. Hero looked away, blushing, though not nearly as furiously as Ron.

Ron, not looking away from January, said, “If you tell Fred and George about this, I’ll – I’ll—”

“Stutter at me? Come on, do you really I think I would do that? To you or Hermione? I mean, if it was a gold chain that said ‘My Sweetheart’ because you were dating Lavender, I might be sorely tempted. But I probably still wouldn’t say anything.”

“You noticed.”

“That Lavender had an enormous crush on you? Even you noticed, Ron. And Hermione’s right, you have the emotional range of a teaspoon most of the time.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Anytime!”

Hero’s presents included a Weasley sweater with a large golden snitch on the front, a large hamper of Wheezes products from the twins, and a small box from Kreacher. Hero picked it up, terribly curious.

“Don’t worry, it can’t be anything too dangerous, our mail’s still getting checked by the Ministry.”

“It might not have come through the mail. Kreacher’s a house elf, remember? But I think he’s over trying to kill me, so it should be safe.” They both eyed the box with trepidation. Slowly, like it might be radioactive, she removed the wrapping paper and lifted the top of the box to reveal . . . a locket.

It was gold, about the size of a chicken’s egg, with a large serpentine s inlaid in glittering green stones. Ron’s jaw dropped.

“I think you’re right. You don’t send things like that to people you hate.”

Hero frowned. “I’ve seen it before. So have you. It was that locket that was in Grimmauld Place that no one could open. I guess Kreacher got it back. I told him to, after what happened with Mundungus. Maybe he wanted to show that he’d done as I asked.”

“Still.”
Everyone was wearing their Weasley sweater when they sat down for Christmas lunch. Well, everyone who had received one, at any rate. Mrs. Weasley had apparently decided, not necessarily without cause, that Fleur wouldn’t appreciate one. Mrs. Weasley, herself, of course, didn’t have one. She was wearing, however, a midnight blue witch’s hat glittering with what looked to be tiny, starlike diamonds and a spectacular golden necklace, both courtesy of Fred and George.

“We find we appreciate you more and more, Mum, now we’re washing our own socks,” George said, waving an airy hand. “Parsnips, Remus?” On the one hand, Hero did not doubt that what he said was true (having the opportunity to miss her probably didn’t hurt). On the other hand, the gifts made it quite clear that, whatever their mother’s objections to them running a joke shop, they were doing quite well for themselves. Hero silently applauded.

Remus hadn’t brought up what she’d told him last night. She was grateful that he seemed content to forget it. In any case, she wasn’t sure what to say on the subject, let alone to him.

Ron went to pass Fleur the gravy boat, but, in his eagerness, sent it flying. Bill, thankfully, with reflexes honed by many near-death adventures, whipped out his wand and spelled the gravy back into the boat. Fleur, ignoring Ron (who had shrunk in his seat and looked like he wished the floor would open up and swallow him), kissed Bill in thanks.

It was only after she had finished that she glared at Ron. “You are as bad as that Tonks. She is the clumsiest person I have ever met—”

“I invited dear Tonks to join us today,” Mrs. Weasley interrupted, glaring at Fleur as she set the dish of carrots down with unnecessary force. “Unfortunately, she declined. Have you heard anything from her recently, Remus?”

“I haven’t really been in contact with anyone. And I would imagine Tonks is as busy as any auror these days. I shouldn’t really be terribly surprised she turned down the invitation. She does, after all, have family of her own.”

“Perhaps you’re right about her being busy. I rather got the impression she was planning to work today.” She got a wistful expression on her face, as if imagining how much nicer it would be to have Nymphadora Tonks for a daughter-in-law instead of Fleur. Hero, looking over and seeing Fleur feed Bill bits of turkey off her fork, was rather of the opinion that Mrs. Weasley would be better off conceding defeat.

It did, however, bring to mind something she’d noticed back at the beginning of September. And look at her luck, to have the expert right next to her.

“Tonks’s Patronus is different. I’m not sure what it looked like before, but now it’s something lithe and furry and four-legged. I was wondering why that might have happened.”

“Sometimes that happens when a person experiences an emotional upheaval. It might be the death of a loved one, and Tonks and Sirius were cousins and fairly close. On the other hand, it can change when you fall in love.” His smile became wistful and bittersweet. “Sirius’s was a dog at first, like his animagus form. If you’d seen him cast it at any point since he was sixteen, it would have been a wolf.”

“Arthur!” Mrs. Weasley cried, standing suddenly. Her hand was pressed to her heart as she stared out the kitchen window. “Arthur, it’s Percy!” Hope shone from her face. More precious than diamonds, the return of the prodigal.

Everyone looked out the window. There, sure enough, striding across the snowy yard, was Percy.
“Arthur, he’s with the Minister!”

There, sure enough, the man from all the Daily Prophet articles, was Rufus Scrimgeour. *I guess the Lovegoods are wrong about him being a vampire, then,* Hero reflected idly. It also seemed unlikely that Percy was there out of a genuine desire to return to the bosom of his family. Hero was at the Burrow, and the Minister had come to call, his junior assistant with him. It didn’t take a genius to put two and two together and come up with four.

Before anyone could say or do much of anything, Percy had opened the kitchen door. Mrs. Weasley threw her arms around him. Rufus Scrimgeour came in behind them, leaning on his walking stick and watching the scene with a smile. Hero didn’t trust that smile any more than she trusted the man who wore it.

“Percy and I were in the area and I knew how dearly he wanted to see his family for Christmas. I do hope you’ll forgive my own intrusion.” Hero noted both that he had actually remembered Percy’s name and that Percy himself looked like he’d rather be anywhere else, refusing to meet anyone’s eye. Mr. Weasley, Fred, and George looked about as happy to see him as he looked to see anyone else.

“No trouble at all, Minister. I’m sure there’s enough food to go around. Turkey, pudding?”

“No, no, Molly, I couldn’t. Really, we’re only here for five minutes. For Percy’s sake, you know. I’ll leave him to his family. But this young lady seems to have finished, perhaps she might show me around your charming garden?”

Bingo. The atmosphere cooled considerably as everyone looked between Hero and Scrimgeour. No one was fooled.

“If you like,” she said, easily enough as she rose. She was fully aware there was no point resisting. “I’m sure Percy will enjoy the time with just his family.”

They set off across the white yard, to the snow-covered garden. It certainly wasn’t all that much to look at in the dead of winter.

“Charming,” Scrimgeour said as he peered around at the indistinguishable lumps of snow that in a few months would be recognizable as plants. “Charming.” Hero said nothing. She’d always preferred to play as the black pieces in chess. There was value in patience.

“I’ve wanted to meet you for a very long time. Did you know that?”

“Really?” Hero asked blandly.

“Yes. Dumbledore’s proven quite protective. I suppose that’s only natural, after all you’ve been through. Especially recently.”

Hero said nothing. Scrimgeour seemed uncomfortable, as if she was not what he had expected. “Goodness me, the rumors flying about you! Whispers of prophecy . . . the Girl Who Lived . . . the Chosen One. . . .” They were getting warmer, now, nearer to the point.

“. . . I assume Dumbledore has discussed these matters with you?”

“He has. Yes.”
Scrimgeour waited a moment, then seemed to realize Hero had no more to say. “And?”

“Oh, but you’ve been so polite, Minister. Surely you ought to know better than to ask a lady to disclose things discussed behind closed doors?”

Scrimgeour ducked his head. His tone, when he spoke, was every bit as pleasant as Hero’s had been. “Of course, if it’s a question of keeping confidences, I would never ask you to divulge. Perish the thought. Of course, it hardly matters, does it, whether or not you are the Chosen One?”

“What, precisely, do you mean, Minister?” she asked, her polite tone now edged with frost.

“Forgive me. I’m sure to you, as a matter of personal interest, it matters enormously. But to the public at large . . . well, perception is everything, isn’t it?”

Hero was beginning to see his intended destination, but she was certainly under no obligation to assist him there. He could spit it out on his own . . . or not.

“Regardless of whether or not you are the subject of a prophecy, you are the people’s hero – by name and deed. The point is, you are a symbol of hope, a beacon in these dark times. I can only hope that you would see it as almost a duty to stand with the Ministry, so that you might shine better into the darkness.”

“You flatter me, sir. What, precisely, would ‘standing with the Ministry’ entail?” she said, watching a gnome dig for worms at the roots of a rhododendron.

Scrimgeour seemed buoyed by her words. “Well, nothing terribly onerous, I’m sure. Popping into the Ministry from time to time would, I’m sure, give the right impression. And I’m sure, while you’re there, you would have plentiful opportunity to speak to Gawain Robards, my successor as head of the Auror Office. I’m informed by Delores Umbridge that you cherish an ambition to join the ranks. I’m sure that can be easily arranged for someone as bright and capable as yourself . . . .”

She ignored the twinge that made itself known when he mentioned a future with the Auror Office. “Ah. I believe I understand, sir. You’d like it to seem I was working with the Ministry.”

“Yes, yes, that’s it exactly! I really feel it would have a rousing effect on the populace to see you more involved.”

“And doing so, I would imagine, would give the impression that I approve of the Ministry’s . . . exploits.”

“Well, yes, that was part of the idea—”

“Oh. Here, I’m afraid, we do run into complications. I know Stan Shunpike, sir. He’s no more a Death Eater than you are. But then, you seem so preoccupied with the appearance of competence that you don’t appear to have time or resources left to make truth of the lie. Though, of course, you’re working quite hard at the former.”

“I don’t expect you to understand, a sixteen year-old girl—” he said coldly.

“And yet you expect me to save your necks. You can’t have it both ways, Minister. And I’m afraid, even if I were moved by your plight, I’m busy. Quite honestly, booked solid. You see, I don’t have time to be a mascot because I have a dark lord to defeat. Thank you so much for the offer, but, as I’m sure you understand, I have better things to do. And you can take me at my word,” she said, her voice as cold as the air as she held up her right fist. There, of course, inscribed in white, were the words she had been forced to carve into her own flesh: I must not tell lies.
“Well, I might as well ask, then. What is Dumbledore up to?” he questioned, his voice no longer pleasant but quite businesslike. She was now facing an auror used to interrogating suspects.

“I thought we’d already agreed that you would never ask me to divulge a confidence. A lady’s secrets, and all that.” She batted her eyelashes at him. He was unmoved.

“I have other means of obtaining information.”

She smiled sunnily at him. “Pardon me. I’m sure you do. However, you may have noticed that Dumbledore didn’t get on terribly well with the last Minister for Magic. You yourself have recently replaced him; I’m not sure if it’s occurred to you, but Dumbledore’s still Headmaster of Hogwarts. I wouldn’t take my chances if I were you.”

“I see he has done a remarkable job with you,” Scrimgeour said, his eyes hard and cold. “Dumbledore’s golden girl to the bitter end.”

“Yes, thank you. Kind of you to say. Do have a happy Christmas, Minister.” With those words, she turned and swanned off back to the house.
Okay, so . . . going to be honest here. I've written through chapter 34. I feel kind of bad leaving you with an update a month when I have enough stored away for, at that rate, the next year. Happy Thanksgiving, guys.

It was a few days after New Years that they were due to return to Hogwarts. Mrs. Weasley had been crying on and off since Percy stormed out of the house Christmas day. The general mood was fairly bleak after that.

There had been portkeys arranged to send students back to Hogwarts. Mrs. Weasley was the only one there to see them off, as everyone else was at work. She was especially weepy at their departure.

“Don’t cry, Mum,” Ginny said as Mrs. Weasley sobbed into her shoulder. “It’s okay . . . .”

“Yeah, don’t worry about us,” Ron said, enduring his mother’s wet kiss on his cheek, “or about Percy. He’s such an enormous prat, it’s not really a great loss, is it?” Hero knew he was trying to help, but she still felt like kicking him.

Mrs. Weasley was crying harder than ever as she hugged Hero. “You promise me you’ll look after yourself . . . stay out of trouble.”

“You know me, I like a quiet life.”

She gave a watery chuckle. “Be good, all of you. I love you.”

The portkey glowed blue, and the Burrow and Mrs. Weasley disappeared. They landed in the Great Hall and trooped up to Gryffindor Tower. The Fat Lady was hung over, as usual following the Christmas holidays. She refused to let them in since the password had changed.

“Oh!” They turned to see Hermione come racing towards them. She flung herself into Ron’s arms. It was only after she pulled away that she greeted Hero and Ginny. Her cheeks, already pink from being out in the cold, darkened.

“I’ve just got back from visiting Hagrid. Did you all have a good Christmas?”

“You’re never going to believe who showed up.”

“Hang on a sec. Password’s abstinence.”

“Precisely,” the Fat Lady said, cradling her head in her hands, and swung forwards to reveal the entrance.

“I heard she and her friend Violet drank their way all that wine in the picture of the drunk monks down by the Charms corridor,” Hermione confided in an undertone. “Oh, here,” she added, handing Hero a scroll that contained the details of Hero’s next lesson with Dumbledore. Ginny said goodbye and went off to find Luna.
The three of them found a quiet corner of the Common Room to talk. Hero cast *Muffliato*.

Hermione pursed her lips. “Do you really think that’s quite necessary?”

“Rufus Scrimgeour came to talk to me Christmas day.”

“The Minister for Magic?” Hermione gasped, her disapproval forgotten.

“Yes. He came to offer me a job. In the Ministry’s publicity department.”

“Oh, Lord. You poor thing.”

“That’s not even the most interesting thing I haven’t told you yet.”

“Really?” Hermione said, raising an eyebrow. “Go on, then. Impress a girl.”

“Impressing you is not the goal with this particular piece of intelligence.” She quickly went over what she had told Ron.

“I’m actually a little bit worried about him,” Hero confessed.

“Well, I can imagine Dumbledore’s not exactly thrilled at the prospect of being murdered by a sixteen year-old.”

“No, I meant Malfoy. I don’t imagine he has much hope of success, and he knows he’ll probably be killed if he fails. I might think he’s a disgusting little ferret, but he doesn’t deserve that.” She remembered again what he had looked like at Slughorn’s party: pale, sick, skinny, and very tired. He’d looked haunted, she realized now, and hunted.

“Ah. And then there’s the fact that Snape’s risking his life over the whole sorry affair,” Hermione mused. Hero tried not to flinch. “You said you talked to him, Hero?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“Did he say much else?”

“Not really, no,” Hero replied off-handedly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at her. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“It’s no use, Hermione. I asked, and she won’t tell me, either. Whatever it is, she’ll let us know when she’s ready. Hopefully, before she’s all the way up to her neck in trouble.” Hero made a face at him. They passed the rest of the evening abusing Scrimgeour, and a good time was had by all.

* The new term started the next morning. On the notice board was a large sign that had been posted overnight. It announced the beginning of Apparition lessons for those who were both eligible and had twelve galleons to spare. Everyone was quite excited. Everyone except Hero.

“So, Apparition. Should be a laugh, eh?” Ron said gamely, his arm around Hermione’s waist.

Hero shrugged. “It was sort of awful when Dumbledore side-long Apparated me. I think he said most people vomit their first time. But don’t pay me any mind, I’m probably just moody because I can’t do it.”
“What do you mean?”

“The thing that begins with c,” Hero replied patiently. “With all the magical scrambling of particles only to rearrange them on the other side, Dumbledore thinks that it might make the abnormal growth worse.”

“Oh. That makes sense, Hero. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Yes, well, that’s why Snape has to drive me to my appointments once a month.”

All the sixth years were abuzz over the lessons. There was much speculation on what they’d be like. The prospect of being able to vanish and reappear at will was, apparently, the absolute coolest thing ever.

Seamus was terribly excited about it. Instead of the fountain of pure water they were supposed to be working on, he sent a hose-like jet that ricocheted off the ceiling and knocked Professor Flitwick flat on his face. He was then set lines once Flitwick had dried himself off (*I am a wizard, not a baboon brandishing a stick*). Of course, it didn’t help that he’d been trying to show off for Dean. Hero had seen him glance over at the Muggleborn out of the corner of his eye.

All in all, Hero was rather grateful come ten to eight when she could escape for her lesson with Dumbledore. She entered to find the lamps lit, the former heads asleep in their portraits (or giving a decent performance, she could never quite tell), and the Pensieve lying ready on the desk once again. Dumbledore stood behind the desk, his hands at either side of the stone basin. Hero went cold at the sight of his right hand, as black and burned-looking as ever. Be that as it may, Hero was fully aware they had a great many things to discuss.

“I heard you met the Minister for Magic over your holidays.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. We didn’t part on the best of terms.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore sighed. “He’s not terribly happy with me, either. A travesty, I assure you, one which gives me no end of despair. Ah, well, I suppose that’s life.”

Hero grinned. “He wanted me for a poster girl, who’d say no end of nice things about the Ministry.”

Dumbledore smiled in a way that seemed like he was trying not to laugh. “Yes. I believe it was Fudge’s idea originally. One of his desperate hopes while he was still clinging to his position.”

Hero’s lip curled in disgust. “He’s got a lot of nerve even considering it after last year. Then again, maybe it’s sheer bloody idiocy.”

Dumbledore gave a slight cough which may have masked a chuckle. “Ah, yes. I told Cornelius there was no chance, but the idea seems not to have died when he left office. I was entertaining – if, indeed, that is the correct term – his demands that I arrange a meeting with you within hours of his appointment.”

“Yes, he alluded to that. And I believe I read something about it in the *Prophet*.”

“Yes, well, they were bound to hit upon a scrap of truth eventually, if only by accident. *I am* sorry that he found a way to corner you, and on Christmas, what’s worse. Very bad form.”

Hero sighed. “I’m sure he would have figured something out eventually. He accused me of being your golden girl to the bitter end.”
“How terribly rude of him.”

“I thanked him for the compliment.”

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. Behind Hero, Fawkes the Phoenix let out a low, soft, musical cry. To Hero’s surprise, and intense embarrassment, Dumbledore’s bright blue eyes looked rather watery. When he spoke, however, his voice was quite steady.

“It is rare that I receive such honor from someone of such esteem. I am very touched, Hero.”

“Th-thank you, sir. He . . . he also asked where you go when you leave Hogwarts.”

“Yes, he’s been rather nosy on the subject. He set Dawlish to tailing me, don’t know what he was thinking. You know I was already forced to hex the poor boy once. I did it again with the greatest regret.”

Hero grinned. “So they have no idea where in the wide world you disappear to? No wonder he was so forceful about it.”

“No, indeed, they have not the slightest clue. I’m afraid I am not yet able to tell you, either. All in good time, I promise. I do believe we can press on, provided there is nothing else?”

Hero screwed up her courage and plunged ahead. “Actually, there is, sir. I’m not sure if Professor Snape told you, but I spoke to him before the Christmas holidays. I think I have it mostly figured out.”

Dumbledore was silent a moment. “Well, why don’t you tell me which pieces you’ve put together?”

Hero nodded, still rather nervous. “I sort of figured out you’re dying. And Malfoy’s been told to kill you. Only he probably won’t be able to actually do it. And Professor Snape’s sworn to help him. And I figured he probably wouldn’t do that unless you had a plan.”

“Yes, you’re quite correct. And rather more perceptive than I tend to give you credit for, for which I must apologize. As I said before, all will be revealed soon enough. Don’t fret. Now, I must insist we press on. I have some very important things to divulge this evening.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Excellent. I have two more memories to show you this evening, both obtained with enormous difficulty. The second of them, I believe, is the most important I have collected.” Hero sat forward in her chair, her curiosity piqued.

He went on to detail Tom’s years at school, where he was swiftly sorted into Slytherin. The staff adored him, knowing him only as a talented, good-looking orphan. Dumbledore, however, had kept an eye on him.

Tom Riddle gathered a group of disciples: the weak, the ambitious, and thugs who gravitated to someone who could show them more refined forms of cruelty. These, then, were the forerunners of the Death Eaters, as many of them would go on to become.

“There are few willing to bear witness to his Hogwarts years, and, as such, memories of that time are difficult to obtain. What little I have been able to discover is that he was obsessed with his parentage. He did eventually come to terms with the fact that his father had been a muggle and his mother a witch. From there, he found that his grandfather and uncle, and himself, of course, were the last surviving descendants of Salazar Slytherin. I believe that, following his discovery that his
father had not a drop of magical blood, he assumed the identity of Lord Voldemort.”

The memory that followed belonged to Morfin Gaunt. It was of the only time he ever met his nephew. The nephew in question had been clearly disgusted by the squalor in which descendants of Salazar Slytherin lived. There was an unusual darkness after that, and the memory ended.

“Why did it go dark like that? What happened?”

“Morfin had no recollection of events beyond that point. What I do know is that the Riddle family, Tom’s father and grandparents, were found dead the next morning, victims of the Killing Curse. Morfin was the obvious suspect. Indeed, he boasted of the deed. He handed over his wand, which was proven to have been used in the murders. There was no reason to look further.

“So, Morfin was carted off to Azkaban. The only thing he told them beyond his confession was that the ring was lost, he’d kill him for losing the ring.”

“Voldemort Stupified him, stole his wand and used it to kill the Riddles, then modified his memory.”

“Yes, quite. Very astute, Hero, once again. The memories do not show it, but it’s fairly clear.”

“How come the Ministry didn’t realize Riddle had done it at the time? Didn’t they use the Trace on underage wizards, like they do today?”

“Certainly, but they only detect magic cast in the vicinity. With a wizard known to live in the area, they would have dismissed it. You were blamed for a Levitation Charm despite having not been responsible. The Ministry relies on magical parents to enforce their offspring’s obedience while within their walls.”

“Well, that’s rubbish! Look what happened to Morfin. And it’s unfair to muggleborns as well!”

“I quite agree. There is, however, another memory I wish you to see, and the hour grows late.”

Hero wondered what made this one so important, the most important he had collected. It seemed almost to have congealed slightly, stubbornly clinging to the phial as Dumbledore emptied it into the Pensieve.

“This one is very important, but also quite brief. Once more into the breach, then . . . .”

They dived into the memory. Hero looked around and was surprised to see a much younger Horace Slughorn. He was slimmer (though by no means starved), with a full head of hair and a rather less spectacular moustache. He was reclining in a wingback chair, his feet on a pouffe, a box of crystalized pineapple next to him. Hero felt a flash of intuition: was this, then, why Dumbledore had been so determined that Slughorn return to Hogwarts this year?

They were in Slughorn’s office, along with about half a dozen teenage boys who Hero assumed were members of the Slug Club. There, in the middle of them, the brightest star in the constellation, was Tom Riddle. He was as handsome as Diary Riddle had been, and far more relaxed than his companions. Marvolo’s ring glinted on his finger; Hero realized with a jolt that he had already killed his father and grandparents.

“Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?” he asked.

“I don’t see why I should tell you. You’re already more knowledgeable than half the staff,” Slughorn said in what he probably imagined was a reproving tone. He ruined the effect by winking. The other boys looked admiringly at Tom.
“What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn’t and your careful flattery of people who matter – thank you for the pineapple by the way, you’re quite right, it is my favorite—”

A thick, white mist swirled through the scene, obscuring the figures. Slughorn’s voice rang out, unnaturally loud, “You’ll go wrong, boy, mark my words.”

The mist cleared, the figures giving no indication that anything strange had happened. The clock on the mantel chimed eleven, cueing Slughorn to usher the boys out. Tom Riddle stayed behind.

“Look sharp, Tom. You don’t want to be caught out of bed after hours, and you a Prefect!”

“I just wanted to ask you a question first, sir.”

“Ask away, Tom, ask away.”

“I wondered if you knew anything about . . . about Horcruxes.”

The mist rolled through the room again, and Slughorn’s voice boomed again, “I don’t know anything about them, and I wouldn’t tell you if I did! Leave at once, and don’t let me catch you mentioning them again!” There, the memory ended.

“That’s it?” It didn’t strike Hero as particularly significant.

“Indeed. I’m sure you noticed that the memory had been tampered with,” Dumbledore said, taking a seat.

“Sir?” Hero inquired, sitting as well.

“Professor Slughorn interfered with his own recollections.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he is ashamed of what he remembers. He has – rather crudely – altered the memory to show himself in a better light and hide the truth that so shames him. The crudeness of it is to the good in our case, as it shows that the original memory is still there, beneath the lie. And so, Hero, I am giving you your first assignment for these lessons. We must have that memory. I must ask that you obtain it.”

“But . . . sir, I can’t imagine I’d do any better than you have. You have Legilimency. Veritaserum, at the very least. . . .”

“Ah, but he will be prepared for those means. Certainly, he doesn’t trust me, and didn’t when I originally requested the memory. Furthermore, he will be well prepared for any means of obtaining the memory without his cooperation. However, he has weaknesses just like the next man. I believe that you are uniquely equipped to get past his defenses. I would do more harm than good. The right words from you, under the right circumstances, and I imagine he will open up like a flower in the sun.” A glint of satisfaction came into Dumbledore’s eyes.

Hero swallowed and bobbed her head. “Yes, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“I can ask no more. Good night, Hero, and good luck.”

“Good night, sir. And, if you need to talk . . . dying really isn’t so bad.”

A sad smile touched his lips. “Thank you for the offer. I’ll bear that in mind.”
Dumbledore watched her leave. It was difficult and unexpectedly painful to be reminded that she was dying. He was dying, he should be able to accept the immediate reality of mortality. However, he was forced to invalidate his own argument with the logic that they were two different circumstances entirely. He was an old man, born in a different century. You could hardly argue that he hadn’t had his fair chance at life, and more besides. But for a young lady who could not claim two decades, to be the one reassuring him that death was not something to fear.

It twisted in his gut, the knowledge that she was so much better than him, the shame at it. Sharp in his heart was a fierce joy, because he wouldn’t matter much in the end anyway. She would. Terminally ill, staring death in the eye, Hero would carry the day.

A voice came from behind him, from the portrait of Phineas Nigellus. “I, for once, agree with the girl. I don’t see how she should do any better than you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, Phineas.” Fawkes gave a low, musical cry. “Barring, of course, the surface reasons you might relate to as a Slytherin.”

“Are you accusing Slytherins of being shallow?” Phineas asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Certainly not. Only yourself. And not necessarily of being shallow, merely of having a skin-deep understanding of the factors in play. Surely you realize that a bright, talented young lady is rather better equipped to manipulate Horace Slughorn than myself?”

“Manipulation is what you have in mind, then? I must say, I approve.”

“I am not so old as to have forgotten that more flies are caught with honey than vinegar. A gentle touch is needed.”

“And a gentle touch is best administered by a lady’s hands? How delightfully devious of you. On occasions such as this, I find myself surprised that you were not Sorted into my own House.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I’ve become wily and irascible with age. At the age of eleven, my mind was not nearly so convoluted. Hero, on the other hand, very nearly went to Slytherin. The potential is most certainly there.”

“Pity it must come to such an abrupt end.”

“I find myself thinking the same thing.”

“Plucked before the full glory of the bloom presents,” Phineas mused.

“You’re rather poetic about a young lady you have been rather vocal in your disdain for.”

“I can understand the appeal without sharing the sentiment. I can’t imagine I’m the only one who does.”

“I rather doubt she has any idea.”

“I gather she has other things to concern herself with.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Another regret.”

“Hers or yours?”
Chapter 23

A promise is a promise. Chapter 23, coming right up. Don't be afraid to speak your mind.

Even if Hero had had a mind to meet Severus on the Astronomy Tower, her lesson with Dumbledore had kept her up late, and, consequently, she missed the chance. She could not bring herself to regret it; however bold she'd been before Christmas, her nerve seemed to have disappeared. Daring, nerve, and chivalry. Was it at least chivalrous to let him think it over? Possibly not, she decided on further reflection, since it was based in large part in apprehension. She’d never had a boyfriend before, though judging by the efforts of Roland Vane, it wasn’t for want of contenders. She’d gone to the Yule Ball with Ron, a nightmare everyone involved agreed would never be mentioned again.

Then again, Severus didn’t strike her as the sort of man one could call a “boyfriend.” A boyfriend was . . . was a Ron, or a Neville, or a Cedric Diggory: young, cute, approachable. By that definition, Severus Snape could not be her boyfriend. She imagined for a moment, introducing him to someone, anyone. “Everyone, this is my boyfriend, Severus Snape.” She could picture the look on his face, the “I can’t believe you’re putting me through this, we will discuss this at home” tight lips, narrowed eyes, and raised brow. She slowly shook her head, unwilling to go there.

Of course, that was all still up in the air anyway. After his reaction to the kiss, there could be no question of her being certain of anything to do with Severus Snape. Except . . . except what she’d told Remus. Because, despite her best efforts, in his opinion (and sometimes hers) against sanity, she’d fallen in love with him. There was no denying it. It was like a candle-flame, tiny, defiant to the last, quite possibly about to set the house alight. A sign of life, of hope, of something, someone, to come home to.

She sighed and got dressed. The day had already started, and it would continue with or without her. She’d only worry herself sick.

Hero related the events of the previous evening to Ron and Hermione at breakfast. Ron seemed to think Hero would have no trouble. Hermione frowned, and Hero braced herself.

“I don’t know. He’s obviously bound and determined that the truth of that memory never see the light of day. I mean, if he wouldn’t even give it to Dumbledore . . . I’m sure he understands that Dumbledore wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. Hmm. Horcruxes . . . Horcruxes . . . I’ve never even heard of them.”

“Really? You’ve never come across it even in some really obscure text on Dark magic?”

“Just because you think I’ve researched every topic under the sun doesn’t mean I know everything. And it sounds like something really dark . . . I mean, I’ve read some dark stuff, but I don’t know how much you can expect of the school library. I’m sure Dumbledore wouldn’t want to leave that sort of thing where just anyone can find it.”

“Oh! That’s an idea.”
“What?”

“What? While you make your way through the Hogwarts library, I’ll set Kreacher to find books that might mention it in the Black library.”

“That is a good idea.”

She and Ron returned to the Common Room to work on homework while Hermione went off to Ancient Runes. Hero felt her lungs seize when she remembered (wondering how she could have forgotten) that her first class of the day was Defense.

* *

Severus threw the door open and looked over the heads of his pupils as they filed inside. He abjectly refused to meet her eye. No good could come of it. It certainly hadn’t the last time he’d been in a room with her. He’d asked her a simple enough question and somehow ended up with an armful of Hero Potter. *And a rather sweet armful it was, too,* a voice whispered, wreathing through his mind like smoke, drifting through his thoughts and permeating them, warping them. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. That shouldn’t matter. It didn’t.

“As I would hope you recall, I assisted Professor Lupin three years ago in this class and taught a lesson on werewolves. It is the headmaster’s wish that you review the subject. It is believed that the Dark Lord has a pack of werewolves, allegedly led by Fenrir Greyback, in his service. Three years ago, I assigned you an essay on how to recognize a werewolf. Today, of far greater importance is protecting yourself should you draw the ire of one.

“You may have heard of the Wolfsbane Potion, which allows a werewolf to keep their mind while transformed. It is ridiculously difficult to brew, and, as such, out of the reach of most of those afflicted. Fenrir Greyback is known to disdain it, preferring to attack fully in the mind of the beast. Any wolves who follow him would doubtless be the same. A wolf that is feral is infinitely more dangerous than one on Wolfsbane.

“Running is usually pointless. Werewolves are extremely fast. Your best bet is to Stun it or otherwise incapacitate it. If you are without a wand, you should try to distract it. Werewolves respond to the call of their own kind. Therefore, it is generally wise to have at least one other person with you when traveling.

“I want you all to divide into pairs and practice Stunning each other, first verbally, then nonverbally. It can be the best spell in your arsenal.”

At the end of the lesson, he called a halt. “I want an essay, of no less than five feet, on at least five other methods of dealing with a werewolf. Potter, stay behind.”

She folded her arms and waited for the other students to leave.

“That was a fair, balanced, and informative lesson.”

He glared at her. “What else would it be?”

“Third year all over again. I’m surprised Dumbledore had you bring it up again.”

“He didn’t. You asked, and I’m trying,” he corrected her frankly.

Her defenses slipped. She smiled softly at him. “What did you have to say to me?”
“Your infatuation with me cannot continue.”

“If I can still feel what I do for you, knowing what I do, what makes you think it’ll just go away?” she appealed, raising an eyebrow.

“I believe it because I must. I have done terrible things. I bully students. So far, I have at least avoided having affairs with them. Can I not leave one ethical standard unbreached?”

“Is that what you think I’m asking for? A breach of your professional ethics?”

“What else can it be?”

She hesitated a moment. “I can’t bring myself to regret it.”

He closed his eyes. “Against my better judgement, despite the war, despite who we are, despite the fact that it is a spectacularly bad idea, despite everything... neither can I.”

He recognized her expression from watching her face as the sun rose, joy and hope and a kind of wonder. His lips twisted as he continued, as he must, “Be that as it may... it cannot happen again. It must not happen again.”

“I want it to happen again.”

“You’re not helping,” he forced out past gritted teeth.

“Did you think I would?” she challenged with a raised eyebrow.

He sighed. “I hoped. Your friends will be looking for you.”

“I suppose they will. We’re not finished. You can’t convince me that it’s wrong. And I won’t give up until you can look me in the eye and tell me it’s impossible.” She drew nearer and brushed her lips against his cheek. “Please don’t keep the both of us from being happy for reasons that don’t matter.” And then she was gone from him.

“Wait!” She turned to look back at him. “You didn’t come this morning. You need to take the potions on a regular schedule. If you could endeavor to be punctual tomorrow, I would appreciate it.” She nodded and slipped out the door.

* 

“What did he want to see you about?”

“The whole thing with Malfoy. You know, ‘if you utter a single syllable of what you heard, I’ll have you in detention for the rest of the year.’ What did you think it was about?” Hero lied easily.

“That’s what we figured,” Ron said. “And you said you don’t hate each other.”

“We don’t. You know he can’t take chances, and everyone knows I don’t get on with Malfoy.”

“Yeah... I suppose.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed, Ron,” Hermione chastised. “I for one think it’s admirable that Hero and Professor Snape are trying to get along.”

Ron snorted. “Only because you’ve been saying she should trust him all along.”
Hermione flushed. “And I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, dear. But then, that’s true 99% of the time, so I don’t see why you need to point it out.”

Hermione looked like half of her wanted to hit him and the other half wanted to snog him. Fortunately, before she could decide either way, the warning bell went off and she had to race away to Arithmancy.

Hero turned to Ron with a look that was at once incredulous and disapproving. “Really?”

“Really, really. You’ll see, she won’t be able to keep her hands off me later.”

Hero rolled her eyes, muttering under breath, “That’s what I’m worried about.”

Hermione did seem a bit more flirtatious than usual at lunch. Hero sat across the table from them, gladder than usual that it impeded her view. Eventually, Hermione scooted away from him on the bench, pink-cheeked and unable to keep from smiling every ten seconds.

“Stop, we’ve got Potions next, and I need to be able to concentrate.”

Ron put his hands in the air and went back to his Cornish pasty, but kept slipping Hermione looks out of the corner of his eye. Hermione kept her head down, but, nevertheless, her cheeks grew still pinker.

Hero glanced up at the head table and caught Severus’s eye, only for him to look away and start a conversation with McGonagall. Inwardly, Hero shrugged philosophically and turned back to her own lunch.

Lunch finished all too quickly, and they joined the rest of the students taking NEWT level Potions on their way to the Dungeons.

They set up their cauldrons and waited as Slughorn called the class to order.

“We’ve got lots of work to get through this afternoon! Now, Golpalott’s Third Law . . . who can tell me—? But of course, Miss Granger can!”

“Golpalott’s Third Law states that the antidote for a blended poison will be equal to more than the sum of the antidotes for each of the separate components.”

“Quite right, ten points for Gryffindor! Now, if we accept Golpalott’s Third Law as true, and why would I have mentioned it otherwise . . .”

Nobody apart from Hermione and Slughorn seemed to have understood what she had said. Hero shot a very confused look at the other witch, who rolled her eyes and mouthed, *I’ll explain later.* Hero nodded gratefully.

“. . . which means, of course, that assuming we have achieved correct identification of the potion’s ingredients by Scarpin’s Revelaspell, our primary aim is not the relatively simple one of selecting antidotes to those ingredients in and of themselves, but to find that added component which will, by an almost alchemical process, transform these disparate elements—”

Ron was looking helplessly at Hermione, who was looking back in fond exasperation that was perhaps a bit less fond than usual.

“And so, I want each of you to come and take one of these phials on my desk. You are to create an
antidote for the poison within it before the end of the lesson. Best of luck, and do remember your protective gloves!”

“Sorry, Hero,” Hermione said briskly, actually managing to sound slightly apologetic as she tipped her own phial into her cauldron and lit the fire underneath. “I doubt your Prince can save you now. You need to understand the principles involved. There aren’t any shortcuts or cheats.”

Hero silently acknowledged that Hermione was probably right. She turned to the section on antidotes in the textbook, anyway. There was no annotation on Golpalott’s Third Law. Apparently he hadn’t had any trouble understanding. It stood to reason, Hero supposed, that the Potions genius had had a firm grasp of what was apparently a basic principle.

Whatever she was supposed to be doing, it wasn’t going well. Well, not for Hero, at any rate. When Slughorn came over to check her progress, the smell of bad eggs rising from her cauldron drove him away. Hermione was getting on splendidly. Hero started flipping desperately through the pages. There. At the end of the long list of antidotes was a single, scrawled sentence: Just shove a bezoar down their throats.

Of course. Their first lesson with Snape, one which she had already quoted back to him. It was ingrained in her memory, the speech, as well as the questions that followed. “Tell me, Potter, where would I find a bezoar?” And then, once she had admitted her ignorance: a stone taken from the stomach of a goat, which will protect from most poisons. She had no idea what sort of poison would, as hers had, present as bright pink with smoke that smelled of bad eggs, but she really hoped it fell under the heading “most poisons.” She scrambled off the stool, knowing if Severus had still been their Potions Master, she almost certainly wouldn’t have had the nerve.

In the store cupboard, in the very back, in a box with the label “bezoars” scrawled on it, she found what she was looking for. Slughorn called time. Hero emerged to find that no one, not even Hermione, had finished in the time allotted. That struck Hero as a chancy thing; didn’t poisons need to be treated as soon as humanly possible?

Slughorn passed all the cauldrons, not looking terribly pleased, when, finally, he came to Hero. “Well, Hero, what have you managed to whip up?” She opened her hand and presented the bezoar. He stared at it for a full ten seconds. Hero wondered if it was the end. Then, Slughorn threw back his head and roared with laughter.

“Gryffindor, indeed! You’ve got nerve, my girl, just like your mother! No fault in your logic, a bezoar would act as an antidote to every poison I handed out. Of course, they are rather rare, it’s still worth knowing how to mix antidotes . . .”

The only person fuming harder than Hermione (Hero supposed she had a reason) was Malfoy, who had something that looked like cat sick down his front. Hermione, whose half-finished concoction had contained fifty-two separate ingredients, including a chunk of her own hair, looked like she was about to cry. Hero had, once again, really, come out on top without doing much of any discernable work, while Hermione was forgotten next to borrowed genius. Any plans she had of cornering Slughorn over the memory were forgotten as Hero rushed off to make amends with Hermione.

She found her in Myrtle’s loo, with Ron trying to talk to her through the stall door. The look he gave Hero wasn’t exactly kind. Hero knew she deserved that, and more. But that wasn’t the point. The point was, Hermione was upset and Hero was supposed to be her friend.

She shot Ron a pleading expression. He raised an eyebrow but stepped aside.

“Hermione?” There was no response, but then, Hero hadn’t been expecting one. She plunged on
ahead. “I’m so sorry. Really. You worked harder than anyone, you’re the one he should have been cooing over. He’s stupid. So am I. I didn’t . . . think. I should never have done it. Please forgive me.”

The door opened to reveal the bushy haired girl, looking only slightly worse for wear. “Oh, Hero. I swear, sometimes you’re worse than Ron. I’ve been reading up on your condition.” Of course she had. “Since your tumor is in the frontal cortex, I imagine it affects your decision making. I forgive you, especially since I can’t be entirely sure it was all your fault.”

“Right. Does it help if I remembered it from our first lesson with Snape?”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “A little bit. Even I can’t remember exactly what he said.”

Hero didn’t say anything. The worst thing she could do would be to draw further attention to it.

Hermione sighed. “Have you called Kreacher yet?”

“Oh. Good idea. Kreacher?”

The old elf popped into the bathroom and bowed low. “Mistress calls for Kreacher?”

“We need to find out about a very dark piece of magic. It’s called a Horcrux. I need you to bring me any books in the Black library that mention it. Can you do that?”

“Kreacher is happy to serve a mistress who defends the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,” he said, bowing low again and disappearing with a soft pop of displaced air. Hermione nodded in satisfaction.

“I think he seems much happier, which is the next best thing since he can’t be freed.”

“Honestly, Hermione, I think that might kill him. I think he’d see it as being fired, rather than given his freedom.”

“Perhaps. It’s all hypothetical, anyway, since he knows too much to let him go.”

“You sound like a character from some mafia movie. And you sounded like some cartoon villain in Potions, twirling your mustache. ‘Your Prince can’t save you now!’”

Hermione giggled. “Did I really say that?”

“Something to that effect.”

Ron came over and slid an arm around Hermione’s waist, then kissed her on the cheek. He gave Hero a weary smile. Together, they trooped off to the library.

* 

Hero got up before first light and made her way to the Astronomy Tower, where Severus was waiting in their usual spot. He looked up at the sound of the door. He stood as she approached and started pulling the phials of potions from pockets in his robes.

“Perhaps I should have just given you the recipes. After all, according to Slughorn, you’re a brilliant potioneer,” he remarked as he handed them to her.

She groaned, then knocked back the first one, grimacing at the taste. “I don’t want to tell you because I’m afraid you’ll accuse me of cheating.”
He raised an eyebrow as she drained the next one. “Now you have to tell me.”

She shook her head, smiling ruefully. “Fine. So, I didn’t buy a Potions textbook because I thought you were teaching Potions again this year, and I only got an Exceeds Expectations on my OWL. Slughorn lent me a used one. It belonged to someone who called himself the Half-Blood Prince,” Hero confessed. “He’s been terribly helpful. Hermione accused me of having a crush on him,” she continued, blushing. “I figured it was safer than them suspecting I had a crush on you.” She snuck a glance at his face then. He looked constipated. A snort escaped him, and she realized it was because he was trying desperately not to laugh. Hero glared at him.

That was it for his attempts at self-control. He laughed, quietly at first, then louder, deep and long and filled with mirth. He kept laughing until Hero elbowed him.

“That’s more of a lie than you think or I realized. Haven’t you wondered who your fabled Half-Blood Prince is?”

“Well, of course, I have, who wouldn’t—No. Oh, you . . . I knew I recognized the handwriting! Bloody. . . .” she trailed off, muttering darkly.

Severus chuckled. “Truly, I am grateful it was you instead of Weasley. I don’t think I could bear it. And if it leads to Slughorn making a fool of himself, so much the better.”

“Dumbledore mentioned that he tends to favor students who are gifted or connected.”

“Whereas I favor Slytherin House?” He observed, finishing her thought. She nodded, glad she hadn’t been forced to say it aloud. “I resented him deeply for the way he ran things when I was a student. I find that resentment has only grown in the years since. I suppose I feel that, had he focused on his own students instead of those he could rely on for favors down the line, he might have seen what was happening. I can only hope he would have cared enough to put a stop to it.”

“Stop . . . the Marauders?” Hero asked timidly.

“They were beginning to see what the Dark Lord was by then. And even then, the people I hung around with weren’t exactly healthy companions. Your mother called them evil. I barely heard her at the time. She was quite right. She was a wise woman, your mother.

“But yes, I blame Horace Slughorn. Make no mistake, I take the . . . lion’s share of the blame upon my own shoulders. But I also see in Slughorn the worst of Slytherin ambition. A head of house is not just a teacher, but a guardian.”

“Well, I do know something about neglectful guardians. Is that part of why you’re trying so hard with this generation of Slytherins?”

His lips twisted. “Draco Malfoy in particular is an idiot I feel a certain sense of responsibility for. Certainly, his upbringing didn’t instill in him many virtues. Notably absent in him are patience, common sense, circumspection, and humility. I continue to hope that they’ll sprout by some
miracle."

“I can’t believe he thinks you want glory.”

“He has a very narrow view of the situation. He thinks of me in a way that is almost a polar opposite
to the way you do. He sees me as the Dark Lord’s agent at Hogwarts, Slytherin to the core, without
any positive feelings toward Albus and the Order. To be fair, it’s an image I’ve cultivated. My
loyalties cannot be known to lie with the Light. He has no idea of what it will be to kill, what it will
mean for me when Albus dies.”

“Would you like me to keep an eye on him?”

“What would that serve but to make him more paranoid?”

“Nah, he already knows I don’t trust him and that I suspect him of something. That, in and of itself,
is not unusual, but after he punched me in the nose and left me to bleed out on the Hogwarts
Express, all bets were off. Besides, he’ll just think I’m being nosy like usual. Look, he has no
reason to connect the two of us. As far as anyone else is concerned, we’re mortal enemies.”

“Which is a perception that must continue at all costs,” he cautioned. His expression became
thoughtful. “But the idea does have merit. I’ll consider it.”

“No one’s noticed anything all year. And I really don’t hate you.”

A smirk touched Severus’s lips. “I did have an inkling.”

Hero grinned. “Oh, good. I worried.”

“Your recent actions would be rather difficult to misconstrue.”

“I hoped that. It’s difficult to know. One kiss seems much like any other when you’ve never had
one.”

He shot her a sidelong glance. “You’re fishing.”

She shrugged. “I figured the next move was yours.”

“Then I’m afraid,” he said, levering himself up from his position stretched out beside her, “you’ll be
sorely disappointed.” He kissed the top of her head and swept down the stairs. Hero smiled and
shook her head.
Hi. I was originally going to post this tomorrow morning, but I figured you deserved something nice. And I just finished my first final, so I suppose I'm feeling generous. Since, at least where I am, the weather outside is frightful (eight degrees Fahrenheit), and the central heating is so delightful, why not curl up in an armchair with a cup of tea and let it snow?

Hermione busied herself over the next few days searching feverishly through the library. She came up with only one book that even mentioned Horcruxes: “‘of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction’ . . . I mean, why bother?” It could justly be said that Hermione, on the whole, was less than impressed.

Hero continued to meet Severus on the Astronomy Tower. He’d adopted the habit of kissing the top of her head before he left. The potions tasted as terrible as ever, but at least she always had a thermos of good, strong tea from the kitchen to rinse her mouth out.

Kreacher brought her the books she’d requested. She was steadily working through them, one by one. They certainly lived up to the family name: the noble and most ancient House of Black, both in magic and of age. Nobility and purity were rather less accurate. They were, unfortunately, also less than helpful. Unlike the books of the Hogwarts library, a great many of them alluded to Horcruxes. Hero, unfortunately, still had no clue what they were. With her mind absorbed in her task (and other, pleasanter occupations), her next appointment arrived as unexpectedly as her first Hogwarts letter.

“*What did you listen to when you were younger?*”

“Oh. I tended to prefer . . . edgier stuff. The Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Ramones. Of course, everyone listened to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who. Queen. Queen was huge, at least in Cokeworth. Your mother was a bit less, ah, Vicious in her tastes. She loved T. Rex, David Bowie, Pink Floyd, Elton John . . . Your aunt took up the flute in protest.”

Hero stared at him. “She *never.*”

Severus chuckled. “Oh, yes. She was never particularly good at it. Something to do with not getting her pucker right to actually produce sound. Then again, I could have told her she’d have problems with that. Pursing and puckering are *not* the same thing.”

Hero snorted, then gave up, throwing her head back and just laughing. “God, no wonder she never mentioned anything about Dudley taking up an instrument. I mean, he wouldn’t have done, but Mrs. Francis across the street was always boasting about her son the upright bass player. It drove Aunt Petunia batty. Well, he *was* Mrs. Francis’s favorite topic of conversation until he joined this really terrible local band as their bass guitarist. Uncle Vernon keeps complaining about how the sound of them practicing hurts property values.”

“What do you listen to?”
“Oh, a little bit of everything. Classic rock, classical, pop, blues, jazz, opera, a bit of new age stuff. I mean, the Spice Girls aren’t bad, and Green Day is decent if you can understand what they’re saying. Not Celestina Warbeck.”

“Opera?” Severus asked, intrigued.

“Yeah. The Catholic priest, God bless him, loved listening to his Maria Callas records. Her, Pavarotti, Elvira de Hidalgo, Renata Tebaldi, Joan Sutherland. He said cathedrals were meant to have those kind of voices ringing through them.”

“But you’re not Catholic.”

“No. Like I said before, as challenging as it can be at times, I genuinely prefer life outside a padded cell.”

Severus smirked. “Fair enough.”

“What was my mum like?”

He glanced at her, more surprised at the abruptness of the query than the question itself. In all honesty, he’d been expecting it for months. “Kind and sarcastic. Friendly with just about everyone. She was full of life. Charming, funny, vivacious.

“She held grudges, though. Stubbornest person I’ve ever met. Except perhaps for you. She was the fastest, firmest friend you could hope for until you broke her trust. Her bad opinion was difficult to earn, but far harder to get rid of. She and your father didn’t start going out until after she and I stopped talking. He chased after her from just about the word go, but it took her years to warm to him. And she never forgave me.”

“Her good opinion, once lost, was lost forever?” Hero surmised, paraphrasing Mr. Darcy.

Severus smiled. “Not quite as hopeless as all that. I’d like to think that, had she lived, you and your father with her, she and I might have reconciled.”

“Did you love her?”

“Yes. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think of her, don’t miss her.” Hero was, from an objective standpoint, surprised by just how much those words hurt. “She was my very best friend. But I didn’t love her in the way I think you mean. I didn’t love her the way she and your father loved each other. There was no element of romance to it. I was so embarrassed all the times she patched me up over the years, and it happened so often, it killed any attraction before it was born.”

He glanced at her. “Don’t worry. Any attraction I feel for you is not as a consequence of holding a candle for your mother.”

Hero was not sure which part to address first and settled for saying nothing at all. She blushed, and a small smile slid across her face.

“What does a Potions Mastery involve?”

Remus stared at the parchment. A drop of ink fell from his quill, poised above the blank surface. He pushed the paper aside, laid his head in his arms, and groaned. He needed to write to Hero. That much was obvious. It was also quickly becoming obvious that he had no idea what to say.
He knew quite well what Sirius would have liked him to say, what Sirius himself would no doubt have told her over the Christmas holidays had he been alive. Then again, Hero was a bright girl. She probably would have known better than to let slip to Sirius any amorous feelings for one Severus Snape.

Part of the trouble was that Remus simply couldn’t wrap his head around the idea. He had difficulty imagining anyone being attracted to the man, let alone professing their love for him. But it wasn’t anyone. It was Hero. If it hadn’t been Hero, he could have kept his nose safely out of it. If it hadn’t been Hero, he probably could have lived in blissful ignorance. But it was. And he couldn’t.

Now, Sirius. Sirius would have told her that Severus was a good for nothing, greasy bastard, and she would be best to simply forget him. Everyone makes mistakes, you just have to correct them as quickly as possible and move on.

Remus knew it wasn’t that easy. Remus had continued to love Sirius even after he had been sent to Azkaban for their best friends’ murders. He, like everyone else, had been convinced of Sirius’s guilt. He’d still loved him. It had terrified him. Learning Sirius had been innocent all along had been wonderful, but in that sense, it hadn’t helped. If Sirius had been every bit as guilty as the entire Wizarding World had always believed him, it wouldn’t have made any difference.

Hero probably wouldn’t have been moved by Sirius’s sentiments, anyway. She had, after all, managed to fall in love with him in the first place despite being well aware of Sirius’s feelings. Every objection he could have made had surely crossed her mind. And nobody could have had more objections than Sirius.

Remus could not hate Severus. Severus had been far too loyal to the Order, to Dumbledore, to the cause of right, for Remus to hate him. That’s not to say he liked him. He respected and trusted him, was grateful to him. Severus was not, however, a likeable person. Remus would have said that he was unlovable, but that was clearly not the case. Hence his current predicament.

He doubted Severus Snape had much experience loving or being loved. His feelings for Lily had seemed to border on obsession, the fanatical devotion of a disciple. Well, perhaps not as the years wore on. He’d been seduced by Slytherins who decided to give him the time of day, and Lily had stood in stark opposition to them and their ideas. Severus had eventually chosen them over her when James had forced the issue. As Hero had apparently witnessed.

He remembered the look in her eyes when she’d told him: helpless and afraid. Hero was no one’s fool; she knew what Snape was as well as anyone. She loved him anyway. It was both heartwarming and worrying. Hero was worried, that was clear. She knew quite well what she was getting into. It didn’t stop her; why now, when it never had before? But this was a girl who thrived in impossible, do or die situations. If anyone could navigate the choppy waters of Severus Snape, it was surely Hero Potter.

The journey home was a mixture of easy conversation and companionable silence. The trend continued the next morning. By unspoken agreement, it had become their habit to watch in silence, until the view was less breathtaking.

“What do you think of the Minister?”

“Scrimgeour? He was head of the Auror office, so one imagines he’s probably less of an idiot than Fudge. On the other hand, I’d like to think it would be difficult to find someone stupider, but you can hardly swing a kneazle at the Ministry without hitting three people just as incompetent.” Severus
paused. “My experience with the Ministry has been somewhat antagonistic. They’ve never been particularly fond of me.”

Hero smiled. “Fudge used to be quite nice to me. Then, last year he suddenly changed his mind. Now, I have Scrimgeour popping by to see me during Christmas lunch.”

“Oh, really? What did he want with you?”

“Right. Well, apparently there’s this idea floating around the Ministry where I publicly approve of the new regime.”

“I thought you cherished dreams of working with the Ministry.”

“I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Severus smirked. “Nor do I. You’ve never been the type to follow orders. Perhaps your interest was why he went in expecting, it would seem, a normal, pliable teenage girl.” Hero rolled her eyes.

“Normal. I wonder what that’s like?”

“I could have told him that pliable is not in your vocabulary. Nor, indeed, are any of its synonyms.”

“I keep expecting them to know better,” she lamented with an aggrieved sigh.

“I believe both Minerva and Miss Granger warned you about provoking Umbridge.”

“Yes, they did,” Hero conceded. “But I’d nearly died, I’d seen a friend die, no one believed me, Voldemort started poking around in my head, and my tumor started to grow. It was a difficult year.”

The ghost of a smile touched his lips, not reaching his eyes. “You have a gift for understatement.”

“Thank you. That means a lot, coming from you.”

“Just so long as you don’t attempt to pass off the events of your second year as a little bit of a reptile problem.”

That surprised a laugh out of her. “Hey! No one died!” she protested good-naturedly.

Severus raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “Only by virtue of your own reckless heroics.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m a Gryffindor named Hero.”

“Your mother named you that because Much Ado About Nothing was her favorite play. Not as encouragement for you to risk your neck at every opportunity.”

Hero only heard the first sentence. Her voice soft, she marveled, “I never knew that.”

“I would imagine she named you Juniper because flower names were something of a tradition for the women of her family. Ironically, she always hated lilies. They reminded her of death.”

“I keep trying to picture her when she was my age, growing up with Aunt Petunia, and . . . I just can’t. I mean, she never talks about Mum. Sometimes, I think she likes to pretend that she never had a sister.”

“When they were children, they got on as well as most sisters, but I think your aunt might have been a bit jealous. Lily loved her and looked up to her, but Petunia was jealous of what Lily could do. I
think she might have been a bit frightened, too. And,” he said, his expression becoming fond with recollection. “she hated me.”

Hero could almost picture it then, her mother and her aunt. Except it all fell apart when she tried to imagine a young Severus Snape with them. It wasn’t that she didn’t know he’d been a child, had grown into the man he was today; she had, after all, seen him at fifteen in that horrible memory. It was just that it was a profoundly odd idea to contemplate.

“I’m not on her list of favorite people either,” Hero muttered wryly. “Actually, I’m not really on anyone’s list of favorite people in Little Whinging except my cousin. Everyone is under the impression that I’m a juvenile delinquent.”

“The housewives in Cokeworth whispered those sorts of things about me. Except in my case, they were more truth than lies. You’ve never been very good at heeding warnings,” he noted, casting her a sidelong glance.

“Warnings have always struck me as more of an invitation,” Hero returned lightly.

“Is that what this is?” Severus asked, narrowing his eyes. Hero blushed.

“No. Well, maybe a little. In the beginning. It was never just that, though.”

“No? Do tell.”

She turned redder. “I . . . I already told you. You’re . . .” she bit her lip. All sorts of endings sprung to mind, each one more embarrassing than the last. She settled for one she could bare to say aloud. “Captivating.”

“No one has ever uttered those words to me in my life, and for good reason.”

“I beg to differ. I never could look away. I never did manage to forget you.”

“Yes, you’ve made that abundantly clear.”

“Good. Maybe if I keep saying it, you’ll start to believe it.”

“It doesn’t matter how many times you say it. Words are like air: the world is full of them, they cost nothing, and only a fool relies on them when he falls.”

Hero contemplated him thoughtfully. “You’re quite right.” Relief broke across his face. “I’ll just have to prove it to you.” The relief was swiftly replaced by panic. Hero grinned at his stricken expression and kissed him on the cheek. He endured it, even when she scooted closer and slipped an arm around his waist. When he kissed the top of her head, he lingered just a moment longer than usual.

At breakfast, a nondescript barn owl landed in front of Hero. She stared at it a moment, wondering who might have cause to send her something. She wondered until the bird nipped her for taking so long and not even having the courtesy to feed it in the meantime. She hurried to offer it a bit of bacon before untying its letter.

Hermione frowned at her throughout the exchange. Ron noticed and looked over in puzzlement. Hero read quickly, ignoring their concern.
Dear Hero,

It was lovely to see you at Christmas. I’m back to work now. I’d like to think I’m making strides, but it’s difficult to know for sure. I hope you, Ron, and Hermione are all keeping well. I’m sure Hogwarts is quite beautiful; some of my favorite memories are of Hogwarts in winter.

When it comes to the confidence you divulged, I’m afraid I don’t really have any advice. I wish I could wave my wand and make you happy. Magic has never held much sway over matters of the heart. Love potions only ever create a powerful obsession, and I’m sure you understand that it’s only the palest shadow of love. Your feelings for Severus, I have no doubt, are far deeper and purer.

That does not mean, however, that they are easy to deal with. I would hazard a guess that they cause you an undue amount of pain. I will not make little of your suffering, or of your feelings. If my own history is anything by which to judge, both are immense. I was about your age when I realized how hard I’d fallen for Sirius. Even still, my love for him is as strong as it has ever been. I treasure it, even though the pain of losing him must needs accompany it. The pain is worth every moment I had with him, even though those are far too few. Then again, I doubt I would have been satisfied with half a century.

I cannot think Severus is an easy man to love. I can’t help thinking that, for you, nothing about this was ever going to be easy. But you have risen to every challenge you have been presented with, and I know this will be no different. Trust your instincts, for they are good and nearly always correct. Mind that, in following your heart, you don’t leave your head behind. I wish you the very best of luck.

Love,
Remus

“Hero? What is it?”

“It’s a letter from Remus. I forgot to mention, I spoke to him a bit over Christmas.” Hermione’s frown dissolved, but the curious spark in her eyes didn’t abate. To Hero’s surprise, her own eyes started to fill with tears. She dashed them away quickly.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione asked, concern coloring her voice, her hand lighting on Hero’s shoulder.

“Nothing, nothing’s wrong. It’s just . . . he talks a bit about Sirius. I think he’s doing a bit better, but I know how much it hurts. How much it still hurts.” She hurriedly folded the letter and stuffed it in her pocket.

“Oh, Hero,” Hermione murmured, throwing her arms around her. Hero buried her face in Hermione’s hair. Hermione rubbed circles on Hero’s back, helpless to do anything else.

Severus was watching out of the corner of his eye. He knew the exact moment she jumped to her feet and ran out of the Great Hall, attracting the stares of those awake enough to notice. He waited a few moments before sweeping after her, following behind Weasley and Granger. He knew his actions were beyond foolish; he couldn’t bring himself to care. They had long since passed the point of no return. No use denying it.

He frowned as they seemed to head toward the library. They turned off for a room he had never
noticed before. Silent as a shadow, he filed in behind them.

It was a chapel. It appeared to have been recently dusted; the wood smelled of beeswax. The purple velvet pew cushions showed years of fading from exposure to the sun. It was a quiet, solemn place; both solitary and filled with an unmistakable presence. It was the kind of place in which one whispered.

Weasley and Granger sat on either side of her, murmuring something. After a few minutes, they left her. They hurried out without noticing him. He didn’t imagine they went very far.

He glided forward, coming to sit next to Hero. Her eyes were glued to her hands, clasped in her lap.

“I thought I was functioning – coping alright with everything,” she whispered, not looking up.

“You were getting by. It’s not the same thing,” he remarked softly. She nodded dumbly.

“What’s the matter?” he asked gently, nudging her.

“I got a letter from Remus.” Severus waited for her to continue. She started to wring her hands.

“He wrote a little bit about Sirius. I don’t think he’ll ever really get over his death. What am I doing to my friends? How can I be so cruel?”

“You’re hardly choosing to die, Hero.”

“I’m choosing to keep them close, making them watch the bitter end. It’s selfish, and cruel, and cowardly. I hate myself for it, and I know they should hate me, too. They will.”

“They will not. You are forcing them into nothing. They choose to stand with you of their own free will. The cruelest, most selfish thing you could do would be to push them away. Don’t worry: I doubt they’ll let you.”

He cupped her cheek, bringing her to look at him, bent his head, and pressed his lips to hers. She froze in shock. He kissed her tear-stained cheeks, then brought her clasped hands to his lips and kissed them, too. Finally, he kissed her mouth again. She kissed him back this time, her response slow and sweet.

He drew back, smiling softly. “Do us all the courtesy of remembering that you’re not dead yet.”
Hi! You know, serendipitously enough, this was supposed to be posted in February. Except then I felt bad. So you get the valentine's chapter in time for new years. All the best in 2017 (fingers crossed)!

“So, you’ve made up your mind, then?” Hero asked timidly. Severus blinked at her. As he paused, time seemed to slow down; Hero held her breath.

“I suppose I have.” A brilliant smile slid across her face. “I have to warn you, though, I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Her eyes crinkled fondly. “That’s alright. Neither do I.”

“Your friends will be looking for you.”

Her smile faded a little. “I suppose they will, eventually. I think they probably expect my crying jag to go on a bit longer.”

“Will it?”

“I shouldn’t think so. Not when I have you here.” Severus colored at her words; he cleared his throat.

“Yes, well.”

“You’re adorable when you’re flustered.”

“I am not, nor have I ever been adorable,” he retorted, sounding genuinely affronted.

Hero grinned. “Whatever you say.” She sighed and relaxed against him. He kissed her temple.

After a moment, she glanced up at him. “What changed your mind?”

“I didn’t. I gave in.” He sighed. “Hero kissed me when we met, jumping from the chair she sat in; time, you thief, who love to get sweets into your list, put that in! Say I’m weary, say I’m sad, say that health and wealth have missed me; say I’m growing old, but add, Hero kissed me.” At her bemused look, he explained, “It’s a poem by Leigh Hunt. The original spoke of a girl named Jenny. I paraphrased.”

Hero chuckled. “I like it. We’d barely started going over poetry in school when I started Hogwarts, but it was all dry, dull stuff. I probably would have paid more attention if it had been like that.”

“I never really paid attention when we were taught it. Your mother loved poetry, though. It was something we could talk about that didn’t have any associations. After her death, it was a way to stay connected to her.”

“Do you have any favorites?”
He thought for a moment. “There was one I came across not long after she died. It’s by Dorothy Parker, about suicide.”

“That’s a bit . . . dark.”

He gave her a look. Had she really expected anything else? “Black humor was her specialty. ‘Razors pain you; rivers are damp; acids stain you; and drugs cause cramp. Guns aren’t lawful; nooses give; gas smells awful; you might as well live.’” He smiled wistfully. “It was what I needed to hear.”

“It was that bad?”

Severus inclined his head, then leaned back and closed his eyes. “I hated myself for what I had done. In many ways, I still do. I had killed Lily; I may not have uttered the words that stole her life away, but I knew it to be true. I wished I were dead instead. But Albus Dumbledore and Dorothy Parker convinced me that I might as well live.”

Hero felt for his hand, giving it a squeeze when she found it. “I’m glad.”

“And now, you really should be going,” Severus murmured.

Hero sighed, but nodded. She pulled away and stood before turning to look at him. “You’ll be on the Astronomy Tower tomorrow morning?”

A smile touched the corner of his mouth as he inclined his head. “I promise.” Satisfied, she brushed her lips against his and swept out, leaving him alone in silence and early morning sunlight.

* *

The next morning found them bundled up on the observation platform, once again watching the sunrise.

“If we are to continue . . . this . . . you must understand, there are dark places in my soul. Stains that will never come out.”

“You think my soul has no shadows?” Hero challenged, raising an eyebrow. She shook her head. “No, Severus. We’re better matched than I think you’d like to admit.”

He scoffed. “A cloudy day and a moonless night.”

“I know that’s what you think, but you’re wrong. About me and about you. One of the first things I loved about Hogwarts was the night sky. We’re so far from a muggle city or town, there’s no light pollution. Out here, you can see the stars. I don’t think you can look at a clear sky full of stars and call it dark.”

A soft smile curved his lips. “‘She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that’s best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes; thus mellowed to that tender light, which heaven to gaudy day denies.’”

“Precisely. And I am not a cloudy day. I don’t trust people. That was never just about you. You know why. You’ve seen me lash out, seen me angry and vengeful, desperate, distraught. You are a midnight strewn with stars. I am twilight, as the new day is born.”

“A beautiful metaphor, but you and I both know that it’s not that simple.”
“Simple? Where’s the fun in that?”

Severus eyed her for a moment. “Indeed,” he replied, only mildly sarcastic.

As January drained away, February came to call in the form of cold, dreary weather. Purplish clouds hung low over the castle, and the constant, bone-chilling rain left the lawns as much a mess as they were a hazard. Consequently, the first Apparition lesson was held in the Great Hall, rather than out in the grounds.

Hero trooped along with everyone else. They entered to find the house tables had all been pushed against the walls. An ancient-looking wizard and the four heads of house were waiting. The man introduced himself as Wilkie Twycrosse, the Apparition instructor from the Ministry. He looked like the barest breeze, let alone the rain lashing the windows, would be the end of him.

Hero threw Ron and Hermione an encouraging smile before making her way to a place on the bench near where Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were, standing towards the back. She glanced up at Severus; he met her gaze out of the corner of his eye. She darted her eyes toward Malfoy and back. Almost imperceptibly, he nodded.

Hero ducked her head to hide her smile. Striving to appear casual, she pulled one of the books Kreacher had delivered out of her bag and opened it to the place she’d marked. Her eyes scanned over the words, unseeing, as she tuned in to the conversations around her.

“Malfoy, be quiet and pay attention!” Professor McGonagall barked, noticing Malfoy having a furious whispered argument with Crabbe. He flushed pink at the reprimand and stepped away from his lackey.

Twycrosse ordered everyone to have five feet of space around them. As everyone scrambled to do so, Malfoy, taking advantage of the upheaval, resumed his argument with Crabbe. “I don’t know how much longer, alright? It’s taking longer than I thought it would.”

Crabbe opened his mouth, but Malfoy spoke again before he could say a word. “Look, it’s none of your business what I’m doing, Crabbe, you and Goyle just do as you’re told and keep a lookout!”

Twycrosse started in on the mechanics of Apparition, then had them try it. Hero thought it was well worth giving up an hour on a Saturday to watch. Most people, when spinning, lost balance and staggered or fell over; Neville was on his back. Ernie Macmillan, on the other hand, had done a kind of pirouetting leap into the other hoop and looked ridiculously thrilled with himself – until he noticed Dean laughing his head off at the sight. On the fourth attempt, Susan Bones Splinched herself.

The lesson ended without any more out of Malfoy or anything more interesting happening than the Splinching. Hero shut her book and joined Ron and Hermione on their way out.

“I think I felt something the last time I tried – a kind of tingling in my feet,” Ron remarked optimistically. Hero did not mention what she’d heard Malfoy say. They had enough to worry about; she would just have to watch the Map and wait.

The following week, there was a flurry of activity, as there was every year. To Hero’s nose, large sections of the castle smelled of summer rain, cedar, mint, and wormwood: of Severus. Clearly, Fred and George were making a killing on their owl order business, at least as far as love potions were concerned. Thinking again of Voldemort, a psychopath conceived under a love potion, she
resolved to have a word with them about that particular venture.

Severus was, as usual, pricklier than ever at this time of the year. Hero wasn’t exactly fond of it, either. She would have preferred to not think about it at all. She had an appointment with Doctor Warren the day after, February 15. If her life was a cauldron in Potions class, Severus would probably have told them not to put cancer and romance anywhere near each other because of the explosive reaction that would occur. And Seamus would probably do it anyway, because he seemed to consider a Potions class in which he did not blow something up a wasted opportunity.

After enduring a week of lovesick teenagers, love potions, and Valentine’s cards, Severus was very nearly at the end of his rope. He swept into the Defense classroom on Friday with an expression clearly meant to terrify those it fell upon into silent capitulation. He did not look at Hero.

He did not start the class, as he usually did, by diving straight into the subject matter. Instead, he glared around at the students who, today of all days, seemed to have developed an immunity to his forbidding expression. Several students seemed to have switched seats to sit next to romantic partners; several pairs were holding hands out of sight beneath the desks.

“I realize that some of you may find concentration a trial due the current atmosphere within the castle,” he began silkily. “I’m sure you, who were intelligent enough to reach NEWT level Defense Against the Dark Arts, are also intelligent enough to realize that I, unfortunately, have no sympathy whatsoever for such a condition. It logically follows, therefore, that I can have no reservations about giving a lecture on Inferi today.” There were collective groans; Parvati looked quite worried. “Complete with pictures.” It was a testament to his prodigious self-control that he contained his glee to no more than a smug smirk. He pulled down the screen, dimmed the lights with his wand, then tapped the projector.

The images were gruesome, to say the least. The first day of classes, Severus had pointed out one of the images on the walls, that of the victim of an Inferius, which had looked rather less like a former human being and more like a bloody mess.

He flipped through the slides as he spoke. “An Inferius is often confused or conflated with a zombie. There are similarities in that both are corpses. However, a zombie is capable of independent thought and choice, though it possesses little brain power. It is a being in the sense that it has the ability to determine its own fate as much as any of us. A zombie is conscious.

“An Inferius is not. The Inferius does not think, does not choose. It is nothing more than a corpse enchanted to do a dark wizard’s bidding. It is a puppet fashioned out of dead flesh.

“That does not mean, however, that it should in any sense be underestimated. An Inferius is not alive, even in the vague sense that a zombie is. Physical attacks, those intended to wound, are useless. The Inferius cannot feel. There can be no point in attempting the Killing Curse; how does one kill what is already dead? The only effective weapon against Inferi is. . .” he flipped to the next slide, which was a photograph of, “fire.”

There was silence as the class took this in. Hermione’s quill had been scratching away furiously the whole time. A quick glance around the room told Hero no one else’s had. She doubted anyone was still holding hands, either. Severus was rather good at that.

He flipped to the next slide: a family portrait, mother, father, daughter, and son, all smiling at the camera. “The Dark Lord used Inferi in the last war. It was quite successful. Imagine, for a moment, an army of the dead, of his victims. This, however, does not provide the complete picture. From time to time, the Dark Lord sent specific Inferi after specific targets. Those he had marked for death might find themselves facing the bodies of their loved ones.
“Fifteen years ago, that was the reality. In the time to come, it may become so once again. The only weapon that will do you any good is fire, to burn the bodies to ash. The only defense is to harden your heart and move past your grief. The price of doing otherwise does not bear contemplation.”

They had lunch after Defense. The first thing out of Ron’s mouth once they had joined the stream of students heading to the Great Hall was: “Snape seriously needs to get laid.”

Hero stared at him, startled, only staying in motion because of the flow of the crowd. Hermione glared at him. “Ronald!”

“What? Everyone was thinking it. Teaching about Inferi on Valentine’s Day, honestly! Unless you have a better idea?”

“It’s none of our business whether he does or not. Whatever he does behind closed doors is his business.”

“It’s our business when it means a lesson like that.”

“I thought it was good,” Hero spoke up.

Ron and Hermione blinked at her. She hurried to defend her statement. “I mean, it’s good that he’s teaching us about stuff that matters at the moment, isn’t it? That’s why we’re there. And it was all useful information.”

“But . . . on Valentine’s Day? Even you have to admit that that’s taking things a little far, Hero,” Hermione said hesitantly.

“Valentine’s Day is bollux.”

“Hero!”

“What? You remember the valentine I got from Colin Creevey second year, don’t you? I mean, who could forget?”

Hermione groaned softly. To make her point, Hero sang it, reciting from memory, a wicked gleam in her eyes. “Oh, her eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad, her hair is as black as a blackboard, I wish she were mine, she’s really divine, the Hero who conquered the Dark Lord!” Hermione and Ron were both cringing. “Let me tell you, they have not improved with the years.”

“All right, fine, fine.”

The following morning dawned cold, wet, and miserable. Severus was, for once, waiting in the entrance hall when Hero came down the stairs. They did not speak as they left the castle.

Once they were in the privacy of the carriage, he brushed his lips across her cheek, murmuring, “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

“I can’t believe you.” He raised an eyebrow. She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. Yesterday. How can you say that after yesterday?”

“It certainly made my Valentine’s Day happy.”
“And what about my Valentine’s Day?”

“You enjoyed it.”

“Yes, but I was probably the only one who did. How were you to know whether I would or not?”

“I know you better than that.”

Seemingly out of the blue, as they were passing Manchester, Hero said, “Ron reckons you need to get laid more often.”

“What?” Severus narrowly avoided slamming on the breaks and causing an accident in the middle of the motorway.

If they had been standing, Hero would have shuffled her feet and stared at the floor. “He said it after class yesterday. He thinks that’s you why, you know, taught a lesson on Inferi complete with graphic images on what many consider to be the most romantic day of the year.”

Severus’s lips twisted. “Does he indeed. Any particular reason you’re bringing it up now?”

“Well . . . I . . . do you . . . ?” Want? Expect?

He sighed. “Hero . . . you initiated things. It is due to your actions that we are . . . in the current state of affairs. Not,” he interrupted, seeing her frown and her mouth pop open to retort, “that I have any objections to continuing as we are. Far from it. But I had thought to leave the pace up to you. I will gladly receive as much or as little as you consent to give.”

“Oh. Um. That’s . . . good to know,” Hero got out, blushing furiously. “Thanks.” He inclined his head.

They got take away from a chip shop for lunch and wandered a bit to stretch their legs.

“What do you like to eat?”

“Food, generally.”

“You’re going to have to be a touch more specific.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not picky. I eat what’s put in front of me.”

“You hated that fast food place. That was food.”

“And I stand by what I said then: you’re stretching the definition.”

“You have standards.”

“It has to be edible, yes, but I’ve never had to concern myself with the quality of my food while at Hogwarts.”

Hero scrutinized his lean figure. “Why do I get the feeling you don’t eat as much or as often as you should?” She got the impression that he tended to forget to eat when he was immersed in work or projects.
“Digestion slows me down.”

“Rubbish.”

“A full stomach dulls one’s awareness, instincts, reflexes, and reaction time. I need to be sharp when I’m with the Dark Lord.”

“And so you don’t eat?”

“I’m used to hunger. I’d rather be hungry than dead.”

Hero grimaced. “Alright, I’ll give you that one.”

“Why the curiosity about my nutrition?”

She shrugged. “I like to cook. I mean, I didn’t exactly have a choice growing up, but it wasn’t that bad. Ron’ll eat anything, and he definitely doesn’t skimp on meals. Hermione likes bouillabaisse, or chowder when she can’t get it, which is most of the time.”

“And what about you?”

“I used to eat most things. These days, it’s whatever my stomach will tolerate. I used to love roast beef,” she replied, wistful.

“Poor darling,” he drawled. She wacked his arm lightly. He wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her closer to his side, a smirk on his face that approached a genuine smile.

“So, Hero, how was your Valentine’s Day?” Dr. Warren inquired. Hero blushed and ducked her head. He raised an eyebrow. “Good, I take it, by that reaction.”

“I . . . started seeing someone a few weeks ago.”

“Does he know?”

“Yeah. He’s known for months.”

“That’s good. You won’t have quite so much guilt to deal with.” Hero looked up in surprise. “You think you’re the first terminal patient I’ve treated who decided they didn’t want to spend their remaining Saturdays alone? Hardly. But it’s best when you both know what you’re getting into – at least enough to be going on with.”

“Right. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I have more good news. Well. It’s not horrible news, anyway. Your tumor is growing at a slower rate than I would have expected. The drugs seem to be doing their job. Unfortunately, they’re not really enough. I’m afraid you’re just dying slightly slower than anticipated. Unless you’re one of the lucky few. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, the cancer . . . goes away. It’s called spontaneous remission. It’s very rare, but, as far as miracles go, that’d about do me. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to get your hopes up. Don’t mind me. But it’s better news than I usually have to give. Not as good as I’d like to give. So, tell me, how are things?”

Severus shifted in his leather chair, trying to get comfortable. He could feel eyes on him, prickling,
judging. Fucking Harley Street clinic.

There was a woman wearing a deep purple turban across the aisle from him, with a matching amethyst cocktail ring, the stone about the size of her thumbnail. Others wore their wealth less ostentatiously. Hero didn’t look a thing like any of the other patients, a fact for which he was immensely grateful.

It had been a long time since he’d felt such a strong sense of not belonging, but the memories came flooding back. The feeling of being unwanted, looked at like he was slime on the bottom of someone’s shoe. It did not make him nervous as it once had. It made him angry, a cool, distant anger that had him curling his lip and sneering, giving the well-heeled patients the sort of look that made his NEWT students quail. The kind of look he’d picked up from the punk rockers of his youth, working class yobs who didn’t give a shit what anyone thought of them.

Every single one of these people was under the protection of the Light. All their lives would be forfeit if they lost. The Dark Lord would destroy them. Ingrates. Didn’t help that they had no idea. He’d been getting those looks all his life, and he was bloody sick of it. Not everyone was casting him disdainful glances, but it felt like the whole room was doing it.

When Hero finally came out, she flashed him a quick smile before making her next appointment with the receptionist. They walked out together, making their way to the parking garage where Severus had left the car. In the empty car park, a silver-white glow appeared – Dumbledore’s phoenix Patronus.

“It is snowing quite heavily here, approaching blizzard conditions. It would be best if you did not risk returning tonight. You are, of course, welcome to stay at the Headquarters.” Its message delivered, the Patronus faded.

“Well, that’s just perfect,” he muttered, his voice dripping sarcasm.

“Not much we can do, is there? Is there anything you need to pick up while we’re here?”

“No,” he replied bitterly. “When I was avoiding you by going to Diagon Alley, I bought enough ingredients for at least the next year and a half.” Hero burst out laughing. He glared at her. “I fail to see what is so amusing about the situation.”

“You can’t even complain because it’s your fault anyway!”

“What do you mean, I can’t complain? I can complain as much as I damn well please.”

“You’re missing the point. You have no legitimate basis for complaint. Because it’s your fault!”

“Remind me again why I like you?”

“I really have no idea, dear.”

“Well, riddles are my area.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. “You . . . are incorrigible.”

“Takes one to know one. Come on. It may not be snowing, but, all the same, I’d rather not linger.”

He parked the car along the street and they entered No. 12. It wasn’t much warmer than outside.
The heating wasn’t on, no fires were lit. No one had been by in some time, it seemed. With Dumbledore either at Hogwarts or traveling, there was little use for the London HQ.

Severus pointed his wand at the fireplace in the drawing room and lit it. He glanced at her.

“Are you cold?” She shrugged. He looked her over, then moved one of the arm chairs closer to the fire. “Sit and warm up. I’ll go light the furnace.”

After a moment, she acquiesced. She took her mittens off, scooted forward, and held her hands close to the flames. Severus nodded in satisfaction and disappeared to the kitchen, where the furnace was. When he came back, he found her decently defrosted.

He dropped into the chair opposite her. “I doubt the beds are made. You might want to summon your elf.”

“Oh. Good idea. Um, Kreacher?”

With a soft pop, the ancient elf appeared and bowed. “Mistress called for Kreacher?”

“Er . . . Professor Snape and I have to spend the night here. We would appreciate it if you could make up the beds. I’m sure you know best where everything is.”

“Yes, mistress. Kreacher will do so.”

“Could you also run an errand for me?”

“Professor Snape, sir?” Kreacher asked, squinting distrustfully at Severus.

“Miss Potter has some medications she needs to take in the mornings that are in Madam Pomfrey’s possession. Once you’re finished with the beds, you can fetch them.”

Hero glared at him for a second before forcing a smile as she turned to Kreacher. “Please and thank you, Kreacher.” He bowed again and disappeared.

Hero looked over at Severus only to find him raising an eyebrow at her. “What? I’m trying to reform him. And Hermione would be upset if I didn’t.”

“Ah, yes. Spew.”

Hero grimaced. “Got it in one.” She sighed and leaned back, sufficiently warmed. “What do you want to do for the rest of the day?”

“I . . . don’t know.”

“You could recite some more poetry. Something less depressing.”

“Whatever madam wishes, of course,” he drawled, then his expression became thoughtful. “Hmm. Less depressing. Let’s see . . . Ah. Valentine, by Carol Ann Duffy. ‘Not a red rose or a satin heart. I give you an onion. It is a moon wrapped in brown paper. It promises light like the careful undressing of love. Here. It will blind you with tears like a lover. It will make your reflection a wobbling photo of grief. I am trying to be truthful. Not a cute card or a kissogram. I give you an onion. Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips, possessive and faithful as we are, for as long as we are. Take it. Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring, if you like. Lethal. Its scent will cling to your fingers, cling to your knife.’”

“It’s better . . . and it isn’t. Do you know any poems that aren’t brutally honest?”
“Of course. I didn’t think you would be interested in them.”

“Try me.”

He rolled his eyes, but spoke again. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate. Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, and summer’s lease hath all too short a date. Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines, and often is his gold complexion dimmed; and every fair from fair sometime declines, by chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimmed; but thy eternal summer shall not fade, nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st, nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade, when in eternal lines to Time thou grow’st. So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, so long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

“Oh. I see what you mean. You were right.” She hurriedly dashed her tears away. Severus frowned in concern, reaching forward and taking her hand.

“Hero?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m fine. It’s nothing. Being silly.” His thumb slowly stroked over the back of her hand. She gave him a watery smile.

“Not at all,” he murmured, Conjuring a handkerchief and handing it to her. She dried her eyes and blew her nose. He Vanished the soiled cloth.

With a solemn expression, he said, “The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat. They took some honey, and plenty of money, wrapped up in a five-pound note. The Owl looked up to the stars above, and sang to a small guitar, “O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love, what a beautiful Pussy you are, you are, you are! What a beautiful Pussy you are!””

Hero blinked at him. “I don’t know whether to laugh or take you to get your head examined.”

“It’s a nonsense poem by Edward Lear.” He paused. “I can’t remember the rest. Something about a ring, and a pig, and dancing under the moon.”

Hero smiled. “That’s nice.” He smiled at her, without even a little bit of a smirk, and she almost forgot that she had had something to cry about in the first place.

*K*

“Kreacher has finished the tasks Mistress set. Does Mistress wish anything else?”

“. . . Do you want me to give you other jobs to do?”

“Kreacher lives to serve the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,” he said, bowing low. It wasn’t even sarcastic, like it would have inevitably been if a human had said it. He meant it.

“O . . . kay. Um, how do you feel about doing a bit of dusting? You know, clean the place up, er, as befits the House of Black.”

“Kreacher would be honored,” he croaked, his nose almost touching the floor by this point. He disappeared with a soft pop of displaced air.

Severus gave her a look. Hero held up a hand to forestall comment. “I know what you’re going to say. I know, okay.”

“Fine. I will refrain. I will, however, voice my profound gratitude that the hat did not put you where
you clearly belonged. I don’t think my sanity could have withstood being your Head of House all these years.” She stuck out her tongue at him.

He rolled his eyes. “What do you want for dinner?”

“There’s no food in the house.”

“So I had surmised.”

“I don’t really know what restaurants are in the area. I was never allowed to wander while I was here.”

He held out a hand. “Would you care to explore?”

“I do believe I would,” she said, taking his hand and allowing him to pull her to her feet.

They put their coats back on and ventured back out into the cold. Hero reclaimed Severus’s hand. They wandered through the streets, past pubs, burger places, and expensive, exclusive restaurants that were probably booked solid the Saturday after Valentine’s.

They were hardly the only couple walking hand in hand through the grey streets of London. No one paid them any mind.

“So, what’s it like finally having the job you always wanted?”

“Honestly? Almost as disappointing as it is satisfying. I don’t have to worry about the dunderheads blowing themselves up, but it’s not like they’re any more intelligent in Defense than they were in Potions. And my God, the essays some of them write.”

“But it is satisfying?”

“I have wanted it . . . so bitterly, for so many years. I am not so foolish that I don’t feel a sense of satisfaction in having finally gotten it. But . . . I must admit it is not quite as I hoped.”

“How so?”

Severus sighed as he tried to find the words to articulate it. “Potions has always been my passion. It is something special, almost sacred. Defensive magic is something I enjoy and have had a great deal of use for over the years, but it’s not the same. Teaching ignorant little brats how to brew has felt like sacrilege, profanation. Potions has always been where my greatest talent lies, and I see it as almost a higher calling. It was ghastly watching snot-nosed cretins muck it up.

“Unfortunately, I find that teaching Defense is not many degrees better. Now more than ever, it is of vital importance. And they don’t try. They don’t seem to care. I’m terrifying; I know I’m terrifying. And yet, neither I nor their potentially imminent doom seems sufficient to motivate them to exert more than a mediocre effort. If I have to read one more bloody essay from some brainless third-year about how she just wishes a vampire would come and make her his queen, I will not be held responsible for the consequences!”

Hero laughed. “Tell me they didn’t!”

His expression was distinctly sour. “I could, but I would be lying. I got no less than three feet each from six separate students about how their deepest desire is for a handsome vampire to come and fly away with them to make them ‘creatures of the night.’”
“Wow. That’s . . . wow. You had to read eighteen feet of that?”

“Don’t be daft; once I had determined the substance of their essays, or rather, lack thereof, I didn’t bother reading further.”

“Oh, of course, forgive me.”

“Of course.”

“They can’t all be miserable. I thought I did quite well with them last year.”

He inclined his head, conceding the point. “You did. Unfortunately, there are those who did not have the benefit of your instruction. Your students know what they’re about; for those who had to contend with Umbridge’s tender mercies, I find myself at a loss.”

“Ah. Of course, I think that was the idea, wasn’t it? Keep Dumbledore from training an army to go against Fudge.”

“Preposterous.”

“Yes, but then, so was he.”

“Preposterous is too kind a descriptor for Cornelius Fudge. ‘Idiot’ and ‘coward,’ I find, are far more apt.”

“Neither of us are either of those things. In better days, I’m sure he did just fine.”

“Mmm. He kept things in decent working order, I suppose. The trouble is, the people who elected him were foolish enough to think the better days were there to stay.”

“I don’t think they could have predicted things would turn out the way they did.”

“If they had the good sense to be pessimists, they would have.”

“I think . . . I think maybe people needed to hope. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have been able to go on.”

“Weak.”

“Again, neither of us is. How could we possibly understand?”

“You are entirely too forgiving.”

“Funny. These days, I don’t think I’m forgiving enough.”

“Nonsense. You are good, kind, and compassionate. It’s hardly your fault people go beyond what even you are willing to accept.”

“Your standards aren’t exactly high.”

“And yours are impossible. Do yourself a favor and reconsider them; I don’t recall the pope making you a saint.”

Hero sighed. “Neither do I.”

“That’s the spirit. Hmm. How do you feel about Chinese?”
“Chinese?” Severus pointed to a small Chinese take-away across the street. “Oh. That sounds nice.”

“Splendid.”

They carried the food back to the house, comparing their observations of the last several DADA Professors. They carefully avoided the subject of Remus. Severus was not amused to discover that Hermione had been the one to set his robes on fire, even if she had inadvertently knocked Quirrel over, thus breaking his eye-contact. Hero thought it was hilarious.

They had dinner in the cozy basement kitchen. They didn’t talk as much as they had while they walked. The silence was companionable, comfortable, like a cat that curled up beside you and dozed while you read. After dinner, they did the dishes, Severus washing and Hero drying, and then went back up to the drawing room.

“I think I remember seeing some records upstairs,” Hero commented, nodding to the gramophone.

Severus smiled contentedly. “Feel free to bring them down if you find anything decent.”

Hero bent down to kiss him on her way out. She found the records in Sirius’s bedroom. It was in the same state as the rest of the house had been. Presumably, Kreacher hadn’t been moved to clean Sirius’s room. It seemed Remus hadn’t either. She suspected he hadn’t set foot in the room since Sirius’s death. The records were in a stack by the desk. She picked a few she liked the look of and went back down.

Severus held out a hand for her selections. He went through them, then handed her one. “This has several good ones on it.” It was a jazz album, a compilation of classics.

It started with Louis Armstrong and the saints marching in, then it slowed down with The Penguins and Earth Angel. They relaxed as they listened to the words of a song popular before either of them were born. When Bobby Darin started to sing Beyond the Sea, Severus got to his feet, held out a hand to Hero, and asked, “Would you care to dance?” She smiled and gave him her hand.

He put an arm around her and she placed her hand on his arm. She rested her cheek against his chest. They swayed to the music, losing themselves in it, in someone else’s faith. Forgetting all that awaited them outside the wall of No. 12 Grimmauld Place.

Somewhere beyond the sea
Somewhere waiting for me
My lover stands on golden sands
And watches the ships that go sailin'

Somewhere beyond the sea
She's there watching for me
If I could fly like birds on high
Then straight to her arms I'd go sailing

It's far beyond the stars
It's near beyond the moon
I know beyond a doubt
My heart will lead me there soon

We'll meet beyond the shore
We'll kiss just as before
Happy we'll be beyond the sea
And never again I'll go sailing

I know beyond a doubt, ah
My heart will lead me there soon
We'll meet (I know we'll meet) beyond the shore
We'll kiss just as before
Happy we'll be beyond the sea
And never again I'll go sailing

No more sailing
So long sailing
Bye bye sailing
Chapter 26

Severus rapped on the door to the headmaster’s office, as Albus had requested in his note.

“Enter.” He swept inside to find Albus dealing with correspondence. “I can come back later if this time is inconvenient.”

Albus sighed. “Not at all. I would appreciate the excuse.”

“Is your hand troubling you again?”

“No more than I’ve become accustomed to. No, it’s a letter from Scrimgeour. Filled with implied threats if I do not tell him where I’ve been going. And letters from Order members, of course.”

“More bad news?”

“At this stage, I’d be more worried if I received good news because they could only be lying, bewitched, or an imposter. Be that as it may, it takes a toll.”

“What was it you wished to discuss?”

“How is Hero?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes gleaming even if his expression was bland.

Severus glanced away. “As well as can be expected. Under the circumstances.”

“Ah. She’s told you, then. How long ago?”

“November.”

Albus nodded, as if this was not unexpected. “It is good to see the two of you starting to set aside your differences before I’m gone. Before . . .” They fell silent, neither quite up to facing that thought, as if by not voicing it, it might not come to pass.

Albus cleared his throat. “And what of Draco?”

“He’s not doing well. The stress is getting to him.”

“I’d consider him a fool if it wasn’t. So much rests on carrying out Tom’s orders. I can only presume that he’s terrified.”

“As you say, he’d be a fool not to be. But yes. Yes, he is terrified. He was born into privilege and has spent his whole life immersed in the flattery of sycophants. He has never failed before. In other circumstances, it would probably be beneficial. But this . . . this will break him.”

“You think so?”

Severus nodded sharply. “He has too much at stake, too much to lose.”

“Indeed. Are you any closer to regaining his confidence?”

“No. He continues to blame me for securing the Dark Lord’s favor after Lucius’s imprisonment, as if I were responsible. He is a child. One carrying a burden that feels like the weight of the world. And because he is a child, he is convinced he must bear it alone.”
“I’m surprised he thought the necklace would be effective.”

“He is arrogant and has been raised to believe you are an overblown, bumbling fool. He does not realize that, even had you not been aware, as he believes, even had the necklace reached its target, it would have served no other purpose than to put you on your guard.”

“He is but sixteen, Severus. Surely it is not to be expected of him to be well-versed in the delicate art of assassination.”

“Perhaps not. But I think his failures are due less to his age than to his upbringing. By his age, the Dark Lord had already killed his own father and unleashed Slytherin’s monster.”

“I take your point. Will he get there in the end, do you think?”

“I can try to help him along as much as I can without him noticing.”

“Splendid. I suppose his preparedness doesn’t really matter in the end, anyway. Draco Malfoy will not have to kill anyone.”

“No,” Severus said bitterly. “He will not.”

“I know I ask much of you, Severus. My gratitude will not die with me.”

“You do ask much of me. Too much. You expect me to act the part to perfection, never mind what I must sacrifice!”

“Sacrifice, Severus? Is that how it seems to you?”

“You act as if it should be easy!”

“Easy? No, Severus. But necessary, of a certainty. You are a practical, pragmatic man. More than that, you are a man who keeps his promises. As I trust you will keep this one.”

“Yes. I will. I have no choice. But it does not mean that I do not resent deeply your . . . requests.”

“Just so long as it’s done, my boy.”

Severus turned on his heel and wrenched the door open, to find Hagrid poised to knock. He swept past him without a word.

“Ah, Hagrid. Do come in.”

* *

Hero, Hermione, and Ginny were gathered together in the sixth year girl’s dorm. They were chatting as they waited for Ron to wake up. It wasn’t every day you came of age, after all. Ginny was on Hero’s bed. Hermione had cast *muffliato* so as not to wake Parvati and Lavender, who had glared daggers at them the last time they’d been rudely awakened.

“What’d you get him, Hero?” Ginny asked.

“Keeper’s gloves.”

“He’ll like that. He’s been wanting a new pair for ages. What about you, Hermione?” Ginny asked, her tone turning sly.
Hermione turned pink and looked away. Hero and Ginny laughed. “If it’s anything like what she
gave him for Christmas, I’m sure he’ll love it,” Hero chimed in.

“What?” I’m not telling her what you gave him for Christmas. Just that he really, really liked it. Is it
anything like what you got him for Christmas?” Hero teased.

“Don’t be silly, he hardly needs a new one already.”

“You’re being deliberately obtuse.”

“And you’re being nosy!”

“Yes, what’s your point?”

Hermione smiled despite herself. “I’m still not telling you.”

“Fair enough. I’ll just get Ron to tell me. Come on, Ginny, you ready to take the ever-loving
Mickey out of the birthday boy?”

Ginny turned to her and blinked, as if dazed. “Not just now, I think, Hero,” she said, her tone
dreamy. She seemed to be staring off into the distance.

“Why not? I mean, after that we’re all going to go down to breakfast, and there’s going to be lots of
packages for him, and we can tease him about that. It’ll be great fun.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

Hero frowned. There was definitely something odd going on here. Ginny wasn’t anywhere near her
brothers, but, having been raised by Molly, all the Weasleys had healthy appetites. Hero doubted
Ginny had ever skipped breakfast in her life. Certainly, she couldn’t remember her having done it in
all the years she’d known her.

“Ginny, what’s wrong?” Hero asked slowly, beginning to get quite worried.

Ginny’s face contorted, and it looked like she was about to burst into tears, her eyes becoming
distinctly shiny. Hero’s worry developed into alarm, and she glanced helplessly at Hermione.

“Oh, Hero, I can’t stand it!” She looked pale, almost sick.

“IT’S ALRIGHT, GINNY, IT’S ALRIGHT. WE’LL GET YOU TO MADAM POMfrey, YOU’LL BE JUST FINE,” HERO SOOTHEd.

“What good will that do?!” Ginny wailed. “I love him, and he’ll never love me back!”

Had Hero and Hermione talking about Ron set her off, reminded her of Dean? Hero had thought
she’d been doing well with everything. She’d been the one to break things off. She’d even been the
one to bring up Hermione’s present for Ron just now.

Hero glanced desperately around the room for some clue. Her eyes alighted on an opened, partially
consumed box of chocolate cauldrons next to Ginny, a note beside them. Roland Vane, she
remembered. Roland had given them to her before Christmas. Hermione had been warning her not
to eat anything he gave her because it was probably spiked with . . .

“. . . Love potion,” Hermione whispered, horrified. Hero felt sick to her stomach. It was her fault
Ginny was like this. If she’d just gotten rid of them . . . or not been famous, or told Roland Vane
exactly what he could with his bloody chocolate cauldrons . . .

Severus. Severus would know what to do. But there would be too many questions. Slughorn was the Potions Professor. Whether she liked it or not, he was the one she was supposed to go to. And nothing could appear out of the ordinary. No one could know.

“He doesn’t even know I exist!”

“Would you like me to introduce you?”

Ginny looked up, hope shining out of her eyes. “You know Roland?”

“Course. What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t do this for you? Come on, I’ll take you to him.”

Ginny practically leapt off the bed. Hero put an arm around her. She looked back at Hermione. “Go find Ron. Tell him what’s happened. I’ll take her down to Slughorn.” Hermione nodded and stood. Hero looked back at Ginny to see her looking at her quizzically. “Roland takes extra Potions lessons with Slughorn on Saturday mornings. I’m sure he’ll understand how important this is.” Considering the state Ginny was in, Hero was sure anyone with a knowledge of potions would understand perfectly.

Slughorn answered the door at the first knock, though he was still dressed in his pyjamas and looked rather bleary-eyed.

“Hero? It’s rather early for visitors – I usually sleep late on Saturdays, you know.”

“I’m terribly sorry, sir. I wouldn’t bother you if it wasn’t an emergency,” Hero said, trying her best to sound contrite. “Ginny’s been dosed with a love potion. I’m quite worried about her.”

Ginny, by this point, was getting rather frantic. She stood on tiptoe trying to see into the room.

“I’d have thought you could whip up a remedy in no time, Hero, brilliant as you are.”

“I wouldn’t trust myself to brew it perfectly the first time, sir. I couldn’t take the chance.”

Ginny was by now attempting to elbow Hero out of the way. She looked ready to charge Slughorn if that was what it took.


Slughorn was eyeing Ginny speculatively now. “Was this potion within date? They can strengthen, you know, the longer they’re kept.”

“That would explain a lot,” Hero panted, doing her best to keep Ginny from barging into Slughorn’s rooms. “Please, sir. She’s had such a rotten year already with romance.”

Slughorn nodded. “I suppose you’d better come in.”

He ushered them in and began rummaging through his kit for the ingredients. “Not particularly difficult really . . .”

“Hero? Hero, where is he?” Ginny asked anxiously, having inspected the room and predictably found no trace of Roland.

“He’s not here yet. I thought you’d like some time to get ready.”
“Oh. Do I look alright?” she asked anxiously, smoothing her hair and adjusting her jumper.

“Yeah,” Hero said, forcing a smile onto her face. “You look lovely.”

“Here you are, my dear,” Slughorn said, presenting Ginny with a glass. “It’s a tonic, for the nerves,” he lied.

“Oh, bless you,” Ginny said fervently before downing the antidote. Slowly, she seemed to return to her normal self. Naturally, she was horrified.

“Hero – what happened to me? I . . . I thought I was in love with Roland Vane!” The horror was now tinged with disgust. “Oh, God, what’s wrong with me?”

“It’s not your fault. Roland put love potion in the chocolate cauldrons. I should have chucked them ages ago.”

“Pick me up, that’s what you need, my girl. Let me see, I’ve got butterbeer – but I think perhaps the circumstances call for something a little stronger. Ah, wine, one last bottle of oak-matured mead . . . that was supposed to go to Dumbledore for Christmas. Ah, well, he can’t miss what he never had. Why don’t we open it in honor of Miss Weasley’s misfortune? Nothing like a fine spirit to chase away the pangs of disappointed love,” he said, twisting off the cap and pouring it into three crystal tumblers. He handed them a glass each.

“To Ginny – for loving and being loved in return is the best thing in the world; loving in vain, the next best. May she find the best of life yet, and live enough by then to be sure she’s found it.”

Ginny didn’t seem to be listening. She’d drained the glass before he’d finished speaking. She turned a pale greenish-grey. Slughorn hadn’t realized anything was wrong; Hero’s heart seized. Ginny collapsed, her extremities jerking uncontrollably. She was foaming at the mouth, her eyes bulging out of their sockets. Hero glanced at Slughorn; shock appeared to have paralyzed him. He’d be useless, then.

Hero dashed to the ingredients cabinet, scanning the neat labels until she found what she was looking for. She yanked the drawer opened, rummaged inside, praying it wasn’t empty. Got it! She raced back to Ginny and shoved the bezoar down her throat, clapping her hand over her mouth so it wouldn’t come back up. Ginny gave a shuddering gasp, then went limp and still.

Thinking of dancing with Snape the day after Valentine’s, she whispered, “Expecto Patronum.” The stag appeared before her. She swallowed. “For Hermione Granger: Tell Madam Pomfrey we’re coming to the infirmary. Ginny’s been poisoned.” The stag inclined its great, antlered head and disappeared. Hero pointed her wand at Ginny’s prone body and murmured, “Mobilicorpus.” Ginny’s body floated up from its place on the floor, remaining horizontal.

Hero glanced at Slughorn, who looked like speech was beyond him. “Come along, Professor.”

He followed after her, not even reacting to a student giving him an order beyond doing as he was told.

* * *

Madam Pomfrey was ready and waiting for them when they reached the hospital wing. She pointed to a bed, to which Hero directed Ginny’s unconscious form. Hermione and Ron were waiting, white faced, to one side.

She felt like she told the story a hundred times, to Ron and Hermione, to Madam Pomfrey, to
Dumbledore, to McGonagall, and to the Weasleys when they came, first Fred and George, then Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Fred and George had apparently been in Hogsmead.

“We were looking into buying Zonko’s,” George told them morosely. “Fat lot of good it’ll do if you lot aren’t allowed into the village anymore.”

“And we wanted to see Ron, give him his present in person. Here you are, Ron. Happy seventeenth.”

“Not really,” he said, casting a worried glance at his only sister, still unconscious. At least she was breathing.

“So, the poison was in the drink? Do you think Slughorn would have had time to poison it?”

“Well, probably, but I don’t think he would have done. He likes Ginny, invites her to dinners and things like he does me and Hermione.”

“It might have been for you, Hero,” Fred pointed out.

Hero frowned. “Slughorn likes me. Why would you think he’d want to poison me?”

“Well, he was a teacher when You-Know-Who was a student, wasn’t he? He might be, you know, a Death Eater.”

“Or he could have been Imperiused.”

“Or he could be innocent. He’s been in hiding, hasn’t he? Maybe now he’s come to Hogwarts someone took the opportunity to bump him off.”

“Oh it could be Dumbledore. You said Slughorn told you he meant it as a Christmas present for Dumbledore,” Ron pointed out.

Hermione snorted. “Well, if that was their plan, they didn’t know Slughorn very well, did they? Odds were, he’d keep anything that nice for himself.”

It was at that point that Hagrid burst into the Infirmary, soaked from the rain, carrying a cross bow, tracking muddy bootprints onto the pristine floor.

“I’ve been in the forest all day, I only just came in for dinner when Sprout told me! Blimey, I can’t believe it . . . poor Ginny. Who’d want to hurt Ginny?”

“We’ve been trying to come up with an explanation, actually,” Hero said. “Nothing so far. I mean, Ginny’s had such a lousy year already. This, on top of everything else . . .”

“You don’t think someone might have a grudge against the Gryffindor Quidditch team, do you?”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, frowning.

“First Katie, now Ginny. Both girls, both Chasers, both Gryffindors.”

“I don’t think so. It was pure chance that Ginny was in Slughorn’s office.”

“Why was it again, Hero?” George asked, frowning.
Hero grimaced. “Roland Vane gave me chocolate cauldrons spiked with love potion before Christmas. I haven’t thought about them since, but Ginny ate a few. I took her down to Slughorn for an antidote.”

“Aw, Georgie, I bet we sold it to him! Merlin. Look at what we did to our own sister!”

Hermione patted his arm comfortingly. “You couldn’t have known. And it wasn’t like you put the poison in the drink.”

“I think we’re going to have to discontinue the love potions, Freddie.”

“No argument from me. Poor Ginny.”

“I don’t think the connection’s Quidditch, but I think there is a connection,” Hermione put in. “I mean, they both ought to have been fatal and weren’t, although that was pure luck. And neither the poison nor the necklace seems to have reached the person who was supposed to be killed. Of course,” she added broodingly, “that makes the person behind this even more dangerous in a way, because they don’t seem to care how many people they finish off before they actually reach their victim.”

That was a dark thought that gave them all something to think about. Not long after that, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came in, having returned from talking to Madam Pomfrey and been assured that Ginny would pull through.

Mrs. Weasley hugged Hero tightly, her cheeks still tear-streaked. “Oh, Hero, you wonderful girl! I haven’t the words to thank you! You saved Arthur, you’ve saved Ginny twice now.” For a few moments, Mrs. Weasley simply held her, and Hero allowed herself to be held. “All I can say is that it was a lucky day for our family when Ron decided to sit with you on the train!”

Hero had no reply. She didn’t want Mrs. Weasley to feel such gratitude, as if Hero wouldn’t do it all again a hundred times, a thousand times. She was relieved when Madam Pomfrey came to remind them that Ginny was only allowed six visitors at a time. Hero, Hermione, and Hagrid left to give the Weasleys time alone.

“All this new security, and kids are still getting hurt,” Hagrid growled. “Dumbledore’s worried sick . . . he don’t say much, but I can tell . . .”

“Surely he has some ideas?” Hermione asked, fear making her voice unsteady.

“Man like Dumbledore, he’s got plenty of ideas at any given moment. But when it comes to the necklace or the poison, nothing he does seems to do much good. I mean, if he knew who it was, they’d have been caught, wouldn’t they?” Hagrid leaned in, looking over his shoulder. Hero glanced to the ceiling, checking for Peeves. “The question that keeps me up at night is, how long can Hogwarts stay open with kids being attacked? Chamber of secrets all over again, innit? There’ll be panic, parents’ll be taking their kids out of school, next thing you know, the Board of Governors . . .” he sighed. The ghost of a woman floated past. He resumed once she was out of earshot. “They’ll be talking about shutting us down.”

“Surely not,” Hermione fretted.

“Gotta see it from their point of view,” Hagrid replied pragmatically. “I mean, you expect a certain number of accidents, don’t you, with hundreds of underage witches and wizards locked up together. But attempted murder, that’s different. It’s no wonder Dumbledore’s so angry with Sn—”

He suddenly had every bit of Hero’s attention. She focused in on him like a laser. “Why would
Dumbledore be angry with Snape?"

Hagrid stopped in his tracks, a familiar, guilty expression on his face. “I never said that. Forget you heard it, alright? Heh, would you look at the time, it’s getting on for midnight!”

“No. Why is Dumbledore upset with Snape?”

“Shhh! You want me to lose my job?! Though, I suppose you wouldn’t care, seeing as you’re not taking my class anymore.”

“Stop trying to distract me with guilt, it won’t work. Hagrid. Why?”

Hagrid sighed. “I shouldn’t have heard it at all. It’s just, I went up to his office to talk to Dumbledore about some of the creatures in the forest, and he was talking to Snape. Sounded like Dumbledore wanted Snape to do something, and Snape thought he was asking too much. Overworked, I reckon. Dumbledore told him he’d agreed to do it, and that was that. Pretty firm with him. I’m sure it’s nothing, and so should you be. To bed with you.”

They said goodnight and walked together the rest of the way.

“Hero, I don’t want you doing anything rash.”

“What?” Hero asked, brought out of her contemplations.

“We’ve been friends for years, Hero. I know you. And I’m asking you, now of all times, with Ginny in the hospital wing, don’t do anything rash.”

“I have no intention of doing anything at all, rash or otherwise.”

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I don’t believe you.”

“Hermione. I have other things to worry about. I’m not about to go skulking after Snape in the Invisibility Cloak, trying to catch him doing something he shouldn’t.” There. None of it was a lie, but it allowed Hermione to draw certain conclusions that weren’t true.

“Alright. It’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s just . . .”

Hero smiled ruefully. “You know better.”

“No, I do trust you! It’s just that, well, sometimes you get carried away.”

“I’ll give you that one. Come on, I’m zonked.”

* *

Hero rolled out of bed, bleary-eyed and three-quarters asleep. She made it all the way out the portrait and down the corridor before faltering. Admittedly, it was muscle memory by this point, requiring little to no mental input. But her sleepy brain had just started to fire up the neurons, and a question occurred to her: would he be waiting today?

The story of the events of the previous day had quickly circulated through the school. Certainly, the Heads of House would have been briefed. He might expect her to sleep later than usual after everything that had happened. She started back to Gryffindor Tower; she changed her mind; she turned back to the tower.

Suddenly, a door appeared. She blinked at it. Maybe she was still dreaming. She glanced around
her, hoping to see something to confirm or deny this hypothesis, like, oh, pigs flying past or cats doing synchronized swimming. Then again, this being the wizarding world, that might not have been much to go off of. What she did see was the familiar tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy trying to teach trolls ballet. She was standing next to the Room of Requirement.

This only answered the first question, that of why a door had appeared. The second, possibly more pertinent question was where the door led. The room only appeared if you had great need of it; what did Hero have great need of at the moment, that she had been thinking of as she paced back and forth?

Put like that, the answer was obvious. She went through the door without fear.

*

Severus could not swallow his disappointment. Really, he should have expected her not to show. Anyone would be exhausted after saving a friend’s life, never mind so unexpectedly. If anyone had earned the right to sleep in, it was her. But still, he was disappointed. Some days, it was the only time they had together.

He made his way back to his rooms, a black mood brewing. It wasn’t her fault. But woe betide anyone else who crossed him today.

He went to collapse on the sofa in his sitting room, only to find it was already occupied.

He shook her awake. “Hero, what are you doing here?”

Her eyes fluttered open. It took her a second for her eyes to focus enough to recognize him. She smiled brilliantly. “Good morning.”

“Good morning. Now, what are you doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m here to see you.”

He sighed, exasperated. “Then why didn’t you come to the Astronomy Tower this morning?”

“I wasn’t sure you’d be there, but I figured you had to come back here eventually.”

He could hardly fault her logic. On the other hand . . . “It was foolish in the extreme for you to come down here. You could have been seen!”

She snorted. “Not likely. I didn’t use the stairs, thank you very much. I’m not an idiot.”

“Idiot, no. Reckless fool, all too often. And what do you mean, you didn’t use the stairs?”

“Do you remember how I was teaching the DA up on the seventh floor last year?”

“Yes,” he replied cautiously, not sure where she was going with this.

“We used a room called the Room of Requirement. If ever anyone has great need of it, it provides. This morning, I . . . needed you. It provided. I came through from the seventh floor to that door over there,” she said, nodding to it.

“You couldn’t have waited?”

“No. We need to talk,” she said, suddenly growing serious. She sat up and curled her legs under her, then patted the place next to her. He sat.
“What’s this about?”

“Hagrid heard you and Dumbledore arguing the other day. You know how bad he is at keeping secrets.”

Severus felt his breath turn to ice in his lungs. “How much did he hear?” he whispered.

“Enough to know that Dumbledore’s asked you to do something you really don’t want to do. And, for whatever reason, he’s letting Malfoy’s attempts continue.”

“The two are . . . not unrelated,” Severus told her slowly. “You already know Albus is dying. You know he’s aware the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to kill him. What you don’t know is that he has no intention of allowing that to happen. He doesn’t want to ruin his soul,” Severus continued bitterly. “On the other hand, he has no intention of allowing the Dark Lord’s curse to be the end of him. He exacted a promise from me.” He looked her in the eye, and she could see the pain of it, the wish that anything else had been asked of him, anything.

“What did you promise him?” Hero whispered, afraid she already knew the answer.

“To kill him.” It was his expression, like he himself had been the one condemned, that truly chilled her.
Right. So, I was supposed to post this this morning, except I, er, forgot. Sorry. Look, it's longer than usual, too. Maybe, comment? Good or bad, either way. I like to know what you think.

It wasn’t until Ron pointed it out that Hero realized that the match against Hufflepuff was less than a week away. It was at that point that Hero cursed the air blue. Katie Bell wasn’t back yet, so she’d have to deal with Dean and Seamus playing the same position on the same team on top of everything else. She felt like pounding her head against a wall. Repeatedly. If only to give herself a concussion so she could kip in the hospital wing with Ginny instead of playing.

“Don’t worry, Hero, it’ll be fine,” Hermione soothed.

“How can you say that?” Hero moaned piteously, lifting her head from her arms, on the Great Hall table. “They’re going to flatten us.” She let her head collapse back into her arms.

“You still have a good team,” Hermione encouraged.

“Sure, before Malfoy started trying to do away with them,” Hero retorted morosely, not lifting her head. Even still, she could practically hear Hermione rolling her eyes.

“Well, she’s sort of got a point,” Ron admitted awkwardly. “I mean, Dean and Seamus won’t even look at each other, and Seamus did alright at trials, but he hasn’t been to any of the practices all year. Quite frankly, it would be difficult to imagine how things could get worse.”

“Shhh! You’ll make it happen!” Hero wailed. Ron and Hermione exchanged grimaces.

Hermione sighed. “Come on, Hero. You’ve got to tell Seamus eventually.”

“No, I don’t,” she mumbled. “I can just stay right here like an ostrich with my head stuck in the sand.”

“It’s still going to happen.”

Finally, Hero looked up at her friend. “Why do you always have to be right?”

“Who am I to say?” Hermione began airily. “Maybe it was the decision of a higher power, maybe I just employ logic. Could be anything, really.” She nodded down the table. “He’s over there.”

Hero nodded, resigned. “Oi, Seamus!” He looked over at her in confusion. “You’re subbing in for Ginny. Practice this afternoon.” He nodded, not looking particularly happy about it. Yeah, join the club, Hero thought.

“There. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“We haven’t gotten to the hard part yet,” Hero muttered darkly.
Ginny woke up a few days later, though it would be some time before she was strong enough to be released. Nearly dying tended to do that to you. Hero, Ron, and Hermione spent as much time as they could with her.

At one point, when Ron and Hermione were elsewhere, Ginny made a confession. “I know it’s made things difficult for you, but I’m glad I’m not strong enough to play. I kind of just want to hide from the world at the moment.”

Hero smiled at her sadly, reaching over to squeeze her hand. “Roland Vane’s a twat.”

“I know. But I haven’t exactly had the best experience. I’m starting to think they all are. Or at least 99%.”

Hero grimaced. “Considering the position you’re in, it’s difficult to argue. They’re not all frogs, though.”

“You think?”

Hero shrugged. “I’d like to. Bit hopeless otherwise.”

Ginny sighed. “Yeah. It is.”

Despite Hero’s doom saying, most of Gryffindor was fired up about the match. After Smith’s inflammatory commentary, there were lots of people hoping to see him and the rest of Hufflepuff steamrolled. Hero didn’t like to think of the reactions of the at the moment adoring crowds if they didn’t manage it. She was used to the public’s opinion of her changing with the wind, but she didn’t have to live with the public.

Hero found herself waiting until the last possible minute to go down to the pitch. She left Ginny, walking through empty corridors. The whole school, she realized was at the match. Such a comforting thought. That would be great for her performance anxiety.

Any other day, she wouldn’t have heard it. Today, it echoed in the deserted corridor. She looked over her shoulder to see Malfoy, two sulky-looking girls flanking him.

Malfoy, meeting her eye, gave a short, humorless laugh and continued walking.

“And where might you be going?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. She’d been checking the map periodically, enough to note that Malfoy occasionally seemed to disappear from the castle.

“And when that’s your business, I’m sure I’ll let you know, Potter,” he returned snottily. “You’d better hurry up, they’ll be waiting for ‘the Chosen Captain’ – ‘the Girl Who Scored’ – whatever they call you these days.”

One of the girls, who looked like she couldn’t be more than fourteen, burst into giggles. Hero raised an eyebrow at her; she blushed. They went off together, disappearing down the corridor and around the corner. Hero swore. It might be her best chance to figure out what he was doing. On the other hand, they’d really be in for it if the captain, who was also the seeker, didn’t even show up. She had obligations. She had people counting on her. And she was pushing it as it was.

When she ducked out of the changing room, Ron glared at her. “Cutting it a little close, don’t you
“I was cheering up Ginny. You know how much she hates missing matches.”

Ron snorted. “You and I both know my sister’s delighted not to be playing today.”

“And I wish I didn’t have to either,” Hero muttered. Ron was the only one who heard her.

He raised an eyebrow. “I’d advise against spreading that around. Morale’s bad enough as it is.”

“I know, I know. Let’s get this over with, then.”

She turned to the rest of the team. “Right, Coote, Peakes, make sure you fly out of the sun. I don’t want you hitting any of us because the sun’s in your eyes.” She glanced at Seamus. He only looked slightly green at having had only a week of practice all year before he had to play. Smashing.

“Come on, guys, it’s only Hufflepuff. Zacharias Smith is toast,” she said dismissively, managing to sound far more confident than she felt. The team conjured up weak smiles. “That’s the spirit!”

She and the Hufflepuff captain shook hands, and everyone took off. Maybe, just maybe, if she spotted the snitch early enough, they wouldn’t have time to be too thoroughly embarrassed. Ron was spectacular when he was on form. No one was expecting spectacular the week after his sister had nearly been murdered, least of all Hero.

She was slightly distracted by the commentating, done by one Luna Lovegood. Hero noticed McGonagall sitting beside her and looking distinctly uncomfortable, as if she was having second thoughts . . . or possibly third, fourth, or fifth thoughts. At least there would be some entertainment.

Both sides scored twice; Luna didn’t seem particularly fussed about making note of it. She was more interested in directing spectators’ attention to interestingly shaped clouds and speculating on whether Zacharias Smith, who had failed to keep the Quaffle for more than a minute so far, was suffering from something she termed “Loser’s Lurgy.” It was likely only due to McGonagall periodically barking into the megaphone that most people could keep track of the score (at that point, disappointing, 70-40 in favor of Hufflepuff).

A few moments after that pronouncement, everything seemed to go topsy-turvy, and the blue sky turned black.

The next thing Hero knew, she was lying in a warm, comfortable bed. A lamp was throwing a golden circle of light on the ceiling. The game was over, then. That was nice.

She blinked a few times, then looked to see if there was anyone else near her.

Ginny smiled at her from the bed next to hers. Or at least, it seemed like she did; it was hard for Hero to tell without her glasses.

“You have an incurable sense of melodrama.”

“Why d’you say that?”

“You just couldn’t stand to watch Gryffindor lose, so you threw yourself off your broom and were lucky enough to land in the hospital wing. At least, that’s the way it sounded, to hear Ron tell it.”

Hero groaned. “Oh, Lord. Please tell me it’s still Saturday.”
“Yes. Late Saturday evening, but still Saturday. Why? Got a date planned for tomorrow or something?”

“Something like that.”

Ginny got a mischievous gleam in her eye, but before she could follow through on it, Madam Pomfrey bustled in.

“What happened?”

The matron raised an eyebrow. “You had a seizure in mid-air. You’ve been kept sedated. I’ll discharge you in the morning, but I’d prefer to keep you overnight for observations.”

“Oh. Brilliant—”

“However, as per our agreement, no more Quidditch.”

“What?! No, you can’t – I’m the captain, I have to be able to play!”

“You can captain from the ground. We agreed, Miss Potter. Quidditch and seizures do not mix.” She sighed. She continued, with what seemed to be genuine remorse, “I’m afraid your flying days are over.”

Hero felt as if she was suddenly tumbling through thin air; probably not unlike she would have felt this morning, had she been conscious. She was distantly aware of tears pricking her eyes and her breath coming in gasps and pants – hyperventilating.

It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair! Hadn’t she already suffered enough? To lose flying on top of everything else seemed sadistic, and worse than that, petty. To know that she would never feel that leap of her heart in her chest when she took off, the feeling that she could handle anything if she was in the air . . . She hadn’t realized just how much she had to lose. She had the disturbing thought that she was still in the dark about exactly how much would be taken from her.

Hero heard, as if she was underwater, Madam Pomfrey calling her name. She couldn’t respond, could only gasp, in and out, her breath hitching. Tears rolled down her cheeks. It was stupid to cry over it. She had a thousand other things to worry about, it shouldn’t matter. But it did, and it hurt, all the more because she hadn’t expected it. It felt like a part of her had been ripped away.

That was her last thought before everything went dark again, and the thought slipped away into the darkness.

★

Madam Pomfrey released her the next morning after giving her her morning meds. “Loathe as I am to discharge you, especially after yesterday evening, physically there’s nothing wrong with you. Well . . . nothing I can do anything about.”

“Right. Thanks.”

“See you, Hero,” Ginny said from her bed, seeming a little glum to be losing the company. Hero wondered how she could have been much company at all considering she’d spent most of the time sedated.

“Bye, Ginny. I’ll talk to you later.”
“Cheers.”

Severus wasn’t at breakfast. This wasn’t terribly unusual to the casual observer; he often had time sensitive potions that needed his attention. Hero doubted that was the case today. After bolting down a bowl of porridge, she made her way down to his dungeon quarters.

She knocked timidly. He opened the door; upon seeing who his visitor was, he pulled her inside.

“You could have been seen!” he hissed.

“I don’t care,” she muttered petulantly.

“You can’t afford not to care! Perhaps your seizure yesterday scrambled your brain, but I shouldn’t have to remind you that what we are doing is forbidden!”

She burst into tears. Severus was aghast; he had very little experience with women crying, and none when the woman was one with whom he was romantically involved. Should he apologize? Offer tea? Say something? He guided her over to the sofa.

Hero curled against his side. Hesitantly, he wrapped his arms around her.

“What’s the matter? Is it what I said?”

She shook her head. “No, no, you’re right. I just . . . I wanted to see you. I needed someone who would . . . understand.”

“What happened?” he asked, aiming for tender.

“It’s stupid. I know it’s stupid.”

He wiped her tears away with his thumb. “Clearly, it’s not.”

“Madam Pomfrey said . . . my flying days are over.”

Ah. “Hero, you are allowed to mourn. None of those who care about you will think any less of you.”

“I think less of me! I hate that I’m so weak.” She shrugged helplessly. “It’s just flying.”

“You are not weak. And of course it’s not just flying: it’s freedom. Your world is getting smaller. Being made to keep your feet firmly on the ground makes that concrete in a way it wasn’t before. Hero . . . there’s nothing to be ashamed of in not wanting to die.”

She looked up at him, asking for something she had no words for. Hoping he was reading the question in her eyes right, Severus brushed his lips against hers. “Yes?” he murmured, looking into her eyes. She sighed in contentment and relaxed against him, twining her arms around his neck.

It started out soft and gentle, but it slowly became fiercer, more passionate. It wasn’t until Severus pulled away, panting, that he processed the fact that Hero was in his lap.

“Hero, I’m so sorry—”

“Well, I’m not. I feel alive.”

“You are alive.”
“Don’t be obtuse.”

“I didn’t think I was. How do you expect me to respond?”

Hero let out a sound that was pure frustration. “I don’t know! I just . . . there’s no use pretending I’m not dying, because I am,” she stated, blunt as a club to the back of the head.

“But here, now, you’re alive. You can’t spend every second you have left obsessed with your own mortality.”

“Why, because it’s not healthy?”

“No. Because you have better things to do,” he said pointedly, tightening his grip on her waist.

“Oh. Oh, I see. You could always distract me.”

“Who’s on top of whom?” Severus asked, raising an eyebrow. Hero grinned and went back to more pleasant occupations.

After a while, they were content to simply lie curled up together on the sofa.

“How are things going on the Draco Malfoy front?” Hero asked idly while Severus played with her hair.

“Hmm?”

“Malfoy. Have you made any progress?” Severus sighed, and his hand stilled.

“None whatsoever.”

“Do you know what he’s doing? Specifically, I mean.”

“I know his precipitous actions have resulted in Miss Bell coming into contact with a powerful curse and Miss Weasley ingesting poison. I know his end goal is Albus’s death. Beyond that, I have no intelligence. He’s being frustratingly closed lipped about the whole thing.”

“He’s terrified.”

Severus snorted. “He’d have to be brain-damaged not to be.”

“He’s been disappearing off the map.”

“What map?”

“Oh. That’s right, I never told you. Funny, the things that slip your mind.”

“Hero.”

“Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs are proud to present the Marauder’s Map.”

“The Marauders?”

“Yes. They created a map of Hogwarts. It shows everyone on the grounds: where they are, what they’re doing, every minute of every day. And what their real name is. Not a spare bit of parchment, exactly.”

“Do you have it with you?”
“No. It’s up in my dorm.”

“I’d like to see it at some point.”

“Sure.”

“But you said Draco seems to disappear off it?”

She nodded. “Right. Every room in the castle is on there, dungeons and grounds included. But most of the time when I look at it, I can’t find him, not anywhere.”

“He can’t be leaving the school.”

“No. But that begs the question of where he is haring off to.”

“I don’t have time to tail him everywhere he goes. And I think he might get a little suspicious if I follow him into the loo.”

Hero sighed. “I suppose it’ll work itself out eventually.”

*

The following morning, Ginny was released from the hospital wing. She seemed so miserable at the prospect of being around people, Hero told her the secret to getting into the kitchens. She barely hung around long enough to say thank you.

“We didn’t see much of you yesterday,” Hermione observed.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t much fancy facing an angry mob because of what happened Saturday, thank you very much. What do people think happened?”

“The prevailing theory is that someone cursed you.”

“There are some people who think you faked it.”

“You just seemed to have a . . . fit.”

“Well, they got that bit right, didn’t they?”

Hermione turned to look at her in concern and ran into a titchy first-year girl next to a tapestry of trolls in tutus. The girl squeaked and dropped her heavy brass scales, her face an almost comical expression of terror. Hermione fixed her scales; she seemed too frightened to speak, and remained rooted to the spot while they continued on.

When they reached the Great Hall, Luna gave him a scroll: another lesson with Dumbledore.

“I loved your commentary on the match, Luna!” Ron told her eagerly.

She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. “You’re making fun of me, aren’t you? Everyone else says I was dreadful.”

“No, no, no! I loved it! I can’t remember enjoying a commentary more.” She smiled at him and went off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron sighed, a wistful smile spreading over his face. “Loser’s Lurgy . . .”

*
Hermione was fixing Hero’s Herbology essay when Hero realized it was time she left for her meeting with Dumbledore. Hermione waved her off. Hero backed out of the Common Room, thanking her profusely. She smiled but didn’t look up from her work.

She knocked on the door to his office was invited to enter, only to have the door wrenched open before she could. There stood none other than Professor Trelawney, in high dudgeon from the looks of it.

“So this is the reason I am to be thrown unceremoniously from your office, Dumbledore!”

“My dear Sybill,” Dumbledore attempted to calm her, with the air of one both long used to it and not expecting it to work any better than it had any other time. “It is not a question of throwing you unceremoniously from anywhere. However, Hero does have an appointment, and as there doesn’t seem to be anything further to say on the topic—”

“Very well,” she sniffed. “If you won’t banish the usurping nag, so be it . . . Perhaps I’ll find a school where my talents are better appreciated.” She seemed to gather what was left of her dignity as she exited. She probably should have concentrated more on gathering her shawls, because they heard her trip halfway down the stairs.

“Close the door and sit down, please,” Dumbledore directed, sounding incredibly weary. Hero did so, noting that the Pensieve once again sat on the desk, two crystal phials of memories waiting next to it.

“That sounds like a bit of a nightmare,” Hero observed frankly.

A ghost of a smile touched Dumbledore’s mouth. “You’re not wrong. I can’t ask Firenze to return to the forest where he would be attacked, in all likelihood killed, for his status as an outcast. Nor can I allow Professor Trelawney to leave the safety of the castle. Between you and me, she has no idea of the danger she would be in if she did. She has no recollection of making the prophecy that has affected so many lives over the past seventeen years. I can see no benefit in enlightening her. But my staffing problems are not why you are here.”

“We have a number of things to discuss. Firstly, have you succeeded in the task I set you when last we met?”

“Er, no, sir.”

“I understand you’ve had many things to worry about. But I must impress upon you the grave importance of obtaining that memory. You have considerable ingenuity at your disposal, cunning I barely dreamed of at your age. I trust you to leave no stone unturned, no depth unplumbed in your quest. I expect the best, Hero, because it is a task I have assigned to you.”

She could feel her insides squirm with guilt. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

“Good. We will say no more about it for now. Do you recall where we left off at our last meeting?”

“Yes, sir. Voldemort killed his father and grandparents and framed his uncle. He returned to Hogwarts and . . . asked Professor Slughorn about Horcruxes.”

“Correct. I mentioned at the beginning of this venture that we would be traveling into realms of speculation. Thus far, and I hope you’ll agree, I have shown you reasonably firm foundations for my interpretations of Tom Riddle’s life up to the age of seventeen.” He paused, surveying Hero over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. She nodded in agreement.
“We have come to a divergence, if you will, a crossroads. The narrative after he left these halls becomes much murkier and stranger, harder to pin down. It was difficult to find anyone willing to reminisce about Tom Riddle as a boy, and we have even been pawned off with lies. Be that as it may, it was nigh impossible to find anyone willing to recall the man Voldemort. I daresay there is not a soul left alive other than himself, who could give a full account of his life after he left Hogwarts. I do happen to have obtained these last two memories from one no longer among the living.” He indicated the two phials sitting next to the Pensieve. “I look forward to hearing your thoughts on the conclusions I have reached.”

At his words, there was a strange, warm feeling in her chest that radiated outwards. It took her a second to recognize it as pride. It warred with the sick feeling of shame still sitting in the pit of her stomach.

“These are a pair of rather curious recollections, from a very old house elf named Hokey. Before we view that with which she has provided us, I must establish how Tom left Hogwarts.

“He reached the seventh year of his schooling with, as you might have expected, top grades in every examination he had taken. All around him, his classmates were deciding which jobs they were to pursue once they had left Hogwarts. Nearly everybody expected spectacular things from Tom Riddle, prefect, Head Boy, winner of the Award for Special Services to the School. I know that several teachers, Professor Slughorn amongst them, suggested that he join the Ministry of Magic, offered to set up appointments, put him in touch with useful contacts. He refused all offers. The next thing the staff knew, Voldemort was working at Borgin and Burkes.”

“Sorry?” Hero asked sure she must have heard wrong.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled in amusement. “Yes, Borgin and Burkes, of all places. I think you’ll see the attraction it held for him once we’ve entered the memory. It was not, however, his first choice of employment. Few knew about it – I was one of the limited circle my predecessor chose to confide in – but Tom requested to be allowed to remain at Hogwarts as a teacher.”

Hero scooted forward in her seat, her eyes intent. “Really?”

“Yes. I imagine he had several reasons, though he confided none of them to Headmaster Dippet. I believe he was more connected to the school than he has ever been to a person, then or since. It was here that he was happiest, the first and only place he had ever felt at home.”

Hero suddenly felt like she was sucking on a lemon. It was just a little too close to the bone.

“As well, the castle is a stronghold of ancient magic, full of many more mysteries than most who pass through its halls ever guess at. It wouldn’t have hurt that, in becoming a teacher, he would be in a position to mold young minds, a very powerful and influential one. I don’t for a moment imagine he intended to spend the rest of his life in quite scholarship. Rather, he would have come to make the school his recruiting ground. At Hogwarts, he would have had hearth, home, and the seeds of an army.”

“But he didn’t get the job.”

“No, for which we must be deeply thankful. Professor Dippet, however, invited him to reapply in a few years, when he had a bit more distance from the students who would have gone from his peers to his pupils. The idea made me, I must admit, deeply uneasy.”

“What job did he want?”
Dumbledore really did smile this time. “Can’t you guess?”

“Defense.”

“Precisely. Professor Merrythought was retiring from the position. I imagine he thought it the perfect opportunity.

“Regardless, he was not awarded the position. Instead, he went to work for Borgen and Burkes. Many members of staff who had been won over by him considered it a terrible waste of talent and potential. He was, however, no mere assistant. You know the wares the shop trades in: the very rare, the very expensive, and the very old. Generally, the darker the better. Tom Riddle was a handsome, charming young man. He was sent to persuade people to part with their treasures, a task at which he demonstrated a singular skill. Now, if you will stand, we will explore the memory of Hokey the house elf.”

Hokey, as it turned out, was the house elf of a woman whom Tom was visiting, as Dumbledore had put it, to convince her to part with her treasures. The poor house-elf was obviously ancient, older than Kreacher; the kind of old family retainer who ought to have retired decades before with a nice, fat pension for all the hard work she’d done. It wasn’t often that Hero really commiserated with Hermione on spew, but if ever there was a reason for it, it was Hokey.

Hepzibah Smith was the name of Hokey’s mistress. She was an old woman with a ginger wig, grossly obese, spackled with makeup, and dressed in pink satin. Mutton dressed as lamb, indeed.

It was just as clear that Hepzibah Smith was infatuated with Tom Riddle as it was that he was repulsed by her. Her horde made up for it. Goblin-made armor, along with any number of similar prizes, all stored away, which Tom had been sent to liberate.

Her weakness for a pretty face indeed proved her undoing. It was Tom’s face that convinced her to show him the two greatest items in her collection: a cup belonging to Helga Hufflepuff, and a locket belonging to Salazar Slytherin. Hero saw Riddle’s eyes glow red, even if Hepzibah Smith didn’t.

Moments later, they departed the scene.

“Hepzibah Smith died two days later. Hokey was convicted of accidentally poisoning her mistress’s evening cocoa.”

This time, Hero was the one seeing red. “You can’t be serious,” she said flatly.

“Unfortunately, it’s quite true. Looking back, you and I can see the many similarities between this death and that of the Riddles. Hokey confessed. She had a clear memory of putting something in Miss Smith’s cocoa that appeared to be sugar but was in actuality a lethal and little-known poison. It was believed that she had done it because she was old and confused. As with Morfin, they were predisposed toward a guilty verdict.”

“Because she was a house elf.” Hero shook her head, scowling. “Hermione’s going to be fit to be tied.”

“Precisely. It seemed an open and shut case; no one bothered to look further. All this memory proves conclusively is that Voldemort was aware of the existence of both the cup and the locket. By the time Hepzibah Smith’s relatives realized her two greatest treasures were missing, Tom Riddle was long gone. That was the last anyone saw of him for a very long time.

“Before we proceed, I wish to draw your attention to certain particulars of what we have seen. I believe, though I have no proof, that this is the first time Tom killed since the Riddles. Previously,
his motive was revenge. This time, it was in order to gain the locket and the cup. Just as he stole objects of value from the other children in the orphanage, just as he stole his uncle’s ring, he made off with Hepzibah’s treasures.”

“But . . . why? I mean, he was obviously good at his job. It might have been his second choice, but he could have worked there until he could ask Professor Dippet again. It seems pointless and honestly sort of stupid to throw all that away for some pretty trinkets.”

“Pointless and stupid to you, Hero, but not to Voldemort. I believe we can assume that he considered the locket his rightful property as Heir of Slytherin.”

“Alright, fine, but why the cup?”

Dumbledore smiled, as if she’d finally come to one of the questions he’d been most hoping she’d ask. “I believe he still felt strong ties to the school. An object that belonged to one of the Founders would have, as we can infer, held irresistible temptation for him. He had other reasons as well, which I hope to make clear to you in due time.

“The next memory I have to show you, the last until you manage to obtain Slughorn’s recollection, is from ten years after Hepzibah Smith’s death. There can be no telling what Voldemort got up to in the intervening years. Certainly, I haven’t been able to weasel it out of anyone.” Dumbledore tipped the second phial into the Pensieve, shaking it so the last vestiges emptied.

“Whose memory is it?”

“Mine.”

Hero and Dumbledore dove in, only to land in the exact office they had just left. Fawkes rested on his perch, and Dumbledore stood behind his desk, but for his two unblemished hands, looking almost identical to the man standing beside Hero. Snow blew past the window.

Tom Riddle was invited to enter. Whatever had happened in the intervening years, it hadn’t done his looks any favors. His features, once so handsome, now looked like melted wax. He was not the inhuman snake he was today, but he’d certainly started down the path.

Tom sat in Hero’s chair. Dumbledore poured him a drink and refused to call him Voldemort, a fact that clearly irritated him. Tom proceeded to ask for the Defense position, while Dumbledore grilled him about his activities and his Death Eaters.

Dumbledore refused him the position, accusing him of not wanting to teach any more than he had at 18. He demanded to know his purpose. Tom refused to give it. He left, and that was the end of it.

Sitting, once again, in the chair she had just vacated, the chair it felt as though Tom Riddle had just vacated, was a strange experience. She was glad she was sitting because thinking about it gave her vertigo.

“Why did he come back? Did you ever find out?”

Dumbledore sighed. “I have ideas, but no more. When you obtain the memory from Slughorn, it is my hope that we will both know. Until we have the last piece of the puzzle, we cannot have any degree of certainty.”

“Yes, sir. Was it the Defense job he wanted again? He never said.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure it was the Defense position he was after,” Dumbledore replied wryly. At Hero’s
questioning look, he explained, “Following that little meeting, we have never been able to keep a Defense Professor for longer than a year.”
Hi! Sorry it's, um, late. In my defense, I have two papers due next week, both due on Tuesday. It kind of slipped my mind. Again, sorry. And comments would be nice. Even if you just comment to tell me how uncool it is to post late . . . I'd probably be okay with that, to be honest. I hope you enjoy it anyway.

“Right. Here’s the map. I’m trusting you with this.”

“I understood the first time. And the second. And the third. A fourth borders on insulting.”

“Sorry.”

Severus sighed. “All I see is a spare bit of parchment.”

Hero grinned wickedly and laid her wand on the map. She intoned, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” Black spread from the tip of the wand like ink, gradually delineating the layout of the castle. Hero pushed it over to Severus.

“Marvelous. Just think how much easier my rounds would be if I had this,” Severus teased, looking over at her.

“Shush. Look, it has everyone on it. Ah . . . here’s you and me,” she said, pointing to two sets of footprints labeled with their names. She tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear absentmindedly as she scanned the map.

“Um . . . Professor Flitwick, teaching choir, I think. Ron and Hermione in the Gryffindor Common Room. Can you see Malfoy’s name anywhere?”

After a few minutes of dedicated scanning, they found him on the fourth floor, heading upwards.

“What could he possibly want up there?” Hero asked, bemused.

“Hmm. Draco, descended from the Blacks, named for a constellation. Couldn’t be the Astronomy Tower, could it? No, that’s way too obvious.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, dear, the only star he’ll have much chance of seeing for a good few hours yet is the sun.”

“What’s your brilliant idea, then, darling?”

Hero exhaled in a gust. “Unfortunately, I haven’t got any.”

“Well then, maybe those without ideas shouldn’t disparage the suggestions of those who do.”

“Sarcastic suggestions don’t count. Besides, he wouldn’t disappear off the map if he was on the Astronomy Tower. It’s plotted like everything else, see?” she said, pointing.

Well, he’s on his way to the seventh floor now. If you can think of anything else on the seventh
Seventh floor . . . Gryffindor Tower, Astronomy Tower, Headmaster’s office. Wait, do you think he’s gotten sick of failing and he’s gone to finish Dumbledore off with the Killing Curse?”

“I very much doubt it. If he thought he had it in him, he would have done it in the first place. Both the fact that it’s gone this far and the fact that he’s doing as poorly as he is would strongly indicate otherwise.”

“Alright. You know him better than I do. But what else is there?”

“I seem to recall, last year, you and your students being discovered practicing on the seventh floor. Wasn’t Draco on the Inquisitorial Squad?”

“As a matter of fact, he was,” Hero confirmed. “You think . . . ?”

“‘Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’ And really, it’s the only thing that makes sense. From what you’ve told me about the Room of Requirement, it stands to reason that it would be Unplottable.”

“True.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “So, we know where he’s going, which is a big step forward. Now we just have to find out what he’s doing. Of course, considering it’s the Room of Requirement, it could be just about anything.”

“On the bright side – what of that there is – we know it doesn’t have anything to do with food.” At her bemused look, he explained, “Food is one of the five exceptions to Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration.”

“Well, I already knew food had nothing to do with it, he’s been losing too much weight. So, where do we go from here?”

“We know where he’s going; that’s something, at least. Perhaps we’ll find out the rest in due course.”

Hero sighed. “I suppose you’re right.”

“That’s my problem. What about yours?”

“Which one?”

“Slughorn.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I suggest manipulation.”

“But . . . won’t he be expecting that, as a Slytherin?”

“Right. Because demanding it straight out is so much better.”

“Fair point. I don’t really know where to start, though.”

Severus gave her a sardonic look. “Now who’s being obtuse?”

“Alright, fine. I’ll . . . think about it.”
“So kind. Have you finished your essay on combatting Dementors yet?”

“Yeah, I finished it yesterday. I don’t think you’re going to like it though.”

“Why?”

“I happen to disagree with you on the best way to tackle them.”

“Oh, how shall I survive? My sweet Hero has a mind of her own? Oh, the horror.”

“I’m more worried how my grade’s going to survive,” Hero grumbled.

“Provided you’ve backed up your arguments with solid evidence, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

“Do you think . . . people are starting to notice we don’t hate each other anymore?”

He blinked at her, adjusting to the abrupt change in subject. “Why? Have you noticed anything?”

“I don’t know. I mean, they probably wouldn’t say anything around me even if people were starting to talk. But you have to admit, before, you probably would have failed my essay if it provided a perspective that wasn’t yours.”

“True,” he conceded slowly, thinking about it. “Do you want me to hand it back with failing marks and put what you actually earned in the gradebook?”

“That’s a good idea, but it has to be more. I mean, the first day of class, we argued, I cursed you into a desk, and you gave me detention! I think people may have noticed that sort of thing isn’t happening anymore.”

“What, you want to script an argument?”

“I shouldn’t think we’d need to go that far. I’m sure it’ll come naturally.”

Severus groaned softly and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re planning to flirt with me in front of the entire sixth-year Defense class, aren’t you?”

“Outrageously, dear. But I guarantee you no one will notice.”

“And how do you intend to pull off that miracle?” he snapped.

“Simple. They’re clearly blind, so they’ll see us arguing, not flirting.”

“You’re planning on playing off our sexual tension as genuine antagonism? You’ve got a lot of nerve.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t so much a compliment as worrying out loud, darling.”

“I take what I can get.”

“Hero, have you talked to Slughorn at all?”

“Not . . . as such.”
“It’s a yes or no question.”

“No. I haven’t.”

“Why?”

“I’ve been . . . busy!”

“How could you have anything more important than getting what Dumbledore has described as the single most important memory in existence?”

When put like that . . . “I guess I didn’t. But I don’t know what to do, Hermione!”

“Knowing you, you had some half-baked idea of turning up at his quarters, holding him at wandpoint, and demanding that he stand and deliver.”

“I’m not that bad.”

“Some days you come close,” Hermione muttered darkly.

“Well, what do you suggest?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Manipulation.”

“But . . . but . . . I’m a Gryffindor. Daring, nerve, and chivalry.”

“Hero, you’re as much a Slytherin as you are a Gryffindor.”

“What?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You’re as brave as anyone, Hero. You’re also cunning and manipulative. Well, you are when you bother to try. And don’t act like I’ve just dealt you grievous insult. It’s who you are. Dumbledore wouldn’t have asked it of you if he didn’t believe you can do it whereas others can’t. Anyone could curse him or slip him a potion. And even if there was a potion that would work, I really think Slughorn would be expecting it.”

“Yeah, Dumbledore mentioned that Veritaserum would be useless because he’d have taken the antidote.”

“There you go.”

“But, Hermione, I don’t know how to manipulate Slughorn!”

“I suggest you figure it out, then,” Hermione returned blithely. Hero threw her a dirty look.

While they’d been talking, Ron had been agonizing over his essay on Dementors for Defense, which Hero and Hermione had already finished.

“How do you spell ‘belligerent’? It can’t be b-u-m—”

“No. And Augury doesn’t o-r-g either.” Hermione frowned, as if unwilling to believe her boyfriend was quite that bad at spelling. “What kind of quill are you using, anyway?”

“One of Fred and George’s Spell-Check ones. But I think the charm’s wearing off.”

“Yes, I rather think it might be, seeing as we’re studying Dementors, not Dug-bogs. And under no
circumstances ever will you see me becoming Mrs. Roonil Wazlib.”

Ron stared at the paper in horror. “You mean I’m going to have to rewrite the whole thing?!”

“No, no, it’s fine.” She started tapping the misspelled words with her wand, which corrected themselves on the page.

Ron stared at his girlfriend with an adoring expression. “Have I told you lately that I love you?”

“You told me yesterday. But I could stand to hear it a little bit more.”

Even with magic, it took Hermione twenty minutes to correct Ron’s essay. By then, they were the only people left in the Common Room; Seamus had gone up ten minutes before, cursing Snape and his essay. Hero had narrowly avoided wincing when she heard him. If people weren’t talking about how weird she’d been about Severus recently, they should have been.

The next morning, as usual, Hero woke before first light. She snuck out the portrait hole and down the corridor, to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. She paced back and forth in front of the blank wall, thinking I need you to become what you do for Draco Malfoy over and over in her head. The wall remained stubbornly blank. She tried other phrases, hoping to hit upon the right one. There was no response.

Finally, she sighed and gave up on that line of inquiry. I need to see Severus, she thought. Even in her head, the voice was small. The Room heard that time, though, and the same door as before materialized. She skipped through it into Severus’s sitting room. He was coming out of his kitchen and caught her.

“Lovely though it is to see you, is there a particular reason?” He asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Wanting to see you isn’t enough?”

His expression softened. “Of course it is.” He kissed her good morning. “Tea?”

“Please.”

* *

They’d decided to give the whole thing a nudge in the right direction: a reason for Severus to notice her in the first place. It only made sense for her to be late to class.

“Late, Miss Potter. Ten points from Gryffindor,” Severus drawled. Hero scowled at him and felt blood rush to her cheeks.

“Before we start, I want your Dementor essays,” he continued, waving his wand and Summoning the twenty-five essays to him; they settled in a neat pile on his desk. “And I hope for your sakes they’re better than the tripe I had to endure on resisting the Imperius Curse. Now, if you’ll all open your books to page – what is it, Mr. Finnegan?”

“Sir,” said Seamus, “I’ve been wondering, how do you tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost? Because there was something in the paper about an Inferius —”

“No, there wasn’t,” said Snape in a bored voice.

“But sir, I heard people talking —”

“If you had actually read the article in question, Mr. Finnigan, you would have known that the so-
called Inferius was nothing but a smelly sneak thief by the name of Mundungus Fletcher.”

Hero snorted with ill-concealed laughter. Severus turned to her with a raised eyebrow. “But Miss Potter seems to have some ideas on the subject. “Do tell us, Miss Potter, what the difference is between an Inferius and a ghost.”

“Er — well — ghosts are transparent —”

“Oh, very good. Yes, I can certainly see that six years of magical education have not been wasted on you, Potter. ‘Ghosts are transparent.’”

“Well, yeah, I mean, a ghost is a soul. An Inferius is a body. Not really the same thing at all. And I sort of doubt a ghost is going to attack you, unless you get on the Bloody Baron’s bad side.”

“Detention, Miss Potter, for your insolence. However, you have ... brushed the surface of the answer. An Inferius is a corpse reanimated to do a dark wizard’s bidding; a ghost is an imprint of a departed soul left upon the Earth. And, as Miss Potter so wisely tells us ... transparent,” he said, his lip curling. “Potter, I’ll see you tomorrow morning at seven for your detention,” he told her, smirking a little. “Now, open up your books to page 213, and read the first two paragraphs on the Cruciatius Curse.”

On the way downstairs for lunch, Hermione pulled Hero into the disused girl’s toilet on the first floor, where they wouldn’t be interrupted. Ron followed.

“I can’t believe you, Hero! You said you were getting along!”

“Oh, come on, Hermione! My answer was fine.”

“Why’d you have to say that about the Bloody Baron?”

“What’s the Bloody Baron got to do with anything?”

“He’s Slytherin’s ghost!”

“So? It’s not like he’s in love with the Baron.”

“Slytherins stick together!”

“I feel like we’re getting off topic here. Look, it’s not my fault if he’s got his wand in a knot. Hermione. It’s Snape. Getting along better or nor, he is who he is.” And I wouldn’t have it any other way, she thought but did not add.

“Oh, er, hello, Myrtle,” Ron said awkwardly. They turned to see the ghost of the girl floating over by the loos and scowling at them.

“Oh. It’s you three.”

Hero raised an eyebrow. “Who were you expecting?”

“Nobody,” she said sullenly. “Well, he said he’d come back and see me, but then you said you’d come see me, too, and I haven’t seen you for months and months. I’ve learned not to expect much from people.”

“He comes here to see you?”
“Sometimes. I can go other places. I came to the prefect’s bathroom to visit you that one time, remember?”

“Er, vividly.”

“But I thought he liked me,” she said plaintively. “Maybe if you left, he’d come back again. . . . We had lots in common . . . I’m sure he felt it . . .” She looked hopefully toward the door. No one entered, and she sighed.

“When you say you have lots in common,” said Ron, sounding rather amused now, “d’you mean he lives in an S-bend too?”

“No,” said Myrtle defiantly, her voice echoing loudly around the old tiled bathroom. “I mean he’s sensitive, people bully him too, and he feels lonely and hasn’t got anybody to talk to, and he’s not afraid to show his feelings and cry!”


Hero barely heard him. “Myrtle, there’s been a boy in here crying? Was he young or old?” she asked, intent on the ghost.

“Never you mind!” said Myrtle, her small, leaky eyes fixed on Ron, who was now definitely grinning. “I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone, and I’ll take his secret to the —”

“— not the grave, surely?” said Ron with a snort. “The sewers, maybe . . .”

Myrtle gave a howl of rage and dove back into the toilet, causing a shower of water to splash out. A bit of it landed on Hero. She glared at Ron, but he was too busy laughing to care.

The following morning was Hero’s next appointment. After everything that had happened, it seemed too soon. She found herself wondering if there was a scientific explanation for why time always seemed to speed up when you most needed it to last. And why the unpleasant bits always seemed to last forever.

From Hero’s perspective, it was an interesting conundrum. The closer you got to death without accepting it, the less you wanted to die. The closer you got to death, the more unendurable living became. Would the cruelties of time steal away the moments you had left or prolong the agony? Hero did not look forward to discovering the answer first-hand.

She found herself unable to keep from sinking into introspection. Perhaps, after holding it off so long, she’d run out of energy. Severus let her be; he knew she’d talk if she wanted.

And so she found herself facing what she’d been running from for so long.

I am dying. It was still hard to comprehend, to process, in large part because she really didn’t want to. I’ll never have children, or get married, or have a job. Well, not one that pays anything, anyway. She remembered Dumbledore saying at the end of her first year, “To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.” She wanted to dig her heels in and refuse to go; she wasn’t through with this one yet.

She glanced at Severus. He wasn’t dying. She was so glad, so aching glad, but she also resented and envied him. She tried to deny it, but it was a part of her, the way flying used to be. It was a part she didn’t like, a part that she, in fact, hated, but she could no more change it than she could keep the
sun from setting.

She loved him. She was only falling deeper in love with him. And, in a way, that made it worse. It certainly made it more painful. And it wasn’t fair, but she already knew that, didn’t she? She hated how self-pitying it sounded because she didn’t want anyone’s pity, certainly not her own. She didn’t have time to piss and moan about the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. But she wasn’t sure she knew how to stop.

She was going around in circles, and she felt all twisted up inside. *You see?* she wanted to scream. *You see? It didn’t do any good! It was for nothing! There was never any point except to make everything worse!* She felt small and alone and utterly spent. Nothing now could ever come to any good.

And with those words, she felt as if the last of her defiance left her. It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. How could it? She sighed, and in that sound was the weight of everything running through her mind and the misery that held her in its jaws. She’d read *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* when she was younger. She remembered a line from the book; she’d always thought it was nonsense. “Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that snatch!” Maybe it meant this. It didn’t matter, though, really, because nothing did.

Except . . . well, there was a war going on, wasn’t there? That mattered, even if nothing else did. It had to. A part of her waved her hand at this lethargically, wanting nothing more than to wallow. Another part of her, the part that knew that there was life after death, even if only for everyone else, refused to stand for that.

*They* mattered. She’d just have to remember that, remember them. Because they deserved a better world, and if she had to die for it, so what? Better her than anyone else. She had so much less to lose.

If next to nothing mattered, she’d just have to focus on the few things that did.
Hi. So, this should have been up Friday, and we all know that. On the other hand, I was at a model UN conference in Toronto without reliable internet, so . . . I mean, it's understandable, right? Right? Anyway, I think you're going to like this one, even if it is late. It'd be nice to know if you do. Just saying.

Myrtle’s story had piqued her interest. She wasn’t quite sure why, though it might have something to do with the fact that it stood to reason that if Myrtle had a crush on him, he was probably an older student. She kept an eye on Myrtle’s loo by way of the map.

She still occasionally checked for Malfoy, but she’d mostly given up on catching him coming out of the Room of Requirement. She still checked, though; she couldn’t help it. Severus had said it didn’t really matter, that things would come to a head eventually in any case, but she knew how worried he was. She was worried for her own reasons: namely, the risks of Severus’s vow.

On Sunday morning, she saw something interesting: Tonks, in the Entrance Hall. Hero met her as she came to the top of the Grand Staircase.

“Hi, Tonks.”

“Wotcher, Hero.”

“What brings you to the castle?”

“I came to talk to McGonagall.”

“McGonagall?” Hero repeated, frowning, and not just because she was confused. Tonks looked even worse than she had at the beginning of the year; thinner, her hair mousy and lank.

“She used to be with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I came to ask for some advice. Actually, I should be going, I’m late. It was nice to see you, Hero.”

Hero watched as she disappeared down the corridor and out of sight. Resigning herself to not knowing everyone’s business, she went down to the Great Hall where she found Ron and Hermione back from Hogsmead, taking an early lunch.

It wasn’t until that evening that Hero finally got around to reading Severus’s comments on her essay. It was as sharp-tongued as he’d ever been. She’d thought she’d been desensitized to it, and she had. His comments on her essay were the sort he only handed out when he was at his cruelest, his most cutting. Yes, it had been her suggestion, but he hadn’t had to take to it with such zeal.

He’d circled one section in red ink and wrote, “This point is too poor to bear comment.” Another had the note, “Your only excuse can be illiteracy, but I find even that is too much to hope for.” She knew he didn’t mean a word (well, she really, really hoped he didn’t), but she still found herself grinding her teeth. She’d only got halfway through when she jumped up and marched toward the
portrait hole, muttering darkly. Ron and Hermione exchanged worried looks.

She didn’t bother going all the way through the castle, flaunting her outrage for the whole school to see. She took the shortcut through the Room of Requirement instead.

She found Severus at his desk, correcting yet more essays. He glanced up when he heard her enter. Taking in her death glare and the white-knuckled grip she had on her essay, he set the quill down.

“Hero—” he began cautiously, only for her to cut him off.

“Really? Really?! What the bloody hell were you playing at?”

He sighed. “I thought it was what you wanted, for everyone to see us as antagonistic as ever.”

“I flirted with you. This was not flirting,” she said, almost shouted, shaking the parchment at him.

“Will it satisfy if I tell you my actual thoughts on your paper?”

“So . . . it was all lies?”

“Of course. Every word. You didn’t actually believe what I wrote, did you?”

“Well . . . I wasn’t . . . sure. I-I mean . . . it wasn’t so long ago that you would have meant every word.”

He rose and swept around the desk. He tugged the parchment out of her hands, tossed it on the desk, and took her face on his hands. “Hero, I was deeply mistaken about you. I cannot apologize enough, but I will do so as many times as it takes to convince you that there is nothing deficient about you whatsoever. You, my darling, are intelligent, brave, noble . . . even if you do have a nose for trouble.” She wrinkled her nose at him. He smiled. “You are good, and kind, resourceful and witty, with an unwavering sense of duty.”

She smiled shyly at him. “So, my essay wasn’t rubbish, then?”

His eyes glimmered in amusement. “You were right, I tend to disagree with you on how to deal with Dementors, but you argued your point well. I stand by my position, but you made good points. A friendly disagreement between colleagues isn’t any reason for me to respect you any less. I don’t see much value in someone who is incapable of thinking for herself. Not to mention, it’s boring.”

Her smile became a wide grin. “I’m so glad you think so.”

“I’d hardly be with you if I didn’t.”

“No, I suppose that’s true. So, where there any really terrible essays?”

He stood back, leaning against his desk. His lip curled in disdain. “Albus wouldn’t let me limit my NEWT students to those who achieved Outstanding. There are those for whom I can only surmise that getting an Exceeds Expectations was a miracle. One of your peers saw fit to write about how one could defeat a Dementor by smiling at it. I haven’t heard anything so inane since Lockhart was here.”

“Who was it?” Hero asked curiously.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly say,” he said, passing her a copy of the essay in question, kept for posterity.

She read the name and snickered. She read through the essay and winced. She quickly handed it
back. “I see what you mean. Would you like to take a break from grading abysmal papers?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Do you have a gramophone?”

“I do.”

“Dance with me?”

“If you like.”

He led her through to his sitting room. He picked a record from his collection and set it on the turntable. He led her through the foxtrot, and soon they were circling the room. His hand on her shoulder blade felt as hot as ever, but it was different now. Night and day, really.

It would be so easy to say it. Three little words. Saying them would require next to no effort. In Severus’s arms, swaying to instrumental jazz, after he had said such lovely things, the words would almost say themselves.

And then everything would be ruined. If he didn’t say it back, that would . . . hurt, to put it mildly. If he did . . . she would hate herself. It would be horribly cruel, to love him, to make him love her, and then die. Well, she already did love him. But that was fine. It would stop being fine if she told him and he loved her back, because her pain would be nothing, nothing, compared to his. And she couldn’t bear to think about that.

But so long as she kept her mouth shut, everything would be fine. She should be able to do that, just this once.

Dancing turned into kissing, and kissing moved from the center of the sitting room to the sofa.

Hero found herself tangling her fingers in his hair, marveling at the feel of it, like silk. His hands were at her waist, burning, oh so exquisitely. Severus started kissing along her jaw, down the column of her throat.

She moaned at the sensation. He pulled away, his expression one of concern. “Did I go too far?”

She looked at him with eyes that smoldered. “More.”

A wicked grin spread across his face. “As you wish.”

More she requested and more she got. It was farther than they’d ventured before, past even kisses that left her dizzy. Hero had no desire to turn back, let alone run for the hills.

The long fingers on those pianist’s hands squeezed her waist, then tugged her shirt free of her waistband, settling skin to skin. His thumbs stroked up and down. Hero stifled a giggle. He looked at her inquisitively.

She smiled, a little embarrassed. “Tickles.”

“I see. Well, we can’t have that. Hmm. How much ‘more’ did you want to pursue this evening?”

“How about you do what you think is best and I’ll tell you when to stop?”

He stilled for a moment, then said softly, “I think I can do that.”
Hero raised an eyebrow. One hand went up to her jaw, cupping her cheek. He kissed her; when he pulled away, she tried to follow, and he chuckled lightly. His fingers went to the top button on her white blouse, then stilled. He looked at her, a question in his eyes. She swallowed down her nerves and nodded.

He went to work on the buttons, his elegant fingers undoing her agonizingly slowly. She found herself gasping for breath by the time he finished, her shirt hanging open.

A corner of his mouth lifted in a knowing smile. “If only you could see how you look right now.”

“Hot and bothered?” she panted.

“Exquisite.” To her surprise, she found she actually was capable of blushing redder.

“And what about you? I can’t help feeling you’re overdressed. All those buttons . . .” Her fingers trailed over the long line of them down his chest.

“I do have to get back to grading at some point, you realize?”

“It’s Friday night.”

“You do realize you have to go back to your dorm at some point, don’t you?”

“Well, yes. But not yet.” She sighed. “So many buttons . . . it’s not fair.”

“If you think this goes any further than it already has when we’re on my sitting room sofa, you are sorely mistaken. And I don’t think you’re ready for that.”

She bit her lip. “Maybe not.” She looked up at him through her lashes. “You could finish what you started, don’t you think?”

“I could do that,” he said, nodding, his expression serious. “Do you think I should?”

“I do. I really, really do.”

“Mmm.” He leaned in and went back to kissing her neck. He started just below her jaw, kissing down, down, until his lips landed not on her neck but on her collar bone. She shivered delicately at the sensation and gasped out his name. Severus smiled as his lips traveled to the top of her cleavage. He looked up at her. “How far do you want me to go?” he asked, his voice rough.

“I . . . I don’t know,” she murmured. He nodded and slid his arms around her.

They lay together, Hero in Severus’s arms, her cheek against his chest. She felt safe, cherished, as if, for as long as she was there, the darkness couldn’t touch her. I’m doomed, she reflected as she drifted off to sleep.

Hermione glanced at her watch and frowned. Hero had left ages ago to talk to Snape about their last paper for Defense. Something to do with a disagreement over the best way to deal with Dementors. Ron had rolled his eyes; when it came to Defense, Hero was even worse than Hermione.

But that had been ages ago. Hero had been reading over the comments, her eyebrows climbing higher and higher up her forehead, before an expression like storm clouds settled on her face, and she’d gone off to Snape’s office “to give him a piece of my mind!” Hermione had blinked after her, knowing better than to get in her friend’s way when she was in that kind of mood. Dragons cowered
and stepped aside when Hero was in that kind of mood. Hermione almost felt sorry for Snape. Almost.

Could they really have been arguing for the past hour and a half? Without one of them killing the other? With that thought having captured her full attention, Hermione leapt up from the sofa and dashed for the portrait hole. She marched through the halls, eventually running for Snape’s office, her heart in her mouth. Horrible visions danced through her mind.

It was quiet in the dungeons. Hermione strained her ears to hear something – anything. Once Snape’s office door was in sight, she finally heard the murmurs of voices. They weren’t raised, shouting spells. They weren’t even arguing. They were . . . soft. She couldn’t make much of anything out. She pressed her ear to the door, wishing (not that she had any intention of letting it slip to Fred and George) that she had an extendable ear handy.

“. . . Did I go too far?” She heard a man’s voice ask, concern in it that she had great difficulty believing came from the Dungeon Bat himself. But there was no mistaking the low, smooth tones of Severus Snape.

After a moment, a woman spoke, her voice a seductive purr. “More.”

Clearly, whatever Ron thought, Snape had no problems getting laid. Maybe the Valentine’s incident had been because he didn’t get to see his girlfriend very often?

“As you wish,” came Snape’s voice, low and gravelly. Hermione felt her cheeks heat. She shouldn’t be listening to Snape and his girlfriend. His sex life was, as Hermione herself had pointed out, none of their business. Besides, Hero had clearly gone off somewhere after coming here. Hermione should go off and find her, really, she should. She stayed exactly where she was. A moment later, she was glad she had. Well, glad and rather sorry.

Because she heard laughter and then the woman say, embarrassed, “Tickles.” Snape wasn’t with some woman. He was with Hero. That was Hero’s voice, Hero’s laugh. Snape doing something to Hero that tickled. Hermione’s mind boggled as she wandered just what he was doing to her friend. She was just about to barge in there and demand that he stop whatever it was he was making Hero do . . . when she remembered that Hero was the same person who had just a moment ago asked for more. Begged for it, actually. And Hermione’s hands, curled into fists at her side, relaxed.

And so Hermione kept listening. She heard their despised Professor call Hero exquisite, heard Hero tease him.

“If you think this goes any further than it already has when we’re on my sitting room sofa, you are sorely mistaken. And I don’t think you’re ready for that.” Hermione turned and left, trying not to make a sound. Then again, she wasn’t sure they’d notice if she did.

Well. Clearly, Hero wasn’t being taken advantage of. And it wasn’t like she was earning her Defense grade with this, because she didn’t need to. Not that she would, Hermione hurried to add in her mind. Except, well . . . she was clearly in a relationship with a teacher. With Snape, of all people!

I want someone of my own to snog, thank you very much. Hero had said that, hadn’t she? And she’d told Hermione that there was someone she liked, but it was impossible. If Hermione had known that someone was Snape, she’d have agreed with her. She’d have questioned her friend’s sanity, but she certainly would have agreed that it was impossible. Except apparently not. Obviously not, actually. And it certainly seemed like Hero had gotten that kiss after all.
Hermione couldn’t pretend to understand. Then again, after hearing the two of them like that, perhaps she did, a little. Much as she fought the idea, it made a sort of sense. She shook herself. Nothing about it made sense! It was wrong, and illegal, and . . . and Hero had sounded happy. Like it’s the first time you’ve done something wrong, something against the rules, a voice whispered in her ear.

No, no, it wasn’t, she conceded. But there was a difference between breaking about fifty school rules to stop Voldemort and actually breaking the law to start a clandestine relationship with a teacher, surely? But Hero had left of her own free will to go down to Snape. She had asked for it.

And if Hermione told a soul about what she knew, Hero would consider it the worst kind of betrayal. Hermione knew she would. And Hero’s fuse was shorter these days; her condition left her prickly and prone to flying off the handle. Hermione understood, except she didn’t. Couldn’t, couldn’t possibly. And so, Hermione would keep her mouth shut. She would pretend she’d never went to look for her in the first place. Certainly, she’d found far more than she’d bargained for.

None of my business, none of my business, none of my business, she repeated to herself as she took the long path back to Gryffindor Tower. Even if it was undeniably Hero’s business. Oh, God, they’d talked about it in front of Hero! No wonder she’d defended him. It was . . . intimately her business. Hermione felt her cheeks burning. Oh, oh, oh. How could she possibly keep a secret this big? She’d kept secrets before, earth-shattering, life and death ones. But not from Hero and Ron. Hero, whose secret it was, who didn’t know she knew. Ron, her boyfriend, who would surely be appalled. She should have trusted Hero to look after herself. She’d proved a dab hand at it, after all.

She needed to calm down. Ron would catch on immediately if she didn’t, then everything would be up in smoke. If only she wasn’t such a terrible liar. Hero was obviously a fantastic liar. Bitter thought, that. Hermione found herself defensive of the feeling. Didn’t she have a right to be just a little bitter after finding out her best friend had been lying for, well, however long they’d been together?

Okay, that wasn’t helping with the calming down. She forced herself to breathe deeply and evenly, in through the nose, out through the mouth. Nothing is wrong. I did not just hear my friend in the throes of passion at the hands of our Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. I know nothing about that whatsoever. I’ll never tell! Hermione found herself abruptly brought back to watching The Rescuers: Down Under before she’d started Hogwarts. A world away.

She sighed. When she’d started Hogwarts, she’d have run to McGonagall in a heartbeat if she’d had even an inkling of what she knew Hero and Snape were doing together. She hadn’t been friends with her then, though. And really, after six years of magical education, she was a different person entirely. The world looked very different from where she was standing now. The world was different. Her best friend was dying and the world she’d been so excited to join was at war.

She didn’t let her parents read the Daily Prophet. She didn’t tell them about the trouble that had brewing for the last few years, the deaths and disappearances that kept the wizards and witches of Great Britain up at night. They didn’t need to know the wizarding world was getting ready to tear itself apart, let alone that their daughter would be on the front lines.

Not even if you never come home? Hermione stifled a sob. That’s just why she had to go through with the plan that had been brewing in the back of her mind recently. She had to spare them that, to do all she could to spare them. It was for the best. It had to be. And then she let herself cry, sinking to the floor in the empty, moonlit corridor.
Hermione was still wiping her eyes when she came through the portrait hole. She rearranged her expression to one of casual indifference before Ron could see her.

He smiled at her. “There you are. I was starting to get worried. Wait, where’s Hero?”

“Oh, she’ll be up in a while. You know her, she’s . . . brooding a bit.”

Ron nodded. “Right. Where is she?”

“Oh, I left her down in the chapel. You know she likes it down there.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure everything’ll work out.”

Hermione gave him a tremulous smile. “You think?”

“No, it was a clever ruse. Alas, I’ve been found out.”

Hermione laughed despite herself. She laid her head on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

He looked down at her, puzzled. “For what?”

“For being you.”
As March moved into April, spring began to bloom around the castle and blue sky started to show between patches of cloud. The warming weather left Hero chilled. It couldn’t be spring yet. It couldn’t be. Dr. Warren had said she would have a year, maybe two. She was acutely conscious of approaching the first anniversary of her diagnosis. She felt brittle, as if she might shatter at a word, at a look.

She’d been losing weight. Well, that stood to reason when you didn’t eat enough. She felt cold most of the time. Like I’ve got one foot in the grave, she tended to think when she was being particularly morbid. At least there was still breath in her body. For now, at least. She remembered the last lines of the sonnet Severus had quoted her on Valentine’s, the one that made her cry. “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, so long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

Hero picked at the sidebar on her Converse. She and Severus were on their way to Glasgow for another radiology appointment. She looked out the window, watching the world fly past and not really seeing anything.

Once there, they injected the contrast dye into her arm and got her into the machine. It always seemed to last forever. Maybe it was just the dread settling into the pit of her stomach like lead that did it. Every time, she feared being told the results, being told that it had grown more quickly than anticipated, that she had months . . . weeks. She looked into the tech’s eyes, searching for shadows, when she promised to send the results to Dr. Warren. If they were there, Hero couldn’t see them; it didn’t reassure her.

After that, they spent the rest of the day wandering through used bookshops in the city. It was like being able to disappear in the best way. She and Severus held hands and had lunch at a café. It was more than Hero had dared hope for.

She’d been trying to muster up the courage to talk to Slughorn, but every time she opened her mouth to talk to him about it, her voice failed. She wasn’t sure where to start manipulating him, whatever Severus and Hermione thought. She’d only met him this year. Everyone else, she knew which buttons to press. Kreacher was easy; he was devoted to the House of Black. Everyone had a tipping point, a weakness. She knew plenty of Slughorn’s weaknesses, but she didn’t see how knowing he liked crystalized pineapple would be of much help to her. Then again, it had worked for Riddle, hadn’t it? But it would probably only make him more suspicious if she tried it, with the obvious parallels.

The following Saturday, she had her appointment with Dr. Warren. She and Severus talked about everything and nothing.

“Okay, what do you think of Romeo and Juliet?”
“I think it’s well-written drivel.”

“Drivel?” Hero demanded, incredulous.

“But of course. Two teenagers ready to defy their families and give their lives when they can’t be together. She should have married Paris.”

“She didn’t love him!”

“What’s that got to do with anything? It was an arranged marriage. Haven’t you ever heard of extramarital affairs?”

“But their love was so strong they decided they couldn’t live apart without betraying their souls!”

“And if she had married Paris, they could have had their cake and eaten it, too.”

“Alright, it does seem a little ridiculous. I’ve had a crush on you for nearly three years and it didn’t destroy me.”

“Oh, be still my beating heart. How am I to go on with such sentiments?” Severus responded dryly.

“Like you always have, dear.”

“Is there a particular reason you’re focusing on a tawdry tragedy written 400 years ago?”

“Yes.”

“And it would be?”

Hero sighed. “I’m worried.”

“What about?”

“I think I’m getting worse. I mean, there was the seizure at the last Quidditch match, and my headaches are getting worse, and . . . I’m so tired, all the time. I’m afraid of what Dr. Warren will say.”

Severus couldn’t say she was probably worrying over nothing; she had plenty of reason to worry. Platitudes wouldn’t fix her. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Hero together again.

“I’ll be here for you, come what may. I will stay until the very end.”

The words were there again, on the tip of her tongue. She swallowed them down. “I can’t tell you what that means,” she said instead, her throat tight. He reached for her hand and squeezed it.

Hero was led into Dr. Warren’s office by one of the nurses. She took a seat, her mouth dry.

“Ah, good morning Hero. How have you been?”

“Not . . . great. I mean, I had a seizure last month. My stomach’s fussy. My head aches.”

He frowned. “Worse?”

“Yeah.”
“Let me see . . . ah, here’s your scan. It’s . . . not good news, I’m afraid. It’s growing. I think we’ll have to relieve the intracranial pressure.”

“What would that involve?”

“An operation. In the short term, we might be able to drain the cerebrospinal fluid to release some of the pressure. But your tumor will keep growing. It would have to be removed.”

“But . . . I thought you said it was inoperable.”

He sighed. “Bad choice of words. Operating then would have been inadvisable. When you cut into the brain, it swells, which just makes everything worse. However, a swollen brain can be treated with medication. We’ve been trying to treat your tumor, but it hasn’t been doing any more than slowing the growth. We’ve gotten to the point where excising the tumor, despite the risks, is the better option. It’s a fairly simple, noninvasive operation. The tumor is removed through your nasal cavity. We’ll keep you in for a few days. I can book you into a room at University College Hospital.”

“When does it need to be done?”

“Soon.”

“Could . . . could we do it next weekend?”

“You’d have to stay a few days, of course. And by that I mean more than just Saturday and Sunday.”

Hero sighed. “I know. But I have to get things sorted at school first. What happens if that’s not soon enough?”

He exhaled in a gust and just looked at her for a moment. “Brain hernia, swiftly followed by death. But I think you should be fine waiting until the weekend. Frankly, I doubt I could find a surgeon who could fit you in before then. How should I contact you?”

“I’ll send my owl.”

A corner of his mouth lifted in something that approached a smile, albeit a weary one. “Right.”

Severus was waiting for Hero when she came out of the doctor’s office. He noticed her posture was stiff, as if she had a tight hold on herself, while she talked to the receptionist.

He fell into step beside her when she turned to leave. She kept her back straight as an arrow all the way out onto the street. Once they were outside the building, she practically collapsed into his arms, mumbling something into his chest. He leaned down to hear and realized it was a refrain of “Make it go away, make it go away, make it go away, make it go away.”

He wrapped his arms around her, not caring in the slightest that she was getting his jumper wet. What mattered infinitely more was why she was crying.

“Hero, sweetheart, talk to me.”

She shook her head and pulled away. “Not here.”

Once they were in the parking garage, standing next to the car, Severus looked at her.
She swallowed, and opened her mouth . . . and nothing came out. She took a deep breath and forced the words out. “I have to have an operation to excise my tumor. Next weekend. Because otherwise the pressure inside my skull will build until my brain herniates and I die. Quickly.”

“Oh,” he said, half-sigh, half-groan, like a collapsing soufflé or a punctured balloon. He reached over and found that she was trembling. “Hero . . . Hero . . .”

“I-I know. There’s nothing to be done. Well. That’s not true. There’s plenty to be done, I suppose. But . . .”

“I understand. Needs must.”

“I’m scared, Severus,” she admitted in a whisper. He knew without having to be told; she was white as a sheet, her eyes wide with fear, her body tensed for impact. Hearing it from her lips, though, was an admission of weakness he hadn’t expected. For her to say anything, she had to be terrified.

And what could he tell her? She had reason to fear. He could hardly lie to her.

“You’ve been through horrible ordeals before. You’ll get through this like you did those.”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t scared then. I mean, I was, but I knew panicking wouldn’t do any good, so I pushed it away and dealt with the situation. That was easy. Facing Voldemort was . . . well, maybe not easy, but it was simple. All I had to do was fight him and do my best to stay alive. It was always going to be over quickly, one way or the other. But this is different. This is the rest of my life. And they’re going to be digging around in my brain, in my frontal cortex, the part that makes decisions! And if they screw up . . .” she sighed, sniffed, and shrugged, “there’s not a whole lot I can do about it.”

Severus knew what she meant. It wasn’t about the ghastly events you endured, not really. It was about power and the lack thereof. Growing up poor and resented by his father, and perhaps a little by his mother, he had had no power to speak of. Against the Marauders, at least he could get revenge after the fact. When his father had killed his mother, there had been nothing he could do, nothing whatsoever. As a Death Eater, he had had power. People had feared him for a change, and it had been enough like respect to satisfy him.

Hero had always been able to fight her way out of dire circumstances or modify her behavior so as to be overlooked. Now, there was no villain to defeat, no person to fill the role of antagonist. There was only a disease that she’d known for months would be the end of her, triumphing where the Dark Lord had long failed. Spells and swords were useless, and it felt like so was she; fighting a losing battle without a weapon in her hand, never mind that there were surgeons who would armed with scalpels. That didn’t matter; what mattered was that Hero could do nothing, and neither could Severus.

She looked up at him, her eyes glistening with tears and asking him why. He held her close, stroking up and down her back, because it was the best he could do. At least it was better than actually admitting that he hadn’t a clue.

* *

The next morning dawned bright and early, a minute before 6 a.m. Hero’s eyes snapped open. She was used to waking with the sun by now. She should get up. She didn’t want to. She knew there wasn’t much chance of her falling back asleep; she didn’t care.

She wanted to lie in the cozy cocoon of her blankets and pretend that the day before hadn’t
happened. Forever, if at all possible. She wished, not for the first time, that she could hang onto that one moment and have it never end. It was no use wishing; if it was, Voldemort would be dead and she wouldn’t have cancer in the first place. But he wasn’t, and she did, and that was that.

Slughorn. Dumbledore was quite adamant that she get that memory off of Slughorn. He’d given her the task all the way back at the beginning of January. And she hadn’t. She hadn’t even tried. She’d had other things to deal with, yes, but if Dumbledore was to be believed (and when wasn’t he?), that memory was essential to defeating Voldemort.

The next time he summoned her for a lesson, whenever that was, he would ask her again whether she had succeeded in obtaining the memory. He would look at her over the tops of his half-moon spectacles, his bright blue eyes giving her the feeling she was being x-rayed. The other things she was dealing with would be of little to no consequence, dying or not. They were both of them dying, and so he expected as much from her as he did of himself.

She knew what he would say, too, or at least she could guess. “We two individuals are of little import next to all those who will be saved by our sacrifices. No one person, or even two, matters more than the rest of the world combined.” And with those few words, she would feel so utterly ashamed of herself and her own wretched selfishness.

She experienced a flash of resentment, but in the next instant she acknowledged that he was right. She was a lost cause, but the people she loved weren’t. If it was up to her to save them, how could she not do anything and everything it took? What did it matter if it hurt and she wanted to give up? They needed her.

She sighed. Daring, nerve and chivalry: she was thinking like a Gryffindor. She needed to think like a Slytherin. “Those cunning folks use any means to achieve their ends,” so spake the Sorting Hat. No wonder it had been such a toss-up.

So. Slytherin, Slytherin . . . cunning. Crystalized pineapple. Velvet smoking jackets. Ambition. Oak-matured mead. Slytherins stick together because there’s no else to turn to. Well. None of that struck her as particularly helpful.

She burrowed deeper under the covers, away from the rosy rays of the sun. It was probably going to be a beautiful day. Good for it. She almost wished the whole ordeal could just be over with already, because it seemed more trouble than it was worth, really. We are born, we live, and we die. Some of us for longer than others. I suppose I should be grateful I didn’t die back in Godric’s Hollow. A sliver of less than abjectly grateful sentiment crept into her mind.

She sighed. She would get up eventually. But not just now. Never mind that she’d be lying there awake the whole time.

* *

The next day marked the long-awaited Apparition tests, which were to take place in Hogsmead. Hero wasn’t alone in not taking the tests; a few other sixth years weren’t seventeen yet, either. Not that she would have been taking it even if she was. She was glad it made her seem a little less conspicuous.

Before Ron and Hermione left to take their test, they took a little time to relax in the sunshine in the courtyard. Ron and Hermione were clutching Ministry of Magic leaflets they’d been given at the last lesson; by and large, the leaflets had proved unequal to the task of soothing pre-exam jitters. Hero was half-listening to them as she rested against one of the statues, her eyes closed as she basked in the sunlight.
She was shaken from this state when Hermione elbowed her. Hero turned to glare at her, but Hermione nodded to the girl approaching them with a note tied with a ribbon. Hero sat up.

“I’ve been told to give this to Hero Potter?” she said shyly, holding out the rolled up parchment. Hero took it and thanked her. The girl blushed slightly and left as quickly as was polite.

It was not, as Hero had thought, a note from Dumbledore. Instead, it was from Hagrid. It was also quite difficult to make out, owing to the large blotches were the ink had run. After deciphering the note, it wasn’t hard to guess why.

Dear Hero, Ron, and Hermione,

Aragog died last night. Hero and Ron, you met him, and you know how special he was. Hermione, I know you’d have liked him. It would mean a lot to me if you’d nip down for the burial later this evening. I’m planning on doing it round dusk, that was his favorite time of day. I know you’re not supposed to be out that late, but you can use the cloak. Wouldn’t ask, but I can’t face it alone.

Hagrid.

Once she’d finished, Hero handed it to Hermione. She frowned as she read through it. “Oh, for heaven’s sake!”

Ron took it from her. His expression became increasingly incredulous. “I don’t believe this! He’s mental! That thing told its mates to eat Hero and me! Now he wants us to go cry over its horrible, hairy body! I for one feel more like celebrating.”

Hero felt rather uncomfortable. Yes, the primary emotion she felt at the news was a strong sense of relief, but Hagrid loved Aragog. Would people want to celebrate when she died? In all likelihood, there would be those who would. Not that she actually wanted to attend Aragog’s funeral, Hagrid’s broken heart or no.

“I don’t know how he expects us to get out in the first place. I mean, security’s about a million times tighter than it was before. And it’s such a terrible risk!” was Hermione’s input.

Hero glanced at the paper, absolutely covered in Hagrid’s tears. Hermione saw the look on her face.

“Hero, you can’t be thinking of going!”

“No, no. Not at all. It’s just . . . he’s obviously terribly upset . . .”

“And he’ll get over it,” Ron told her firmly. “He’ll just have to bury Aragog himself.”

“Yeah . . . I suppose.”

“Good,” Hermione said, relaxing. “Now, Hero, Potions will be nearly empty this afternoon. It’s a perfect time to try to talk to Slughorn about the memory.”

“Right, because maybe I’ll somehow be lucky enough to charm him into giving up a memory he’s repressed for fifty-odd years,” Hero retorted sarcastically.

“That’s it!” Ron interjected excitedly.

Hero turned to him, bemused. “Eh?”

“Lucky! Use your lucky potion!”
“Felix Felicis? Oh, er, I suppose…” In all honesty, Hero had been waiting to use it for when she finally faced Voldemort. But Dumbledore seemed to think that would be impossible without getting the memory from Slughorn. As Severus had said, needs must.

“Okay. Okay. If I can’t get Slughorn to give it up this afternoon, I’ll… I’ll take Felix Felicis this evening.”

Hermione gave her an approving look. “Excellent.” She glanced at her watch. “Come on, Ron, we’d better go.”

“Good luck.”

“Same to you,” Hermione said with a significant look. Hero sighed and headed off to the dungeons.

She was one of only three in attendance that afternoon, with Malfoy and Ernie Macmillan. Malfoy really did look awful, thin and peaky, with dark circles under his eyes.

“All too young to Apparate?” he asked genially. “Not turned seventeen yet?”

They all shook their heads.

“Ah well,” said Slughorn cheerily, “as we’re so few, we’ll do something fun. I want you all to brew me up something amusing!”

Ernie appeared delighted. Malfoy scowled. “What do you mean, something ‘amusing’?”

“Oh, surprise me,” Slughorn said airily, making a vague gesture.

Malfoy started flipping through Advanced Potion-Making with an air simultaneously sulky and weary. He probably would have preferred to be in the Room of Requirement, doing whatever it was he was doing, Hero reasoned. She suppressed a bitter laugh as she reflected on how unnecessary it all was; he wouldn’t have to lift a finger. Lucky him.

Hero pulled her own book out and started flipping through the pages half-heartedly. Malfoy wasn’t the only one wishing he could make better use of the time. A recipe caught her eye. Well, it wasn’t the recipe so much as Severus’s handwriting. He had heavily edited the instructions; not even the ingredient list remained unchanged. It was for an Elixir to Induce Euphoria. Hero turned thoughtful. It certainly seemed to fit the bill. And maybe it would put Slughorn in a good enough mood to listen to her.

“Well, now, this looks absolutely wonderful,” said Slughorn an hour and a half later, clapping his hands together as he stared down into the sunshine yellow contents of Hero’s cauldron.

“Euphoria, I take it? And what’s that I smell? Mmmm… you’ve added just a sprig of peppermint, haven’t you? Unorthodox, but what a stroke of inspiration, Hero, of course, that would tend to counterbalance the occasional side effects of excessive singing and nose-tweaking… I really don’t know where you get these brain waves, dear girl… unless —” Hero blinked up at him innocently, praying his eyes didn’t land on Severus’s book. “— it’s just your mother’s genes coming out in you!”

She smiled up at him. “You think? That’s nice, Professor. It’s so rare that I get to feel close to them.” She felt no shame whatsoever in playing the orphan angle for all it was worth.

Ernie had taken the unorthodox path of attempting to invent his own potion; it looked like curdled, baked on clam chowder. Malfoy was packing up with a sour expression. Slughorn hadn’t been
particularly interested in his Hiccupping Solution.

Hero looked back at Slughorn to offer him a sip of her potion—only to find he’d disappeared. She scowled, muttering darkly under her breath, “Done a bunk . . .”

She emptied her cauldron, packed up, and trudged up to the Common Room. Ron and Hermione came back in the late afternoon.

“Hero, I passed!” Hermione cried jubilantly, throwing her arms in the air as she came in through the portrait hole. Ron followed behind her with an expression not unlike Malfoy’s in Potions.

“That’s wonderful, Hermione. And . . . Ron?”

“He failed,” she said, throwing a sympathetic look over her shoulder at her boyfriend. “But only barely.”

“An eyebrow! And only half, mind you! Like that matters!”

“I know, dear, I know. It does seem terribly harsh,” she said, patting his arm. He grimaced at her.

He looked over at Hero. “How’d it go with Slughorn?”

She sighed. “No joy.”

“Ah, well. You’ll just have to take a bit of Felix this evening.”

Hero nodded wearily, conceding. “I probably shouldn’t need the whole thing, not twelve hours’ worth. Only two, maybe three.”

“It’s a great feeling when you take it,” Ron said wistfully. “Like you can do no wrong.”

“What are you talking about?” said Hermione, laughing. “You’ve never taken any!”

“Yeah, but I thought I had,” Ron said, as if this should all have been perfectly obvious. “Same thing, really . . .” His girlfriend rolled her eyes at him. Hero laughed, glad for something as normal as Ron and Hermione bantering. It felt like ages since she’d really laughed.

All the girls in their year were down in the Common Room, so Hero dashed up to the girls’ dorm and excavated the tiny bottle from the bottom of her trunk, where it was hidden in a pair of Uncle Vernon’s socks, and grabbed the Invisibility Cloak while she was at it. She went up to the boys’ dorm; with any luck, no one would start any rumors about Hero Potter sneaking into the boys’ dorm. Then, again, she was just about to get lucky. Mmm. Terrible pun, that.

She got up to where Ron and Hermione were waiting by his bed. She grimaced at them, raised the bottle to them, uncorked it, and took a measured sip. Ron and Hermione waited with baited breath.

“Well?” Hermione asked, her gaze intense as she watched for a reaction. “How do you feel?”

At first, she couldn’t really say she felt anything different. Slowly, however, a tide of certainty swept through her. She heard a voice singing softly in her ear: “I can see clearly now the rain is gone, I can see all obstacles in my way.”

A smile unfurled across her lips. She knew, just knew, that anything was possible. As heady as the feeling was, her mind was clear, as it seemed it had never been before. The way forward seemed
perfectly obvious. She wondered how she could have failed to see it before.

“I’m wonderful. Right. I’ll be down at Hagrid’s if you need me. Have a lovely evening. Oh, look, you’re all alone up here.” She winked at the two of them, who were staring at her, open-mouthed, and floated down the stairs, the Invisibility Cloak over her arm.

She wasn’t entirely sure where Slughorn came into it, but that didn’t seem to matter terribly much. She was quite sure he would, eventually. She came to the front door, only to find that Filch had apparently forgotten to lock it. She swanned out, whistling as she went.

Felix was just lovely. All her insecurity had evaporated; she hadn’t realized the weight of her troubles until it was relieved, even if it was only temporary. She wondered if it could feel any better taking Elixir to Induce Euphoria. As it was, she felt like singing.

She inhaled the scent of grass and fresh, evening air. The vegetable patch. She needed to go by the vegetable patch. Nodding decisively, she set off.

As she strolled past, she noticed Professor Slughorn talking to Professor Sprout. Well, that made sense, then.

“I do thank you for taking the time, Pomona,” Slughorn was saying courteously, “most authorities agree that they are at their most efficacious if picked at twilight.”

“Oh, I quite agree,” said Professor Sprout warmly. “That enough for you?”

“Plenty, plenty,” said Slughorn, who, Hero saw, was carrying an armful of leafy plants. “This should allow for a few leaves for each of my third years, and some to spare if anybody over-stews them. . . Well, good evening to you, and many thanks again!”

Professor Sprout headed off into the gathering darkness in the direction of her greenhouses, and Slughorn directed his steps to the spot where Hero stood, invisible. Ah. Now seemed just the moment. Hero pulled off the Cloak and put it over her arm.

“Good evening, Professor.”

Slughorn started and turned toward her with a somewhat wary expression. “Merlin’s beard, Hero! You gave me quite a start. But however did you get out of the castle?”

“Well, the front door, sir,” she replied, as if to say, however else? “I think Mr. Filch might have forgotten to lock it.”

Slughorn scowled. “I’ll have to have a word with Albus about him. He’s more concerned with litter than proper security if you ask me. But why are you here?”

Hero found her eyes filling with tears. “Oh, sir, it’s Hagrid. A dear friend of his has died, and I couldn’t bear to let him go through with the burial alone.” She paused, biting her lip as she peered at Slughorn. “You . . . you won’t tell anyone, will you, sir? I don’t want him to get in trouble when he’s already so broken up over this. . . .”

“Well, I can’t promise anything,” he said gruffly. “But I’m sure there’s nothing untoward in attending a funeral. Hagrid’s friend, you say?”

“Yes, his oldest friend, an acromantula he raised. They’ve been together since he was at Hogwarts. It lived in the forest, and it talked. I bet he’ll miss their conversations most of all.”
“Oh . . . goodness. So, the rumors are true, then, about the acromantulas in the forest.”

“Oh, yes. They’re all Aragog’s descendants. Really, Hagrid’s just devastated. I should probably go, sir. He needs the moral support, he’ll never get through it alone.”

“It’s touching, Hero, truly. I have no doubt your mother would have done the same. But . . . er, the beast has just recently died?”

“Only last night, Professor.”

“Well, er, acromantula venom is rather valuable . . . if er, Aragog has only just . . . passed, it may not have dried up yet. Of course, I would never wish to do anything that might be construed as insensitive . . . no, no, perish the thought! But, if there were any way to procure some . . . seeing as it’s almost impossible to do so when the acromantula is alive . . .”

Slughorn seemed to be talking more to himself than Hero now. “. . . seems an awful waste not to collect it . . . might get a hundred Galleons a pint . . . To be frank, my salary is not large . . .”

“Well, sir, I’m sure Hagrid would appreciate someone else to be there with him. I know the whole staff really respects you, sir.” In all honesty, Hero had no idea if this was true; she was well aware that Severus quite resented him. But Professor Sprout seemed to get on fine with him.

“Ah, well, in that case, I’d be delighted! Er, in a rather solemn, grave sort of way, of course.”

Together, they went the rest of the way to Hagrid’s. He had out his enormous checkered handkerchief, which one would be mistaken for thinking might have originally been a tablecloth. He was wearing a black armband that appeared, if Hero was not mistaken, to be a rag dipped in boot polish. His enormous body was wracked with sobs.

“Aw, Hero, you came!”

“Oh, I had to. Ron and Hermione really wanted to come, but we’re too big these days for the Cloak to cover the three of us.”

“I understand. I’m grateful you came, really. It’d have meant a lot to him, you being here . . .”

Hero patted him on the forearm, the highest part of him she could easily reach, as Hagrid blew his nose.

It was only after he’d finished wiping his nose that he appeared to notice Professor Slughorn.

“Blimey, Professor, you’re not going to give Hero detention, are you?”

“No, nothing of the sort. Hero told me of how much he meant to you, and I felt I had to come, to bear witness to the passing of such a noble beast.” Hero nodded, trying to convey sincerity. Felix saved her from laughing out loud. Slughorn conjured three bottles, “so that we may drink to his memory.”

“That’s, that’s right nice of you, Professor.”

“Erm, where is Aragog, Hagrid?”

“In-in the back,” he said, gesturing out the window, to where the enormous spider was laying on its back.

“Are we to bury him in the garden, Hagrid?” Slughorn inquired.
“Yeah. I already have the grave dug for him. Just... just beyond the pumpkin patch. I thought we might say a few nice things over him—happy memories, you know.”

“Of course, of course, my dear man. Shall we, er, do it, then?”

“Yeah, yeah, I reckon we should,” Hagrid said, nodding and sniffing again.

They trooped out to the garden, over to where Aragog’s body was, illuminated by the moon and the light from Hagrid’s hut. It glistened softly on the pincers and the eight milky eyes.

“Magnificent,” Slughorn breathed as he leaned over, ostensibly to get a closer look at Aragog’s head. Hero heard the tinkle of glass on glass as he fiddled with the bottles.

Hagrid was too choked up to speak. Slughorn ended up giving the epitaph, which was about as much waffle as Hero had been spouting since she’d left the castle. Hagrid seemed to like it, though.

Hagrid and Slughorn both drank from the whiskey Hagrid had on hand. Hero only pretended too, knowing enough to keep her wits about her.

Hagrid went on about having Aragog from an egg and raising him. Slughorn wasn’t really listening, not that Hagrid noticed. Slughorn’s eyes instead wandered about the cabin with an air of great interest.

“But... that’s never unicorn hair, is it, Hagrid?” he asked, his gaze alighting on a skein of silver-white hair that hung with Hagrid’s pots and pans.

“Sure,” Hagrid said, shrugging. “They catch it on branches and stuff in the forest, you know—”

“But, my dear fellow, do you know how much that’s worth?”

“I use it for binding on bandages if a creature gets hurt. It’s dead useful, very strong, you see.”

Slughorn seemed to struggling to contain his reaction as he took another sip of his whiskey.

They moved on to other subjects that were routine for Hagrid and potential sources of extra income for Slughorn. Discussing his subject with someone who seemed to have a flattering interest helped him move past his grief slightly.

After about an hour, they started making toasts, to Hero, “to friendship, to generosity, to ten galleons a hair!”

Then they started singing a ballad about a dying wizard named Odo. Whether due to their drunkenness or simply innate lack of skill, they were painfully off-key.

When they finished, Hagrid was mopping his eyes again. “Ah, the good always die young. My dad, your mum and dad, Hero.” Large tears started rolling down his cheeks. “Aw, terrible... terrible.”

“Sorry,” Slughorn said, having not really been paying attention. “Can’t carry a tune to save my life.” Hagrid fell asleep, making a pillow out of his folded arms.

“He was talking about my parents, actually,” Hero corrected quietly.

“Oh. Oh, yes. Terrible indeed. I... don’t suppose you remember it, do you, Hero?”

“But I do. I grew up having nightmares about it. I relive it every time the Dementors come close.
“I — I didn’t,” said Slughorn in a hushed voice.

“He – Voldemort –” Slughorn flinched “— murdered my father, then went upstairs, to where Mum and I were. He . . . he told her to get out of the way. He only wanted me. She could have run.”

“She might have survived?” Slughorn asked, horrified.

Hero nodded, not quite finished with her tale yet. She sighed. “Do you think it’s true, that the good die young?”

“I . . . well, your parents were young, certainly, but that’s surely an anomaly. There’s no reason you should die at the same age.”

“No. No, I don’t suppose I will. I have to kill him. Did you know that? That’s what the prophecy is.”

“It’s true?” he rasped, shocked.

“Yeah. But I’m not worried about that.”

“You’re . . . not?”

“No. I have terminal cancer. Dumbledore’s trying to train me before . . . well. But he doesn’t think we’ll get much farther than we are now. So it’s sort of a moot point anyway. It’s a shame. I really wanted to be the one to get rid of him. I guess they’ll have to find someone else to be their savior.”

“Why . . . why can’t you go any further?”

“Well, Dumbledore’s trying to show me everything there is to know about Voldemort, to find out his weaknesses and figure out a way to defeat him. But there’s this one memory that’s more important than all the others. The person whose memory it is won’t give it to him. I can’t understand that, can you, Professor? How could they just let Voldemort go on destroying people’s lives when they could have a part in finishing him?”

“Well . . . ah . . .”

“You liked my mother, didn’t you, Professor?”

“Yes, but I don’t see what that has to do with—”

“I would gladly lay down my life, what little of it I have left, to save the people I love. My mother gave her life for me. Compared to that, is it really so hard to give me a memory?”

“If . . . if it was a question of helping you, certainly. But no good can come of you seeing that memory!”

“Ah, but there you’re wrong. Knowledge is power, and without the knowledge in that memory, there can be no question of us winning the war. My mother will have died in vain, and so will I.”

Slughorn bowed his head, staring at his lap, where his wand was held in his hands. “I . . . am deeply, deeply ashamed of what this memory shows. I fear I may have done great damage that day.”

“If you let me have the memory, I can begin to make amends for your mistake.”
Slughorn finally looked into Hero’s eyes, raising his wand to his temple. He pulled it away, a silver strand of memory clinging to the tip. He reached into his cloak and pulled out the last bottle, empty. He let the memory trail into the bottle, where it swirled, neither liquid nor gas.

“I only beg you not to think too badly of me once you have seen it,” he whispered. Hero patted his arm and left him, swinging the Cloak around herself as she turned toward the castle.
The door was still unlocked, but that seemed to be where she and Felix parted ways. She narrowly avoided Peeves on the third floor, and a less than amused, recently awoken Fat Lady refused her entry to Gryffindor Tower, insisting the password had changed at midnight.

“And if you don’t like it, you can take it up with the headmaster!”

“Wait, he’s back?”

“Oh, yes,” said a voice behind Hero. She turned to find Nearly Headless Nick. “I had it from the Bloody Baron, who saw him arrive. Apparently, he appeared to be in good spirits, though rather tired. I understand he had something to attend to before he turned in.”

“Brilliant!” Hero said, taking off for his office.

“Come back! All right, I lied! I was annoyed you woke me up! The password’s still ‘tapeworm’!” Hero ignored her.

Minutes later, she was standing in front of the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore’s office.

“ToFilee Eclairs!” she blurted. It hopped aside and she took the stairs two at a time. She took a moment to compose herself before knocking.

“Enter.” Hero pushed the door open to reveal the headmaster’s office and a rather-exhausted looking Dumbledore.

“Good gracious, Hero. To what do I owe this very late pleasure?”

“I got the memory, sir.”

Dumbledore’s face broke into a wide smile and the tiredness seemed to fall away from him. “That’s spectacular news, Hero! I knew you could do it.” He took the bottle she held out and strode over to the cabinet where he kept his Pensieve. He emptied the memory into the swirling depths and gestured for Hero to come stand beside him. She did, bending at the waist and feeling the now familiar sensation of falling into the scene.

She found herself once again in Slughorn’s office of many years before. The scene played out rather differently. Instead of telling Tom Riddle he would go wrong, Slughorn instead told him he quite expected him to be Minister for Magic in twenty years. After the other boys left, once again Riddle asked about Horcruxes. And this time, as it really had happened all those years ago, Slughorn told him.

“Well,” said Slughorn, not looking at Riddle, but fiddling with the ribbon on top of his box of crystalized pineapple, “well, it can’t hurt to give you an overview, of course. Just so that you understand the term. A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul.”

“I’m not sure I quite understand how that works, sir.” He was lying, Hero realized. He knew perfectly well, quite possibly a good deal better than Slughorn did. This was not the reason for the conversation.

“Well, you split your soul, you see,” said Slughorn, “and hide part of it in an object outside the body.
Then, even if one’s body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form . . .

Hero felt a chill go through her as she remembered Voldemort’s words from the graveyard. “I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost . . . but still, I was alive.”

“. . . few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be preferable.”

This did not deter Riddle; far from it, he could no longer conceal his hunger. He hesitated a moment before speaking again. “How do you split your soul?” Another question he already knew the answer to.

“Well,” said Slughorn uncomfortably, “you must understand that the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature.”

“But how do you do it?” Riddle pressed.

“By an act of evil—the supreme act of evil. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: He would encase the torn portion —”

“Encase? But how—?”

“There is a spell, do not ask me, I don’t know!” said Slughorn, shaking his head like an old elephant bothered by mosquitoes. “Do I look as though I have tried it—do I look like a killer?”

“No, sir, of course not,” said Riddle quickly. “I’m sorry . . . I didn’t mean to offend . . .”

“No at all, not at all, not offended,” said Slughorn gruffly. “It’s natural to feel some curiosity about these things. . . . Wizards of a certain caliber have always been drawn to that aspect of magic. . . .” Hero could certainly understand Slughorn not wanting anyone to hear him say those words, let alone have them in the record of memory.

“Yes, sir,” said Riddle. “What I don’t understand, though—just out of curiosity—I mean, would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn’t it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn’t seven the most powerfully magical number, wouldn’t seven — ?”

“Merlin’s beard, Tom!” yelped Slughorn. “Seven! Isn’t it bad enough to think of killing one person? And in any case . . . bad enough to divide the soul . . . but to rip it into seven pieces . . .” Slughorn looked deeply troubled now: He was gazing at Riddle as though he had never seen him plainly before, and Hero could tell that he was regretting entering into the conversation at all. As well he should.

“But, but, this . . . this is all hypothetical, isn’t it, Tom, what we’re discussing?” He was practically begging to be told his star pupil wasn’t considering a career as an effectively immortal serial killer instead of letting Slughorn set him up at the Ministry. Yes, Slughorn, and everyone else, for that matter, would have been infinitely better off had he kept his mouth shut.

“Oh, yes, of course, sir,” His face once again presenting a charming smile. “And don’t worry. It’ll stay our little secret.”

“I think, Hero, it is time we left,” Dumbledore said gently. She nodded, and they surged back up to Dumbledore’s office.

They moved to Dumbledore’s desk. Hero waited for him to speak, which seemed a very long time
“I have been hoping for this piece of evidence for a very long time,” said Dumbledore at last. “It confirms the theory on which I have been working, it tells me that I am right, and also how very far there is still to go. . . .” Exhausted did not even begin to describe his expression.

“He did it, then. Made himself immortal.” It wasn’t a question.

“Oh, yes. I received proof of that years ago.” At the question in her eyes, he explained, “The diary you yourself handed me at the end of your second year, belonging to one T.M. Riddle. A memory, preserved in a diary, draining Ginny Weasley of life.”

“So . . . do you think he’d already made one by that point?”

“It’s quite possible. He had already murdered his father and grandparents. I believe you are familiar with another of his victims, a Miss Myrtle Warren?”

“Yeah, Moaning Myrtle.”

“I suspect it was her death that he used to create the diary.”

“But did he just kill his father for revenge, then, or . . . No. No. The ring. The ring with the curse that’s . . . killing you. Seven. He asked about splitting his soul in seven. That’s why you wanted the memory, not because you wanted to know whether he’d made a Horcrux, but how many. . . Bloody hell.”

“Precisely. What disturbed me more than anything was that the diary was not treated as might have been expected. Far from being kept far from harm, it was used as a weapon. I rather doubt, were it his only Horcrux, he would have left it in the hands of Lucius Malfoy of all people. No, I imagine he succeeded in creating his six Horcruxes.”

“You do? Do you have any idea what they are?”

“I do, as it happens, as do you. What have you seen of Tom Riddle? What would you presume he would select to house the fragments of his soul?”

“The . . . the cup and the locket. The ring.”

“I concur. However, that still leaves us with the question of the other two Horcruxes. I have a theory about one of them, as it happens.”

“Sir?”

“Your dream of Arthur Weasley being attacked.”

“I was the snake . . .”

“Indeed. Why would your sleeping mind have deposited you as a passenger in the body of Nagini? Your mind, as we both are aware, is linked to Voldemort’s. It stands to reason, therefore, that there is also a link between Voldemort and Nagini. This is perhaps the most troublesome on the list; very rarely does he send Nagini to act on his orders, preferring to keep her close, albeit ostensibly for waste disposal,” Dumbledore said distastefully. “The others will be guarded, protected by powerful enchantments and tainted by curses meant to incapacitate any who attempt to make off with them.” He raised his blackened hand to punctuate this statement.
“You got it from the ring, didn’t you? The ring is a Horcrux.”

“Was, Hero. Was. I have destroyed it, though I still have to contend with the consequences of my rash action in neglecting to remove all the curses on it before touching it,” he said, gazing at it ruefully.

“How did you destroy it?”

“A Horcrux can only be destroyed if its container is damaged beyond repair. Being considerably strengthened by the application of Dark Magic, this is, as I’m sure you understand, quite difficult. There are only two known substances that can destroy a Horcrux: Fiendfyre . . . and basilisk venom.”

“That’s why Riddle was destroyed in the Chamber of Secrets, wasn’t it? Because the fang I stabbed the diary with just so happened to have come from a Basilisk.”

Dumbledore inclined his head. “Your logic is faultless. There is one point I would like to add, however. Nagini needs only to be killed as any other snake would be. I have found no records of a living creature being used for such a purpose. A living being housing a piece of Voldemort’s soul need only die, as it might have naturally.”

“That’s not exactly a huge help.”

“No, I imagine not.”

“So . . . the other Horcrux might be something of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw’s?”

“I have no idea whether or not he managed to procure something of Ravenclaw’s. I am quite sanguine, however, in my certainty that he managed to get nothing of Gryffindor’s. The only know relic of Godric Gryffindor,” he said, pointing behind her, “is right there.”

Hero turned in her seat and found herself looking at the Sword of Gryffindor, hanging on the wall. She smiled nostalgically.

“That’s not too bad, I suppose. Is . . . is that where you’ve been going all year?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Indeed, Hero. I tend to keep that information to a need to know basis. Rufus Scrimgeour may be Minister for Magic, but he certainly does not fall into that category. As it happens, I believe I may be close to finding another one.”

“Really?!”

He inclined his head. “There are hopeful signs.”

“Can . . . can I come with you the next time you go?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Hero blinked. She hadn’t honestly expected to be permitted. She felt like she was eleven again, running toward the barrier, fully expecting to smack into it, only to continue past it to a place she hadn’t known was possible. “Thank you.”

“Certainly. Now, as marvelous as this has been, I really do need to get to bed, as do you, I’m sure.”

“Yes, sir. Goodnight.”
“Goodnight, Hero. You’ve done very well.”

Back in the Common Room, Hero found Ron and Hermione who, it seemed, had really tried to wait up for her. They’d fallen asleep on the one of the sofas, curled up together, Hermione’s head on Ron’s chest, his arm around her shoulders. Remembering falling asleep that way more than once with Severus, she smiled fondly at the two of them. She debated whether or not to wake them up, but decided they’d be mortified if they were found like that the next morning.

She sat on the coffee table and poked Ron in the arm. He shifted slightly, muttering incoherently. Hero rolled her eyes, then poked him again. There was more of a reaction this time as he scowled, but did not wake. Hero sighed and took hold of his nose.

His eyes opened wide in alarm and he fumbled for his wand. Hero let go. Hermione frowned, woken by her boyfriend’s urgent movements, and blinked blearily.

“Wakey, wakey. I thought you might, possibly prefer not to be caught like this tomorrow morning.”

Hermione’s eyes opened wide; quite awake now, she scrambled up, her face pink. “Thanks, Hero. Erm, goodnight, Ron,” she said, quickly tiptoeing up the stairs to the sixth year girls’ dorm.

Ron glared at Hero. “You can’t let a chap sleep?”

“It’s better this way, and you know it. Now, stop fussing and get to bed. I could have just left you to the firsties,” she reminded him.

He grimaced and nodded. He wandered up to his own dorm, yawning, then waving at her. Hero smiled and shook her head. No one would ever accuse Ronald Weasley of being disingenuous.

Hero told them the events of the previous night during Charms the next morning after quickly casting muffliato. They were suitably impressed with her careful handling of Slughorn, and quite awestruck by both the contents of the memory and Hero’s discussion with Dumbledore.

“Fiendfyre and basilisk venom,” Hermione fretted. “I don’t think we can use the Fiendfyre, it’s simply too difficult to control. And basilisks are so rare, it’s not like we can just go out and buy a bottle of venom. . .”

Hero snickered. When Hermione frowned at her, she said, trying to keep a straight face, “Right. Right. Because it’s not like there’s a great dirty snake beneath our feet or anything, with a mouth full of fangs.”

Hermione blushed. “Oh. Right.”

“So Dumbledore reckons he might have found one?”

“Yeah. He said there were hopeful signs.”

“And he’s letting you go with him? Blimey,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“I know. I never thought he’d agree to it.”

“How long do you think it’ll take us? I mean, if Dumbledore’s been searching all year, and he only now thinks he might have found one . . .” Hermione worried, biting her lip.
They went up to the Common Room after Charms, one of the few free periods they had together. There was a bit of crowd there; after fighting their way through it, they realized why: Katie was back.

Hero and Hermione went over to give her a hug.

“Katie, it’s wonderful to see you again! You’re feeling alright?” Hermione inquired.

“Oh, yes, I’m much better. They let me out of St. Mungo’s on Monday. I’ve had a few days to be with my family, but now I’m back.”

“Brilliant. Now that you and Ginny are both back, we might not finish bottom of the table.” That was on her mind a fair bit recently, probably more than it should be. But she really didn’t want to be known as the captain who led Gryffindor to their first bottom of the table defeat in two centuries. There was no coming back from that.

“Yeah, they mentioned about your, er, accident in the last match. It sounds awful. But I know you’ll lead us to victory,” Katie said cheerfully.

“Listen, Katie, do you know who’s responsible for your attack?” Hero asked, careful to keep her voice low.

“I’m afraid I don’t, Hero, I’m sorry. You’re not the first person to ask, everyone’s curious. But the last thing I remember is walking into the lady’s room at the Three Broomsticks.” She shrugged helplessly.

“Well, thanks anyway. It’s really great to see you.”

Katie smiled. “You, too. I’d love to say I missed everyone, but I haven’t really been in a state to miss much at all until two weeks ago.”

It was a year of rather dramatic changes in the Gryffindor Quidditch team’s lineup. First Katie had been cursed and replaced with Dean, then Ginny had been poisoned and temporarily replaced with Seamus, and now Hero wasn’t permitted to fly, so Ginny would be filling in as seeker. But it was still Hero’s team. Still, as she had told McLaggen back at the beginning of the year, her Quidditch pitch. No one was going to tell her what to do; she was going to enjoy it while she could, for as long as she could.

As she went to sit down, she realized she hadn’t told Dumbledore about her surgery. Drat. Severus might mention it to him, but it would be best if she told him herself. She thought of the extra practice she had for Charms on turning vinegar to wine and sighed. But she got up and left the Common Room, heading for Dumbledore’s office.

“What are we going to tell people?”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re going to notice when I’m not there. I mean, they haven’t noticed when I leave on Saturdays, but that’s because it’s Saturday. When I’m gone Monday and Tuesday, I have a feeling
it’s going to be commented on.”

“Did you have any thoughts?”

“Nose job?” she suggested sarcastically.

Severus glared at her. “Don’t go there.”

“Fine. Sorry.”

“We’ll tell them you’ve had an illness in the family. Your aunt was in a car accident or something.”

“I suppose that’ll work. It’s hard to believe I might never see her again. I mean, it’s not a great loss, but . . . it’s weird to think about.”

“What was her reaction to the news?”

“You mean finding out her niece is at death’s door?” Hero sighed. “Honestly, I think she actually is sorry about it.”

“As if that’s any good to anyone.”

“You don’t appreciate the sentiment?”

“What does her sentiment give you?” he sneered.

“It is what it is. Are . . . are you going back once I’m settled?”

“No. Albus didn’t think it wise for you to be without a guard in the middle of London. I’ll stay nearby. Don’t worry.”

“But what if it gets back to the Dark Lord that you’re protecting me, just you?”

“Why should it?”

Hero rolled her eyes. I think people might wonder why Hero Potter and Severus Snape are both absent from Hogwarts at the exact same time.”

“But Hero Potter and Severus Snape will not both be absent from Hogwarts.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I may be the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor, but I am still a Potions Master. It wouldn’t be terribly strange for Albus to ask me to brew something for him instead of Slughorn, something requiring me to absent myself for several days at a time. It will be utterly unremarkable. When would I ever pass up the opportunity to spend time with potions instead of students?”

“Clever. Sev, what do I do?”

“What?” he asked, not really hearing her as he was distracted by a reckless driver.

Hero sighed. “They’re taking out part of my brain. What am I going to be like once they’re through with me?”

“You’ll be you, with most of your tumor gone.”

“Don’t be obtuse.”
“I didn’t think I was. Hero . . . this won’t change who you are. Your brain is not your mind, or your heart, or your soul. It’s an organ.”

“An organ that I use to think and feel. What good will I be if something goes wrong?”

“As much as you can. I know you, remember? Even if it somehow leaves you three-quarters paralyzed, you’ll find a way to fight Voldemort. But it won’t. You’ll be fine. This is what these people do for a living. I’m sure they think it’ll be a doddle.”

“I hope not. It’s when you think everything’s going to be easy that it all goes to hell.”

“Sometimes you give even me a run for my money when it comes to pessimism.”

“Just hold me and tell me everything’s going to be alright.”

“Do you mind if I wait until we can safely pull over?” he asked dryly.

That surprised a laugh from her. “No, no, I don’t mind.”

“Gracious of you, I’m sure.”

* It all went very quickly. They checked in, a nurse took her medical history, and they met with the anesthesiologist. Hero was given an ID bracelet and a gown to change into. They put in her IV, and she went to sleep. Some things weren’t easy, but they were simple.

After the surgery, she felt like she had a horrible head cold. Her sinuses ached; she supposed that made sense, seeing as that was the way the surgeons had gone. She was awake . . . sort of awake, at any rate, but the anesthesia had left her groggy. She wished she could slip back into the blackness. Black was such a nice, warm, comforting color. She wanted to be embraced by it, run her fingers through it, stare into it. As she closed her eyes, smiling at the memories, she did just that.

The next time she came to, her head was a little less foggy, though she still ached. There was a particularly vicious headache brewing. Hero supposed that was to be expected.

She glanced around the room, inspecting her surroundings. It was a hospital ward, the curtains drawn around her bed. Soft murmurs came from the other side, not unlike the Veil at the Ministry. She suppressed a shudder at the memory.

Severus was asleep in the chair next to her bed, his neck at what she had to assume was an uncomfortable angle. He was dressed as he had been this morning, in a white button down and black trousers with his hair pulled back. Only, was it this morning? She couldn’t see a clock, wasn’t anywhere near a window. She had no idea. She didn’t even know what day of the week it was. It was a strange feeling, she mused, being outside of time.

Severus murmured and shifted to a more comfortable position. How long had he been sitting there, asleep in that horribly uncomfortable hospital chair? He couldn’t have been there for very long, surely.

She sighed. Severus started awake at the sound, instantly alert.

“I was wondering when you’d wake up,” he commented mildly, sitting up and cracking his neck.

“How long have I been . . . ?”
He smiled. “It’s Saturday evening. You slept most of the day.”

“What about you?” she asked timidly.

“I drifted off . . .” he glanced at his watch, “. . . about an hour and a half ago. I’ve been reading,” he said, picking up a book from her bedside table.

“Poetry?”

“It passes the time. Those of us who haven’t recently had surgery have a little more trouble sleeping for hours on end.”

“I think I’m awake now.”

“That’s what you said last time.”

Hero blinked. “There was a last time?”

“You were fairly out of it. I believe you said something about running your fingers through black, and warmth. You weren’t terribly clear,” he said, fighting a smirk.

Hero turned bright red. “Oh. Oh, that’s embarrassing. I don’t suppose you would be willing to forget that ever happened?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell a soul.”

“I suppose I can trust you.”

“You’re so kind,” he murmured dryly.

“Only for you, dear.”

* 

They kept her in Sunday and Monday for observations. If Severus hadn’t been there, Hero was pretty sure she would have gone stir-crazy. As it was, it was a sort of perfection.

“Let’s see. What would Hero like? Hmm. Ah: Wordsworth, ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’.”

He eyed her assessingly for a moment, lowering the book. She nodded contentedly.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed – and gazed – but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.
They told most people that Hero’s aunt had unexpectedly taken ill. It was so utterly unremarkable lately that no one thought to question it. She, of course, had told Ron and Hermione the truth before she departed for London. She hadn’t even missed much. After missing Monday and driving back Tuesday, they were still on the spells they’d started that week. Hermione had notes on what she’d missed.

Hero felt rather foggy and she tired more easily, but no one seemed to notice that either. Or maybe they just thought nothing of it. Everyone was feeling the toll of the current climate. Everyone knew someone who had lost someone. Hannah Abbot still had yet to return following her mother’s murder, and no one really expected to see her back. The Montgomery sisters’ little brother had been attacked by Fenrir Greyback and had died of his injuries in St. Mungo’s. Susan Bones was still grieving for her aunt. A part of Hero was still grieving for Sirius, though most of the time she kept it safely stowed away, where it didn’t hurt as much.

One day seemed to blend into the next. Quidditch practice was going as well as could be expected. Hero knew both that, in order to win the Quidditch cup, they had to win by at least 300 points and that, in all likelihood, they wouldn’t manage it. She found it difficult to care, though she tried to keep that from the rest of the team.

As always, the last game of the year was a big deal. People made up chants about members of the opposing team, who either strutted in the face of all the attention, or periodically ran to the loo to throw up. Hero had found that her chemo meds weren’t any easier on her stomach since the surgery, and so she found herself in the second camp, though for an entirely different reason.

May had seemed to sneak up on her, perhaps because April had been such a busy month. It seemed mostly made up of appointments. The first Saturday of the month, she had another radiology appointment in Glasgow, then the Saturday after that, she went to Dr. Warren.

“So . . . how long do you think I have?”

“Well, I can see you don’t feel like being delicate today. I think the outlook looks good. Got any plans for the summer?”

“My best friend’s brother is getting married the first of August.”

“Ah. I think you’ll definitely be able to be there for that.”

“You think?”

“Yes. The surgeons couldn’t get rid of the whole thing, there are pockets of cells they couldn’t get to or felt they couldn’t remove without compromising your frontal cortex. But you have much less tumor than you did, and the chemo tends to work better when it has less to deal with. I can’t say for sure at this point how much time you’ll have, but I’m fairly confident I can get you to August. Beyond that, it’s difficult to say. We’ll play it by ear.”

The week before match against Ravenclaw, Hero found herself running into Myrtle’s toilet to throw up. Afterward, she settled on the cool tile floor, hugging her knees to her chest, her head against the side of the stall. She felt cold and clammy, like death warmed over. As she returned to reality, she heard crying.
“Don’t,” crooned Moaning Myrtle’s voice from one of the cubicles. “Don’t . . . tell me what’s wrong . . . I can help you . . .”

“No one can help me,” said the crying boy. Hero recognized Malfoy’s voice; he sounded like he was cracking up. “I can’t do it . . . I can’t . . . it won’t work . . . and unless I do it soon . . . he says he’ll kill me . . .”

Hero shakily got to her feet and pushed the stall door open. She saw Malfoy shaking, actually crying, leaning over one of the sinks.

Malfoy straightened and spun at the sound of the hinges squealing. He sneered when he saw Hero. “Weak stomach, Potter? Or are you just up the duff?”

Hero, remembering that Severus had thought the same thing, felt a flash of irritation. “Why does everyone ask that? Ron was doing the same thing twenty minutes ago, and I’m fairly certain you wouldn’t accuse him of being pregnant.”

“Yeah, but you’re not playing, are you, Potter?”

“Clearly, I’m ill. Judging from the looks of you, so are you.”

He sneered at her again, but there was a tinge of panic to it. “You don’t know anything.”

She raised an eyebrow and leaned against the stall. “I know quite a bit more than you think.”

“What do you think you know?”

“I know the Dark Lord has ordered you to kill Dumbledore,” she retorted bluntly.

He stared at her, horror in his eyes. “Get on with it, then,” he said gruffly, looking down.

“What are you talking about?”

“Kill me. You’ll be doing me a favor,” he said bitterly.

“I have no intention of killing you. If I was going to, I would have done it months ago. Bit like you and Dumbledore,” she added thoughtfully.

“Why do you care?” he asked, well and truly confused now.

She pursed her lips as she took in his white, tired, tear-stained face. “Let’s just say I’m one of a number of people with a vested interest in your predicament.”

“You sound like you’ve been spending too much time around Snape.”

“I resent your implication that one can spend too much time around Severus.”

He stared at her as if she’d just told him Blast-Ended Skrewts weren’t that bad.

“Have you been spending time with my godfather?”

She considered the question, remembering the days spent driving to London, in the hospital, the hours they’d stolen together. “You might say that,” she finally replied.

If his expression had been confused before, it was nothing short of bewildered now. “Who are you
“That’s a bit rich coming from you,” she returned coolly. “Look, you don’t want to kill Dumbledore. You’ve had since September and you haven’t gotten anywhere. Keep going if you really think you must, but go easy on Severus. He worries about you, even though you really are being an idiot. Look, he doesn’t want glory, you numpty. He just wants to help you.” That was a bit of a lie, but Malfoy didn’t need to know that.

“I’ll . . . I’ll think about it.”

Hero nodded in satisfaction. “Splendid. I’ll be seeing you.” With that, she swanned out of the bathroom. Malfoy watched her go with an expression not unlike one might wear upon seeing a fish ride a bicycle.

From Myrtle’s bathroom, Hero went straight to Severus. She rapped on his office door and waited with ill-concealed impatience. He opened the door; when he saw who it was, he stepped aside to let her in.

“Is something the matter?”

She sighed. “Malfoy knows I know.”

“What?”

Hopping up onto his desk and crossing her ankles, she proceeded to explain.

“I was in the loo, and . . . well, basically I told him I know what he’s been up to. He asked me to kill him. I told him I didn’t have any more intention of killing him than he has of killing Dumbledore.”

“You . . .” he started to laugh, helplessly, verging on hysterical. “Oh, fuck. We’re finished.”

Hero rolled her eyes. “Don’t be so melodramatic. Haven’t you been saying how close-lipped he’s been?”

Severus snorted. “He’s upper-class, he’s been taught to maintain a stiff upper lip practically from birth. He knows better than to breathe a word about his difficulties. He has no such restraint when it comes to the affairs of others.”

“But it’s entwined with his ‘difficulties’ as you put it. He can’t say anything without implicating himself.”

“Hmm. True.” His gaze turned suspicious. “What else does he know?”

Hero batted her eyelashes at him innocently. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t be obtuse. What else. Does. He. Know?”

She sighed. “He said I sounded like you. He asked if I’d been spending too much time with you.”

“And?”

“I . . . confirmed it, more or less.”

“More? Or less?”
“I don’t know, I can’t read Malfoy’s mind. Why don’t you?”

Severus scowled. “I’ve been trying to, but he’s become too accomplished an Occlumens.”

Hero held out a hand. Severus took it and went to stand beside her, leaned against his desk, and sighed. Hero laid her head on his shoulder. “It’s going to be fine. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“I thought I was supposed to reassure you,” he said wearily.

“You did, remember? I’m returning the favor.”

“But I don’t believe you.”

“I know. That doesn’t matter. Now, shush.”

“Why?”

“. . . Hermione’s never mentioned, but it’s always seemed to work.” Severus sighed and, for once, did as he was told.

* 

Her role as captain ended with the practices for the most part; during the other games, she’d given directions while searching for the snitch. They’d never hear her if she was on the ground. For her final match as captain, she would be no more than a spectator. It just seemed to get more painful rather than less. She supposed it was because she kept fussing with the wound instead of letting it heal, a gouge she couldn’t leave be.

It didn’t seem like it could be the end of the year already. It was May, nearly a year since her diagnosis. She was starting to feel like she was living on borrowed time. She wished she could stop thinking about it, lingering over it. She was like Moaning Myrtle, who seemed to spend most of her time in the room where she died, floating over the cubicle where she took her last breaths. Morbid, that was the right word. It was morbid, and, unfortunately, endlessly fascinating. But she hadn’t wanted her last months to be focused on dying. She’d wanted to spend it living instead of dying. She hadn’t realized the reality would be that it would be both, because both were true. And since living was like breathing, something you didn’t think about but just got on with, she found herself concentrating on dying, like poking with your tongue at the space where a tooth used to be, then the new one growing in. It was an endless cycle that she found herself unreservedly sick of.

But she wasn’t supposed to be thinking about that now. She was supposed to be getting ready to cheer her team on in the final match of the year. She shook herself out of her brooding and got on with it.

* 

There were no words. None that could adequately express her shock. Gryffindor was playing phenomenally. They were playing better than they ever had before, the best practice, when she’d felt that, in better times, most, if not all of them, would have been fending off recruiters for the top teams. Ravenclaw was good; Gryffindor could do no wrong.

Hero listened, pleased as punch, to verse after verse of “Weasley is Our King.” The chasers were flawless, the beaters superb. And then, 300-140, Ginny caught the snitch, winning them the match and the championship. The sound from the Gryffindor supporters was deafening, earsplitting. Hero’s heart lifted, and it was almost as good as flying.
Everyone landed and lifted Ginny onto their shoulders to carry her back to the Common Room. McGonagall handed her the trophy (even then, they refused to put her down), and an enormous grin spread across her face. It was beautiful, that moment, golden and shining, untarnished and untainted.

The party that followed was a little less golden and shining. What it was, was loud, and jubilant. Once they got back to the Common Room, Ginny had them put her down. She presented the cup to Hero with a flourish and a bow.

“Couldn’t have done it without you, captain,” she said, a twinkle in her eye.

Hero grinned at her, then kissed the cup and held it high. A cheer went up around the room. Sometimes, the impossible became possible for just long enough for it to be attainable.

“Speech! Speech! Speech!” came a chant; Hero never did find out who started it.

“Alright, alright. How many of you thought we would get here? Inter-house Quidditch champions again, at long last? We’d have had it last year, except Umbridge stuck her nose in. We’d have had it the year before that, except someone had the bright idea of having the Triwizard Tournament again. We actually did manage to win it the year before that by some miracle. Of course, the year before that, there was a great dirty snake slithering through the castle, and the year before that, I’m really sorry, but I happened to be in the hospital wing after facing Voldemort.

“This year, it has been one thing after another. Katie, and Ginny, and me, all out of the lineup at one point or another. But look at what you’ve done! Oliver Wood would be proud of you today. Oliver Wood would be proud to be you today, and he’s with Puddlemere United! I know I’m proud of you. You should be proud of yourselves. You’ve done it. No one who was here will ever forget it. If you can come back from what happened in the last match to win the tournament,” she shrugged, grinning, “you can do anything.”

And then they started chanting her name. And she realized she was crying from the pure joy of it. And in the euphoria of it, Seamus pushed his way through the crowd, and Dean reached for him. Without even seeming conscious that they were in the middle of a crowd, Dean kissed him. The cheering only got louder.

Hero just laughed. When they pulled away, blushing, they looked at her. She shook her head at them. “Thank God you finally got your act together. I’d have had to do something drastic if it went on much longer.”

Seamus laughed and pulled Dean back so they could go on kissing. After a few moments, the two of them wandered out of the Common Room in search of somewhere they could make a spectacle of themselves without spectators.

“Albus, you wanted to see me?”

“Yes, do take a seat, Severus. Tea?”

“If you would be so kind. What’s this about?”

Dumbledore looked at him over his half-moon spectacles as if to say, is that a question you really have to ask? And it wasn’t.

Severus sighed. “What else do you require of me?”
“There is something Hero must be told, but I do not think it wise to enlighten her until the last possible moment. Otherwise, how could she do what must be done?”

“And what is it she must do?”

“That is between Hero and myself. Now, listen closely. After my death, there will come a time – no, do not argue, do not interrupt! There will come a time when Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake.”

“For Nagini?” Severus asked, bemused.

“Yes. Once the moment arrives when Voldemort ceases to use her as a tool and weapon and instead keeps her by his side under magical protections . . . then, I think it will be time to tell Hero.”

“Tell her . . . what?” Severus demanded through gritted teeth, glaring at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore took a breath and closed his eyes. “Tell her that, on the night Voldemort tried to kill her, when Lily gave her life, the Killing Curse rebounded, and . . . a portion of Voldemort’s soul was blasted off from the whole. It . . . latched itself onto the only living thing in the house. To Hero. It is this that gives her the ability to talk to snakes and the connection with Voldemort’s mind she has never understood. So long as that fragment of Voldemort’s soul is protected within Hero, Voldemort cannot be destroyed.”

“And so . . . Hero must die?” Severus asked, his voice deceptively calm. His eyes had a steely glint in them quite unlike Dumbledore’s twinkle. Dumbledore’s eyes opened; they certainly weren’t twinkling now.

“And Voldemort himself must do it. That is essential.”

“All these years, I have given my time, my energy, all my efforts, given you my life . . . so that Hero Potter would be safe. I agreed all those years ago because I thought we were protecting her, for Lily!”

“We have protected her because it was necessary to teach her, to raise her, to let her try her strengths. Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth. Sometimes I have thought that she suspects it herself. I believe she will have ensured that, by the time she meets her end, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort.”

Beyond horrified, Snape looked appalled. Actually, he looked like he was going to be sick. “You have kept her alive so that she can die at the correct time?!?”

“Come now, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?”

“Lately, only those I could not save,” he murmured bitterly. “My every breath has been for your plans for Hero Potter, in the belief that she would live. And now you tell me that, all along, you’ve been raising her as a pig for slaughter?”

Dumbledore was looking at him with an odd expression. “But this is touching. Will you now tell me that you have grown to care for her after all?”

“I love, I love . . . I love her,” he rasped, looking away.

Dumbledore seemed to wither and shrink in on himself at these words. “Oh. Oh. How . . . how long?”
“January. At the very latest.”

“What have you done?”

“I believe that’s between Hero and myself.”


“Nothing she didn’t wish. I certainly didn’t seduce a student, if that’s what you’re implying. If anything, it was the other way around.”

“Hero . . . ? Never mind, I don’t want to know,” Dumbledore said, holding up a hand to forestall comment.

“If I might?”

“Oh, go ahead. You might as well.”

“Tell her.”

“What?”

“If . . . I must, I will tell her what she needs to know. I beg you not to make me tell the woman I love that she must give her life, and I urge you not to be a coward. She may never forgive you.”

“It’s no matter.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Don’t pretend it doesn’t bother you, I know it does. And besides, she’s dying. She may not be ready to die, but she’s accepted the reality. Trust me, she’d far rather her death meant something.”

“You know her that well?”

Severus swallowed. “I do.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“One.”

*  

It wasn’t going well, but that was nothing new. Back in September, he’d thought it would be easy. He wished he could go back in time and wring the neck of the version of himself from September. It didn’t make a great deal of sense, but he blamed the boy from nine months ago for the position he was in now, bloody cocky, little brat that he’d been.

Every time, the bird was dead, or the apple was missing a segment. Every fucking time. The Order of the Phoenix would be delighted if they knew how easy it would be to hack pieces off the Death Eaters. A teleportation device that Splinched you every time you used it. Brilliant – provided you weren’t bringing through people who were on your side.

Except, what did sides matter anymore? Voldemort would kill him when he failed. He wondered, as he had, guiltily, for many months now, if his father had somehow missed that part. If, somewhere along the line, he’d lost the wisdom that it was better to be free in hell than to serve in heaven. That it was better to be one’s own master and keep out of sticky things like wars, even if perhaps you believed in the ideology and had been promised certain things. What good were promises when you
were in dead – or in Azkaban?

Guy Fawkes was the man for whom he’d heard Dumbledore’s phoenix had been named, at least according to his father. Draco had taken to taking his father’s words with a grain of salt these days, but he still remembered the history. Guy Fawkes had been a muggle who had attempted to overthrow the king at the time, who had believed in worshipping differently than he had. He’d planned to use gunpowder to cause an explosion in the House of Lords when the king opened it, killing him along with everyone else in the building. He hadn’t just been executed for treason; every year, apparently, on thousands of bonfires across the country, he was burnt in effigy. What would become of him if Voldemort were to lose, or even if he were to publicly fail in killing Dumbledore? Would he, then, become the Guy Fawkes of the wizarding world? But what other choice did he have?
Hi! So sorry for the inconvenience, but it's been fixed. For your trouble, here's another chapter. Things are coming to a head for book six, but we've got plenty more to go.

It would be untrue to say that Hermione was cracking up under the pressure. She wasn’t. Really. Go bother someone else with your ridiculous questions. What do you mean, who am I to tell you what to do?! I’m a prefect! What do you mean, the fact that my eye is twitching negates my authority?! Really, she was fine, just fine. Cool as a cucumber.

It was exhausting keeping secrets all the time. Hermione didn’t know how Hero did it, especially getting up at the crack of dawn most mornings. Hero didn’t know she’d realized, but she had. Hermione simply hadn’t had any reason to mention it. She’d noticed her friend had been coping better since, well, most of the time, at least, so she’d assumed she’d gone off to make her peace with the hand she’d been dealt. Although, now Hermione was better informed, she thought she was probably going off to spend time with Snape. Hermione was still going to do her very best to keep her mouth shut.

To keep herself from losing her mind to the point of actually breathing a word of what she knew, she turned to what she did best: distracting herself with research. And to really make sure she was distracted, she dove into a topic that had been bothering her since the beginning of the year: the identity of the Half-Blood Prince.

It didn’t take her very long to discover that there were no royal bloodlines with magical ability. She was reminded of all the fairytale kings and queens with newly christened children who had to rely on fairy magic. There were no wizarding princes. None. But Hermione had suspected as much. Surely no prince, charming or otherwise, would have invented the type of spells in that book. Why would he need to?

That left her with limited options. It was either a nickname or a made-up title, either of which would be difficult to track down . . . or it was someone’s real name. Some people had Prince as a last name, didn’t they? It seemed the only avenue she could really explore, at least with the limited resources at her disposal. And so . . . to the library!

Hero was, once again, not the subject of gossip. Dean was, once again, the subject of gossip. And because of the whole debacle from earlier in the year, there was renewed interest in Ginny, though there was the added respect that came with ensuring Gryffindor won the Quidditch cup. Ginny seemed to take it in her stride, her expression perpetually one of cool indifference. With those closest to her, she was both more honest and more vulnerable.

Dean seemed a new person now that he’d come to terms with who he was. He and Seamus were happy, though they tended to fight fairly often. It was usually over as quickly as it began and they were back to living in each other’s pockets.

One day, when the fifth years were all busy with their OWLs, Hermione dropped into the seat next
to Hero with a purposeful look on her face. Hero looked up from her Herbology homework, startled.

"Is something the matter?"

"I want to talk to you about your so-called Half-Blood Prince."

"Look, would you give it a rest, Hermione?"

"No, I will not. I've been doing a bit of research, in the library—"

Hero rolled her eyes. "Shocker."

"Oh, shut up. I found this," she said, pulling a very old piece of newsprint out of her pocket and presenting it to Hero. It was a picture of a rather sullen young woman who was captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team. She was identified as Eileen Prince.

Hero picked up the clipping with reverent fingers. She peered at the girl with an expression of almost . . . grief. "Do . . . do you mind if I keep this?" Hero asked quietly.

"Oh, er . . . I suppose," Hermione asked, bemused.

"Right, thanks," Hero said, getting up, her Herbology essay forgotten.

"Where are you going?" Hermione called after her. Hero looked over her shoulder.

"Never you mind."

* *

"Sev? Are you here?"

"In the lab," he called back to her.

She found him chopping up ingredients. He set the work aside when she entered. She smiled as she neared, going up on her toes and twining her arms around her neck to kiss him.

"Hi."

"Good evening."

"What are you brewing?"

His lips twisted as he looked over at the ingredients. "An antidote for Nagini’s venom."

"That would certainly make her easier to kill."

"Why on earth are you thinking about getting close enough to the Dark Lord to kill the thing?"

"Dumbledore reckons she’s one of his Horcruxes."

"One . . . of his Horcruxes?"

"Dumbledore didn’t tell you, did he? He’s a fine one to go on about trust," she snorted, then sighed. "But he usually has his reasons. Maybe I shouldn’t say."

"Oh, go on. You might as well."
“Well, I do trust you completely . . . but no blabbing.”

“Bit of a contradiction, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I know you won’t go off and tell the Dark Lord. I’m a bit more worried you’ll go off at Dumbledore for not telling you.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.” She glared at him. He rolled his eyes. “Fine. Cross my heart and hope to live to a ripe old age and die in my sleep at the age of 120. Happy?”

“S’pose. Alright. So . . . you know what a Horcrux is, right?”

“I did a double-mastery in Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Of course I know what a Horcrux is.”

“Right. Just checking,” she murmured, tucking a curl behind her ear. “So, that memory, from Slughorn? Tom Riddle asked about having . . . a seven-part soul. Six Horcruxes. Of which, two have been destroyed, and Dumbledore’s been looking for the rest. Unfortunately, he hasn’t, er, found any yet.”

Severus looked speechless, as though not even profanity had the power to express his reaction.

“Mmm. I know. It’s not good news.”

A half-strangled excuse for a laugh emerged from his throat. “No. No, I can’t it say it is.”

“And he thinks Nagini is one of them. So, thank you, so much, for making an antidote to her venom.”

“Well, you know me . . . always prepared,” he muttered weakly.

“Because you’re a pessimist,” Hero agreed cheerfully.

“Not complaining, are you?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, dear.”

“You don’t usually come down in the evening,” he observed. “Not that I’m complaining. But is there a particular reason?”

“Yes, as it happens. Hermione’s been searching the library for the identity of the Half-Blood Prince.”

“And do you think she’ll be successful?”

“Well, she’s going through old Prophets. Do you think she’ll find any record of you there under the name Prince?”

“Possibly my parents’ wedding announcement. I don’t know whether it would have been placed in the Prophet or not.”

“Well, she did find something about your mother. I thought you might like to have it.” She fished the newspaper clipping out of her pocket and handed it over.

“Thank you,” he murmured, taking it almost reverently. “I . . . have very few pictures of her. Cameras were for happy occasions. There weren’t too many of those growing up.”
“I figured as much. I only have a small album of my parents, and apart from pictures taken before they died, there aren’t any pictures of me when I was younger, not family pictures. I just, you know, thought you might want it.”

“I do. Thank you.” With his index finger, he delicately traced his mother’s face. She remained scowling, but Severus seemed entranced. After a moment, he tucked it into the inside pocket of his robes. “You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to. You would have done the same.” He gave her a look. “Okay, maybe you wouldn’t have. Doesn’t change anything.”

“I’m glad.”

* *

When Hero returned to the Common Room, Hermione didn’t say a word, didn’t even look up from the book she was translating for ancient runes. She just handed Hero a scroll of parchment. Hero untied the ribbon, looking to Ron for explanation; Hermione tended to hold grudges a while.

“Jimmy Peakes gave it to us, knew we’d get it to you.”

Hero nodded and quickly scanned the note. “It’s from Dumbledore. He wants me to go to his office as quick as I can. How long ago did Jimmy give this to you?”

“Oh, er, ten minutes, maybe?” Before he’d finished speaking, Hero was running back toward the portrait hole.

As she was nearing the Room of Requirement, she heard a scream and a crash. Hero stopped to listen.

“How—dare—you—aaaaargh!”

It was definitely coming from the direction of the Room of Requirement. Hero sprinted towards the commotion to find Professor Trelawney lying sprawled on the floor, her scarves over her head, surrounded by sherry bottles, one of which was broken. Hero went to help her up.

“What happened, Professor?”

“You may well ask!” she said shrilly. “I was strolling along, brooding upon certain dark portents I happen to have glimpsed . . .” If two years in Divination had taught Hero anything, it was how to tune out Trelawney when she started in on “dark portents.”

“Professor, were you trying to get into the Room of Requirement?”

“What, what?” she said, peering at her with a degree of suspicion.

“The Room of Requirement. Were you trying to get in?”

“I, er, was not aware the students knew of its existence,” she muttered uneasily.

“Not everyone does.” Mostly those who have something to hide, Hero thought but did not say. “But what happened? I heard you scream, are you hurt?”

“I, em, wished to deposit certain . . . personal items . . . in the room,” she replied, glancing surreptitiously at the sherry bottles and muttering something about “nasty accusations.”
“Right. Right. But you couldn’t get in?”

“Oh, I got in just fine. The problem is that there was someone else already there.”

“Do you have any idea who it was?” Hero demanded; she didn’t have time to make it sound like anything other than what it was: an interrogation.

“No, I do not. All I know is that never, in all my years of . . . using the room, have I ever encountered another soul.”

“What did it say?”

“It didn’t say much of anything. It was . . . whooping.”

“Whooping?”

“Mmm. Gleefully.”

“Male or female?”

“I believe it was male.”

“It sounded happy? Like it was . . . celebrating?”

“Oh, indeed. Yes, and then I asked who was there.”

Hero felt like shaking her. “You couldn’t have found out without asking?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“The Inner Eye was focused on matters less mundane than whooping voices,” she told Hero in a forbidding tone. For the briefest instant, Hero was reminded of McGonagall.

“And then?”

“And then everything went pitch black, and the next thing I knew, I was being hurled headfirst out of the Room!”

“And you didn’t See that coming?” Hero asked, deadpan.

“No, I did not. As I say, it was pitch—” she stopped, glaring at Hero suspiciously.

“Er, right. Look, I’ve got to . . . go. Good luck with, um . . . everything.”

“Oh, no, I doubt anyone will have much luck,” she said, shaking her head gravely. “No matter how I lay the cards out . . . calamity. The Lightning-Struck Tower,” she said, pulling the card from her shawls. “Disaster, coming closer with every passing moment, coming with no warning. The strike of lightning. It is nearer now. It is at the door; it has lifted the latch . . .” With that, she wandered off, trailing shawls.

Hero went the rest of the way up to Dumbledore’s office, trying to ignore the chill Trelawney’s words had given her. She tried to tell herself that Trelawney was just a hopeless old fraud, but it was impossible to forget that Trelawney was the one who had spoken the prophecy that led them to this whole sorry mess. And all those times the old bat had predicted her death at a young age were coming true after all.

She burst into the office. Dumbledore looked over in surprise. “Professor, sir – Malfoy. Whatever
he’s been working on, he’s done it. It’s going to be tonight.”

He stilled. “Then we haven’t much time. You are coming with me tonight, I take it? Do you have the Cloak?”

“No, sir. I can run back and get it—”

He waved a hand dismissively. “It’s no matter. If need be, I can Disillusion you. However, I must warn you, Hero, that what we do tonight may be perilously dangerous.”

“I understand, sir. I’m coming.”

“You must agree to do as I say, no matter what. You must obey at once, without question. If I order you to run, you run. If I order you to hide, you hide. If I order you to turn back without me, you are to do so without hesitation. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. Sir . . .”

“Yes, Hero?”

“I’m probably never going to get another chance, so I just want you to know . . . you’ve been like the grandfather I never had, and I love you. And I’m really sorry I destroyed your office last year. And I’m going to miss you so much.” She was sniffling by the time she was finished and trying in vain not to cry.

Dumbledore patted her shoulder, smiling kindly, though rather misty-eyed himself. “Thank you, Hero. It means more than I can say to hear those words. I hope you know . . . how very dear to me you’ve become. It has been a rare pleasure to know you.”

Hero knew the tears were running down her cheeks, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. They both knew this was goodbye. She supposed she ought to be grateful to have had the chance to say it.

“Come along, Hero. We have much to do this evening.”

She nodded, swallowing thickly. He approached and tapped the top of her head with his wand. As ever, there was the sensation of cold flooding her, like someone cracking an egg on her head. Before he could move away, she put her arms around his middle and squeezed. He patted her shoulder.

“We’ll Apparate out of Hogsmead. Let’s be off.”

When they passed the Three Broomsticks, Madam Rosmerta was chucking out a grubby-looking wizard.

“—And stay out! Oh, hello, Albus. You’re out late.”

“Good evening, Rosmerta, good evening . . . forgive me, I’m off to the Hog’s Head. . . No offense, but I feel like a quieter atmosphere tonight . . .”

They turned the corner, out of sight of the Three Broomsticks, to come up to the Hog’s Head, which appeared empty, or almost so. “I wish I had time . . .”

“Time, sir?”

“To say goodbye. My brother Aberforth is the barman,” he explained.

“I hesitate to mention it, sir, but . . . I think they’ll wait until we get back. Bit hard to start the party
“You’re right, of course. Yes. You’re quite right.” He pushed the door open.

The pub was, indeed, empty but for the barman, wiping glasses with his filthy rag.

“Albus. Haven’t seen you in for a good while.”

“Aberforth . . . I’m sorry.”

“Why? ‘Cause you know I don’t have much business?” he snorted.

“For a great many things.”

Aberforth finally set down both glass and cloth. “This isn’t a social visit, is it?”

“I am 115 years old. It is long since time I faced my regrets. I should have told you years ago that you were the better man. You were right. All those years ago, you were right. And I was a blind fool. It’s all my fault, I know it is.”

“Albus . . .”

“No, I can’t die with this on my conscience. You must know . . . that you cannot despise me more than I despise myself. I was selfish, and arrogant. And for two months, two months of insanity, stupidity, and cruel dreams, I neglected you and Ariana, the only two people I had left in all the world. But you spoke up, and for that I will never stop being grateful. You saved me, though I couldn’t possibly deserve it.”

There was a long silence. Finally, Aberforth said gruffly, “I forgive you.” Dumbledore, that is to say, Albus, stared at him, uncomprehending. Aberforth sighed. “She’d have wanted it,” he said, jerking his chin toward a portrait of a young girl. “Always hated to see us fighting. Recon we’ve been at it long enough.”

“I can’t thank you enough.”

“Don’t suppose you need to, do you? I’m your brother. Besides, I know you loved him, however horrible he was. Now, what’s this about you dying?”

Albus grimaced and held up his blackened hand. “Another bit of ill-considered, reckless stupidity. And the poor Malfoy boy’s been ordered to kill me. I imagine I have a few hours left. I thought I’d better not waste them.”

“Going somewhere, are you?”

“Only a short errand. I’ve already done the most important thing.”

A shadow of a smile curved Aberforth’s lips. “You always did have a way with words.”

“Maybe so. I . . . won’t be seeing you.”

“Aye, well . . . Say hi to Mum and Dad and Ariana for me.”

“I promise.”

Hero gripped his arm tightly, and they winked away.
They rematerialized in darkness, in a place that smelled of the sea. It was a bleak place, nothing but rocks and water, as devoid of color and vegetation as it was of joy. Dumbledore tapped the top of her head; as warmth flooded through her in defiance of the weather, she shimmered back into the visible spectrum.

He spoke over the wind and the waves. “We have to go a little farther. Down, actually.” They scaled down the cliff-face, Dumbledore moving slowly due to his hand.

Once they’d reached the bottom, Dumbledore whispered, “Lumos.” He held his wand high, and Hero saw a small fissure in the rocks.

“I hope you don’t mind getting a little wet.” Together, they swam out to it. Once inside, they found it soon widened into a tunnel.

Dumbledore inspected the place they found themselves in. After a moment, he murmured, “Yes, this is the place. This, I think, however, is only an antechamber of sorts. Before us stand Voldemort’s obstacles, his protections in the unlikely event of intruders.”

He began to run his hands over the rock, looking for something. What, Hero had no idea. Finally, he spoke again. “Here. We go through here. The entrance is concealed.”

Dumbledore stepped back from the cave wall and pointed his wand at the rock. For a moment, an arched outline appeared there, blazing white as though there was a powerful light behind the crack.

“B-brilliant,” Hero chattered. Dumbledore turned to her in concern.

“How inconsiderate of me, leaving you standing there in your wet things, I do apologize. Just a moment,” he said, waving his wand over her to dry her. She was left feeling as if she had just put on clothes that had spent the last several hours before a warm fire.

Dumbledore turned back to the wall, staring at it intently, not unlike the way Hermione stared at Arithmancy problems. After a minute or two, he said, almost to himself, “Oh, surely not. Not so crude.”

“Sir?”

“I rather think,” he said, putting his uninjured hand inside his robes and drawing out a short silver knife of the kind Hero used to chop potion ingredients, “that we are required to make payment to pass.”

“Payment?”

“Blood, if I am not much mistaken.” He shook his head, snorting. “I said it was crude.” He sounded disdainful, even disappointed, as though Voldemort had fallen short of the standards Dumbledore expected. “The idea, as I am sure you will have gathered, is that your enemy must weaken him- or herself to enter. Once again, Lord Voldemort fails to grasp that there are much more terrible things than physical injury.”

“I’m quite aware of that. All the same, I’d rather not if I can avoid it.”

“Sometimes, however, as in this case, it is unavoidable.” He shook back his sleeve, exposing the blackened skin of his injured hand.
“Sir, wouldn’t it be better if I—”

“Oh, no, no. I believe we are both aware of how little time I will have the use of it. And your blood is much more valuable than mine.” There was a flash of silver, a splash of scarlet, and then Dumbledore healed the deep gash as if it had never been there to begin with. “Ah. That seems to have done the trick.”

The blazing silver outline of an arch had appeared in the wall once more, and this time it did not fade away: The blood-spattered rock within it simply vanished, leaving an opening into what seemed total darkness.

“I ought to go first, I think.” He stepped into the darkness, Hero following. She, too, lit her wand. They found themselves in a deep cavern; they could see neither the ceiling nor the other side.

A misty greenish light shone far away in what looked like the middle of the lake; it was reflected in the completely still water below. The greenish glow and the light from the two wands were the only things that broke the otherwise velvety blackness, and even they were little help. Hero had the unwelcome thought that no tomb could be darker.

“Let us walk,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Be very careful not to step into the water. Stay close to me.”

Their footsteps echoed as they walked along the bank, at first making Hero flinch at the sound that seemed enormous, breaking the utter silence. It was unnerving. Hero was torn between wanting to scream at the top of her lungs and make it so that no sound could ever come into that place ever again. Looking around her, she shuddered. No, screaming would not be a good idea here.

“Professor, it is here, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, it’s here. The only question is, how are we to get to it?”

“Er, we couldn’t try a Summoning charm, could we?” It was probably a stupid question, but Hero had no desire to stay in that place longer than they had to.

“Capital idea. Why don’t you try it?”

She was so used to Severus’s sarcasm by now that she peered at Dumbledore, looking for a sign that he was having her on. He merely looked back expectantly. She raised her wand into the air and intoned, “Accio Horcrux.”

With a noise like an explosion, something very large and pale erupted out of the dark water some twenty feet away; before Hero could see what it was, it had vanished again with a crashing splash that made great, deep ripples on the mirrored surface. Her heart in her mouth, Hero lowered her wand and turned to Dumbledore.

“Something, I think, that is ready to respond should we attempt to seize the Horcrux.”

“Oh. That makes sense,” she murmured faintly. She looked back toward the water; the surface was once more as still as glass, shining in the light from their wands and that eerie, green light. The ripples shouldn’t have faded so quickly.

“Was that what you expected?”

“I expected something, certainly, to stand in our way if we made an obvious overture to obtain the
Horcrux. It was a sound idea, Hero, much the simplest way of discovering what we’re facing. Shall we walk on?"

“Sir, will we have to go into the lake?”

“Only if we are very unfortunate.”

“You don’t think the Horcrux is at the bottom?”

“Oh no . . . I think the Horcrux is in the middle.” He pointed to the misty, green light emanating from the center of the lake.

They kept walking, and eventually Dumbledore flung out a hand. “Yes, I think this is it.” He paused to inspect something Hero couldn’t see. “Oho,” said Dumbledore happily, seconds later. His hand had closed in midair upon something. He moved closer to the water, then tapped his wand to his fist. At once, a thick, coppery green chain appeared, and up from the depths came the ghostly prow of a boat.

“Do you think it’s safe?”

“Oh yes, I think so. Voldemort needed to create a means to cross the lake without attracting the wrath of those creatures he had placed within it in case he ever wanted to visit or remove his Horcrux.”

“So the things in the water won’t do anything to us if we cross in Voldemort’s boat?”

“They’ll probably realize who we are not eventually, though it seems we are fine for the moment. They have, after all, allowed us to raise the boat.”

They got in, Hero first this time, both careful not to touch the water. The boat moved without their aid, cutting through the waves with a whisper.

As Hero watched the sparks of her wand-light reflected, golden, in the water, she eventually noticed something else. Floating just below the surface, marble-white, was a hand. Awful as it was, it was better than the next sight revealed by the light of her wand: a dead man lying face-up inches beneath the surface, his open eyes misted as though with cobwebs, his hair and his robes swirling around him like smoke.

“Inferi . . .” she whispered, looking over at Dumbledore.

“Yes. We won’t have to worry about them just yet, though. I am sure that, once we attempt to make off with the Horcrux, we will find them less peaceable. You know, I take it, how to combat an Inferius?”

“Yes, sir. Fire.”

“Good.”

Eventually they reached a small island in the center of the lake, no larger than Dumbledore’s office. It was from this place that the green light came, from a stone basin set upon a pedestal. They approached warily.

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know, though I would hazard a guess that it’s something more worrisome than the bodies in
the water.” He went to touch it with his injured hand, only to stop an inch away from it. He looked at Hero. “I cannot. See for yourself.” Hero did, only to find that, like Dumbledore, she couldn’t make contact with the surface.

Dumbledore began to wave his wand over the surface of the potion, muttering soundlessly. Eventually, he lowered his wand, frowning. “The Horcrux is most definitely in there. Unfortunately, the potion cannot be penetrated by hand, Vanished, parted, scooped up, or siphoned away, nor can it be Transfigured, Charmed, or otherwise made to change its nature.”

Almost absent-mindedly, he Conjured a glass goblet. “I can only conclude that it must be drunk.”

“No! No, sir, you can’t!”

“I must. Only by drinking it can I empty the basin and see what awaits.”

“But it could kill you.”

“Very likely. However, considering the situation brewing back at the castle, that is a minor concern. However, I doubt that is the purpose. No, Voldemort would not wish to kill whoever reached this island.”

“Come again?”

He smiled. “He would not want to *immediately* kill whoever reached the island. He would want them to suffer first, and he would want to keep them alive long enough to discover how they managed to get so far through his defenses and, most importantly, why they were so intent on emptying the basin.

“Now, Hero. You must continue to give me the potion. I have no doubt that its effects are such as to strongly discourage one from continuing. But I have you, and you must continue to tip it into my mouth, no matter how I protest, no matter what I say.”

Hero swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

At first, Dumbledore himself poured glasses of the potion down his throat. Halfway through the fourth goblet, he staggered and fell forward against the basin. His eyes were still closed, his breathing heavy.

“Professor?” Hero said, her voice small and desperate as she went to support him. “Professor, can you hear me?”

He did not answer. His face was twitching as though he was deeply asleep, but dreaming a horrible dream. His grip on the goblet was slackening; the potion was about to spill from it. Hero reached forward and grasped the crystal cup, holding it steady.

When he spoke again, it was almost a whimper. “I don’t want . . . don’t make me . . .”

Hero stared into the whitened face she knew so well, at the crooked nose and half-moon spectacles, and hated herself for what she had to do, for what she did not hesitate to do. She took the goblet by the stem, put it to his lips, and tipped it back.

“No,” he groaned as Hero refilled the goblet. “I don’t want to . . . I don’t want to . . . let me go . . .”

“I’m sorry, Professor. It’s alright, I’m here.” He moaned for her to make it stop and she felt like crying. “This will make it stop,” she said, tipping the contents into his open mouth.
He screamed, moaning and sobbing. Again Hero refilled the goblet, and again she forced him to drink. He did so, obediently as a child receiving communion in church. Then he fell to his knees, shaking uncontrollably.

“It’s all my fault, all my fault,” he sobbed. “Please make it stop, I know I did wrong, oh please make it stop and I’ll never, never again . . .” And so Hero tipped the seventh glass down his throat.

Dumbledore began to cower as though invisible torturers surrounded him; his flailing hand almost knocked the refilled goblet from Hero’s trembling hands as he moaned, “Don’t hurt them, don’t hurt them, please, please, it’s my fault, hurt me instead . . .”

Again, she tipped the goblet, again he drank. He drank even as he kept his eyes tight shut and shook from head to toe. When she went to fill the ninth, he screamed and hammered his fists on the ground. By the eleventh, he was begging for death, screaming for it at the top of his lungs. And then, he asked for water.

Hero tried to conjure some, only to find she couldn’t, that, whatever the magic of that place, it was made so the only water was what was already there. And what was there . . . was teeming with the dead.

Even so, she could not bear to not give him what he requested, and so she slipped the goblet into the still waters. She threw it into Dumbledore’s face. A cold feeling closed around the hand not holding the cup. Not the chill of the water, but the chill of an icy grip. She pointed her wand at the Inferius, shouting, “Petrificus Totalus!” It fell back in the water with a splash.

But it was far from the only one. Hands were all around them, rising out of the water. They were climbing onto the rock, clawing at its slippery surface, their blank, frosted eyes upon her, trailing waterlogged rags, sunken faces leering.

Hero looked around her, pushing away her terror. “Incendio!” Smoke and flame curled their flesh like newsprint, crackling at the edges and burning them to cinders. It wasn’t enough. Fire was, as Severus had told them, the only way to destroy Inferi. Incendio wasn’t big enough, powerful enough, to keep them all at bay, let alone destroy them. Hundreds of them, possibly thousands, had been waiting in the water, but no longer. She didn’t have time to be grateful that none of them looked familiar.

And, sure enough, they gradually overcame her, grasping her with cold, wet, white fingers, lifting her, surely to carry her back to the water, to join Voldemort’s legion of the dead . . .

But then, through the darkness, fire erupted: crimson and gold, a ring of fire that surrounded the rock so that the Inferi holding Hero so tightly stumbled and faltered; they did not dare pass through the flames to get to the water. They dropped her; she hit the ground, slipped on the rock, and fell, grazing her arms, but scrambled back up, raising her wand and staring around.

There stood Dumbledore, revived, apparently, by the little water Hero had managed to get to him. Fire danced in his eyes as he raised his wand like a torch, the flames emanating from its tip, encircling them all in its warmth and light.

Dumbledore scooped the locket from the bottom of the stone basin and stowed it inside his robes. Wordlessly, he gestured to Hero to come to his side. Distracted by the flames, the Inferi seemed unaware that their quarry was leaving as Dumbledore led Hero back to the boat, the ring of fire moving with them, around them, the bewildered Inferi accompanying them to the edge, where they slipped gratefully back into their inky waters.
For all Dumbledore’s impressive pyrotechnics, he had a difficult time getting into the boat. He staggered; it seemed like most of his energy was going toward maintaining the ring of fire that protected them. Once they were back on the bank, Dumbledore was forced to lean on Hero for support as they approached the entrance.

“You did very well, Hero, very well,” he murmured weakly.

“Shush, now. Save your energy,” she chided gently.

“The archway will have sealed again. . . My knife . . .”

“There’s no need, I cut myself on the rock,” said Hero firmly. “Just tell me where. . .”

“Here . . .”

Hero wiped her grazed forearm upon the stone; having received its tribute of blood, the archway reopened instantly. Once inside the outer cave, Hero was faced with a dilemma. The most experience she had with apparition was side-along and watching her peers attempt it, which had, for the most part, been more entertaining than informative. But there was someone who could do it . . .

“Kreacher,” Hero called out, her voice ringing in the chamber. He popped into sight and bowed.

“What does Mistress wish of Kreacher?”

Hero’s first response was, oh, thank God. She’d been sure it wouldn’t work. “We need to get back to Hogsmead, outside the Hog’s Head. Can you take us both?”

“Kreacher can do whatever Mistress wishes.” He took hold of both of them, and they Disapparated, passing from one point to the next as if moving through a sheet of falling water rather than a vacuum tube. They arrived in the darkened streets of Hogsmead without slamming down on the pavement, having barely seemed to have moved at all.
Hi! So, I have finals this week, and I thought it would be best to post this now instead of forgetting at the end of the week. Can't wait to see what you think. So, you know, comment. Bonus points if you can recognize the poem the title comes from.

“Thank you, Kreacher.”

“Is there anything else Mistress requires?”

“I’m not sure.” Hero glanced over at Dumbledore, to find that he looked paler and weaker than ever. “Sir?”

“It’s no matter. We must return to the castle. Mr. Malfoy, I’m sure, grows impatient.” Hero very much doubted that. Celebrating or not, this was not a task he relished, however he’d acted back in September.

Madam Rosmerta came running out of the Three Broomsticks in high-heeled, fuzzy slippers and a silk dressing gown embroidered with dragons.

“I saw you Apparate as I was pulling my bedroom curtains, I’m so glad I did! But what’s wrong with Albus?”

“He’s ill, he needs to get back to the castle.”

“You . . . you haven’t seen?”

Hero frowned. “Seen what?”

She pointed toward the castle with a shaking finger. Hero looked, and saw that someone had already taken care of the decorations: the Dark Mark had been conjured over the castle.

“Oh . . .” she whispered. *It is at the door; it has lifted the latch.* Death had come to call in the company of the Death Eaters. Her heart twisted in her chest when she thought of Severus, how very much he did not want to go through with it. And the moment had come. God have mercy on all their souls.

“We need to return to the castle at once,” said Dumbledore. “Rosmerta”—and though he staggered a little, he seemed wholly in command of the situation—“we need transport—brooms—”

“Yeah, I’ve got some behind the bar. Shall I run and fetch . . . ?”

“No, Hero is quite capable.”

“*Accio Rosmerta’s Brooms!*” They came flying out the door, stopping before them at waist height. They mounted the brooms; Hero was ready to catch Dumbledore if he should start to fall, but the sight of the Dark Mark seemed to have acted on him like a stimulant.
The Mark was over the Astronomy Tower. Clearly, whatever Malfoy’s reservations about murder, his sense of melodrama was unaffected. They landed on the observation platform that, after so many months, Hero could navigate in the dead of night – she often had before, after all.

She looked over at Dumbledore to find him clutching his chest with his blackened hand.

“Sir?”

“It doesn’t matter at this point, you know that. Go and wake Severus. Explain the situation and bring him up here. You know what he must do.” With that, he tapped the top of her head, Disillusioning her.

Hero nodded grimly and hurried to the door to the spiral staircase. Before she could open it, she heard footsteps on the other side. She glanced back at Dumbledore, who gestured for her to retreat. She stepped aside, knowing she could not intervene, could not interfere.

Malfoy burst through the door and Disarmed Dumbledore. He didn’t catch the wand, but instead let it simply roll on the floor.

There was no fear in Dumbledore’s eyes, no apprehension at the prospect of imminently meeting his maker. He had made his peace with his demons, after all. Instead, he merely regarded his attacker calmly, saying, “Good evening, Draco.”

He sneered, but it seemed more like a contortion than an expression. “There’s nothing good about it. Not for you.”

“Ah, but dying ought not rob me of common courtesy, don’t you think?”

“Yes . . . you know?”

“I would be a very poor headmaster, indeed, if one of my students could plot to murder me without my knowledge.”

“Why . . . why haven’t you done anything?”

“Everyone has to go sometime. Though I am sorry the thankless task had to fall in your lap, Draco. Most indecorous.”

“Shut up! Just . . . shut up, alright? I’ve got Death Eaters with me. They’re already in the castle. Waiting.”

“Goodness! You did manage to do the thing correctly, then. However did you get them in?”

“The Vanishing Cabinet.”

“Ah! It has a twin, I take it? Quite ingenious. But . . . where are they now?”

“They’re downstairs. They met some of your guards. I came on ahead.”

“But of course. Do not let me interrupt you; we old people tend to talk because we can no longer do. Of course, doing has always been the providence of the young.”

Draco Malfoy did nothing but stare at Albus Dumbledore, who, incredibly, smiled.

“Draco, Draco, you are not a killer.”
“You don’t know me! You don’t know what I’ve been doing.”

“Of course I do. You almost killed Katie Bell and Ginevra Weasley, such feeble attempts on my life that your heart could hardly have been in them. A cursed necklace that would almost certainly come into contact with the wrong person? Oak-matured mead that there was only the smallest chance would reach me? No, Draco. Killing is never as easy as innocents imagine. Besides, here I stand, unarmed. Why haven’t you done it already?”

Malfoy just stared at him.

“Ah, but perhaps you are waiting for reinforcements – an audience? Take all the time you like, I am entirely at my leisure.” He paused, but still Malfoy stood frozen, terrified. “Tell me, how long has Madam Rosmerta been under the Imperius Curse?” Dumbledore continued in a conversational tone.

“You know?” he rasped.

“It’s perfectly logically. I applaud the idea. She would, of course, have ready access to her own toilets and have been able to pass the necklace to any Hogwarts student who came in unaccompanied. It would have been a simple matter for her to poison the bottle of mead before sending it to Slughorn, who intended to give it to me for Christmas. Filch wouldn’t think to check a bottle from her. Very clever.”

Malfoy perked up a bit. “Yeah. Yeah, it was, wasn’t it?”

“And then, tonight, I take it, she informed you of my departure?”

“Yeah. She said you were just going to have a drink, then you’d be back . . .”

A hint of a smile showed on Dumbledore’s face. “Well, I cannot deny that I had a drink. And clearly, I have returned. So you decided to spring a trap for me?”

“Yeah, that’s right. We decided to put the Dark Mark over the tower and get you to hurry up here, to see who’d been killed.”

“I take it, then, that no one has been murdered at this stage?”

“Someone’s dead, I think. One of your people . . . I don’t know who, it was dark . . . I stepped over the body. . . I was supposed to be waiting up here when you got back, only your Phoenix lot got in the way . . .”

“Yes, they tend to do that,” Dumbledore agreed, the smile now more than a hint. “They’re quite good at it.”

There was a bang and shouts from below, louder than ever; it sounded as though people were fighting on the actual spiral staircase that led to where the three of them stood.

“There is little time, one way or another,” said Dumbledore. “So let us discuss your options, Draco.”

“My options?” he sounded at once confused and bordering on hysterical. “I don’t have options! I’ve got to kill you.”

“Come now, Draco. That hardly signifies at this point, does it? ‘Got to’ or not, if you were going to do it, you would have done it already, done it when you first disarmed me. The fact remains, undeniably, that you have not.”
“He’ll kill me,” Malfoy said, and it seemed somehow that he was the one who was begging. “He’ll kill my whole family.”

“I appreciate the difficulty of your position,” said Dumbledore. “Why else do you think I have not confronted you before now? Because I knew that you would have been murdered if Lord Voldemort realized that I suspected you.” Malfoy winced at the sound of the name. “I did not dare speak to you of the mission with which I knew you had been entrusted, in case he used Legilimency against you,” continued Dumbledore. “But now at last we can speak plainly to each other. . . No harm has been done, you have hurt nobody, though you are very lucky that your unintentional victims survived. . . I can help you, Draco.”

He looked close to tears by this point. “No one can help me! He’ll . . . he’ll kill me if I don’t.” He shrugged helplessly, the wand now held loosely at his side. His expression became pained, as if he was exerting great effort, and he raised it once again. His hand trembled. The wand dropped a fraction.

But suddenly footsteps were thundering up the stairs, and a second later Malfoy was buffeted out of the way as four people in black robes burst through the door onto the ramparts. It seemed the Death Eaters had won the fight below. Hero stood frozen, trying her very best to remain stock still and silent.

A lumpy-looking man with an odd lopsided leer gave a wheezy giggle. “Dumbledore cornered!” he said, and he turned to a stocky little woman who looked as though she could be his sister and who was grinning eagerly. “Dumbledore wandless, Dumbledore alone! Well done, Draco, well done!”

“Good evening, Amycus,” said Dumbledore calmly, as though welcoming the man to a tea party. “And you’ve brought Alecto too. . . Charming . . .”

The woman gave an angry little titter. “Think your little jokes’ll help you on your deathbed, then?” she jeered.

“Jokes? No, no, these are manners,” replied Dumbledore.

“Do it,” said the stranger standing nearest to Hero, a big, rangy man with matted gray hair and whiskers, whose black Death Eater’s robes looked uncomfortably tight. He had a voice like none that Hero had ever heard: a rasping bark of a voice. She could smell a powerful mixture of dirt, sweat, and, unmistakably, blood coming from him. His filthy hands had long yellowish nails.

“Is that you, Fenrir?” asked Dumbledore.

“That’s right,” rasped the other. “Pleased to see me, Dumbledore?”

“No, I cannot say that I am.”

Greyback grinned, showing pointed teeth. Blood trickled down his chin and he licked his lips slowly, obscenely. “But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore.”

“Am I to take it that you are attacking even without the full moon now? This is most unusual. . . You have developed a taste for human flesh that cannot be satisfied once a month?”

“That’s right,” said Fenrir Greyback. “Shocks you, that, does it, Dumbledore? Frightens you?”

“Well, I cannot pretend it does not disgust me a little,” said Dumbledore. “And, yes, I am a little shocked that Draco here invited you, of all people, into the school where his friends live. . .” Dumbledore threw Draco a disapproving look over his half-moon spectacles.
“I didn’t,” breathed Malfoy, shaking his head desperately, like a first year accused of wrong-doing. He was not looking at Fenrir; he did not seem to want to even glance at him. “I didn’t know he was going to come—"

“I wouldn’t want to miss a trip to Hogwarts, Dumbledore,” rasped Greyback. “Not when there are throats to be ripped out. . . Delicious, delicious . . ."

“Do it now, Draco,” the fourth Death Eater ordered. “Quickly.”

Malfoy was showing less resolution than ever. He looked terrified as he stared into Dumbledore’s face, which was even paler, and rather lower than usual, as he had slid so far down the rampart wall.

“He’s not long for this world anyway, if you ask me!” said the lopsided man, to the accompaniment of his sister’s wheezing giggles. “Look at him — what’s happened to you, then, Dumby?”

“Oh, weaker resistance, slower reflexes, Amycus,” said Dumbledore. “Old age, in short . . . One day, perhaps, it will happen to you . . . if you are lucky . . .”

“What’s that mean, then, what’s that mean?” yelled the Death Eater, suddenly violent. “Always the same, weren’t you, Dumby, talking and doing nothing, nothing. I don’t even know why the Dark Lord’s bothering to kill you! Come on, Draco, do it!”

But at that moment there were renewed sounds of scuffling from below and a voice shouted, “They’ve blocked the stairs — Reducto! REDUCTO!”

Hero seized upon the voice as if it was a life preserver. These four, then, had not eliminated all opposition, but merely broken through the fight to the top of the tower, and, by the sound of it, created a barrier behind them—

“Now, Draco, quickly!” said the brutal-faced man angrily. But Malfoy’s hand was shaking so badly that he could barely aim.

The door to the ramparts burst open once more, and there stood Severus, his wand clutched in his hand as his black eyes swept the scene, from Dumbledore slumped against the wall, to the four Death Eaters and Malfoy.

“We’ve got a problem, Snape,” said the lumpy Amycus, whose eyes and wand were fixed alike upon Dumbledore, “the boy doesn’t seem able—"

But somebody else had spoken Severus’s name, quite softly. “Severus . . .” Hero knew, as Severus did, what he was asking for, pleading for.

Severus roughly shoved Malfoy aside. The Death Eaters fell back without a word. Even the werewolf seemed cowed.

Behind him, they could not see his face. Hero, having moved as silently as a cat, could. Where they might have believed it held hatred and revulsion, it instead showed a grief as vast and deep as oceans.

“Severus . . . Please . . .”

Severus swallowed, clenched his jaw, and then said the words she knew he’d been dreading for almost a year.

“Avada Kedavra.”
Dumbledore was blasted off the tower by the power of the spell, seeming to hang in the air for a moment, a puppet held up by strings, only for those strings to then be cut. He fell, the long drop from the top of the Astronomy Tower, the highest room of the tallest tower. And there was nothing anyone could do, for him or to him, after that.

The Disillusionment was broken with Dumbledore’s death. Thankfully, if there could be anything to be thankful for under the circumstances, the intruders were too distracted by Dumbledore’s death to notice as she crouched off to one side. Severus, however, did.

*Help*, she mouthed. He ducked his head in acknowledgement, making it a part of the motion as he spun to face the others. He seized Malfoy by the collar and forced him out the door, the others preceding them. The door closed behind them.

Hero waited a few moments before running after them. Perhaps, just perhaps, she could have a few moments alone with Severus before they all fled, as they must. It was essential that Severus maintain his cover for the sake of the war. For his own sake, she hoped he hadn’t left yet. She knew he needed reassurance, to be told that it wasn’t his fault, that his actions on the tower were those of mercy rather than of murder. He needed her.

Once she reached the bottom of the stairs, she found the dimly lit corridor full of dust; half the ceiling seemed to have fallen in. A battle was raging before her, but even as she attempted to make out who was fighting whom, she heard Severus shout, “It’s over, time to go!” and saw him disappearing around the corner at the far end of the corridor. He and Malfoy seemed to have forced their way through the fight unscathed; Hero sent up a prayer in gratitude.

As she plunged after them, one of the fighters detached themselves from the fray and flew at her: it was the werewolf, Fenrir. He was on top of Hero before she could raise her wand: she fell backward, with filthy matted hair in her face, the stench of sweat and blood filling her nose and mouth, hot greedy breath at her throat—

*Petrificus Totalus!* Hero felt Fenrir collapse against her; with an enormous effort, she pushed the werewolf off and onto the floor as a jet of green light came flying toward her. She ducked and glanced behind her. Two bodies were lying face-down in a pool of blood; Ginny was locked in combat with Amycus, who was throwing hexes and curses at her while she dodged.

Hero wasted no time in sending the Impedimenta jinx toward him. She had to trust her friends to take care of themselves. She ran off after Severus, though she did what she could in the way of curses to aid Order and DA members she encountered.

She finally saw him again past Hagrid’s hut, running for the gates, where they would be able to Disapparate.

“Severus!” she cried, knowing if he didn’t stop, she wouldn’t get to him, might not see him again for weeks or even months.

He turned and caught her as she threw herself into his arms. “It’s not your fault, it’s not your fault. He drank a potion, it was killing him anyway. It’s what he wanted,” she whispered fiercely.

“My darling . . . my darling . . .” he murmured into her hair.

Malfoy had stopped when he heard Hero call his godfather’s name, turning toward the unexpected sound. He was staring at the embracing couple now, unable to believe the evidence of his senses.

Hero pulled Severus’s head down so that his lips met hers. She kissed him fervently, as if it might be
their last. “You know where to find me,” she whispered when she drew back. Louder, she said, “Go. Both of you. Go. They’ll kill you, no matter what I say.”

Severus nodded sharply. Caressing her cheek one last time, he ran, taking Malfoy by the collar again and half-dragging him to the gates. Malfoy, for his part, still looked bewildered, as if the world had stopped making sense. Once outside the castle wards, they Disapparated.

Hero turned away from the spot where he, the man who had taken her heart with him, had disappeared from, back towards the castle. Hagrid’s hut was on fire. It only made sense to start on her role in the affair, that of witness to spread the tale. For it was vital that the story of Snape’s murder of Dumbledore be circulated, so as to get back to the right ears and cement his credentials with the Dark Lord. It was what Dumbledore had wanted. Even if every time she repeated those words, she wished them unsaid. It didn’t matter, she couldn’t afford for it to matter.

And so she approached Hagrid, who was watching, Fang by his side, as his wooden house burnt. Not even Norbert had managed to do that. A part of her thought Hagrid might not have minded.

“Hello, Hagrid. Are you alright?”

“’Course I am. Takes more than that to finish me.”

She noticed blood trickling down Hagrid’s cheek from a deep cut under one eye, which was swelling rapidly. Otherwise, he seemed relatively unharmed, actually.

“We should probably put out your house. The charm’s ‘Aguamenti’.”

“Knew it was something like that,” Hagrid muttered, and raised a smoldering pink, flowery and said, “Aguamenti!” Hero joined him. Together, they poured water on the house until the last of the flames had been extinguished.

“It’s not so bad,” Hagrid said optimistically a few minutes later as they surveyed the smoking wreck. “Nothing Dumbledore won’t be able to put right...”

Hero felt her gut twist at the sound of his name. Severus was not his murderer, but he was still dead, would keep on being dead, no matter how a part of her thought she would wake up and find everything had been a horrible dream.

“He won’t, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s dead.”

“What?” Hagrid asked, as if she was speaking a language other than English, as if the words, the meaning, would be different if only she translated them properly.

“Snape killed him.” If she couldn’t put the requisite anger and blame into her tone, she made up for it with her grief. “I saw it.”

“Nah, couldn’t be.”

“Hagrid. I was there.” Unable to help it any longer, she started to crying, leaning against Hagrid’s side. “He’s gone. They’re both gone.”

As they approached the castle, people began to emerge, uncertain, in pyjamas, dressing gowns, and
slippers. To Hero, this was all peripheral. She was focused on the prone figure at the foot of the highest tower, the tower where, for months, she had watched the sunrise, the birth of a new day. As it would in a few hours. It didn’t matter. There was no Severus to share it with; the tower would forever be sullied by the memory of Dumbledore’s death, stained by the metaphorical blood which had been spilt.

“What’re they all looking at?” said Hagrid, as they approached the castle front, Fang keeping as close as he could to their ankles. “What’s that, lying on the grass?” Hagrid added sharply, heading now toward the foot of the Astronomy Tower, where a small crowd was congregating. “See it, Hero? Right at the foot o’ the tower? Under where the Mark . . . Blimey . . . you don’t think someone got thrown—?” He still didn’t believe her. She envied him.

They moved, dreamlike, through the murmuring crowd to the very front, where the dumbstruck students and teachers had left a gap. Hero heard Hagrid’s moan of pain and shock, but she did not stop; she walked slowly forward until he reached the place where Dumbledore lay and knelt down beside him. She had at least gotten to say goodbye; that was something. She’d known for months that he was dying, that this would be how it would end, exactly as he’d scripted it. But there was still no preparation for seeing him here, spread-eagled, broken: the greatest wizard Hero had ever, or would ever, meet. There was little comfort in knowing he’d chosen it, that it had been as he wished it down to the letter, to the choreography.

Dumbledore’s eyes were closed; but for the strange angle of his arms and legs, he might have been sleeping. Hero reached out, straightened the half-moon spectacles upon the crooked nose, and wiped a trickle of blood from the mouth with her sleeve. Then she gazed down at the wise old face and tried to absorb the enormous and incomprehensible truth: that never again would Dumbledore speak to her, never again could he help.

After what felt like an eternity, the crowd standing in silent vigil, Hero became aware enough of her surroundings to realize she was kneeling on something hard. The locket they’d retrieved what felt like centuries ago had fallen out of his pocket.

It wasn’t big enough; there was no large, ornate S in emeralds. Inside, where a portrait ought to have been, was wedged a tightly folded scrap of parchment. She unfolded it and scanned the words by the light of the many wands that had been lit behind her, like vigil candles.

To the Dark Lord,

I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B.

It didn’t, hadn’t mattered. They’d gone off on a wild goose chase. They were no closer to ending Voldemort. She tried to tell herself that at least he’d made his peace with his brother, at least he himself was at peace now. But it didn’t seem to matter. As, next to her, Fang began to howl his grief, her heart made the same sound in her chest.
Hello again! I meant to post this yesterday, but I forgot what day it was. Even still, we haven't quite reached the end of half-blood prince. As I'm sure you've noticed, there will be quite a few changes from canon at this stage. In other news, the title of the previous chapter came from "Funeral Blues" by W. H. Auden. Look it up, it's good.

“You . . . you and Potter?!”

“Shut up.”

“For fuck’s sake, Severus! I know what I saw!”

“And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep your mouth shut. And your mind Occluded,” Severus warned his godson darkly, his face set in a glower.

“She said she’d been spending time with you. I never thought . . .”

“Do you have a point, or are you just babbling?”

“Am I on the wrong side?”

Severus eyed him. “Yes. I daresay you are.”

“How . . . how do I fix that?”

Severus sighed. “It’s dangerous. Every moment, you risk your life. And I can no longer vouch for you with the Order of the Phoenix. It’s nothing so blatant as turning coat, you understand; you simply work against from within.”

“You’ve been on Dumbledore’s side the whole time.”

“For a little less than sixteen years. Yes.”

“My parents don’t have any idea.”

Severus smiled dryly. “If you will recall, your aunt has always suspected.”

“That’s why you killed him.”

“It’s one of number of reasons. It wasn’t quite that simple.”

Draco paused, nodding slowly as he digested this. “Where . . . where are we?”

“Spinner’s End. My house.”

“Oh. It’s not what I expected.”

“I don’t spend a great deal of time here. Not if I can help it.”
“What would my being a double agent entail?” Malfoy said, perching on an armchair as if afraid by actually sitting, he risked contamination.

“You watch. You listen. You report back to me. You do as I tell you.”

“Why?”

Severus glared at him. “Because I know what I’m doing. You do not.”

“I think I’d know better than to get involved with the Girl Who Lived.”

“You know . . . nothing.”

“So explain it to me.”

“The minute Hero is back in Surrey, you and I are going to meet her, and you’re going to swear an Unbreakable Vow. And then you’re going to be placed under the Fidelius Charm. I won’t say another word on the subject – any of these subjects – until then. If you so much as breathe a word of what you know, godson or not, so help me—!”

“I get it, I get it! I’ll stop asking.”

“Ah. So you do retain some sense of self-preservation.”

Draco frowned contemplatively, relaxing into the chair as he did so. After a moment, looked up and asked, “Is the Dark Lord going to kill me?”

“I think not. Your family will be disgraced members of his circle, but I’m sure he’s well aware you’re more useful to him alive than dead.”

“Well, aren’t you just full of sunshine and daisies.”

“He’s the Dark Lord, you little twit!”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Or maybe there’s just no sunshine when she’s gone. It’s not warm when she’s away.” He gave an exaggerated shiver.

“Shut up.” After a moment, “How do you know that song?”

Draco flushed. “I used to go through your music collection at Hogwarts when I visited you and you had to leave.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Did you, now?”

“Sorry.”

“Oh, no. Your father would be so displeased at your listening to muggle records . . . I find myself almost happy to hear that you violated my privacy.”

“Er . . . right. So, what do we do now?”

Severus gave him a sardonic look. “We wait.”

Ron and Hermione led her away, each taking one of her hands.
“We’re going to the hospital wing,” Hermione said gently.

“I’m not hurt.”

Ron shook his head. “Everyone’s up there, McGonagall’s orders.”

“Who else is dead?” she asked, dully.

“Don’t worry, none of us,” Hermione assured her.

“But, but Malfoy said he stepped over a body.”

“He stepped over Bill,” Ron said. “But it’s alright, he’s alive.” There was something in his voice that filled Hero with dread.

“What happened?” she breathed.

“Greyback attacked him. He’s, er, a bit of a mess, to be honest. Pomfrey says he won’t look the same anymore,” Ron relayed. He sounded like he was coming apart at the seams and trying his best not to show it.

“We, we don’t really know what the effects will be,” Hermione volunteered timidly, “since Greyback wasn’t transformed at the time.”

“But . . . I saw bodies.”

“Neville and Professor Flitwick were both injured, but Madam Pomfrey said they’ll be fine. One of the Death Eaters is dead, he got hit by a Killing Curse. That blonde one was firing them off every which way. I . . . we took the rest of the Felix Felicis.”

“Good. I think the lot of you would probably be dead if you hadn’t. Thank you for doing it. I couldn’t bear it if . . . .”

Hermione patted her shoulder. They had reached the hospital wing by then. They entered to find Neville, apparently asleep, in one of the beds near the door. Ginny, Luna, Tonks, and Lupin were gathered around a bed. At the sound of the doors opening, they all looked up. Lupin approached them, looking anxious.

“How are you, Hero?”

“I’m fine. How’s Bill?”

No one answered. Hero walked forward and saw an unrecognizable face lying on Bill’s pillow, so badly slashed and ripped that it looked grotesque. Madam Pomfrey was dabbing at the gashes with a harsh-smelling green ointment.

Hero remembered Severus explaining to her what Sectumsempra did and the counter-charm he’d devised. “Isn’t there a charm that would work?”

“I’ve tried everything I know,” Madam Pomfrey replied wearily. “No charm will work. There is no cure for werewolf bites.”

“But he wasn’t bitten at the full moon,” said Ron, who was gazing down into his brother’s face as though he could somehow force him to mend just by staring. “Greyback hadn’t transformed, so surely Bill won’t be a, a real—?” He looked uncertainly at Lupin.
“No, I don’t think that Bill will be a true werewolf,” said Lupin, “but that does not mean that there won’t be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds. They are unlikely ever to heal fully . . . and Bill might have some wolfish characteristics from now on.”

“Dumbledore might know something that would work, though,” Ginny said. “Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore’s orders, Dumbledore owes him, he can’t leave him like this . . .”

Ron looked at her with eyes that seemed ages old. “Ginny . . . Dumbledore’s dead.”

“No!” Lupin shouted. “No . . .” this time, it was a whisper as he grasped the foot of Bill’s bed to keep himself upright. It wasn’t fair, of course it wasn’t fair. Hero felt as if she was intruding on something very private, seeing him come apart like this. He hadn’t done his mourning for Sirius where anyone could see him. His grief, she thought, left him naked.

“How did he die?” whispered Tonks. “How did it happen?”

Hero took a deep breath. She knew what she needed to do. “Snape killed him. I was there, I saw it. We arrived back on the Astronomy Tower because that’s where the Mark was. Dumbledore was . . . ill, he was weak, but I think he realized it was a trap when we heard footsteps running up the stairs. He Disillusioned me and . . . and he immobilized me, I couldn’t do anything, I’m so sorry. And then . . . and then Malfoy came through the door and disarmed him . . . and more Death Eaters arrived . . . and then Snape . . . did it. The Killing Curse.”

It was mostly the truth, but twisted into a form that would give Severus the cachet he needed in Voldemort’s inner circle. She wondered how she’d make sure Severus was forgiven afterward despite her framing of the event.

Madam Pomfrey burst into tears. Nobody paid her any attention except Ginny, who whispered, “Shh! Listen!”

Gulping, Madam Pomfrey pressed her fingers to her mouth, her eyes wide. Somewhere out in the darkness, a phoenix was singing in a way Hero had never heard before: a stricken lament of terrible beauty. Hero felt, as she had felt about phoenix song before, that the music was inside her, not without. It was her own grief turned magically to song that echoed across the grounds and through the castle windows.

How long they all stood there, listening, she did not know, nor why it seemed to ease their pain a little to listen to the sound of their mourning, but it felt like a long time later that the hospital door opened again and Professor McGonagall entered the ward. Like all the rest, she bore marks of the recent battle: there were grazes on her face and her robes were ripped.

“Molly and Arthur are on their way,” she said, and the spell of the music was broken. Everyone roused themselves as though coming out of trances, turning again to look at Bill, or else to rub their own eyes, shake their heads. “Hero, what happened? According to Hagrid you were with Professor Dumbledore when he . . . when it happened. He says Professor Snape was involved in some—”

Hero swallowed and forced the words out. “Snape killed Dumbledore.” McGonagall stared at her for a moment, then swayed alarmingly; Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have pulled herself together, ran forward, conjuring a chair from thin air, which she pushed under McGonagall.

“Snape,” repeated McGonagall faintly, falling into the chair. “We all wondered . . . but he trusted . . . always . . . Snape . . . I can’t believe it . . .” Hero hated herself even more, seeing McGonagall like this. She wanted to take the words back, to scream that it wasn’t true. But she couldn’t. And it was
true, technically, in the way that the technical truth can obscure the facts far more readily than a complete fiction.

Lupin glanced at Hero furtively. She might have to tell him the truth. If anyone could keep a secret, it was a werewolf.

“But Dumbledore swore he was on our side!” whispered Tonks. “I always thought Dumbledore must know something about Snape that we didn’t . . .”

“He always hinted that he had an ironclad reason for trusting Snape,” muttered Professor McGonagall, now dabbing at the corners of her leaking eyes with a tartan-edged handkerchief. “I mean . . . with Snape’s history . . . of course people were bound to wonder . . . but Dumbledore told me explicitly that Snape’s repentance was absolutely genuine . . . Wouldn’t hear a word against him!”

“I’d love to know what Snape told him to convince him,” said Tonks.

Hero kept her mouth shut at that. They didn’t need to know that, and she’d forgiven him. It was hers, his and hers, and she’d be damned if she’d tell a soul who didn’t absolutely need to know.

“This is all my fault,” said Professor McGonagall suddenly. She looked disoriented, twisting her wet handkerchief in her hands. “My fault. I sent Filius to fetch Snape tonight, I actually sent for him to come and help us! If I hadn’t alerted Snape to what was going on, he might never have joined forces with the Death Eaters. I don’t think he knew they were there before Filius told him, I don’t think he knew they were coming.”

Hero’s gut twisted at that. If McGonagall hadn’t sent Flitwick for Snape, Hero would have been the one to go. It had all been organized far in advance; Professor McGonagall shouldn’t feel she was to blame. But Hero couldn’t say it, not yet. Maybe not ever.

They all fell silent as they listened to the phoenix song. As the last echoes faded from the grounds, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley burst into the hospital wing. Fleur was just behind them, her beautiful face terrified.

“Molly—Arthur—” said Professor McGonagall, jumping up and hurrying to greet them. “I am so sorry—”

“Bill,” whispered Mrs. Weasley, darting past Professor McGonagall as she caught sight of Bill’s mangled face. “Oh, Bill!” Mrs. Weasley bent over her son and pressed her lips to his bloodied forehead.

“You said Greyback attacked him?” Mr. Weasley asked Professor McGonagall distractedly. “But he hadn’t transformed? So what does that mean? What will happen to Bill?”

“We don’t yet know,” said Professor McGonagall, looking helplessly at Lupin.

“There will probably be some contamination, Arthur,” said Lupin. “It is an odd case, possibly unique . . . We don’t know what his behavior might be like when he awakens . . .”

Mrs. Weasley took the nasty-smelling ointment from Madam Pomfrey and began dabbing at Bill’s wounds.

“And Dumbledore . . .” said Mr. Weasley. “Minerva, is it true . . . Is he really . . . ?”

As Professor McGonagall nodded, Hero felt Ginny move beside her and looked at her. Her slightly
narrowed eyes were fixed upon Fleur, who was gazing down at Bill with a frozen expression on her face.

“Dumbledore gone,” whispered Mr. Weasley, but Mrs. Weasley had eyes only for her eldest son; she began to sob, tears falling onto Bill’s mutilated face.

“Of course, it doesn’t matter how he looks... It’s not r-really important... but he was a very handsome little b-boy... always very handsome... and he was g-going to be married!”

“And what do you mean by that?” said Fleur suddenly and loudly. “What do you mean, ‘he was going to be married’?”

Mrs. Weasley raised her tear-stained face, looking startled. “Well... only that—”

“You think Bill will not wish to marry me anymore?” demanded Fleur. “You think, because of these bites, he will not love me?”

“No, that’s not what I—”

“Because he will!” said Fleur, drawing herself up to her full height and throwing back her long mane of silver hair. “It would take more than a werewolf to stop Bill loving me!”

“Well, yes, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Weasley, “but I thought perhaps... given how, how he—”

There was a light of understanding in Fleur’s eyes. “You thought I would not wish to marry him? Or perhaps, you hoped?” she said, her nostrils flaring. “What do I care how he looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I think! All these scars show is that my husband is brave! And I shall do that!” she added fiercely, pushing Mrs. Weasley aside and snatching the ointment from her.

Mrs. Weasley fell back against her husband and watched Fleur mopping up Bill’s wounds with a most curious expression upon her face. Nobody said anything; they were all waiting for the explosion.

“Our Great-Auntie Muriel,” said Mrs. Weasley after a long pause, “has a very beautiful tiara – goblin-made – which I am sure I could persuade her to lend you for the wedding. She is very fond of Bill, you know, and it would look lovely with your hair.”

“Thank you,” said Fleur stiffly. “I am sure that will be lovely.”

And then both women were crying and hugging each other. Ron looked stunned and Ginny and Hermione were exchanging startled looks. Hero couldn’t help smiling slightly. It seemed that, though the evening was tainted by tragedy, it was also one of families putting aside their differences. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; impossible to have one without the other.

Not long after that, Hagrid walked in. The little of his face that was not obscured by hair or beard was soaking and swollen; he was shaking with tears, a vast, spotted handkerchief in his hand.

“I’ve... I’ve done it, Professor,” he choked. “M-moved him. Professor Sprout’s got the kids back in bed. Professor Flitwick’s lying down, but he says he’ll be alright in a jiffy, and Professor Slughorn says the Ministry’s been informed.”

“Thank you, Hagrid,” said Professor McGonagall, standing up at once and turning to look at the group around Bill’s bed. “I shall have to see the Ministry when they get here. Hagrid, please tell the Heads of Houses – Slughorn can represent Slytherin – that I want to see them in my office forthwith. I would like you to join us too.”
As Hagrid nodded, turned, and shuffled out of the room again, she looked over at Hero. “Before I meet them I would like a quick word with you, Hero. If you’ll come with me . . .”

God have mercy, would the torture never end? But she knew her place, and so she filed out after McGonagall.

The corridors were empty, silent and still. It took Hero a few minutes to realize that they were heading not for McGonagall’s office on the second floor, but rather the head’s office on the seventh. Of course. McGonagall had been deputy headmistress. Now, with Dumbledore gone, she would step into the role of headmistress.

The room looked almost exactly as it had when they’d left it mere hours previously. Hero had wanted to hang onto moments, hadn’t she? The last few hours had felt like years. It wasn’t what she’d meant.

Fawkes’s perch stood empty, and there was a new portrait that had joined the ranks of former heads. Dumbledore was slumbering in a golden frame over the desk, his half-moon spectacles perched upon his crooked nose, looking peaceful and untroubled.

After glancing once at this portrait, Professor McGonagall made an odd movement as though steeling herself, then rounded the desk to look at Hero, her face taut and lined.

“Hero,” she said, “I would like to know what you and Professor Dumbledore were doing this evening when you left the school.”

“I’m afraid I cannot make you privy to that information, Professor.”

“It may be vitally important.”

“It is. I’m afraid that changes nothing. Dumbledore ordered me not to tell a soul.”

Professor McGonagall glared at her. “Potter” – Hero registered the renewed use of her surname – “in the light of Professor Dumbledore’s death, I think you must see that the situation has changed somewhat—”

“And I must disagree,” Hero told her, polite but firm. “I agreed to follow his orders, whatever they were. I don’t recall him telling me that should no longer be so in the case of his death. And so, respectfully, Professor, I must ask that you not pry.”

“But—”

“Oh, also, before the people from the Ministry get here, you ought to know that Madam Rosmerta’s been under the Imperius curse. Malfoy confessed. She was his means of getting the necklace and the mead into the castle.”

“Rosmerta?” McGonagall asked, incredulous, but before she could go on, there was a knock on the door behind them and Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and Slughorn traipsed into the room, followed by Hagrid, who was still weeping copiously, his huge frame trembling with grief.

“Snape!” ejaculated Slughorn, who looked the most shaken, pale and sweating. “Snape! I taught him! I thought I knew him!”

But before any of them could respond to this, a sharp voice spoke from high on the wall: a sallow-faced wizard with a short black fringe had just walked back into his empty canvas. “Minerva, the Minister will be here within seconds, he has just Disapparated from the Ministry.”
“Thank you, Everard,” said Professor McGonagall, and she turned quickly to her teachers. “I want to talk about what happens to Hogwarts before he gets here,” she said quickly. “Personally, I am not convinced that the school should reopen next year. The death of the headmaster at the hands of one of our colleagues is a terrible stain upon Hogwarts’s history. It is horrible.”

“I am sure Dumbledore would have wanted the school to remain open,” said Professor Sprout. “I feel that if a single pupil wants to come, then the school ought to remain open for that pupil.”

They discussed it for a while, finally agreeing on Flitwick’s suggestion that the governors be consulted and the ultimate decision left with them.

“Now, as to getting students home . . . there is an argument for doing it sooner rather than later. We could arrange for the Hogwarts Express to come tomorrow if necessary—”

“What about Dumbledore’s funeral?” said Hero, speaking at last.

“Well . . .” said Professor McGonagall, losing a little of her briskness as her voice shook. “I, I know that it was Dumbledore’s wish to be laid to rest here, at Hogwarts—”

“Then that is what will happen,” Hero said, her voice recovering some of its steel.

“If the Ministry thinks it appropriate,” said Professor McGonagall. “No other headmaster or headmistress has ever been—”

“No other headmaster or headmistress ever gave more to this school,” growled Hagrid.

“Hogwarts should be Dumbledore’s final resting place,” said Professor Flitwick.

“Absolutely,” said Professor Sprout.

“And in that case,” Hero said, “you shouldn’t send the students home until the funeral’s over. They’ll want to say—” The last word caught in her throat, but Professor Sprout completed the sentence for her, giving her a kind, if watery smile.

“Good-bye.”

“Well said,” squeaked Professor Flitwick. “Well said indeed! Our students should pay tribute, it is fitting. We can arrange transport home afterward.”

“Seconded,” barked Professor Sprout.

“I suppose . . . yes . . .” said Slughorn in a rather agitated voice, while Hagrid let out a strangled sob of assent.

“He’s coming,” said Professor McGonagall suddenly, gazing down into the grounds. “The Minister . . . and by the looks of it, he’s brought a delegation . . .”

“May I be excused, Professor?” Hero interjected hastily.

“Yes, indeed,” Professor McGonagall agreed. “And quickly.” She strode toward the door and held it open for her. Hero all but ran down the spiral staircase and off along the deserted corridor.

Some days, there was no winning. Today, she thought, was one of those days. The world used to seem so simple. Black and white, good and evil. Nothing was simple anymore, or easy, or, least of all, painless. Everything hurt, the good and the bad. Everything was cast in the shadow of death. Every happy moment was still a moment gone, a grain of sand out of the top of the hourglass.
Everything you took joy in was one more thing that could be taken from you.

Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee. Nothing really matters, anyone can see. Nothing really matters to me . . . She wanted to scream, to rage, not necessarily at God or the universe, but at the way life kicked the shit out of them all. Fucked over and fucked up, and what did it really matter in the end? We all die, and, if we’re lucky, we’ve managed to wring a few drops of joy out of all the pain. What was the fucking point?

Instead of venting her fury, she found herself sinking to the floor, the tears running down her cheeks. She hated feeling so fucking useless.

Lupin was waiting for her by the Fat Lady’s portrait. “We need to talk,” he said, with an expression that brooked no argument. Hero sighed and nodded, leading him to a disused classroom.

“Hero, what happened? The truth.”

“I-I told the truth.”

He folded his arms, unimpressed.

“Alright, fine. Dumbledore’s been dying all year. He forced Severus to agree to kill him when the time came, so Malfoy wouldn’t have to do it and so Severus could secure his place as someone Voldemort trusted. He didn’t want to, he argued with Dumbledore about it until the end.”

“Do you know where he is?”

Hero met his gaze steadily, a spark of defiance in her eyes. “No. I don’t.”

“And you’re not just saying that because of the way you feel about him?”

“Severus knows where to find me. It’s better for all concerned if I don’t know where to find him.”

Remus’s gaze turned shrewd. “You did it, didn’t you? You and Severus are together.”

“Do you really need to ask that question? Would I be standing here in front of you defending him if we weren’t?”

A corner of Remus’s lips lifted. “Yes. You’ve always defended those you loved, no matter how little most people seem to think they deserve it.”

“Well. They’ve always been wrong. If they’re not about to change, I don’t see why I should.”

Remus ducked his head, looking like he was fighting a smile. “Sometimes I forget just how much like your parents you can be. James was unfailingly loyal, to the point of pig-headedness at times. Lily saw the best in everyone.”

Hero smiled sadly, and repeated the rest of his words from her third year back to him. “Even, and perhaps most especially, when that person couldn’t see it in themselves.”

“Yes. So, you’re telling me Dumbledore knew he was going to die and orchestrated the entire thing.”

“Not the entire thing. He . . . was a good enough strategist that he understood the value of room left to improvise. But yeah, he had it planned for months. He was never the sort to leave things up to chance. You know that.”
Remus inclined his head, conceding the point. “I do.”

“Was there anything else?” Hero asked, sweeping past him.

“How are you?”

She regarded him for a moment, her hand on the handle of the door. “Don’t make me answer that.”

“Of course. I won’t tell a soul, I promise. And Hero . . . Godspeed.”

When she finally stepped into the Common Room, her eyes swollen and red but dry, she saw Dean and Seamus sitting together by the fire. They were holding hands, not talking. They looked like they’d been crying, too. She supposed everyone had.

If they were in the Common Room, it meant the sixth year boys’ dorm was almost empty. Ron would probably be up there, maybe Hermione, too. She knew she’d handle everything better with them.

Hermione wasn’t there, but Ron was. It seemed he’d been waiting for her.

“Hermione?”

“Library. You know how she deals with loss.”

“Right.” Hero came to sit next to him on his bed.

“Did you end up getting a Horcrux?”

“No.”

Ron frowned. “Dumbledore was wrong?”

“No, he was right. Someone else got there first.”

“What?” Wordlessly, she fished the locket out of her pocket and handed it to him. He read the message inside, then folded it up, put it back, and closed the locket.

After what seemed like a long time, he spoke. “Who do you think RAB is?”

“No idea. I just hope he finished off that one for us.”

“Yeah. Do you think he did?”

Hero snorted. “With our luck?”

Ron smiled ruefully. “Right. Still, we’ll get there.”

“You think?” Hero asked listlessly.

“Sure. You may be the Chosen One, but you’re not alone.”
Toasting Life

Chapter Notes

Hi! How are you guys? Posting this before my shift as a cashier on Memorial Day weekend. Doesn't that sound like fun? This is the last chapter for book six, but as you may have realized, my version of Deathly Hallows will diverge quite a bit from the original. I hope you all have a great weekend. Don't forget to leave a review!

Hero found it difficult to sleep in the days that followed. Then again, she probably would have had trouble sleeping anyway. Her body had adapted to wake with the first light in the sky, which was coming earlier and earlier these days. She went to bed exhausted; she woke up only slightly less so. And where before, she’d had time with Severus to look forward to, now there was nothing. But it had to be said that grief sapped her energy almost as much as the chemotherapy.

War was not glory. Sometimes, it didn’t even feel much different than it had the last few years. But she supposed she’d been fighting for years, since before her fifteenth birthday. Actually, it was about a little more than week past the second anniversary of the graveyard and Cedric’s death. A year and two weeks since the Ministry and Sirius’s death. It didn’t feel different because it wasn’t. People had been being murdered for months. Dumbledore was dead, but, as devastating as it was for the cause of Light, he was just one more name to add to the list of the dead, the casualties of war.

Dudley had said, all those months ago, that in war, people get killed. It happens. It was one of those things that made sense intellectually, the way they’d studied it in History of Magic. All those goblin wars. But that was distant, like knowing children in third-world countries are starving. It was different when you were in the middle of it, caught in the thick of it. A picture was worth a thousand words, but a thousand words weren’t enough to describe it. Maybe there couldn’t possibly be enough, and never quite the right ones. It had to be lived in order to be understood, and once you’d lived through it, you didn’t want to understand.

She didn’t want to need anyone. She didn’t want to depend on someone who might not be there when the time came to fall on their strength. But she had to accept that even Severus, a double agent who courted death from both sides, had a better chance of surviving the war than she did. She had no chance. It made her want to laugh, if only because she felt like she didn’t have any tears left.

But she would soldier on, as she’d known she would. As long as there was breath in her body and blood in her veins, she wouldn’t be able to stop herself. It was for the best. Really. Before, a part of her had worried that there would come a point where she would give up. Now, she knew giving up would be beyond her. The war would, in all likelihood, outlive her, but she would die fighting. And that would be that.

Hermione spent the next several days in the library, suffocating her sorrows in clouds of dust from old editions of the Daily Prophet. She was searching for R.A.B. . . . and for references to Eileen Prince. The records of Potions Awards had turned up nothing, but it was still a tradition to publish wedding announcements in the Prophet. She rationalized that she could search for the both of them that way.
One morning as she was searching feverishly, for once glad final exams had been canceled, she struck pay dirt. It just wasn’t what she’d wanted or expected. There was, in fact, a wedding announcement for Eileen Prince, about her marriage to a man named Tobias Snape. A few years later, there was a birth announcement, that of Severus Snape. Severus Snape, known to be one of the most accomplished potioners in the Britain, was the Half-Blood Prince. It made sense. Of course, more recently, he was Dumbledore’s murderer and Hero’s . . . whatever he was to Hero. Hermione generally tried not to think about it.

Of course, this was something else for her to keep her mouth shut about. Hero couldn’t bear to hear his name. Hermione supposed it stood to reason, though it was hardly surprising; they’d always suspected he’d been on Voldemort’s side the whole time. But . . . why had Hero been with him? They’d been together, doing things . . . They’d seemed close. Snape had seemed like a different person than the git they knew. Had it all been a trick? If it was, Hermione couldn’t imagine what Hero was going through. If it wasn’t . . . but what else could it be?

Hermione longed for the good old days, when life made sense. And Ron didn’t ask her if anyone they knew had died with that forced air of casualness. And Hero wasn’t dying, and they didn’t have to fight in a war in a world she hadn’t known existed until six years ago. But all of that was true.

Before she’d gotten her Hogwarts letter, she’d dreamed of becoming a dentist like her parents. She hadn’t given it a thought in years. It seemed like something from a dream, it was so disparate from her plans now. She went to a school for magic and becoming a dentist was what seemed like the impossible fantasy. Of course, wizards didn’t seem terribly keen on their lives making sense. Percy had said about Dumbledore their first evening in the castle, “He’s a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes.”

Remembering that, Hermione started to cry. She shoved the newspaper away so it wouldn’t get wet. She’d never been close to Dumbledore the way Hero was, but she’d liked him, respected him. He’d always been there, silver-haired and indestructible, the greatest wizard in the world. And now he wasn’t. He wasn’t anything. And all the hope they’d had for him was gone in the time it took to say two words.

But Hero had said he was dying anyway. His hand, black from a curse. It didn’t make sense. None of it made a bit of sense. But then, that was in keeping with everything else that had been happening recently, so why should she have expected anything else?

* 

The next morning was Dumbledore’s funeral. When Hero woke with the sun, instead of staying in bed, staring up at her canopy, she started packing. The Hogwarts express would be leaving an hour after the funeral; there wouldn’t be time then.

Downstairs in the Great Hall, everyone was in their dress robes. McGonagall sat in the throne-like chair designated for the head. Hagrid’s chair was empty; Severus’s was filled by Rufus Scrimgeour. The sight left a sour taste in Hero’s mouth. She noticed Percy in Scrimgeour’s entourage. Ron gave no sign of having noticed his brother, apart from stabbing his sausages with unwarranted venom.

Professor McGonagall rose to her feet, and the mournful hum in the Hall died away at once.

“It is nearly time,” she said. “Please follow your Heads of Houses out into the grounds. Gryffindors, after me.”

They were heading towards the lake. The sun was warm on her face; it was a beautiful summer day. Hundreds of chairs were set out facing a marble table.
There was a huge and varied crowd of people already assembled. Most of them, Hero did not recognize. The ones she did were the Order members, people she knew from Diagon, the Hogwarts ghosts, and Aberforth Dumbledore.

Hero, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny filed into the end of a row next to the lake. People were whispering to each other; it sounded like a breeze in the grass, but the birdsong was louder by far. People continued to arrive. Infuriatingly, she spotted Cornelius Fudge spinning a black bowler hat in his hands, none other than Dolores Umbridge at his side, an abjectly false mask of grief on her face. Rita Skeeter was off to one side, a notebook clutched in her scarlet talons.

The staff were seated last. Hero noticed Scrimgeour next to McGonagall. She was distracted from her uncharitable thoughts by an almost otherworldly sound: the singing of the merpeople. They had congregated as close to the banks as possible and were singing their own farewell to the fallen headmaster.

Then Hagrid came up the aisle, sobbing as he carried Dumbledore’s body, wrapped in its burial shroud, purple with gold stars. Ron was white; Hermione and Ginny were crying silently, the tears falling thick and fast. Hero felt cold and empty, as though she had no tears left to shed. She felt like keening and wailing like a banshee, the fairy women who mourned the passing of the dead for those who in life had been truly great. Dumbledore ought to have had a choir of them, too.

Hagrid laid Dumbledore’s body on the marble table, then went to the back to sit next to his brother, Grawp. A little tufty-haired man in plain black robes got to his feet and stood in front of Dumbledore’s body. Hero could not hear what he was saying. Odd words floated back to them over the hundreds of heads. “Nobility of spirit” . . . “intellectual contribution” . . . “greatness of heart” . . . It did not mean very much. It had little to do with Dumbledore as Hero had known him. She suddenly remembered Dumbledore’s idea of a few words, “nitwit,” “oddment,” “blubber,” and “tweak,” and had to suppress a grin . . . What was the matter with her?

Hero closed her eyes and tuned him out. She thought of the man she had known, the kind, good-humored, good-hearted man who, in the last hours of his life, had admitted that he despised himself. Who had given everything in him to fight the good fight, up to and including his last breath. She found she’d been wrong after all; she still had tears left to shed. They fell from under her closed lids, hot and seemingly endless.

Hermione nudged her, and she opened her eyes and blinked quickly. The centaurs, she saw, had also come to pay their respects. At last, the little man in black stopped speaking and went to sit down. Hero, having never been to any funeral before, wasn’t sure what would happen next. Would politicians step forward to utter yet more empty words about a man who’d never had much time for them?

What instead happened next was that several people screamed. Bright, white flames had erupted around Dumbledore’s body and the table upon which it lay; higher and higher they rose, obscuring the body. White smoke spiraled into the air and made strange shapes: Hero thought, for one heart-stopping moment, that she saw a phoenix fly joyfully into the blue, but next second the fire had vanished. In its place was a white marble tomb, encasing Dumbledore’s body and the table on which he had rested.

There were a few more cries of shock as a shower of arrows soared through the air, but they fell far short of the crowd. It was, Hero knew, the centaurs’ tribute: He saw them turn tail and disappear back into the cool trees. Likewise, the merpeople sank slowly back into the green water and were lost from view.

Hermione was now sobbing into Ron’s shoulder while he held her, stroking her hair. Hero, not
needing any more reasons to feel bitter, got up and left them to it. Unfortunately, Scrimgeour spotted her easily.

He approached her, leaning on his cane. “I’ve been hoping to have a word . . . do you mind if I walk a little way with you?”

She cast him a sidelong glance. “Not at all,” she murmured blandly. She began to walk along the bank, Scrimgeour limping along beside her.

“Hero, this was a dreadful tragedy,” said Scrimgeour quietly. “I cannot tell you how appalled I was to hear of it. Dumbledore was a very great wizard. We had our disagreements, as you know, but no one knows better than I—”

“Your rambling does you a discredit, Minister. You would do better by yourself and me to simply make your point.”

Scrimgeour stopped too, leaned on his stick, and stared at Hero. He raised an eyebrow, his eyes turning cold and calculating. “The word is that you were with him when he left the school the night that he died.”

“Indeed? And what little bird might have whispered that in your ear?”

“Somebody Stupefied a Death Eater on top of the tower after Dumbledore died. There were also two broomsticks up there. The Ministry can add two and two, Hero.”

“Oh, that does ease my heart. Yes, it certainly is good to know that the Ministry in whom we entrust our safety is not quite so incompetent as to be incapable of basic arithmetic.” Scrimgeour glared at her. She paused. “You may rest assured that the very moment where we went and what we did becomes your business, I shall let you know. I cannot foresee the arrival of that day at any point in the near future, however. Dumbledore was quite adamant it remain . . . behind closed doors, as it were.”

“Such loyalty is admirable, of course,” said Scrimgeour, who seemed to be restraining his irritation with difficulty, “but Dumbledore is gone, Hero. He’s gone.”

Hero regarded him coolly. “I do not believe I have given you leave to address me by my given name, Minister. Dumbledore will only be gone from Hogwarts when there remain none who are loyal to him. And I assure you, that day won’t come until long after your tenure has terminated.”

“My dear . . . Miss Potter . . . even Dumbledore cannot return from the—”

“I am neither delusional nor a fool. I am perfectly well aware that such a thing is impossible.” She shook her head. “I don’t imagine you could possibly understand that sort of loyalty. I have nothing left to say to you.”

Scrimgeour hesitated, then said, in what was evidently supposed to be a tone of delicacy, “The Ministry can offer you all sorts of protection, you know, Miss Potter. I would be delighted to place a couple of my Aurors at your service—”

Hero laughed derisively. “Voldemort wants to kill me himself, and Aurors won’t stop him. Respectfully, I must decline. Thank you so much for the offer. I’m sure you understand.”

“So,” said Scrimgeour, his voice quite cold now, “the request I made of you at Christmas—”

“Request? You must forgive me, I find I cannot recall any request . . . Oh! You mean your demand
that I take up the Ministry’s line and lie to the wizarding world for you in exchange for—”

“— for raising everyone’s morale!” snapped Scrimgeour.

Hero considered him for a moment. “Tell me . . . has Stan Shunpike been awarded the freedom he so richly deserves?

Scrimgeour turned a nasty purple color highly reminiscent of Uncle Vernon. “I see you are —”

“Dumbledore’s Golden Girl. To the bitter end,” Hero agreed serenely. “Quite right.”

Scrimgeour glared at her for another moment, then turned and limped away without another word. Twat.

Ron and Hermione came hurrying toward her, passing Scrimgeour going the opposite direction. Hero continued on slowly, allowing them to catch up with her. They finally did in the shade of a beech tree.

“What did Scrimgeour want?” Hermione whispered.

Hero threw her a look. What did she think? Hermione looked down, falling silent.

Ron seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, then he said loudly to Hermione, “Look, let me go back and hit Percy!”

“No,” she said firmly, grabbing his arm.

“It’ll make me feel better!”

Hero laughed. Even Hermione smiled a little, though it faded as she looked up at the castle.

“I can’t bear the idea that we might never come back,” she said softly. “How can Hogwarts close?”

“Maybe it won’t,” said Ron. “We’re not in any more danger here than we are at home, are we? Everywhere’s the same now. I’d even say Hogwarts is safer, there are more wizards inside to defend the place. What d’you reckon, Hero?”

“I’m not coming back even if it does reopen,” Hero replied frankly.

Ron gaped at her, but Hermione said sadly, “I knew you were going to say that. But then, what will you do?”

“I’m going back to the Dursleys’ once more, because Dumbledore wanted me to. It’ll be a short visit, and then I’ll be gone for good.”

“But where will you go if you don’t come back to school?”

“I have Horcruxes to hunt for. There are still four left, remember? I’ll figure out a way to find them and then I’ll destroy them. And if I’m still alive at that point, I’ll go after the seventh part of his soul, the bit that’s still in his body.”

There was a long silence. The crowd had almost dispersed now, the stragglers giving the monumental figure of Grawp a wide berth as he cuddled Hagrid, whose howls of grief were still echoing across the water.

“We’ll be there, Hero,” Ron said, sounding like he was taking an oath.
“What?”

“At your aunt and uncle’s house,” said Ron. “And then we’ll go with you wherever you’re going.”

“Absolutely not. I can’t protect you. You are going to stay behind, and I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

“You’ve said it before” said Hermione quietly. “That there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We’ve had time, haven’t we?”

“We’re with you whatever happens,” said Ron. “Look, mate . . . you’re dying. You won’t be able to cope on your own, especially later on. You need us.” He held Hero’s gaze until she nodded. “Besides, you’re going to have to come ‘round my mum and dad’s house before we do anything else.”

“Why?” Hero asked, frowning.

“Bill and Fleur’s wedding, remember?”

She looked at him, startled; the idea that anything as normal as a wedding could still exist seemed incredible and yet wonderful. “Yeah, we shouldn’t miss that,” she said finally. Her hand went automatically to the fake Horcrux around her neck. In spite of everything, in spite of the dark and twisting path stretching ahead of her, she felt her heart lift a little at the thought that there was still one last golden day of peace left to enjoy with Ron and Hermione. Life was made up of good days and bad, any life, no matter how many or how few years it lasted. As long as there was breath in her body and blood in her veins, she’d just have to trust that she would have good days left.
Dudley and Aunt Petunia came to pick her up. They didn’t mention Uncle Vernon; they didn’t have to. Hero was just as glad not to see him as it seemed he was not to see her. Well, that worked out just fine, then. Dudley had grinned and gathered her into a bear hug. Aunt Petunia had stood off to the side with a pinched expression on her face. She declined to talk to her niece. Hero was fine with that, too.

Hero had ducked into the bathroom to conjure her Patronus; with so many witches and wizards about in central London on a normal day, let alone the day Hogwarts students came home, it wouldn’t seem odd in the slightest that magic was being cast in her vicinity.

It stood before her expectantly. “Severus, I’m on my way back to Surrey. The coast will be clear in a few hours, around nine this evening.” The stag inclined its head and disappeared. Hero nodded in satisfaction; that much accomplished, she went to slip back out to where Dudley and Aunt Petunia waited. Struck with inspiration, she didn’t stop when she got to them, instead taking her trunk to a secluded area to shrink it; if she was leaving soon, she would want something easy to carry. Having done so, she walked out, whistling, a much smaller piece of luggage on her trolley.

Uncle Vernon didn’t appear to be at home when they arrived. Hero certainly didn’t object, but it was rather odd. She glanced curiously at Dudley.

“He’s in his study, brooding,” he explained. “You may not see him at all while you’re here.”

Hero nodded. Dudley carried her trunk up to her room for her. She and Dudley chatted a bit about how their years had gone, which turned out to be depressing. Then again, it wasn’t terribly surprising, considering.

“So... how’s it feel to be seventeen?”

“There’s not a whole lot different. I mean, I don’t come of age until next year. It’s different for you, you’ll come of age in a few weeks.”

“Yeah. I didn’t think I’d get here, actually. I guess it’s nice to have... outlived my expectations.”

Dudley shook his head. “You’re so bloody morbid. Do you get off on it, or something?”

“I’m being realistic!” She shrugged. “I thought I’d be dead by now. I’m not. That’s... you know, nice.”

Dudley shook his head again. “Am I ever glad I don’t live in your head. I don’t want to imagine what it’s like in there.”

Hero sighed. “It hasn’t all been horrible.”
Dudley smiled slowly. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Got yourself a boyfriend, have you?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Ah, just a crush, then?”

“It was. It’s moved beyond that. He’s not my boyfriend because . . . I don’t think he’d ever let me call him that.”

“Why? Is it a friends with benefits sort of thing?”

“It’s not that. It’s just . . . he’s not exactly a boy.”

Dudley stared at her, shocked, his tea halfway to his lips. “You’re dating an older man?” Hero blushed, but didn’t deny it. It was, after all, perfectly true. “How much older are we talking?”

“He’s a professor.”

“Hero, that’s . . . that’s kind of illegal. He’s not taking advantage of you, is he?” he asked, suddenly fierce.

“No! He’d never. Look, I started it, alright? And it’s not illegal anymore; I’m not going back.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got a job to do, to get rid of the man who murdered my parents. He’s gone and made himself immortal, and I have to fix it. I don’t have time to go to school. I can’t . . . I can’t.”

“I won’t pretend to understand, but . . . do you love him?”

“Yes.”

“Does he love you?”

“I hope to God he doesn’t.”

“Sorry?”

“It’ll just hurt him. I’m dead either way. He likes me, fine. He loves me . . .”

“Haven’t you ever heard it’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?”

“He’s been hurt enough. What good would it do?”

“Love for its own sake?”

“I can’t do that to him. I can’t.”

“Alright.” He shrugged. “I think you’re wrong, but it’s your life.”

“Thank you.”

“So, how long are you staying, anyway?”
“I think the plan was to move me the 31st. Sev is coming tonight, though. I’m sure that’s one of many things he’ll want to talk about.”

“Sev?”

“Severus.”

“He’s . . . ?”

“Yeah.”

“I want to meet him.”

“Dudley . . .”

“No. Before this goes any further, I want to meet him.”

“Dudley, we’ve been together since January. Almost six months.”

“I don’t care. I need to approve him.”

“Since when?”

“Since I pulled my head out of my arse long enough to see what was going on around me.”

“Fine. But you’re going to be polite.”

“I will be threatening.”

“No, you won’t. You may be a boxer, but he’s a wizard who’s been a double agent for the past sixteen years.”

“And you’re my cousin. I have to make sure he’s worthy of you.”

“Trust me, he is. He’s wonderful.”

“Yes, but love is blind. I have to see him for myself.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. It’s not going to be my fault if you end up with a pig tail again!”

“I never said it was. It’ll be his fault.”

“I’m going to regret this.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But the fact of the matter is, it’s going to happen whether you like it or not.”

“And if we go off somewhere and I just ‘forget’ to tell you?”

“Oh, no chance of that. I’m not leaving your side,” he told her cheerfully.

“But I’ll get bored.”

“Oh,” he said, miming getting shot with an arrow to the heart. “That, that hurts! I suppose I have no choice but to show you my tapes of Keeping Up Appearances, which I assure you my mother doesn’t know I have.”

Hero blinked at him. “You bought tapes of that program?”
“You mean the one Mum doesn’t allow mentioned in the house?”

“Yes, that one.”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

“I’m game.”

“I thought you might be.”

*

Severus surreptitiously checked his watch again. Hours yet to go. Damn.

Draco noticed what he was doing and looked away, suppressing a smile. If Severus saw, he would yell at him again, and Draco would avoid that if at all possible. What Potter saw in him, he wasn’t sure. Of course, what Severus saw in Potter was an equally mystifying question. He might be being forced into an Unbreakable Vow, but at least he’d get a chance to indulge his intellectual curiosity. And it was rather amusing watching Severus worry over going to see his lady love.

Severus’s house was . . . not what he had expected. He’d said it before, but he kept thinking it. It was . . . muggle. And small, almost claustrophobic. The walls were lined with books. That wasn’t surprising. It was cramped and dull and gray and utterly devoid of grandeur. It didn’t seem to be a place where a Slytherin, any Slytherin, belonged. Draco wanted to drag his godfather away from the place, to save him. Even if it was the safe haven they were hiding in. Draco hated it, and he got the distinct feeling Severus loathed it. So why were they there of all places?

Oh, right. Because Severus had killed Dumbledore and Draco had failed to kill Dumbledore. He sighed and idly slipped a book off the shelf. Severus’s eyes caught the motion and pinned Draco with a glare.


“I’m bored.”

“A travesty, I’m sure.”

“Why can’t I read something?”

“You have no intention of reading; you merely wish to pry.”

“You’re my godfather, I feel like I should be allowed to know something about you,” Draco said petulantly.

“I’m a spy. Letting people get to know me is bad for business.”

“Especially when that person is Hero Potter,” Draco pointed out.

“Some people are worth it.”

Draco frowned. After a moment, he asked, “I’m not?”

Severus snorted. “The risk isn’t worth it until you’ve sworn the Unbreakable Vow.”

“Oh, come on, I heard her Patronus! We’re not going anywhere until nine o’clock!”
“No. We are not.”

“What do you expect me to do?” Draco demanded plaintively.

“I don’t particularly care.”

Draco folded his arms and scowled.

* *

As nine o’clock approached, Dudley turned off the television in his room. “He makes you happy?”

“Very.”

Dudley nodded, looking thoughtful. “He’s a good man?”

“He’s as good as I am.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I think you’ll find it’s all the answer you need. It’s certainly all the answer you’re going to get.”

“Hero . . . I just need to know that you’re going to be alright.”

“I won’t. But Severus will do all he can in the months to come.” She brought her legs up, her feet on the edge of the chair, and hugged her knees to her chest. “I miss him,” she admitted.

“Oh, Hero—”

There was a soft crack of displaced air, and she was on her feet in an instant.

Dudley’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “What—”

“Shhh,” she said holding up a finger. “Severus is here. At least, I hope it’s Severus.”

“It might not be?”

“Well, the Dark Lord might have summoned him, seen it in his mind, and sent someone to kill me.”

“You’re really paranoid.”

“It’s why I’m still alive. It’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you. Come on, then, if you’re coming.”

Hero silently crept down the stairs, Dudley following behind her; he wasn’t used to sneaking, and so he wasn’t as adept at not making a sound. Severus was standing in the front hall. Hero froze at the sight of him, simply taking him in. A soft, crooked smile settled on his lips. “Hello, darling.”

Hero ran down the remaining steps, stopping on the bottom one so they’d be of more equal heights. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him as if it had been months since they’d seen each other instead of a week. His hands went to her hips as he kissed her back.

“Uh. Get a room, Potter.”

Hero drew back, though she left her arms linked around Severus’s neck. “I live here, Malfoy. Piss off.” She looked back at Severus. “What’s he doing here anyway?”
“I could hardly send him off to the Dark Lord after he saw the two of us engaging in a public display of affection.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

A corner of his mouth lifted in a wicked smile. “I’m not.” Hero rolled her eyes in fond exasperation. Behind her, Dudley had clammed up. A thoughtful expression was on his face.

Malfoy cleared his throat. “Could we get on with it?”

“Right, yeah. The sitting room?” Hero suggested, looking back at Dudley.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah, that’ll do. Mum’s out of the house and Dad’s working, so we won’t be disturbed.”

Malfoy glared at him. “Who are you?”

“He’s my cousin. You may be a wizard, but his reflexes are better than yours. And he’s a junior heavyweight boxing champion. I’d watch my mouth if I were you.” Sending him a censorious look, she unwound her arms and led the way to the sitting room. They followed in her wake, Dudley bringing up the rear.

Hero settled into the same armchair she’d sat in when Dumbledore had collected her the previous summer. Severus took the other one. Hero looked over at him.

“So. Why exactly did you bring Malfoy along?”

“Draco has decided that he wishes to join the cause of right. He’ll be spying for us.”

“Oh. Splendid.”

“He’ll be swearing an Unbreakable Vow to you.”

“What? I thought I was swearing to you!” Malfoy cried, glaring at his godfather.

“Certainly not. No, you’re doing this all the way or not at all. And she’s going to be Secret Keeper.” Seeing the look of betrayal on his godson’s face, Severus sighed. “My life is dedicated to her. How do you imagine I’ll be able to trust you unless you, too, swear fealty?”

Malfoy muttered mutinously under his breath but didn’t argue out loud. Severus nodded in satisfaction.

“Right, then. Draco, you won’t get another word on the subject out of either one of us until after you’ve sworn.”

The mutinous expression on his face faded, to be replaced by one of weary resignation. He got to his feet, came closer, and knelt.

“Hero, you’ll need to kneel across from him and take his right hand in yours.” Hero did so, looking confused. Severus stepped forward and rested the tip of his wand on their joined hands. “Hero, you set the terms. Be sure to make them airtight.”

Hero stared into Malfoy’s silver eyes, eyes that were very frightened beneath the bravado. She pushed away the twinge of sympathy she felt for her rival. “Will you serve my cause and follow any and all orders given to you by myself or Severus Snape while there is breath in your body, regardless of condition?”
His hand was shaking in hers, but his voice was steady. “I will.” A tongue of flame encircled their linked hands.

“Will you keep our secrets, never communicating them in any form or otherwise betraying us and our good faith?”

“I will.” A second tongue of flame joined the first.

“Will you bind yourself in fealty to the cause of right and to me?”

“I will.” A third flame came to join the other two, twining themselves together like a rope. It glowed for a moment like a miniature sun, then seemed to fade into their skin. She dropped his hand and balled hers into a fist.

She looked up at Severus. “Was there something else?”

“I was considering putting him under the Fidelius Charm, but it’ll work best if the secret is already there and established.”

“Right. Well, Draco, ask away,” Hero said, gesturing vaguely as she got to her feet and sat back in the armchair.

Draco got up and stumbled to the sofa. “How did you know what the mission was?”

“Slughorn’s Christmas party. I snuck out and eavesdropped on your little tiff with Severus.”

“How long have you been together?”

“Funnily enough, also Slughorn’s Christmas party. About five minutes after you left, actually. Well, that’s when I kissed him. He didn’t kiss me until, oh, about a month later.”

Draco paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. He licked his lips nervously and said, “What... what do you need me to do, exactly?”

Severus fielded this question. “Be our eyes and ears where we can neither see nor hear. Undermine the enemy where possible. Report back. Carry out tasks for us. Do as you’re told.”

“I just swore fealty to Hero Potter and the ‘cause of right’. When does that end?”

Severus just looked at him. “It doesn’t.”

“Well, that’s bloody perfect.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m dying of cancer, so you won’t have me to worry about for very long.”

Draco stared at her. “You’re dying of cancer?”

“Yes. Well, I mean, they took out most of it, but it’ll come back. And I’ll die. Soon. I mean, it’s been a year, and he said I might have two, so no, I won’t be around long enough for it to be terribly inconvenient for you.”

Draco snorted. “You’ve definitely been spending too much time with Severus.”

Hero snorted. “Not enough, recently.”
“Well, you can have him, he won’t let me do anything.”

“Well, that’s about to change, isn’t it?” Hero asked, raising an eyebrow.

Draco looked caught off-guard. “Oh. I suppose.”

“Any further questions?” Severus asked.

“Come on, I know you have others. Shoot,” Hero interjected.

“Why were you really throwing up?”

Hero’s smile had an edge to it. “I’m dying of cancer. Next question.”

Draco swallowed but continued. “Do Weasley and Granger know?”

“What, specifically?”

“About what you said to me, about you and him, about Dumbledore . . .”

“They have no idea I said a word to you. They don’t know about Severus. And they had no idea about Dumbledore ordering Severus to kill him. They knew he was dying, though.”

Draco’s expression turned incredulous, his mouth hanging open slightly. “You . . . they . . . you all knew?”

Hero raised an eyebrow. “Of course. Poor Malfoy. The Dark Lord doesn’t tell you a thing, does he? Probably for the best. God knows most of his new recruits would go running for the hills if they saw the larger picture. You couldn’t even cope with this part of goings on. Tell me, what makes you think you’ll be able to work for us as a spy? You haven’t got the nerve.”

“I can’t run away, not now. I know that, alright? The best thing I can do is switch to the right side while I still can. And if I die, I die. I probably would have done anyway. At least I can die honorably.”

Hero was looking at him with new eyes. “I didn’t realize that mattered to you. I mean, it matters to me that my death mean something. I suppose I always thought Slytherins were too ambitious to be fatalistic.”

“I’m not a fool; I know my chances aren’t good. Better to die fighting alongside decent people than the scum on the Dark Lord’s side.” She knew he was thinking of Greyback and maybe of the Carrows siblings. She was thinking of Bellatrix and Yaxley, Karkaroff and Peter Pettigrew. He was right; shejust hadn’t expected him to have seen it.

Hero stared at him with a faint light of approval in her eyes. “Good.”

“We still have to discuss your departure.”

“I thought the plan was to move me on the 31st, when the blood wards break.”

“Yes, but even the Dark Lord can figure it out. It is, after all, suicide, to break the protections of this place prematurely.”

“Suicide,” Hero repeated flatly. Severus inclined his head.

“That’s the perception. One should never underestimate the element of surprise, however. Of
course, I’m going to have to leak that bit so he won’t suspect me.”

“I’m sorry . . . how is this helpful?”

“Well, he won’t know which one is which, will he?”

“Sorry?”

“There’s going to be seven of you.”

Hero paused a moment, looking at him with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. “Let me get this straight. We’re leaving early so as to have the element of surprise, which we won’t have so you can maintain your cover, and six people will be Polyjuicing as me so we can make our getaway.”

“In a nutshell.”

“Absolutely not. I’m not having six people risk their lives for me, especially not when I’m already dying. It’s madness. It is suicide!”

“Everyone involved will be of age. They will have freely consented to join the war effort in full knowledge that they might die at any point. They have thought long and hard about their sacrifice and are still tendering it. Don’t throw away their offers of their lives because you are naïve enough to believe that if they do not do this, they will live out the war untouched. They will not, nor, if I know them at all, would they want to.”

Hero sighed. “You’re right. Of course you’re right. I just . . . I hate that they’re taking risks for me.”

“Don’t be absurd. It’s not for you, it’s for what you represent. In war, a foot soldier does not throw himself in front of a bullet aimed at his commanding officer because of any personal sentiment; he does it because the commander is more important. They love you, Hero, but they’re doing this because of who you are to the war, to the Dark Lord. They’re doing this because it’s how you fight. You wage battles and try to destroy the other side. Whoever gets there first wins.”

Hero remembered, back in their first year, right before Hermione left for Christmas, seeing a queen smash a knight.

“That’s barbaric!”

“That’s wizard’s chess.”

Perhaps, all those years ago, when the three of them took the place of McGonagall’s life-size chess-set, she should have realized that that would be the way her life would be from that point on. What were they, really, but chess pieces directed according to someone else’s strategy? There would be casualties, friends lost to the brutal realities of war. It wouldn’t be at all pretty. Unfortunately, the stakes were a great deal higher.

“Do you think it’s going to be like . . . real wizard’s chess?”

After seeing a pawn smashed, Ron’s reply: “Yes, Hermione. I think it’s going to be exactly like real wizard’s chess.” They had all seen pieces smashed to bits around them. It wouldn’t be finished until a king was captured or killed. Black or white, the war, and with it the fate of the wizarding world, falling to one side or the other.

“I think you should present the plan.”
“Me?”

“Why not? It was Dumbledore’s idea originally, but he only ever mentioned it to me. It’s a brilliant plan, and it’s centered around you. Why shouldn’t you be the one to present it?”

“People think I’m a reckless idiot. They’ll never believe I came up with it.”

“I used to be the person least disposed to think well of you. Trust me when I tell you that I would have seen nothing suspicious in you presenting the idea. You are reckless, that’s certainly true, but even I must admit that you have occasional flashes of brilliance. It would not be uncharacteristic. Albus wanted Mundungus Fletcher to present the idea, under the influence of the Imperius Curse, of course. I told him it would scarcely be believed. I understand where your worries spring from, but it is no idle flattery when I tell you that they are completely unfounded.”

Hero was quite red by the time he finished. She stared down at her lap, trying not to smile, rather unsuccessfully, if truth be told. “Thank you.”

“Certainly.”

“Alright, how am I supposed to get the word out? I can’t do any magic until the 31st, the fireplace isn’t connected to the Floo network . . .”

“You could send an owl,” he suggested, deadpan.

“Yes, but we’re in a bit of a time crunch. This sort of thing takes planning. We may not have time, especially if the owl is blown off-course. I’m just saying, it seems risky.”

“Write a letter. I’ll make sure it gets to where it needs to be.”

Hero smiled and shook her head. “What would I do without you?”

“Perhaps it’s best not to ponder it.”

She looked over at Dudley. “Satisfied?”

Dudley scrutinized Severus, then nodded reluctantly. “I suppose. He seems decent enough.”

Hero sniffed. “Not exactly glowing praise, but I suppose it’s better than the alternative.”
Hi! So, another chapter. This is the beginning of book seven material and the beginning of a new arc. It's going to be a bit more of an ensemble piece from now on, since Hero has a diminished role in my version. Here's hoping you all can sink your teeth into it anyway.

They didn’t have time to return to Spinner’s End before they were both summoned to the Dark Lord’s side. Severus took a moment to brush his lips against her lips before Apparating to Malfoy manor. He made sure to remind her of the taboo the Dark Lord planned to instate once the Ministry fell. She nodded in understanding.

He touched down outside the gates; Malfoy, having been keyed into the wards, was undoubtedly already inside.

Severus glanced around. Within seconds, someone else popped into being beside him. He spun on his heel and pointed his wand at the interloper’s chest in a reaction borne of long habit. The other man did the same. After a second, Severus recognized Yaxley and, it seemed, Yaxley recognized him. They both lowered their wands and began to walk briskly in the direction of the Manor.

“News?”

Severus did not bother to glance at the man walking by his side. “The best.” This was it; this was where he needed to be, the role he needed to play. He would play it to perfection. Hero was depending on him. He shut down that thought, allowing himself to slip into the persona he had cultivated, to hide his true thoughts, feelings, and intentions, until he himself almost believed it.

“Thought I might be late,” Yaxley confided as they strode along the moonlit lane. “It was a little trickier than I expected. But I hope he will be satisfied. You sound confident that your reception will be good?”

Severus nodded; the character he had cultivated did not allow for small talk. He did not wish to discuss it with his companion in any case. They passed through the wards in silence.

The gravel crunched under their feet as they made their way to the front door, which swung open, seemingly without anyone touching it. They walked together to the drawing room, where the meeting was to be held, watched by portraits of Malfoy ancestors.

The drawing room was full of silent people sitting at a long, ornate table. The ordinary furniture had been pushed against the walls to make room. The only light came from a roaring fire. As Severus’s eyes adjusted, he realized there was something floating above the table: an unconscious body. The figure was upside down, as if it had been hoisted up by the ankle. As it slowly rotated, it was reflected in the gleaming, polished surface of the table. Malfoy was sitting directly below it. He couldn’t help glancing up at it every now and again. Deep inside himself, Severus cursed; did he have to be so bloody obvious about it?

At the head of the table, almost blotted out by the light of the flames, was the Dark Lord.
His voice, when he spoke, was high and cold. “Snape. Yaxley. You were very nearly late.” He indicated the place to his immediate right. “Severus, here. Yaxley – beside Dolohov.”

It was to Severus that he spoke first. “So?”

“My lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Hero Potter from her place of safety next Saturday at nightfall.

The interest around the table sharpened palpably: some stiffened, others fidgeted, all gazing at Severus and the Dark Lord.

“Saturday . . . at nightfall.”

The Dark Lord stared into his eyes. Severus stared back calmly, knowing that the slightest hesitation, any action that might give reason to distrust, would likely cost him his life. He brought to the forefront of his mind an imagining he’d gone over so many times, it almost seemed more real than would a real memory. It was an invented recollection of interrogating Mundungus Fletcher before Obliviating him.

“Good. Very good.”

“My lord, I have heard differently,” Yaxley put forward.

The Dark Lord gave no indication that he should continue; he had no reaction whatsoever. Yaxley plowed on ahead. “Dawlish, the Auror, let slip that Potter will not be moved until the 30th, the night before the girl turns seventeen.”

Severus allowed a condescending smile to unfurl across his features. “My source informed me of plans to lay a false trail. This must be it. No doubt a Confundus Charm was placed on Dawlish; he is known to be susceptible.

“I assure you, my lord, Dawlish seemed quite certain.”

“Well, naturally, if he were Confunded, he would seem certain. I assure you, Yaxley, the Auror office will play no further role in the protection of Hero Potter.” After all, they’d done such a bang-up job of it. “The Order believes we’ve infiltrated the Ministry.”

“Got one thing right, then, haven’t they?” a Death Eater interjected with a wheezy giggle. Voldemort did not laugh. He glanced up at the body and seemed deep in thought.

“My lord,” Yaxley continued, “Dawlish believes an entire contingent of Aurors will be used to transfer the girl—”

The Dark Lord held up a white hand. Yaxley fell silent immediately, but looked on resentfully as the Dark Lord turned to Severus.

“Where will they hide the girl next?”

“At the home of one of the Order. The place has been given every protection the Ministry and the Order together could provide. I think there is little chance of taking her once she is there, my lord, unless, of course, the Ministry has fallen before next Saturday, which might give us a chance to discover and undo enough of the enchantments to break through the rest.”

“Well, Yaxley? Will the Ministry have fallen by next Saturday?”
“I have good news on that score. I have – with great difficulty, after prodigious effort – placed Pius Thicknesse under the Imperius curse.” The Death Eaters were cheered by this; the Dark Lord was nonplussed.

“It is a start. Thicknesse is only one man; Scrimgeour must be surrounded by our people before I act. One failed attempt on the Minister’s life will set me back a long way.”

“But, my lord, Thicknesse, as the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, has contact with all the other heads of departments and routinely with the Minister himself. It will, I think, be easy, now that we have such a high-ranking officer under our control, to subjugate the others, so they then may all work to bring Scrimgeour down.”

“Provided, of course, that he is not discovered. Well, it seems rather unlikely that the Ministry will fall completely to me before next Saturday. If we cannot touch her at her destination, it must then be done while she travels.”

“We have several people in the Department of Transportation. If Potter Apparates or uses the Floo, we’ll have her.”

Severus narrowly refrained from rolling his eyes. “She will do neither. The Order mistrusts everything to do with the place. They will eschew any form of transportation controlled by the Ministry.”

If the Dark Lord had been more human, he might have smiled. “All the better. She will have to move in the open. Easier to take by far.”

He glanced up at the rotating body, then around at his followers. “I shall attend to her . . . in person. Do not engage; too many mistakes have been made concerning Hero Potter. Some of them, I must admit, have been my own. Her continued survival is more due to my own errors than her triumphs,” he said, his lip curling.

A few people fidgeted nervously, wondering who the Dark Lord would blame for the breath still in her body. He paid them no mind, instead gazing at the rotating body.

“I have been careless, and so have been thwarted by luck and chance, those wreckers of all but the best-laid plans. But I know better now. I know that I must be the one to kill Hero Potter, and I shall be.”

It was at those words, as if in response to them, that a wail, shrill, the sound of human misery, floated to them, seemingly from somewhere beneath their feet. The Dark Lord looked to Wormtail with irritation. “Wormtail, what have I told you about keeping our guest quiet?”

“Yes, my lord,” the rodent-like excuse for a human being muttered, scurrying out of the room.

“As I was saying, I understand circumstances with infinitely more clarity now. I shall need to borrow a wand from one of you before I go to kill Potter.”

The faces of those pledged to serve him were pictures of shocked apprehension. A wand was like a limb, only more important. A wand made available what mere hands never could.

“No volunteers?” he asked, his tone faintly mocking. “Let me see . . . Lucius, I see no reason for you to retain your wand.”

Lucius Malfoy looked up; he’d certainly seen better days. His cheeks were sunken and hollow, his skin like wax. His voice, when he spoke, was hoarse.
“My lord?”

“My lord?”

“Your wand, Lucius. Has Azkaban dulled your wits so terribly that you are no longer able to understand the English language? I require your wand.”

Malfoy glanced sideways at his wife. She kept staring straight ahead but, a moment later, Lucius withdrew his wand from his robes and handed it to his master.

The Dark Lord examined it closely. “The composition?”

“E-elm, my lord . . . and dragon heartstring.”

“Good.” Lucius’s eyes flicked down to his lap. Severus fervently hoped he wouldn’t do anything foolish and that that would be the end of the matter.

“Tell me, Severus, do you recognize our guest?”

Severus glanced up at the upside-down face, making sure to keep his own impassive. As the woman came to face him, she let out a whimper. In a cracked, abused, and terrified voice, she said, “Severus, please, help me!”

Stupid cow, he allowed himself to think. Yes, she surely was aware that she was about to die; certainly her ordeal had been unspeakable already, going by the state of her; it was true that Severus’s was a face she had known for many years. It was, however, easy under the circumstances to find it inexcusable for her to beg him for her life. Was he not sitting at the Dark Lord’s right hand? Had he not given information that seemed likely to lead to the capture and eventual death of Hero Potter? She was a fool to place her remaining seconds in hands which she ought to have thought soaked with the blood of innumerable innocents.

“And you, Draco?” Draco shook his head jerkily, looking anywhere but at the women, his eyes wide and showing the beginning stages of panic. Get a grip, Draco! Severus wanted to bark at him. Fat lot of good the boy would be as a spy if he went to pieces twenty minutes in.

“But, of course, you would not have taken her classes. For those of you who do not know, we are joined this evening by Charity Burbage, who, until quite recently, taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Yes, Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles . . . how they are not so different from you and I.”

One of the Death Eaters spat on the floor. Charity had revolved to face Snape again. “Severus . . . please . . . please . . .”

“Silence,” the Dark Lord murmured and, with a lazy flick of his wand, he made it so.

“Not content with corrupting and polluting the minds of wizarding children, last week Professor Burbage wrote an impassioned defense of Mudbloods in the Daily Prophet. Wizards, she says, must accept these thieves of their knowledge and magic. The dwindling of the Purebloods, she says, is a most desirable circumstance. She would have us all mate with Muggles, no doubt.” His voice was contemptuous, but Severus could not miss the undertone of rage and utter loathing, cold and unrelenting.

For the third time, Charity revolved to face Snape. She was crying, her tears running down into her hair. As he watched the woman he had known for over ten years, he kept his expression blank, his eyes cold.

“Avada Kedavra.” Green light filled the room, and, with a resounding crash, the body that had once
belonged to a woman named Charity Burbage fell.

“Dinner, Nagini,” the Dark Lord murmured, and the great snake slithered from his shoulders onto the table.

After the meeting, Severus sought out his godson. He wasn’t difficult to find; like most young men dealing with a crisis while living with his parents, he was in his room. At the sound of the door opening, Draco looked up. Severus put his finger to his lips, then warded the room as fully as he was capable.

“I was sick,” Draco confessed dully when Severus had finished. Severus nodded, unsurprised. “How . . . how did I never realize how awful he was?”

“You were raised as much on tales of the Dark Lord’s greatness as milk. You have been deluded your entire life. It is not a pleasant reality to be awakened to. But living in ignorance, no matter how blissful it may seem, was never really a choice. And you may have been rather a fool, but you have never been the sort of person to embrace his breed of . . . of madness.”

“I have been a fool, haven’t I?”

“Oh, yes. But take heart, it’s not entirely your fault. Your father had rather a large hand in it. Of course, he merely laid the foundations. He pointed where to go; you were the one to take off like a shot. Had circumstances been otherwise, I imagine you wouldn’t have been anything worse than a spoiled prig. But they aren’t, and that’s the least of your worries.”

“I’m weak. I can’t afford to be weak anymore.”

“Weak?”

“I couldn’t kill him. He’s right, I had the opportunity. It would have been easy. It would have been nothing. But I was so weak, I couldn’t even do it when he was standing there in front of me, telling me to!”

“You think it weakness, to have an unarmed old man at your mercy and not take the kill?”

“Look, I didn’t do it because it was right, I didn’t do it because . . . even with him almost on his knees in front of me, no wand in his hand . . . I just couldn’t. I was weak.”

“We all knew you weren’t going to do it in the end, so don’t be too hard on yourself. Of rather greater concern is your conduct since. Particularly this evening. Not killing Dumbledore was a sign, not of a failing but of the smallest hint of something in you worth nurturing: compassion. No, weak was your behavior before the Dark Lord.”

“I know. I need to do better.”

“Yes. Though if you don’t, I don’t imagine you’ll have very long to lament it, if that’s any consolation.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t reassure me.”

“Well, no, I can’t imagine it would.”

“I have to be stronger.”
“Yes.”

“How?”

“It’s a process. At first, it’s a pretense. You act as if it doesn’t bother you. The initial reactions are still there, but you repress them. You show the world a face that is not afraid. Eventually even you believe it. You become the mask you have created for yourself.”

“You were never as afraid as I am.”

“No. Not initially. I did embrace the cause, before I truly understood what it meant. You do not have that luxury; you’ve already been exposed. Once I knew the truth, I knew there was only one way forward. That sort of resolve has a rare power of transformation. I was not, perhaps, weak as you might think of it. I was, however, weak of character. Tell me, what do you know of Hero’s parents?”

Draco frowned. “Hero? Well, I mean, I know her father was James Potter and her mother was a Muggleborn witch named Lily. But everyone knows that.”

“You’ve seen my house, where I grew up. Lily Evans grew up in the same town. In a rather better part. She was my best friend from the age of nine. We had a falling out at the end of fifth year. After that, I became more heavily involved with certain Slytherins who were seated in your drawing room this evening.

“You’ve heard that there’s a prophecy regarding Hero—”

Draco snorted. “Yes, but that’s a load of bunk.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “You think so? The Dark Lord disagrees. As a matter of fact, I was the one who overheard it – the first half, at least – and reported it to the Dark Lord. And didn’t I pay dearly for my misplaced loyalties? For it was Lily Evans’s daughter who he believed was the child it alluded to. I exacted from him a promise that Lily might be spared . . . but I didn’t believe he would honor it.

“And so I went to Albus Dumbledore, to beg him to protect her, her husband and child with her. He did. He did all that was in his power. But they put their trust in the wrong person. In Peter Pettigrew, who betrayed them. But Hero lived.”

“Have you told Potter this?”

“Of course, ages ago. I’d hardly be telling you if I hadn’t.”

“What’s it got to do with me?”

“I was weak until I couldn’t afford to be any longer. I became strong because I had to. My resolution was ironclad, my motivation absolute. I am the man I am today because I have suffered. I’m afraid, if there are shortcuts, I do not know of them.”

“How do I start?”

“By deciding to be better.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“If those words seem to describe an easy process to you, I’m not sure what to tell you. It’s
agonizingly difficult. But it is simple. The effort involved is incalculable. You must decide, day after day, to stay the course, to remain unwavering. Beneath the bludgeonings of chance, your head, though bloody, must remain unbowed. You cannot wince or cry aloud. It isn’t yours to reason why; just do as you’re told. Hero and I will handle the rest.”

“You just expect me to trust her.”

“You don’t?”

“It’s a lot to ask. I mean, we’ve been at each other’s throats since we were eleven. It’s a little hard to suddenly turn around and trust her with my life.”

“Oh, you’ll be trusting her with far more than that. We’re all trusting her with the world.”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean. I of all people know she’s more to you than just a soldier. I was there, remember?”

“And what, precisely, do you think you saw?” Severus asked, his voice like the steel of blade.

“The two of you, together. You said you’d sworn fealty to her.”

“So?”

“Any Slytherin worth the name knows how to locate a person’s weak points. It’s transparent that she’s yours.”

“Transparent?” Severus asked, his voice silky, the way it always got when he was about to move in for the kill.

It had been a long time since that had worked on Draco. “Completely. I mean, I haven’t noticed all year, so the both of you can hide it when you need to. But tonight? I’ve never seen you like that, and I’ve known you my whole life. You don’t have to say it, but you and I both know it’s true. So how does that work when she’s dying?”

Severus didn’t hold back his glare. “I don’t see any reason I should tell you.”

“Fine. But maybe you should talk to someone. I mean . . . that’s a hell of a thing to deal with.”

“Perhaps. It’s hardly the first thing I’ve suffered in silence. I’m sure it won’t be the last. But I wouldn’t give up one minute with her for anything.”
Hi! Hope you're all well. Frankly, it's a small miracle you're getting this, because I had to replace my computer hard-drive, and then the charger stopped working. But this is still backed up, so. Anyway, it's a long one. I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Hero was on tenderhooks. Any minute, they might arrive. She wasn’t sure quite when they would come. She’d told them it would be better if they picked a random time, better if she didn’t know, if it seemed like someone else’s idea. It was a sound precaution, but it was doing nothing for her peace of mind. She’d been packed since the previous morning. There was nothing to do now but wait. She drummed her fingers against the coverlet in an attempt to alleviate some of her nervous energy.

She met Hedwig’s yellow eye. She seemed to give her a knowing look. “I know, I should be doing something useful. But what do you suggest?”

Hedwig looked away, as if to say, well, if you can’t figure it out, who am I to tell you?

There was a knock on her door. She looked over, startled. “Er, come in?”

Dudley came in with a shy smile. “Hi. How are you?”

“Going out of my mind,” she admitted.

“Yeah. It’s got to be tough, having people risk their lives to get you across the country.”

Hero laughed darkly. “You have no idea. And it’s so close now, but these last few hours just drag on. And after all these years, I know what to expect. So the adrenaline’s starting to kick in. I’m not sure how long it’ll last. I’m really hoping it doesn’t peter out in midair while I’m getting fired at. I’m sure there are worse things that could happen, though I’m not sure I want to spend time thinking about them.”

“Right. Do you want a cup of tea?”

“At a time like this?”

“What wrong with the time? There’s never a bad time for tea. And I know you’re ready for them to pop in at any moment, but deep down you know it’s going to be a good few hours yet. Have a cup of tea, calm down. You’ll feel much better, you know you will. Come on.”

He sat her down in the kitchen and put the kettle on. He got mugs out of the cupboard and fished two teabags out of the tin, whistling quietly. He made the tea before he sat down. “Now, tell me, how are you?”

She took the tea and smiled sardonically. “Well. I’ve been better.” After a moment, she sighed. “Then again, I’ve been worse. It’s all relative, isn’t it?”

“I suppose. I’ve become self-aware enough to realize that I’ve lived a charmed life, however much
my parents would object to the phrase. I know that. The worst that I’ve experienced is knowing just how awful I’ve been, not just to you.”

“How is Mark Evans?”

“I apologized to him last summer. Haven’t talked to him since. If he hates my guts, I’d hardly blame him. I was horrible. I’m a better person, and it feels better, you know? Or maybe you don’t. You didn’t spend the summer you turned fifteen beating up ten-year-olds.”

Hero wrapped her hands around the mug, a faraway look in her eyes. “Maybe not, but there are plenty of things I regret. So many things I’ve done wrong. You might have ruined his life, you might not have. There are people who are dead because of me.”

He reached out and took her hand. “Hero, there are people who are alive because of you. No one’s perfect, and the stakes, from what you’ve told me, are sky-high. The kind where, if you fall, it’s unforgiving. But because of you, people are alive who wouldn’t have been. Doesn’t that make up for it, at least a little?”

“I suppose. I hadn’t thought of it like that. I just focused on . . .”

“Oh the casualties.”

She shrugged, her expression melancholy as she stared into her tea. “They’re easier to count. The good I’ve done is a lot more ambiguous. Like trying to read the future in a crystal ball, it’s mostly fog. The deaths are so much easier to see, to feel responsible for. They’re easier to remember, impossible to forget. And I know they’ve barely begun.”

“Hero . . . there is good in the world. There’s joy, and beauty. People are killed, and hurt, and that’s . . . beyond awful. But it doesn’t make the beautiful, wonderful things any less beautiful or wonderful. There will still be sunrises and sunsets, butterflies, flowers. People will still do good things and love each other. Maybe they even love each other more because they’re afraid there won’t be enough time to fit it all in otherwise. I don’t know. But even though it’s horrible, you have to find things reasons to go on. And if you just focus on everything bad, maybe you won’t be able to go on, and I think maybe that’s a tragedy all its own. But what do I know?”

Hero smiled, squeezing his hand. “No, I think you’re right. I’ll just have to try to remember that. Thank you. It’s nice to have a bit of perspective. Everyone’s been living in the shadow of war, it’s all we think about sometimes. And it’s understandable. But the world will keep turning no matter how many people die. Life will go on, even if the Dark Lord tries to make it a privilege instead of a right. Half a world away, roses will bloom, and people will fall in love. Thank you, Dudley. I needed that.”

“Look, I’m . . . probably not going to see you again after tonight, so just . . . look after yourself, alright? Live a good life. Love Piers. Don’t let anyone keep you from being happy. You deserve it. I forgive you, for everything, and I love you. You’re a good person, Dudley, and you did it all on your own. I’m so proud of you.”

“I’ll name my first child after you,” he said solemnly, a spark of mischief in his eyes.

“No, no! No one deserves to be saddled with a name like Hero! Use it as a middle name, if you absolutely must.”

“If you insist. I’m sorry I said it was a dog’s name when we were younger.”

“Mmm. I’m sorry I didn’t punch you in the nose. I should have seized the chance before you turned
into a junior heavyweight boxing champion. God knows I’ll never get a hit in now.”

“Aw, I might let you get a hit in, to make you feel better.”

“No, I couldn’t. Piers might never forgive me. Speaking of your lovely boyfriend, will he be going with you?”

“Yeah, I convinced my parents I wouldn’t go without him. And you know his parents barely notice whether he’s there or not.”

“Aren’t you worried about your parents finding out about . . . ?”

“Well, I would be, if I didn’t plan on telling them first.”

“You’re finally going to do it?”

“Well, you’re right. I figured they might notice by the fifth time I snogged him in front of them. But we’re going to be cooped up together, hiding, for months on end. They can’t kick me out. If they’re ever going to accept it, this is probably the best chance I’m going to get. I figure I can eventually train them not to mind, psychological conditioning and all that.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“For which bit, manipulating my parents or finally being honest about who I am?”

Hero smiled. “Both.”

Piers arrived around 7, dragging his suitcase behind him. He nodded to Hero and grinned at his boyfriend.

“Hello, luv. Did you miss me?”

“I saw you only yesterday.”

“I know, but did you miss me?”

Dudley rolled his eyes, but his grin got wider. “You know I did.”

“Yes, but I wanted to hear you say it.”

“Cheeky bugger.”

“Ah, but you know you wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Give us a kiss, then.”

Piers glanced furtively at Hero. Dudley rolled his eyes. “She’s known for years, you know she has.”

“But what about other eyes and ears? Older ones?”

“I’m not hiding you anymore. I won’t. I love you, and there’s nothing they can say or do to change that.”

“They can add a d to the end of it,” Piers muttered morbidly. Dudley squinted at him. Piers
sighed. “They can make it so that’s it’s past tense. Dead men can’t do nothing.”

Dudley snorted. “Never. They may have treated my dear cousin like shit, but I’m their Dinky Diddykins. Ickle Diddydums. My mother would sooner rip my father’s throat out than let him touch a single hair on my head.” He glanced sideways guiltily. “Sorry, Hero.”

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just the poor, orphaned relative who was dumped on your doorstep. I’m of no consequence, really. Invisible, honestly, for all intents and purposes.”

“Shut up, Hero.”

“Oh, look at that, silent, too. Woe is me, to be cast upon such rocks of misfortune in life’s storm-tossed sea.”

“You are neither invisible, nor, no matter how nice it might be at the moment, silent. Shove off and give me some time with Piers.”

“Oh, come on. He’s only the other half of your soul. I’m your cousin,” Hero protested. “You’ll be seeing so much of each other, you’ll get sick of the view. I have another few hours, then you’ll never see me again.”

“I said I loved you, what more do you want?” Piers was watching the exchange with a smirk.

“Time with my darling cousin, that the memory might be a salve to the shreds that will be all that will be left of my heart!”

“I doubt it could possibly mean that much to you.”

“But what if I just want to spend a little more time with you? Before I die?” she asked pointedly.

Dudley turned to Piers. “You see? You see what I have to deal with? Bloody nightmare, she is.”

“You bring it on yourself, you know,” Piers pointed out.

Dudley heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Yes. I know.”

Uncle Vernon was sitting on the side of the sofa farthest from the door to the sitting room with a sullen expression on his face. Aunt Petunia was beside him, her face pinched and worried. Dudley and Piers were hanging back together by the door. Hero was, once again, in the same armchair she’d sat in when Dumbledore had collected her the previous summer. It was uncomfortable on more levels than Hero preferred to contemplate.

“Tell me again, what we’re doing?” Petunia asked, trying to hide the tremor in her voice. It was the eighth time she’d asked in the past week. Hero was quite sick of explaining by this point, but she knew her aunt wasn’t far from just going to pieces. And, as ever, it would fall to Hero to pick them up off the floor. It was in her best interests to just answer.

“You’re going with two members of the Order of the Phoenix to a safe house. You won’t be able to contact anyone until the war is over, at which point you’ll either be safe, or it won’t matter. You’ll stay together, the four of you. It’s the best I can do.”

“Do . . . do you know where we’re going?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. It’s better for all concerned if we have no idea where the other is. Even
if you or I are captured, we won’t be able to tell anyone anything. It’s safer that way.”

“Captured?” Uncle Vernon’s head popped up. “What do you mean, captured? I thought we were going somewhere safe!”

“Theoretically, yes. If it comes to it, though, no one in the world will really be safe. Don’t take that as meaning you can just fend for yourselves, because you can’t. This is your best chance. If you don’t take it, they’ll find you and torture you inside of a week, just on the vague, unlikely chance that you might know where I am. You’ll go with the Order and you’ll show them the respect they deserve for keeping you alive. Do we understand each other, Uncle Vernon?”

He glared at her. She stared back, resolute, raising an eyebrow. After a moment, he dropped his gaze and nodded. Hero rose. “Excellent. They’ll be here any moment. You’ll invite them in, won’t you?” Her airy tone belied the consequences of answering in the negative. She eyed her aunt and uncle, then swept out of the room, winking at Dudley on the way out. Piers rolled his eyes.

She went up to her room to make sure, for the twenty-fifth time, that everything was ready to go. Of course, it was. She sat heavily on the bed she supposed she couldn’t really call hers anymore, and clasped her hands in her lap. She sighed and glanced at Hedwig. The snowy owl looked back at her, her amber eyes sharp. Hero got to her feet and went to stand by her owl, stroking her feathers through the bars of the cage.

“I know it’s been a long time since you’ve been able to stretch your wings. I’m really sorry about that, I wish it could be different. But soon we’ll both be at the Burrow, and it’ll be nothing but wide open space. It’ll be wonderful, won’t it? Free as birds, the both of us. For a bit, at least. Maybe I should just let you stay at the Burrow, like a holiday, while I go haring after Horcruxes. I can’t imagine you’d enjoy it. I can’t imagine I will. But we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, I suppose.”

The doorbell rang, and, after a moment’s deliberation, she decided she’d probably better go downstairs; she could hardly expect her aunt and uncle to cope with Dedalus and Hestia without an intermediary.

She found Dedalus Diggle not terribly different from the way she remembered him; short, with a mauve top hat and a squeak of a voice.

“Hero Potter!” he cried, sweeping off the top hat as he swept her a bow. “An honor, as ever!”

Hero smiled, embarrassed. “Thanks, Dedalus.” She smiled – though, in fact, it was closer to a grimace – at the dark-haired Hestia.

She coughed slightly and turned to the Dursleys. “Er, this is my Aunt Petunia, my Uncle Vernon, my cousin Dudley, and Dudley’s . . . er . . . friend.”

“Good day, Hero Potter’s relatives, and friend!” Aunt Petunia blinked at the odd form of address. Uncle Vernon looked mutinous. Dudley looked like he was trying not to laugh, while Piers smirked at his side.

Dedalus went through the plan again – they would leave before Hero, then Disapparate to the safe house.

“You know how to drive, I take it?” Dedalus asked politely. Hero had a funny feeling the question wouldn’t go over the way he meant it.

Sure enough: “Know how to – of course I ruddy well know how to drive!”
“Very clever of you, sir, very clever. I, personally, would be bamboozled by all those buttons and knobs.” He seemed to be under the impression he was flattering Uncle Vernon, who was staring at him, aghast. Hero felt like burying her face in her hands.

“Doesn’t even know how to drive . . .” her uncle muttered, unheard, fortunately, by Dedalus and Hestia.

“You, Hero, will wait here for your guard. I’m sure you understand the plan, having proposed it yourself. Quite brilliant, if I may say so. Ingenius, in fact.”

Hero smiled nervously, uncomfortable with the prospect of taking credit for others’ ideas. Then again, she’d been doing it all year with Severus’s textbook.

A moment later, a terse voice barked, “Hurry up!” The Dursleys jumped, looking around in bewilderment for the source of the sound. Dedalus took out his pocket watch and checked the time.

“Quite right. We’re on a very tight schedule. We have timed your respective departures very precisely; the protective charm will break the moment you all head for safety in disparate directions.” He turned to the Dursleys. “You’re all packed and ready to go, I presume.”

For a moment, no one said anything. Uncle Vernon was still staring, appalled, at the bulge in Dedalus’s waistcoat pocket.

Dudley spoke up eventually. “Yeah, we’re all ready. The bags are under the stairs, right, Mum?”

“Oh. Yes. Yes, they’re just there,” she murmured, pointing to the small cupboard. Hero felt something sour wash through her. But it didn’t matter anymore. She’d never see a brick of Privet Drive, let alone so much as a splinter of that cupboard, ever again. Good riddance.

“Shall we, er, start loading it into the, er, car, then?” Hestia said, clearly trying to make herself scarce. Perhaps she was imagining a tearful farewell between Hero and the Dursleys and wanted to be tactful. Hero would have told her it was a wasted hope, but Uncle Vernon saved her the breath.

“Well. Suppose this is goodbye then. We won’t be seeing you,” he said gruffly, though certainly not due to any excess of emotion. He lugged his suitcase out of the cupboard and went out the door.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Dudley swept Hero off her feet in a bear hug.

“Oh, my stubborn little cousin! I’m going to miss you. You go be the Hero you were born to be.” He drew back, tears in his eyes, laid a loud, wet kiss on her forehead, and hurried out the door. Piers grinned at her and shook her hand, then kissed her on the cheek, before following after his boyfriend. Dedalus and Hestia bid her farewell and exited.

Aunt Petunia was watching her with a strange expression in her eyes. “You. . . I know you can’t tell us where you’re going. And probably wouldn’t even if you could. And I can hardly blame you. But, I just wanted to . . . to wish you the best of luck with whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Thanks.”

Her aunt looked around wistfully. “I have lived in this house for twenty years. It’s not an easy thing to leave it behind in one night.”

“You know the stakes,” Hero reminded her calmly.

She nodded, not looking at her niece. “Yes, I do. I know perfectly well what they’re capable
of. You didn’t just lose a mother that night, all those years ago, you know. I lost a sister. I don’t know, maybe someone’s told you. But I . . . I wanted to go to Hogwarts with Lily. And it was impossible, obviously. I couldn’t have it, so I told myself I hated it, that it was . . . wrong, unnatural. I never quite believed what I said until it took my sister from me.

“We’d fallen out. We weren’t talking. I think she might have been willing to let bygones be bygones, but I wasn’t. I wanted her to apologize. For what, I ask myself now. I always thought we’d reconcile. I lost the chance along with her.

“Vernon hates you because you look so like your father, and he thinks your father insulted him. Whether he meant to or not, I really have no idea. I didn’t treat you the way I did – which is a regret I will take to my grave, I promise you – because you look like him. I never knew him, what do I care? No, it’s your eyes. Lily’s eyes. Reminding me, day after day, of my every failing. I’m sorry, for what it’s worth. I’m . . . I’m so, so sorry.”

Hero looked away, uncomfortable. “I know you are. It doesn’t change anything, but . . . thanks. I guess. You should probably get going. Like Dedalus said, we’re on a tight schedule.”

Petunia nodded and hurried toward the door. She paused in front of her niece for a moment, simply looking at her, then turned her attention straight ahead and went out the door without another word.

Hero watched out the window while they pulled out of the driveway, not looking away until they’d disappeared around a corner. The culmination of sixteen years of misery, just . . . gone. And the stupid house was still here, which somehow seemed surprising. She was very briefly tempted to set it on fire. Not with magic, because she couldn’t yet; the good, old-fashioned way, with a few litres of petrol and a box of matches. But people would probably notice. And did it really matter if it was still standing when she’d never see it again?

She sighed and stuck her hands in her pockets as she peered around the entrance hall. The end of an era, she supposed, though not one whose passing she would mourn. But she was wasting time.

She went back up to her room to bring down her things. She picked up her Firebolt with her right hand and put her arm around Hedwig’s cage (which she didn’t look too happy about). She picked up her trunk with her left. She cast one last look around the bedroom she’d had for six years. It was the smallest bedroom, as some of the many Hogwarts letters she’d been sent could attest, but it had been hers. It was tidier than she’d ever seen it before, like it had been wiped clean of the evidence of her habitation. Shaking herself out of her nostalgia, she carried everything downstairs. She set her broom and trunk down and got a firmer grip on Hedwig.

When she’d been younger, sometimes – rarely – the Dursleys would go out and leave her all alone. Most of the time she’d been sent to Mrs. Fig, but sometimes she had the whole house to herself. It was strange to remember those years, as if they’d happened to someone else. There was an unexpected ache in her chest as she remembered those days. She’d sneak something from the fridge, something she’d never have been allowed, and then she’d go up to Dudley’s room. She’d jump on the bed for probably twenty minutes before going through his computer games. It had seemed like tasting paradise.

Only, she’d been spending the majority of her time away from the Dursleys, at Hogwarts, and though in many ways it was better, in some it was worse. It seemed impossible that she’d ever been that innocent, that there had been a time when she hadn’t been tainted by all the events of recent years. But that was true of everyone, she supposed, to a certain extent. Everyone grew up, and it was an easier process for some than others.

She sighed and looked down at Hedwig, who was peering around at the entryway. She, like Hero,
hadn’t spent much time outside Dudley’s second bedroom. “It’s hard to imagine, isn’t it, that we’ll never be here again? We’ve had some good times here, haven’t we? I mean, look at this doormat. If only it could talk . . . it would probably complain about Dudley throwing up all over it after I saved him from the Dementors. Last summer, Dumbledore walked through that front door. He was already dying by then, already had the whole thing planned out.” She fell silent, lost in thought.

After a moment, she turned away from the door, only to catch sight of her cupboard. She pulled the door open. There was no cot anymore; there wouldn’t be. It had been a lifetime ago, it seemed, that she’d slept there. In all the time since she’d started attending Hogwarts, it had been just another cupboard.

“This is where I used to sleep, Hedwig. That was before you knew me, of course. I’d forgotten how small it was. Though, unfortunately, I think I’d still fit if I squeezed.” Her lips twisted ruefully as she thought about how much she hated being not much above five foot. At least these days, she mostly didn’t have to worry about spiders. And she knew what those memories of flying motorbikes and strange green lights meant, even if she might be better off if she’d never found out. Of course, then she’d have attended Stonewall High, oh the horror. She smiled, remembering when she’d told Uncle Vernon about her dream about Sirius’s motorbike. He’d nearly crashed the car . . .

There was a loud roar outside; Hero straightened immediately, only to bang her head on the low doorframe. She took a few moments to employ some of Severus’s favorite curses.

She wandered into the kitchen, the direction the sound seemed to have come from, rubbing the back of her head where she’d made contact. The darkness seemed to ripple, then several Disillusionment charms were removed at once. In the back garden was a small group of people dismounting from their various modes of transportation. Hagrid stood out a mile astride that very same motorbike Hero had just been reminiscing about. He grinned at her underneath the grime everywhere on his face except where the goggles had covered his eyes. Others were dismounting from brooms and, in two cases, thestrals.

She threw the French doors open and walked out, only to be faced with an armful of Hermione. Hero smiled as she patted her friend on the back. She smiled at Ron over Hermione’s shoulder, who grinned back.


“Definitely,” Hero replied fiercely. She glanced around the grouping. “They’ve already left, you might as well come in.”

They started trooping into the kitchen. Mad-eye was carrying two enormous, bulging sacks that Hero assumed held the changes of clothes for her duplicates. His magical eye was spinning to take in house, garden, and darkening sky at a dizzying speed.

They gathered in the pristine kitchen, sitting at the table or on the countertops. It all seemed a little incongruous next to Aunt Petunia’s spotless, state of the art appliances. Hermione hopped up on the counter; Ron stood next to her, leaning against the fridge. He subtly stroked the back of her hand. Bill and Fleur sat at the table; he was as scarred as ever, but Fleur didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. Mr. Weasley also sat at the table. He sent Hero a reassuring smile, which she returned. Mad-Eye was watching everyone and everything at once. Lupin was there, looking tired but happier than she’d seen him in ages. Tonks stood next to Kingsley, sending him occasional sidelong glances which he didn’t seem to notice. Her hair was dark brown and wavy today, which was an improvement over limp and mouse-brown, though she didn’t look much more upbeat than she had a few months before. Mundungus, as unkempt as ever, was trying to stand as far away from
“Kingsley, I thought they needed you guarding the Muggle Prime Minister.”

He smiled at her. “He can do without me for one night. You’re more important.” Tonks looked away, instead studying the directions on the laundry detergent.

“Right!” Moody barked, and the soft hum of conversation fell silent. “We’ve had this planned for ages. Unfortunately, we won’t be able to implement plan A, for lots of reasons including that Pius Thicknesse has gone over and has made it an imprisonable offense to connect this house to the Floo network, place a Portkey here, or Apparate out. But, a few weeks ago, Potter here had a brilliant idea. We’re leaving early. We’re all going to be flying out, obviously. And there will not be a single Hero Potter to be seen.” He grinned, and it was a little feral. “There will be seven, each with a different destination.” He held up the two bulging sacks. “It’s all thanks to Potter here. The Death Eaters won’t know what hit them.”

“Blimey, Hero!” George exclaimed. “It’s ingenious.” She blushed and fidgeted uncomfortably, hating to take credit for someone else’s idea. Fortunately, they seemed to mistake it for modesty.

“Right, then. Some of your hairs, if you’d be so kind,” Moody ordered. Hero sighed and ran her fingers through her curls, coming up with a few loose strands. Moody nodded in satisfaction, popped the lid of his flask, and held it out for her to deposit them. As soon as the hairs made contact, the mud-like potion began to froth and smoke before turning a clear, bright gold.

“Right, then. Fake Potters line up over here, please.” Ron, Hermione, George, and Fleur lined up next to him.

“We’re one short,” Lupin observed.

“Here,” said Hagrid gruffly, and he lifted Mundungus by the scruff of the neck and dropped him down beside Fleur, who wrinkled her nose pointedly and moved along to stand between Fred and George instead.

“I’ve told you, I’d sooner be a protector,” Mundungus protested.

“Shut it,” growled Moody. “As I’ve already told you, you spineless worm, any Death Eaters we run into will be aiming to capture Potter, not kill him. Dumbledore always said You-Know-Who would want to finish Potter in person. It’ll be the protectors who have got the most to worry about, the Death Eaters’ll want to kill them.”

Mundungus did not look particularly reassured, but Moody was already pulling half a dozen eggcup-sized glasses from inside his cloak, which he handed out, before pouring a little Polyjuice Potion into each one. “Altogether, then . . .”

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Fleur, and Mundungus drank. All of them gasped and grimaced as the potion hit their throats. Their features began to bubble and distort like hot wax. Everyone shrunk, because even Hermione was taller than Hero. Their hair was darkening; Ron, Fred, and Mundungus’s hair got longer, while Hermione and Fleur’s got slightly shorter. Everyone’s suddenly got a great deal curlier.

Moody, quite unconcerned, was now loosening the ties of the large sacks he had brought with him. When he straightened up again, there were six Hero Potters gasping and panting in front of him. Even though Hero had known what to expect, it was still surreal to see six clones of herself in clothes she certainly wouldn’t have picked out.
Fred and George turned to each other and said together, “Wow—we’re identical!” It went beyond surreal to hear their voices emerging from her own mouth.

“Those whose clothes are a bit roomy, I’ve got smaller here,” said Moody, indicating the first sack, “and vice versa. Don’t forget the glasses, there’s six pairs in the side pocket. And when you’re dressed, there’s luggage in the other sack.”

They all seemed to have a great deal less modesty when not displaying their own bodies and began stripping with impunity. Hermione grimaced at Hero but followed suit. Hero knew there was no point asking them to show a little more respect.

Once dressed, they pulled out the glasses. Hermione peered through them. “Hero, your eyesight really is awful.”

“Trust me, I know.”

Once they were dressed, they gathered luggage and owl cages complete with stuffed snowy owls. Hero winced and fought the urge to cover Hedwig’s eyes.

“Weasley twin A, with Arthur. Weasley twin B, with Remus. I don’t care which, just sort it out. Miss Delacour—”

“I’m taking Fleur on the thestral,” Bill put in. “She’s not that fond of brooms.” Fleur looked over at her beloved with a soppy, slavish expression Hero fervently prayed had never appeared on her face before and, with any luck, never would again.

“Miss Granger with Kingsley, again by thestral. Ronald with Nymphadora—” Hero expected an outburst from the witch, as had always happened before. Instead she only nodded and conjured up a brief, tense smile. Ron didn’t look too happy.

“And you’ll be with me, Hero,” Hagrid said. “We’ll be on the bike. Brooms and thestrals can’t take my weight, see. But there won’t be much room on the seat with me on it, so you’ll be in the sidecar.”

“Sounds great, Hagrid.” She wished she could be on a broomstick, but she knew it wouldn’t be a good idea. She’d be much safer in something she wasn’t controlling if she had another seizure.

“We think the Death Eaters will guess you’ll be on a broom,” Moody said, noticing her melancholy. “Snape’s had plenty of time to tell them everything about you he’s never mentioned before, so if we do run into any Death Eaters, we’re betting they’ll choose one of the Potters who look at home on a broomstick.” Oh, that hurt. But then again, he hadn’t, of course. Everyone already knew she was good on a broom – had been good on a broom. If he’d actually been spilling everything, he would have mentioned the cancer, the seizures, and being banned from travel by broomstick by medical order. Which, of course, he hadn’t.

“All right then,” Moody went on, tying up the sack with the fake Potters’ clothes in it and leading the way back to the door, “I make it three minutes until we’re supposed to leave. No point locking the back door, it won’t keep the Death Eaters out when they come looking . . . Come on . . .”

Hero hurried into the hall to fetch her miniaturized trunk, Firebolt, and Hedwig’s cage before joining the others in the dark back garden. On every side, broomsticks were leaping into hands; Hermione had already been helped up onto a great black thestral by Kingsley, Fleur onto the other by Bill. Hagrid was standing ready beside the motorbike, goggles on.

“This is Sirius’s bike, isn’t it?” she asked, her voice soft with memory.
“The very same,” said Hagrid, beaming down at her. “And the last time you were on it, Hero, I could fit you in one hand!”

Hero tried not feel a little humiliated as she got into the sidecar. She was several feet below everyone else; Ron smirked at the sight of her sitting there like a child in a bumper car. She sighed, resigned, and stuffed her trunk and broomstick down by her feet while she gripped Hedwig’s cage with her knees. All in all, it was extremely uncomfortable. The snowy owl blinked at her as if not quite sure about the whole affair. Hero didn’t blame her one bit.

“Arthur’s done a bit of tinkering,” Hagrid told her eagerly, quite oblivious to her discomfort. He settled himself astride the motorcycle, which creaked slightly and sank a good few inches into the ground. “It’s got a few tricks up its handlebars now. That one was my idea.” He pointed a thick finger at a purple button near the speedometer.

“Please be careful, Hagrid,” warned Mr. Weasley, who was standing beside them, holding his broomstick. “I’m still not sure that was advisable, and it’s certainly only to be used in emergencies.”

“All right then,” said Moody. “Everyone ready, please; I want us all to leave at exactly the same time or the whole point of the diversion’s lost.” Of course, Hero already knew everyone on the other side was quite aware of when they would be leaving. She kept her mouth shut. Everybody mounted their brooms. Hagrid kicked the motorcycle into life: it roared like a dragon, and the sidecar began to vibrate.

“Good luck, everyone,” shouted Moody. “See you all in about an hour at the Burrow. On the count of three. One . . . two . . . THREE.”
There was a great roar from the motorbike, and Hero felt the sidecar give a nasty lurch: she was rising through the air fast, her eyes watering slightly, hair whipping away from her face. Around them brooms were soaring upward too; the long black tail of a thestral flicked past. Her legs, jammed into the sidecar by Hedwig’s cage and her resized trunk, were already sore and starting to go numb. She almost forgot to take a last glimpse of no 4, Privet Drive. By the time she remembered, she couldn’t tell which one it was. Higher and higher they climbed into the sky—

Hero had been expecting it, but it still gave her a nasty start that twisted her stomach in knots. As soon as they were outside the protections of the blood wards, they found themselves surrounded. There was a vast circle of them, thirty at least, around the unsuspecting Order members. Hero wished for a moment that she could have warned them, but it simply wouldn’t have been possible, not if they were determined to keep Severus’s cover. But if anyone died, she knew it would be her fault.

Screams, a blaze of green light on every side: Hagrid gave a yell, and the motorbike rolled over. Hero lost any sense of where they were: streetlights above her, yells around her, she was clinging to the sidecar for dear life. Hedwig’s cage, the Firebolt, and her trunk slipped from beneath her knees—

“No—HEDWIG!”

The broomstick spun to earth, but she just managed to seize the handle of her trunk and the top of the cage as the motorbike swung the right way up again. A second’s relief, and then another flash of green light, and Hedwig, Hero’s single unswerving companion of the past six years, fell to the floor of her cage, dead.

“No — NO!”

The motorbike zoomed forward; Hero glimpsed hooded Death Eaters scattering as Hagrid blasted through their circle.

“Hedwig—Hedwig—”

There was no time to mourn her, no time to even feel more than a brief flash of agony: her concern for the others was paramount, had to be paramount. She would have time enough to grieve later.

She glanced over his shoulder and saw a mass of people moving, flares of green light, two pairs of people on brooms soaring off into the distance, but she couldn’t tell who they were—“Hagrid, we’ve got to go back, we’ve got to go back!” she yelled over the roar of the engine, pulling out her wand, ramming Hedwig’s cage onto the floor, never mind that she was dead. “Hagrid, TURN AROUND!”
“My job’s to get you there safe, Hero!” bellowed Hagrid, and he opened the throttle.

“Stop—STOP!” she shouted, but as she looked back again two jets of green light flew past her left ear: four Death Eaters had broken away from the circle and were pursuing them, aiming for Hagrid’s broad back. Hagrid swerved, but the Death Eaters were keeping up with the bike; more curses shot after them; Hero ducked low to avoid them.

She twisted around and shot a Stunning spell at their pursuers. The four of them scattered to avoid the red bolt of light.

“Hold on, Hero, this’ll do for them!” Hagrid roared. Hero glanced up at him just in time to see him slam a thick finger onto a green button near the fuel gauge. She winced as if preparing for impact.

A solid brick wall erupted out of the exhaust pipe. Three of the Death Eaters swerved and avoided it, but the fourth was not so lucky: he vanished from view and then dropped like a boulder from behind it, his broomstick broken into pieces. One of his fellows slowed up to save him, but they and the airborne wall were swallowed by darkness as Hagrid leaned low over the handlebars and sped up.

More Killing Curses flew past Hero’s head from the two remaining Death Eaters’ wands; they were aiming for Hagrid. It was simple pragmatism, she supposed, considering what a large target he presented. She responded with further Stunners: red and green collided in midair in a shower of multicolored sparks. Perhaps the world would end with a bang after all.

“Here we go again, Hero, hold on!” yelled Hagrid, and he jabbed at a second button. This time a great net burst from the bike’s exhaust, but the Death Eaters were ready for it. Not only did they swerve to avoid it, but the companion who had slowed to save their unconscious friend had caught up. He bloomed suddenly out of the darkness like blood from a bullet wound, and now three of them were pursuing the motorbike, all shooting curses after it.

“This’ll do it, Hero, hold on tight!” yelled Hagrid. Hero saw him slam his whole hand onto the purple button beside the speedometer. With an unmistakable bellowing roar, dragon fire burst from the exhaust, white-hot and blue, and the motorbike shot forward like a bullet with a sound of wrenching metal. Hero saw the Death Eaters swerve out of sight to avoid the deadly trail of flame, and at the same time felt the sidecar sway ominously; its metal connections to the bike had splintered with the force of acceleration. She had an instant for a thought to cross her mind before she acted: *Fuck.*

She pointed her wand at the connection, muttering, “Reparo!”

But even with that problem solved, they were still coming after them. Hero twisted around and shouted, “Impedimenta!” The jinx hit the middle Death Eater in the chest; for a moment, the man was absurdly spread-eagled in midair as though he had hit an invisible barrier: One of his fellows almost collided with him.

She didn’t have time to wonder who they were, aside from hoping against hope that none of them was Severus. “Confringo!” There could be no mistaking the intentions of that particular spell: the Blasting curse, intended to create maximum damage by means of explosion. There was no pretense of nicety or, really, anything less than clear intent to kill when used against an opponent. She thought perhaps Severus would have been proud of her.

The Death Eater to whom it was directed was engulfed in orange flames; there would likely be very little left of him. His nearest comrade was blasted off his broom. Unfortunately, the reprieve didn’t last very long; within moments, another two Death Eaters were on their tail.
As the curses came shooting across the intervening space again, Hagrid swerved and zigzagged. Hero sent Stunning spell after Stunning spell back at their pursuers, barely holding them off. She shot another blocking jinx at them. The closest Death Eater swerved to avoid it and his hood slipped; by the red light of his next Stunning Spell, Hero saw the strangely blank face of Stanley Shunpike, probably Imperiused while in Ministry custody.

“Expelliarmus!” she yelled.

“That’s her, it’s her, it’s the real one!”

The hooded Death Eater’s shout reached Hero even above the thunder of the motorbike’s engine. Next moment, both pursuers had fallen back and disappeared from view. She felt like burying her head in her hands. Severus would take her over the coals when he found out, as, she suspected, would every other adult who heard. It was war, people died, and you did your damndest to make sure they were on the other side. Except Stan didn’t deserve to die for Scrimgeour’s pride. He’d just be one more death to mourn – one more to blame herself for.

“Hero, what’s happened?” bellowed Hagrid. “Where’ve they gone?”

“I don’t know!” But she did, of course she did. No one but the Dark Lord would be permitted to finish her, she knew that. Which meant that they would soon have the sort of company that wouldn’t be so easily deterred.

“Look, I’ll make sure nothing happens to the sidecar, just do the dragon fire thing again. Something tells me we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“Right.” He slammed his hand down on the button again. Hero had her wand out and pointed at the metal connection, but her repair-job seemed to hold.

“I think we’ve lost them, Hero!” Hagrid bellowed triumphantly. Hero didn’t think it would be nearly so easy and wasn’t letting herself relax. Hagrid let out a huge sigh of relief. “We’re nearly there, Hero, we’ve nearly made it!”

Hero felt the bike drop a little, though the lights down on the ground still seemed remote as stars.

And then came the thing she’d been expecting – the thing she’d been dreading: her scar burned like it was on fire. There was a Death Eater on either side of them, many more behind, shooting Killing Curses that missed them by millimeters. And then she saw him, flying like smoke – the Dark Lord. His white, skeletal fingers raised his wand.

Hagrid let out a bellow of fear and steered the motorbike into a vertical dive. Clinging on for dear life, Hero sent Stunning Spells flying at random into the whirling night. She saw a body fly past and knew she’d managed to hit one of them. But then came a bang, sparks flying from the engine; the motorbike spiraled through the air, completely out of control.

Green jets of light shot past them again. She didn’t know which way was up: her scar was still burning. She expected to die at any second. A hooded figure on a broomstick was feet from her, she saw it raise its arm—

“NO!”

With a shout of fury Hagrid launched himself off the bike at the Death Eater; to her horror, Hero saw both Hagrid and the Death Eater falling out of sight, their combined weight too much for the broomstick—
Helpless in her position in the sidecar, she heard Voldemort’s triumphant scream, “Mine!”

It was over. She could not see or hear where Voldemort was; she glimpsed another Death Eater swooping out of the way and heard, “Avada—”

As the pain from her scar forced her eyes shut, her wand acted of its own accord. She felt it drag her hand around like some great magnet, saw a spurt of golden fire through her half-closed eyelids, heard a crack and a scream of fury. The remaining Death Eater yelled; Voldemort screamed, “No!”

“Hagrid!” Hero called, holding on for dear life. “Hagrid—Accio Hagrid!” Hero could see nothing but distant lights growing nearer and nearer. She was going to crash and there was nothing she could do about it. She was just about resigned at this point.

Behind her she heard another scream, “Your wand, Selwyn, give me your wand!”

She felt him before she saw him. Looking sideways, she stared into the red eyes and was sure they would be the last thing she ever saw: the Dark Lord preparing to finish her once and for all—

And then he vanished. She looked down and saw Hagrid spread-eagled on the ground below her. She lurched up, pulling hard at the handlebars to avoid hitting him, groping for the brake, but with an earsplitting, ground-trembling crash, she smashed into a muddy pond.

All at once, far below him, the fourteen of them rose into the air. The very instant they could, the Death Eaters surrounded them. They stopped, still not particularly close, held back by the Dark Lord’s orders. Because they were all Potter, or at least half of them were. Obviously, they’d used Polyjuice potion, but that still left unanswered the question of which one was the real one. Not even Severus knew which one was his Hero. The Dark Lord had declared her his own, woe betide anyone who tried to get rid of her themselves. They didn’t dare attack to kill until they were sure it wasn’t the real Potter they were aiming at. The Dark Lord had made that much quite clear.

Yaxley was next to him, his eyes cold and calculating. He cast the first curse, deciding the only option was to target the protectors. His comrades soon saw what he was doing and followed suit, lighting up the night with green spellfire.

From that moment forward, chaos reigned. The Order members swerved and shot back at their opponents. Severus and Yaxley followed after Lupin. Lupin, it had to be said, held his own. He would be expected to, as someone who had taught Defense Against the Dark Arts. Even Severus could respect him for his abilities, if little else.

Yaxley was closing in on them, about to curse Lupin. Severus knew the werewolf wouldn’t be able to react in time, would meet his maker, unless Severus prevented it. And then Potter, perhaps his Hero, would die. He redirected his wand to Yaxley without a moment’s hesitation.

“Sectumsempra!” Except he hit, not Yaxley’s hand, but the Potter. There was a spray of something that would have been scarlet in better light coming from her head. Distantly, he felt his heart wrench in his chest. He’d taught her the counter-curse to stop the bleeding, but body parts couldn’t be grown back if they’d been cursed off.

Lupin looked like he would have dearly wished to attack, but he had to keep the Potter on the broom, gathering her close so she might lean on him and not lose her balance.

And before he was forced to stop Yaxley finishing them off, they were called away by the Dark Lord: he’d located Potter. And he was viciously, unforgivably glad that the person bleeding out on
the broom not twenty feet from him was not the woman he loved, might well not be a woman at all.
It shouldn’t matter; he’d hit someone she cared about, perhaps even someone she loved. It was
possible she wouldn’t be able to forgive him this time. But he could not find it in him to care,
because he hadn’t harmed her. Though the Dark Lord had identified her, so perhaps it could be said
it was six of one, half dozen of the other.

He, as with every other hooded figure in black flying through that summer night, abandoned the
others in favor of joining their master in giving chase to Hero. He knew he would be walking on
thin ice – how to keep her alive without announcing his true allegiance? It was really only the next
level of whatever game he’d been enlisted into. It was only his personal stake in the whole affair that
had increased exponentially.

The Dark Lord pulled them to him and they Apparated to his side. It didn’t look good: Hero was
clearly not doing well. She looked to be losing consciousness, her face contorted in pain due to the
proximity of the Dark Lord. He raised his wand to bring the whole sorry affair to an even sorrier
end. Severus felt his heart stutter in his chest—

When Hagrid leapt off the motorbike, launching himself at one of the Death Eaters with a shout of
fury. They both began to sink under the half-giant’s weight. Severus felt nothing but gratitude in
that moment, though he would later think that it might have solved a great many problems if Hagrid
had instead leapt on the Dark Lord. One cannot expect that level of suicidal tendency, however.
There are limits.

Of course, the Dark Lord barely noticed one of his followers being hit with a missile-like flying
giant. His cry was triumphant: “Mine! Avada—”

Severus didn’t care how suicidal such a course of action might be: he would not allow him to
complete that sentence. He was fractions of a second away from using the Killing Curse on the Dark
Lord. Of course, as perhaps he should have expected considering the fact that Hero was the target in
question, he needn’t have gone to the trouble.

He didn’t quite understand how she could have done it: her eyes were closed, she was clearly in an
enormous amount of pain, there was a resigned, helpless quality to her posture. But her wand
seemed to spin in her hand like a compass, magnetized to her adversary. It shot a vicious burst of
golden flames at the Dark Lord, a wall that seemed like it wouldn’t end. There was a crack as the
borrowed wand was destroyed; with no choice but to fall back, the Dark Lord gave a scream of
fury. He ordered Selwyn, now, to give up his wand.

Hero seemed to be having trouble: still in the sidecar, the motorbike unpiloted and crashing. She
could hardly continue to shoot magical flames, even if she didn’t seem to have had much input in the
process. She had, it had to be admitted, other things to worry about.

The Dark Lord, however, was not laboring under any such difficulties. He was preparing to make
another attempt, which, of course, meant that Severus was ready to do whatever he had to. Again,
he was saved at the last instant. This time, it was because they had finally reached the boundaries of
the protections for the safe house; the Dark Lord was kept back. Severus made sure to seem as if he,
too, was unable to breach the protections; it wouldn’t do to break his cover because of a mistake so
idiotic as that. He winced as he watched her crash to earth.

The Dark Lord let out a shriek of pure frustration. He waved a wand to dismiss them, which they
wasted no time in getting on with. There would be punishments to dole out, that much was obvious.
No one could assume they would survive unscathed. One of the first things any Death Eater learned
was that the Dark Lord’s ire, let alone his wrath, was to be avoided if at all possible. Unfortunately,
most of the time it wasn’t.
Draco was back at the manor house; it was part of his punishment for being unable to kill Dumbledore that he was not permitted to participate in any further missions. The Dark Lord, when he and Severus had returned, had sneered and called him “lily-livered.” Draco, however, felt very little shame in it and a substantial amount of gratitude. He couldn’t imagine hunting his former classmate with the intention of incapacitating and capturing her. Even before, the idea would have disgusted him. Now that he had sworn undying fealty to her, it was a prospect that, frankly, terrified him as well.

There was a curt knock on his door.

Draco cleared his throat. “Er, come in?”

The door swung open to reveal his godfather. “Draco,” he greeted him. Weariness was in every line of his face and figure, but it seemed to Draco that grim and comfortless despair was not present. Of course, Severus Snape was a consummate professional. To all but the very closest to him, he could hide everything.

“Well?”

“The Dark Lord will not be pleased. He almost had her twice. She escaped unscathed both times. There’s going to be hell to pay for this.”

Draco immediately understood; one never knew who might be listening. It would be strange if that much went unheard. Appearances had to be maintained.

“How close?”

“He was seconds away from his prize, only for it to be snatched away at the last instant. Merlin knows who he’ll find responsible. You ought to be grateful; he can’t blame you. Although, considering what happened to your father’s wand, I wouldn’t be so sanguine about the Malfoy family as a whole.”

Draco turned a sickly grey. He looked like he was about to lose the contents of his stomach. Severus strode forward and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Breathe, Draco. Calm down. I will do what I can. I will help you through this. Your father is still of value to the Dark Lord. You need not fear to lose him. What condition he will be in, I do not care to speculate. But he will be alive.”

“Thank you,” Draco gasped, his head between his knees as he struggled to breathe evenly and not hyperventilate.

“Don’t talk. Just breathe.”
Hero groaned and struggled to free herself from the wreckage of metal and leather. The Dark Lord wasn’t coming after her. She wasn’t sure why, and, admittedly, her thought processes in general were kind of fuzzy, but so long as he kept . . . not coming after her, she was perfectly happy living in blissful ignorance.

She tried to stand and found her hands several inches deep in muddy water. Something hot and wet was trailing down from her forehead and down her chin. She frowned; it hurt. She crawled out of the pond toward the dark form she assumed was Hagrid.

“Hagrid? Hagrid, talk to me—”

But the dark mass did not stir.


She didn’t recognize his voice. A woman shouted, “They’ve crashed, Ted! Crashed in the garden!”

Hero’s head was spinning. She struggled to hold onto conscious. “Hagrid,” she murmured. He was hurt far worse than she was, he was the one they should focus on. Unfortunately, her knees buckled and she lost consciousness before she managed to articulate that.

*

The next moment she found herself aware of, she was lying somewhere soft and warm and dry. Pillows, she thought, I’m lying on pillows. She was, unfortunately, also aware of a burning sensation in her ribs and right arm. Her head was throbbing, but that was so normal as to hardly be worth mentioning.

“Hagrid?” she murmured, cracking her eyes open.

She found herself in an unfamiliar room lit by lamps. The pillows were sofa cushions. A fair-haired, large-bellied man was watching her anxiously.

“Hagrid’s fine, my dear. The wife’s seeing to him now. How are you feeling? Anything else broken? I’ve fixed your ribs and your arm. I’m Ted, by the way, Ted Tonks – Dora’s father.”

Hero groaned softly and tried to lever herself into a sitting position. She fell back again as lights popped in front of her eyes and she suddenly felt dizzy and sick.

“Easy there. You had quite a crash. What happened, anyway? Something go wrong with the bike? Arthur overstretch himself again, him and his muggle contraptions?”

“No,” Hero said, closing her eyes again against her headache. “Death Eaters, loads of them. They
chased us.”

“Death Eaters?” said Ted sharply. “What do you mean, Death Eaters? I thought they didn’t know you were being moved tonight, I thought—”

Hero sighed, her eyes still closed. “They knew.”

Ted Tonks looked up at the ceiling as though he could see through it to the sky above. “Well, we know our protective charms hold, then, don’t we? They shouldn’t be able to get within a hundred yards of the place in any direction.”

Hero forced her eyes open and swung her legs off the sofa. She needed to get up and see Hagrid for herself; until she did, a part of her would believe he was dead and it was her fault. Like all the others.

Fortunately for her recuperation, Hagrid emerged at that point from the other room. His face was a mess of mud and blood and he was limping a little, but he was quite alive. Hero felt her whole body relax at the sight of him.

“Hero!”

Knocking over two delicate tables and an aspidistra, he covered the floor between them in two strides and pulled her into a hug that nearly cracked her newly repaired ribs. “Blimey, Hero, how did you get out of that? I thought we were both goners.”

Hero grinned. “I know, I can’t believe . . .” She trailed off at the sight of a woman coming into the room. The features were unmistakable. She found herself reaching into her pocket for her wand, only to find it wasn’t there.

“Your wand’s here,” Ted said, tapping it against her arm. “It fell beside you. And I think you’ll find that’s my wife,” he added, his tone rather mild given the venom in her expression.

The resemblance between Andromeda Tonks and her sister, Bellatrix, was striking, though less so in full light. Her hair was a light, soft brown, her eyes softer and kinder. She raised an eyebrow, her expression somewhat haughty. Hero felt a rush of affection as she was reminded of Severus, even if perhaps she should have been reminded of Bellatrix. But no, that one raised eyebrow was pure Severus.

“Oh. Oh, I’m sorry.”

Andromeda’s expression softened, then grew worried. “What happened to our daughter?” she asked. “Hagrid said you were ambushed; where is Nymphadora?”

“I-I don’t know.” She exchanged a glance with Hagrid. “We don’t know what happened to anyone else.”

The worried, fearful looks Ted and Andromeda exchanged wrenched at Hero’s heart. It hadn’t been her idea, but she’d suggested it, she’d given them her hair . . .

“The Portkey,” she said, only now remembering. “The Portkey’ll take us back to the Burrow, we can find out and send word—or, or Tonks will when she . . .”

“Dora’ll be okay, ’Dromeda,” said Ted. “She knows her stuff, she’s been in plenty of tight spots with the Aurors. The Portkey’s through here,” he added to Hero. “It’s supposed to leave in three minutes, if you want to take it.”
“Yes, thank you.” She stood and picked up her trunk, noticing it looked rather worse-for-wear. She looked glanced between Ted and Andromeda, filling with guilt at the position they were in because of her. “I—” She didn’t know what to say; anything that came to mind felt hollow and insincere, as if there weren’t any words that could possibly mean enough to convey how very sorry she was. She cleared her throat. “I’ll, er, tell Tonks – Dora – to send word when she . . . um, thanks for patching us up, by the way. Thanks for . . . everything, really.”

She very gratefully followed Ted Tonks along a short hallway and into a bedroom. Hagrid came after them, bending low to avoid hitting his head on the door lintel.

“Here you are, my dear. That’s the Portkey.” He nodded to a small, silver-backed hairbrush lying on the dressing table.

“Thanks,” she said, already reaching for it, quite ready to leave.

“Wait. Hero, where’s Hedwig?”

Her hand paused in midair; her eyes drifted shut as she felt her eyes prick with tears. “She’s gone,” Hero whispered.

Hagrid reached out a great hand and patted her painfully on the shoulder. “Never mind,” he said gruffly. “Never mind. She had a great old life—”

“Hagrid!” said Ted Tonks warningly, as the hairbrush glowed bright blue, and Hagrid only just got his forefinger to it in time.

Hero felt herself spin uncontrollably into nothingness, her finger glued to the hairbrush. Seconds later, she reconnected with solid ground. Still weak, she fell to her hands and knees. She heard screams. She got to her feet, swaying slightly and tossing away the no longer glowing hairbrush. She saw Mrs. Weasley and Ginny running down the steps by the back door as Hagrid, who had also collapsed on landing, clambered laboriously to his feet.

“Hero? Are you the real one? What happened? Where are the others?” she demanded anxiously.

“They’re not back yet?” Hero asked, turning white.

The answer was clearly etched in Mrs. Weasley’s pale face.

“They – the Death Eaters were waiting for us,” Hero told her. “We were surrounded the moment we took off—they knew it was tonight—I don’t know what happened to anyone else, four of them chased us, it was all we could do to get away, and then th-Voldemort caught up with us—”

She could hear herself begging for her to understand why she did not know what had happened to her sons, trying to say she was sorry without damning herself by actually admitting her complicity.

“Thank goodness you’re all right,” she said, pulling her into a hug she did not feel she could deserve.

“Haven’t got any brandy, have you, Molly?” asked Hagrid a little shakily. “For medicinal purposes?”

She could have summoned it by magic, but as she hurried back toward the crooked house, Hero couldn’t help but think she wanted to hide her face. She turned to Ginny, who answered her unspoken plea for information at once.

“Ron and Tonks should have been back first, but they missed their Portkey, it came back without
them,” she said, pointing at a rusty oil can lying on the ground nearby. “And that one,” she pointed at an ancient sneaker, “should have been Dad and Fred’s, they were supposed to be second. You and Hagrid were third, and,” she checked her watch, “if they made it, George and Lupin ought to be back in about a minute.”

Mrs. Weasley reappeared carrying a bottle of brandy, which she handed to Hagrid. He uncorked it and drank it straight down in one.

“Mum!” Ginny shouted, pointing to a spot several feet away.

A blue light had appeared in the darkness; it grew larger and brighter, and Lupin and George appeared, spinning and then falling. Hero knew immediately that there was something wrong: Lupin was supporting George, who was unconscious, his face was covered in blood.

Hero ran towards them, picking up George’s legs. Together, she and Lupin carried him into the house, through the kitchen and into the sitting room, where they put him on the sofa. As the lamplight fell across George’s head, Ginny gasped and Hero’s stomach flipped: one of George’s ears was missing. The side of his head and neck were drenched in wet, shockingly scarlet blood.

No sooner had Mrs. Weasley bent over her son than Lupin grabbed Hero by the upper arm and dragged her, none too gently, back into the kitchen, where Hagrid was still attempting to ease his bulk through the back door.

“Oi!” Hagrid cried indignantly. “Let go of her! Let go of Hero!”

Lupin ignored him. “What creature sat in the corner of my office the first time Hero Potter visited me at Hogwarts?” he asked, giving her a small shake.

Hero swallowed, afraid but not about to show it. She looked up at him, her eyes narrowed defiantly. “It was a Grindylow.”

Lupin released her and fell back against the kitchen cupboards.

“What was that about?!” Hagrid demanded, glaring at him.

“I’m sorry, Hero, but I had to check,” said Lupin tersely. “We’ve been betrayed. Voldemort knew that you were being moved tonight and the only people who could have told him were directly involved in the plan. You might have been an impostor.”

“So why aren’ you checkin’ me?” panted Hagrid, still struggling to fit through the door.

“You’re half-giant,” Lupin pointed out, looking over at him. “Polyjuice is for human transformation only.”

“None of the Order would have told Voldemort we were moving tonight,” Hero told him firmly. She couldn’t allow them to turn on each other when she knew perfectly well who’d told him. “He only caught up with me toward the end, he didn’t know which one I was in the beginning. If he’d been in on the plan, he’d have known from the start I was the one with Hagrid. And you know they were confused when they saw seven of me. Why would someone leak the date but leave out the most important part?” she reasoned.

“Voldemort caught up with you? What happened? How did you escape?”

Hero grimaced ruefully and briefly explained what had happened with Stan Shunpike and the ensuing fight just before they’d reached Tonks’s parents’ house.
Lupin was aghast. “Hero, the time for Disarming is past! These people are attempting to capture and kill you! At least Stun if you’re not prepared to kill.”

She knew Severus would have told her exactly the same thing, that they both would have said it because they cared about her. All the same, she felt her temper inflame.

“You make it sound like a moral failing, not wanting to kill people. We were hundreds of feet up. Stunning him would have killed him just the same as Avada Kedavra but without the honesty.” Lupin still looked like he was going to argue the point. “I won’t blast people out of my way because they’re there. That’s Voldemort’s job.”

He closed his mouth. Whatever he’d been about to say, that was a point he couldn’t argue against. Finally succeeding in squeezing through the door, Hagrid staggered to a chair and sat down; it collapsed beneath him. Ignoring his mingled oaths and apologies, Hero addressed Lupin again.

“Will George be okay?” All Lupin’s frustration with her seemed to drain away at the question. He sighed. “I think so, although there’s no chance of replacing his ear, not when it’s been cursed off —”

There was a scuffling from outside. Lupin dove for the back door; Hero looked out the kitchen window just long enough to ascertain who it was. She saw Kingsley and Hermione, her features just now morphing back to her own.

Hero returned to the sitting room, where Mrs. Weasley was trying in vain to stop the flow of blood. Hero gently shifted her aside. “Don’t worry, I know a spell.” Softly, she began chanting the Vulnera Sanentur, as Severus had taught her. It seemed only fair. She would definitely be having a word with him about this. In the meantime, she would do what she could on behalf of the both of them. Mrs. Weasley wept with relief as she saw the blood disappear, the wound healing as if it had been many weeks since the injury. Once Hero was satisfied that it was the best it was going to get, barring the return of the ear, she drew back. Mrs. Weasley hugged her tightly, sobbing into her shoulder.

“Thank you, thank you,” she whispered through her tears. Hero patted her shoulder, not quite sure what else to do.

Lupin, Kingsley, and Hermione came in then. “. . . lost an ear,” Lupin was telling them.

“Lost an—?” Hermione repeated in a high voice.

“Sectumsempra was always a specialty of Snape’s. I wish I could say I’d paid him back in kind, but it was all I could do to keep George on the broom after he was injured, he was losing so much blood.”

Hero looked away, down at George, partly to make sure he was still doing alright, partly so they wouldn’t see the relief on her face. It wouldn’t do to be relieved to hear Severus was unhurt. She had far too many secrets to keep belonging to other people to be so careless.

Ginny hugged Hermione. Kingsley returned to the kitchen to wait to interrogate the others who
“I’ll prove who I am, Kingsley, after I’ve seen my son, now back off if you know what’s good for you!” Mr. Weasley burst into the living room, his bald patch gleaming with sweat, his spectacles askew, Fred right behind him, both pale but uninjured.

“How is he?”

Mr. Weasley dropped to his knees beside George. For the first time since in all the years Hero had known him, Fred seemed to be lost for words. He gaped over the back of the sofa at his twin’s wound as if he could not believe what he was seeing. Perhaps roused by the sound of Fred and their father’s arrival, George stirred.


“What’s wrong with him?” croaked Fred, looking genuinely terrified. “Is his mind affected?”

“Saintlike,” repeated George, opening his eyes and looking up at his brother. “You see . . . I’m holy. Holey, Fred, geddit?”

Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever. Color flooded Fred’s pale face.

He shook his head, his expression one of fond exasperation. “Pathetic. The whole world of ear-related humor before you and you go for holey?”

“Well, in my defense, I’m not quite all there.” Fred smile seemed almost against his better judgement. “Besides, you should have seen your face,” George chuckled. He looked over at his mother. “Well, at least you’ll be able to tell us apart now, Mum.”

He looked around the room, his eyes falling on Hero. “Hi, Hero – it is you, isn’t it? The real one, I mean?”

Hero tucked a curl behind her ear, her smile a little sad. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s me.”

“Well, at least we got you back okay,” said George. “Why aren’t Ron and Bill huddled round my sickbed?”

“They’re not back yet, Georgie,” said Mrs. Weasley. George’s grin faded.

Ginny moved toward Hero to whisper, “Ron and Tonks should be back by now. They didn’t have a long journey; Auntie Muriel’s not that far from here.”

Hero had known all along it was a losing battle; with those words, she surrendered. Fear enveloped her, seeming to crawl along her skin, rip open her chest; from there it marched unopposed to conquer the territory of her throat.

From Hero’s perspective, her fear made the minutes stretch until they seemed like hours. In reality, it was a fairly short time later that they heard a crash from the garden. Everyone except Fred and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley rushed out to greet the newly-arrived survivors.

It was Tonks and Ron, Tonks having “landed” the broom into the gravel. Tonks leapt up and threw herself at Kingsley. He caught her, seeming shocked, though Hero would bet a hundred galleons he
wasn’t so oblivious as he acted. After a moment, he started to rub her back soothingly, an uncomfortable expression on his face.

Ron tipped towards Hero and Hermione. “You’re okay,” he mumbled, before Hermione flew at him and hugged him tightly.

“I thought—I thought—”

“’M all right,” said Ron, patting her on the back. “’M fine.”

Tonks stepped back from Kingsley, both of them blushing fiercely. “Um, Ron was great. Wonderful. Stunned one of the Death Eaters, straight to the head, and when you’re aiming at a moving target from a flying broom—”

“You did?” said Hermione, gazing up at Ron with her arms still around his neck.

“Always the tone of surprise,” he said a little grumpily, mostly teasing her. Hermione smiled and kissed his cheek. “Are we the last back?”

“No,” said Ginny, “we’re still waiting for Bill and Fleur and Mad-Eye and Mundungus. I’ll go tell Mum and Dad you’re okay—” She ran back inside.

“What happened?” Hero asked him.

“Ah, we ran afoul of Bellatrix. We didn’t get her, unfortunately, but we definitely got Rodolphus. Then we got to Auntie Muriel’s. It was awful, she kept fussing over us. We missed our Portkey.”

Hermione nodded, still not letting go. She rested her head on his shoulder.

“So, what happened with you lot?” Tonks asked.

They recounted the stories of their own journeys, but all the time the continued absence of Bill, Fleur, Mad-Eye, and Mundungus was around them like a vice, slowly cinching tighter and tighter, biting into them.

“I’m going to have to get back to Downing Street, I should have been there an hour ago,” said Kingsley finally, after a last sweeping gaze at the sky. “Let me know when they’re back.” Lupin nodded. With a wave to the others, Kingsley walked away into the darkness toward the gate.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came racing down the back steps, Ginny behind them. Both parents hugged Ron before turning to Lupin and Tonks.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Weasley, “for our sons.”

“Don’t be silly, Molly,” said Tonks at once.

“How’s George?” asked Lupin.

“What’s wrong with him?” piped up Ron.

“He’s lost—”

But the end of Mrs. Weasley’s sentence was drowned in a general outcry: a thestral had just soared into sight and landed a few feet from them. Bill and Fleur slid from its back, windswept but unhurt.

“We saw it,” said Bill; Fleur nodded, tear tracks glittering on her cheeks in the light from the kitchen.
“It happened just after we broke out of the circle: Mad-Eye and Dung were close by us, they were heading north too. Voldemort—he can fly—went straight for them. Dung panicked, I heard him cry out, Mad-Eye tried to stop him, but he Disapparated. Voldemort’s curse hit MadEye full in the face, he fell backward off his broom and—there was nothing we could do, nothing, we had half a dozen of them on our own tail—” Bill’s voice broke.

“Of course you couldn’t have done anything,” said Lupin.

Mad-Eye hadn’t really been her teacher, but it felt like he had. There’d always been a sort of solid, permanent sense to him, like if he could survive the countless attacks that gave him all those scars, there wasn’t anything that could take him down. But he was gone; he was gone, and it seemed like the bottom had fallen out of her world. Anyone could die. Maybe everyone would. She wasn’t all that close to Mad-Eye – she was fond of him, but she got the feeling very few people actually got close to him. He’d been the strong, stalwart warrior, invincible. With Dumbledore gone and now Moody, it seemed like they didn’t really stand a chance.

At last it seemed to dawn on everyone, though nobody said it, that there was no point waiting in the yard anymore, and in silence they followed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley back into the Burrow, and into the living room, where Fred and George were laughing together.

“What’s wrong?” said Fred, scanning their faces as they entered. “What’s happened? Who’s—?”

“Mad-Eye,” said Mr. Weasley. “Dead.”

The twins’ grins turned to grimaces of shock. Nobody seemed to know what to do. Tonks was crying silently into a handkerchief. She had been, Hero thought, almost like a daughter to Mad-Eye, his favorite and his protégée at the Ministry of Magic. Hagrid, who had sat down on the floor in the corner where he had the most space, was dabbing at his eyes with his tablecloth-sized handkerchief.

Bill walked over to the sideboard and pulled out a bottle of firewhisky and some glasses. “Here,” he said, and with a wave of his wand he sent twelve full glasses soaring through the room to each of them, holding the thirteenth aloft.

“Mad-Eye.”

“Mad-Eye,” they all said, and drank.

“Mad-Eye,” echoed Hagrid, a little late, with a hiccup.

The firewhisky seared Hero’s throat. It seemed to burn feeling back into her, dispelling the numbness and sense of unreality, firing her with courage, or something enough like it to do for the moment.

“So Mundungus disappeared?” said Lupin, who had drained his own glass in one.

The atmosphere changed at once. Everybody looked tense, watching Lupin, both wanting him to go on, it seemed to Hero, and slightly afraid of what they might hear.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Bill, “and I wondered that too, on the way back here, because they seemed to be expecting us, didn’t they? But Mundungus can’t have betrayed us. They didn’t know there would be seven Hero’s, that confused them the moment we appeared. Why tell them the date and not the essential point? No, I think Dung panicked, pure and simple. He didn’t want to come in the first place, but Mad-Eye made him, and You-Know-Who went straight for them. It was enough to make anyone panic.”
“You-Know-Who acted exactly as Mad-Eye expected him to,” sniffed Tonks. “Mad-Eye said he’d expect the real Hero to be with the toughest, most skilled Aurors. He chased Mad-Eye first, and when Mundungus gave them away he switched to K-Kingsley...”

“Yes, and that is all very good,” snapped Fleur, “but still it does not explain how they knew we were moving Hero tonight, does it? Somebody must have been careless. Somebody let slip the date to an outsider. It is the only explanation for them knowing the date but not the whole plan.”

She glared around at them all, tear tracks still etched on her beautiful face, silently daring any of them to contradict her. Nobody did. The only sound to break the silence was that of Hagrid hiccuping from behind his handkerchief. Hero glanced at Hagrid, who had just risked his own life to save hers —Hagrid, who everyone here knew had once been tricked into giving Voldemort crucial information in exchange for a dragon’s egg.

She was in deeper than anyone, in up to her neck. And she wasn’t about to drag anyone else down with her. Not when it would amount to trench warfare. Those secrets were heavy; they weighed on you like lead. But she also couldn’t have them turning on each other, all these people who had risked their lives for the cause of right tonight, like they had so many other times. They deserved better.

“No,” she said aloud, and they all looked over at her, as if surprised to hear her speak, surprised at the steel in her voice. “Stop it, right now. This ends here. No more, understand? We have to trust each other. If we stop trusting each other... we’ve already lost. And I for one think we’ve lost too many good people to turn on each other now. We fight to the end, side by side. I trust every person in this room with my life. As tonight shows, I’ve got plenty of reason to.

“It doesn’t matter how he found out. It changes nothing. We can only move forward and try to stay in the light. If we give in to doubt and turn against each other, Voldemort won’t need to destroy us, because we’ll have done the job ourselves.” She glanced away from the crowd of people staring at her, down at the last drops of firewhiskey in the glass she held in her lap.

“Well said, Hero,” said Fred unexpectedly.

“Yeah, ‘ear, ‘ear,” said George, with half a glance at Fred, the corner of whose mouth twitched.

Lupin was looking at her with an odd expression, almost pitying. Hero raised an eyebrow.

“Something the matter?”

“No, no, not at all.” He swallowed and turned to Bill. “There’s work to do. I can ask Kingsley whether—”

“No, no, I’ll do it. I’ll come.”

“Where are you going?” said Tonks and Fleur together.

“Mad-Eye’s body,” said Lupin. “We need to recover it.”

“Can’t it—?” began Mrs. Weasley with an appealing look at Bill.

“Wait?” said Bill. “Not unless you’d rather the Death Eaters took it?”

Nobody spoke. Lupin and Bill said good-bye and left. The rest of them now dropped into chairs, all except for Hero, who remained standing. The suddenness and completeness of death was with them like a presence. Hero wanted to shy away from it and felt ashamed at herself. They’d faced death
head on, met it without fear, without regret. The least she could do was follow their noble example.

In addition to her usual headache, her scar was prickling. It hurt like it hadn’t in over a year. She closed her eyes and sighed.

Everyone was quiet, thinking. As her scar seared with pain, she barely avoided moaning. She left the room, going outside, into the cool night air.

As she crossed the dark yard, the great skeletal thestral looked up, rustled its enormous batlike wings, then resumed its grazing. Hero stopped at the gate into the garden, staring out at its overgrown plants, rubbing her pounding forehead and thinking of Severus.

She wished she had him here. Odds were, he wouldn’t really be able to tell her much that would help. He hadn’t said, but she got the feeling he took deaths the way she did, that every one of them was a blow you never quite recovered from; a wound that remained open, throbbing, no matter how many years passed or how many others were inflicted. How many deaths would it take until you were nothing but wound, raw and aching every moment? He probably wouldn’t have anything to tell her, but just him being close would help.

She missed him. She hadn’t realized how much she would. Of course, they’d been in close quarters since September. It was bound to be strange to suddenly not be.

She sat on a bench a few feet away that overlooked the yard and cradled her head in her hands. The pain in her scar peaked, and she let the vision wash over her.

A voice screamed inside her head. “You told me the problem would be solved by using another’s wand!”

An emaciated old man, dressed in rags, cowering on a stone floor. Screaming. He was screaming. It sounded like the sound of someone subjected to unendurable agony.

“No! No! I beg you, I beg you . . .”

“You lied to Lord Voldemort, Ollivander!”

“I did not . . . I swear I did not . . .”

“You sought to help Potter, to help her escape me!”

“I swear I did not . . . I believed a different wand would work . . .”

“Explain, then, what happened. Lucius’s wand is destroyed!”

“I cannot understand . . . The connection . . . exists only . . . between your two wands . . .”

“Lies!”

“Please . . . I beg you . . .”

And Hero saw the white hand raise its wand and felt Voldemort’s surge of vicious anger, saw the frail old man on the floor writhe in agony—

“Hero?”

It was over as quickly as it had come. Hero sat under the stars, trembling, not taking in the sight of the yard. It was several moments before she realized that Ron and Hermione had come to sit next to
“Come on, Hero, come back inside. You shouldn’t be alone right now. I know you, remember? You’ll take some ridiculous idea into your head unless someone’s there to make you see reason.”

“No fear, I’m too tired to be considering anything reckless.”

“Are you alright?” Hermione asked, peering into Hero’s face. “You look awful.”

“Well. I bet I’m a shade or two better than Ollivander.”

When she had finished telling them what he had seen, Ron looked appalled, but Hermione downright terrified.

“But it was supposed to have stopped! Your scar—it wasn’t supposed to do this anymore! You mustn’t let that connection open up again—Dumbledore wanted you to close your mind!”

Hero glared at her. “Well, it’s not like we’ve got any other source of intelligence, seeing as our spy killed Dumbledore!”

She seemed to shrink. Even so, she refused to back down. “Still. We’ll find another way. He’s already on his way to taking over the Ministry and the newspapers and half the wizarding world! Don’t let him into your head, too.”

Hero let out a bitter, humorless laugh. “I don’t think there’s room for him, do you?”

Hermione flinched. She reached over to take Hero’s hand and laid her head on her shoulder. Ron looked on grimly. “When push comes to shove, you just make sure he’s the one who gets booted out on his arse, and not you.”
Hi! Hope you're all well. And so, the journey continues. I'm close to finishing ch. 58, and I still don't know how much further we have until the end. Anyway, let me know what you think.

A funeral pall hung over the Burrow. When Order members popped by, Hero always went to see who it was, half-expecting it to be Moody, stumping in, grim and taciturn, demanding to know why they left him stranded in Exeter. Of course, it never was, and it only made Hero more restless.

She wanted to do things while she still had time and strength enough to finish them. The best way to keep people alive, at least as she saw it, was to make the war as short as possible. The sooner she got on with things, the sooner it would be over, and the fewer people they’d be grieving over. It seemed simple logic. Of course, it was simple in her head; it ran into problems when introduced to the outside world.

“Well, you can’t do anything about the” — Ron mouthed the word Horcruxes— “till you’re seventeen. You’ve still got the Trace on you. And we can plan here as well as anywhere, can’t we? Or;” his voice dropped to a whisper, “d’you reckon you already know where You-Know-Who’s You-Know-Whats are?”

Hero had a fleeting thought that all these unnamable names really were getting ridiculous. “I have some ideas. But I suppose I don’t know, exactly.”

“Well, then. We’ll stay here. No reason to go on the run before we have to. Oh, and Hermione mentioned something about research. I think she was waiting until we were here to share it.”

They were sitting at the breakfast table; Bill and Mr. Weasley had already left for work. Mrs. Weasley had gone up to wake Hermione and Ginny. Fleur had drifted off to take a bath.

“The Trace’ll break on the thirty-first,” said Hero. “That means I only need to stay here four days. Then I can—”

“Five days,” Ron corrected her firmly. “We’ve got to stay for the wedding. They’ll kill us if we miss it. And I doubt they’ll lose a minute of sleep over it.”

Hero understood “they” to mean Fleur and Mrs. Weasley.

“It’s one extra day,” said Ron, when she looked mutinous.

“I of all people know how important one day can be. It could make all the difference in the world. Don’t they realize how important this is?”

“Course they don’t,” said Ron. “They haven’t got a clue. And now you mention it, I wanted to talk to you about that.” Ron glanced toward the door into the hall to check that Mrs. Weasley was not returning yet, then leaned in closer to Hero.

“Mum’s been trying to get it out of Hermione and me. What we’re off to do. She’ll try you next, so
brace yourself. Dad and Lupin’ve both asked as well, but when we said Dumbledore told you not to
tell anyone except us, they dropped it. Not Mum, though. She’s determined.” The churning
sensation in her stomach as the breakfast Mrs. Weasley had made her tried to rebel did not bode well.

Ron’s prediction came true in a matter of hours. Shortly before lunch, Mrs. Weasley detached Hero
from the others by asking her to help identify a lone sock that she thought might have come out of
her trunk. Once she had her cornered in the tiny scullery off the kitchen, she started.

“Ron and Hermione seem to think that the three of you are dropping out of Hogwarts,” she began in
a light, casual tone.

“Well, I don’t want to present a target to Voldemort. I don’t want to put anyone else in danger. And
I’m sick. It won’t be long that I won’t be able to attend anyway.”

“Ron and Hermione seemed to think it had something to do with a mission Dumbledore gave you.”

Hero really wished they had decided to be a little less honest, but that wouldn’t change things now.
“Well, yes, there is that. He spent the year teaching me so I could do it. Only I can. It’s vital that I
get it done as quickly as possible, before . . .”

Mrs. Weasley, bless her, refused to let it go. “What sort of mission?”

“The essential kind that he didn’t want anyone else to know about.”

“Well, frankly, I think Arthur and I have a right to know, and I’m sure Mr. and Mrs. Granger would
agree!” said Mrs. Weasley. Hero had been afraid she’d go the “concerned parent” route.

She forced herself to look straight into Mrs. Weasley’s eyes, eyes that were tired and worried and full
of love. It didn’t help her, but she pressed on. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Weasley, but you don’t. Ron’s of
age. I will be in a few days. I know you want to keep us safe, but you can’t. And everyone will
suffer if you try to keep us from doing what we need to. You don’t have a right to know, and it
would be irresponsible of me to tell you.”

She glanced at the sock that had been Mrs. Weasley excuse for bringing her in. “That’s a man’s
sock. And I don’t support Puddlemere United. You know I support the Harpies, same as Ginny.”

Mrs. Weasley looked down at the sock in her hand. “Oh. Oh, yes, of course. Silly of me. Well,
dear, while we’ve still got you here, you won’t mind helping with the preparations for Bill and
Fleur’s wedding, will you? There’s still so much to do.”

“Er, course not,” Hero said, caught off guard by the sudden change of subject.

Mrs. Weasley smiled and patted her cheek. “Sweet of you,” she murmured as she left the scullery.

In the following days, Hero, Ron, and Hermione were buried in wedding preparations. Ron and
Hermione were barely able to sneak off for the occasional snog, never mind the three of them getting
together to plan. Despite Mrs. Weasley’s high-handed handling of the situation, which Hero really
wished she wasn’t so used to, she found she enjoyed herself. She’d never been to any wedding
before, never mind a wizarding one. All the little details seemed endlessly fascinating. Of course,
there was the added benefit of it taking her mind off of all the recent deaths, never mind those yet to
come. She barely had time to think, and it was sort of wonderful. She missed Ron and Hermione,
though. Mrs. Weasley was bound and determined to keep them apart, it seemed, since she never
assigned them tasks that kept them anywhere near each other. She hadn’t had a spare minute to talk
to them since the night they’d arrived.
“I think Mum thinks that if she can stop the three of you getting together and planning, she’ll be able to delay you leaving,” Ginny told her in an undertone as they laid the table for dinner on the third night.

Hero sighed. “I know. It won’t be enough, though. Even if her plan works, we’re still going to leave eventually. I mean, what does she think is going to happen? Someone else’ll kill him off while she’s holding us here making vol-au-vents?” She saw Ginny blanche and released she’d spoken carelessly.

“So it’s true? That’s what you’re trying to do?”

Hero silently cursed herself. Ginny didn’t need any more reasons to worry, and hearing her brother was going haring off after a Dark Lord would make anyone anxious.

“I was joking.” Didn’t mean it wasn’t based in fact, though.

Ginny looked skeptical, but turned her attention back to the table-settings.

* * *

They were often joined by members of the Order for dinner, seeing as the Burrow had replaced Grimmauld Place as headquarters. When Dumbledore had died, each of those who knew had become secret-keeper. This, of course, included Severus, whom everyone believed to be a traitor. They’d evacuated as soon as they’d realized the possibility of the Death Eaters breaching the protections. Hero tended to grind her teeth when she was reminded; hopefully, everyone mistook it for her being angry about Severus killing Dumbledore. He deserved better.

In any case, the kitchen was so crowded that evening that it was difficult to maneuver knives and forks. Hero kept bumping against Ginny’s elbow when she went to cut her chicken.

The discussion turned, as perhaps was inevitable so soon afterward, to Mad-Eye. They had not been able to have a funeral because Bill and Mr. Weasley had been unable to recover a body. There had been no mention of his death in the Daily Prophet, nor any charges against Hero for the underage magic she’d performed in the battle. They seemed to still be pretending to be on top of the situation. It was an untenable position, Hero knew. It couldn’t hold for much longer, and then they’d really be in the soup.

Once apple tart was on the table, Fleur changed the subject. “Hero, we must decide how you will be disguised for the wedding.”

“I suppose you couldn’t just turn my hair red and pretend I’m a Weasley cousin?”

“That might work, I suppose,” Mrs. Weasley agreed. “We had thought to get a bit of hair from one of the muggles in the village for Polyjuice.”

“No, it’s too unreliable. What if something happens and I forget to drink it? No, simpler will be best I think. Besides, my hair is what most people look for. I’ll blend in like a charm.” It was a terrible pun. Hero fought the urge to grin.

“Well, that answers that question.” Mrs. Weasley took out her list of things that needed done before the ceremony the next day. “Ron, have you cleaned out your room?”

“Why?” exclaimed Ron, slamming his spoon down and glaring at his mother. “Why does my room have to be cleaned out? It’s fine the way it is!” Hero had to agree that this sounded fishy. It was blatantly an excuse to separate them. Of course, Ron should have known better than to argue, but
still.

“We are holding your brother’s wedding here in a few days’ time, young man—”

“And are they getting married in my bedroom?” asked Ron furiously. “No! So why in the name of Merlin’s saggy left—”

“Don’t talk to your mother like that,” said Mr. Weasley firmly. “And do as you’re told.”

Ron scowled at both his parents, then picked up his spoon and attacked the last few mouthfuls of his apple tart.

“I can help, some of it’s probably my mess,” Hero told Ron, but Mrs. Weasley cut across her.

“No, Hero, dear, I’d much rather you helped Arthur muck out the chickens, and Hermione, I’d be ever so grateful if you’d change the sheets for Monsieur and Madame Delacour; you know they’re arriving at eleven tomorrow morning.”

But as it turned out, there was very little to do for the chickens.

“There’s no need to, er, mention it to Molly,” Mr. Weasley told her, blocking her access to the coop, “but, er, Ted Tonks sent me most of what was left of Sirius’s bike and, er, I’m hiding—er, that is to say, keeping—it in here. Fantastic stuff; there’s an exhaust gaskin, as I believe it’s called, the most magnificent battery, and it’ll be a great opportunity to find out how brakes work. I’m going to try and put it all back together again when Molly’s not—I mean, when I’ve got time.”

When they returned to the house, Mrs. Weasley was nowhere to be seen, so Hero slipped upstairs to Ron’s attic bedroom.

“I’m doing it, I’m doing—! Oh, it’s you,” said Ron in relief, as Hero entered the room. He lay back down on the bed, which Hero would be willing to bet he’d scrambled up from seconds before.

The room was just as messy as it had been all week; the only change was that Hermione was now sitting in the far corner, Crookshanks at her feet, sorting books, some of which Hero recognized as one’s that had come from Privet Drive, into two enormous piles. Hero found herself profoundly grateful they seemed to have already got the snogging out of the way.

“Hi, Hero,” she said, as she sat down on the camp bed beyond the divider.

“And how did you manage to get away?”

“Oh, Ron’s mum forgot that she asked Ginny and me to change the sheets yesterday,” said Hermione. She threw Numerology and Grammatica onto one pile and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts onto the other.

Hero smirked. “She’s slipping.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Fat lot of good it’ll do. She’ll probably remember soon, and then we’ll be in for it. Still, might as well enjoy it while we can.”

“Ron, we need to plan while we can!” Hermione said, exasperated, looking up from her sorting.

Ron blinked at her. “’Swat I said.” She suppressed a smile, shaking her head as she turned back to the books. “What are you doing with all those books, anyway?”

“Just trying to decide which ones to take with us. You know, when we’re looking for Horcruxes.”
“Right,” he said, glancing at the towering pile that seemed to be composed of the books she’d designated useful. It seemed rather larger than the discard pile. “Of course. I forgot we’d be hunting down Voldemort in a mobile library,” he remarked dryly.

Hermione shot him a quelling glance. “Ha ha.” She looked down at Spellman’s Syllabary. “I wonder . . . do you think we’ll have to translate ancient runes? I think I’d better take it just in case.” She added it to the tower and picked up Hogwarts, A History.

Seeing Hermione going through her most prized possessions with an air of casualness brought home to Hero exactly what they were going to do. She wasn’t sure she was comfortable with it.

“Look . . .” Ron and Hermione looked at her with a mixture of resignation and defiance. Hero was struck by the thought that they’d been expecting this, which was odd, because she hadn’t.

“Look, I know after the funeral, you said you were coming with me—”

“There she goes,” Ron said, rolling his eyes at Hermione.

“Well, we knew she would,” Hermione said, sighing. “You know, I think I will take Hogwarts, A History. I mean, we probably won’t need it, but I’d feel weird not having it.”

“Listen!” said Hero again.

“No, Hero, you listen,” said Hermione, a flinty look in her eyes. “We’re coming with you, and there’s nothing you can do to stop us. If you’ll remember, we can Apparate and you can’t. It was decided months ago—years, really.”

“But—”

“Shut up,” Ron advised her.

“—are you sure you’ve thought this through?” she persisted.

“Let’s see,” Hermione replied in a clipped tone, slamming Travels with Trolls onto the discarded pile with a rather fierce look. “I’ve been packing for days, so we’re ready to leave at a moment’s notice, which for your information has included doing some pretty difficult magic, not to mention smuggling Mad-Eye’s entire stock of Polyjuice Potion right under Ron’s mum’s nose. No need to thank me.

“I’ve also modified my parents’ memories so that they’re convinced they’re really called Wendell and Monica Wilkins, and that their life’s ambition is to move to Australia, which they have now done. That’s to make it more difficult for Voldemort to track them down and interrogate them about me—or you, because unfortunately, I’ve told them quite a bit about you. Assuming I survive our hunt for the Horcruxes, I’ll find Mum and Dad and lift the enchantment. If I don’t—I think I’ve cast a good enough charm to keep them safe and happy. Wendell and Monica Wilkins don’t know that they’ve got a daughter, you see.” Hermione’s eyes were swimming with tears again, but her expression was still fierce. “So don’t you dare ask me that question, Hero Potter. Don’t you dare imply that I haven’t thought this through. I’ve given up too much for you to try to ditch me now. We both have.” Ron got back off the bed, put his arm around her once more, and frowned at Hero in reproach. Hero felt guilt pricking along her skin.

“I—Hermione, I’m sorry . . . I didn’t—”

“Didn’t realize that Ron and I know perfectly well what might happen if we come with you? Of course we do. It’s been perfectly obvious for years. Ron, show Hero what you’ve done.”
“Nah, she’s just eaten. For that matter, so have I.”

“She needs to know.”

“Oh, fine. Come on, Hero.” Reluctantly, he withdrew his arm from his girlfriend’s shoulder and headed for the door to his bedroom. He looked at Hero, only to see her looking at him with a degree of uncertainty and, it must be admitted, distrust. “Come on. The sooner we get this over with, the better.”

Hero followed Ron onto the landing, not sure what to expect. Ron pointed his wand at the ceiling and muttered, “Descendio.” A hatch opened right over their heads and a ladder slid down to their feet. A horrible, half-sucking, half-moaning sound came out of the square hole, along with an unexpected and unpleasant smell like open drains.

“That’s your ghoul, isn’t it?” Hero had never seen the creature that sometimes caused things to go bump in the night and, if the sound and smell was anything to go by, wasn’t sure she wanted to now.

“Yes.” said Ron, climbing the ladder. “Come and have a look at him.”

Gingerly, wrinkling her nose, she followed after him.

Once back in Ron’s room, he explained. “Once we’ve left, the ghoul’s going to come and live down here in my room,” said Ron. “I think he’s really looking forward to it—well, it’s hard to tell, because all he can do is moan and drool—but he nods a lot when you mention it. Anyway, he’s going to be me with spattergroit. Good, eh?”

Hero tried to catch Hermione’s eye, but she was still poring over her books. “Er . . .”

“It is! Look, when the three of us don’t turn up at school, they’ll assume we’re with you and go after our families.”

“Hopefully, they’ll assume I left with my parents,” Hermione interjected, not looking up. “Lots of muggleborns are fleeing the country these days.”

“We can’t hide my whole family, it’ll look too fishy and they can’t all leave their jobs,” Ron continued. “So we’re going to put out the story that I’m seriously ill with spattergroit, which is why I can’t go back to school. If anyone comes calling to investigate, Mum or Dad can show them the ghoul in my bed, covered in pustules. Spattergroit’s really contagious, so they’re not going to want to go near him. It won’t matter that he can’t say anything, either, because apparently you can’t once the fungus has spread to your uvula.”

“And your parents know about this?” Hero asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Dad does. He helped Fred and George transform the ghoul. Mum . . . well, you’ve seen what she’s like. She won’t accept we’re going till we’ve gone.”

There was silence except for the sound of Hermione’s sorting. Ron was looking at her with a soft expression that made Hero feel like she was intruding on something private. She hadn’t realized, before, that they knew precisely how dangerous it would be. The lengths they’d gone to showed that quite clearly. Somehow, they were still quite insistent on coming along. She wasn’t sure what she’d done to deserve friends like them. She wished she had words to express just how much it meant.

“What we really need to decide,” said Hermione, tossing Defensive Magical Theory into the bin without a second glance and picking up An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe, “is where
we’re going after we leave here.”

“We need a base of operations,” Ron said. “Somewhere to work from, hide if we need to. I mean, we could stay on the run, but that sort of thing’s draining, and I’m not sure how much you’ll be able to take, Hero. You’re bound to get a lot worse, and I don’t think you’ll be in any position to be moving a lot.”

“Good point,” Hermione approved. “We should probably stay near medical care, too, in case there’s an emergency.”

“Grimmauld Place.”

“But . . . Hero, they’re not using it as Headquarters anymore for a reason. Because Snape can get in there?” Ron reminded her.

“I know that. But it’s still got other protections. They haven’t tried to take it, and he’s had a month to tell them. I think it’s our best bet.”

Hermione frowned thoughtfully. “I suppose it makes sense. And we can always find somewhere else if it comes to that.”

“I don’t think they’d expect it. I mean, no one goes to Grimmauld anymore, so it should be fairly obvious we’ve switched headquarters. And no one in the Order is willing to go there because they’re worried the Death Eaters will attack. Things might change once we take up residence, though,” Hero added.

“There’s something else, though,” Ron said. “This R.A.B. person, the one who stole the real locket. He said in his note he was going to destroy it, didn’t he?”

“Right.”

“Well, what if he did manage to destroy it?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I scoured the Black library, and I only found out how to destroy them when Dumbledore told me. If a collection like the Black library doesn’t have any information, it’s got to be pretty hard to find.”

“Actually, er, I did find some books on it,” Hermione admitted, biting her lip.

Hero stared at her. “And you were going to mention that, when?”

Hermione blushed. “Well, I found them the day of Dumbledore’s funeral, and it’s not like we’ve had much time to talk since.”

Hero nodded, conceding the point. “What do they say? And what do you mean, found them?”

“Well, er, they were in Dumbledore’s quarters. I just used a Summoning charm. I really think he wanted us to, he could have made it much harder to get them. They just . . . soared out the window and into the girls’ dorm.”

“Okay. What do they say?”

“Everything, basically. There’s this one, it’s called Secrets of the Darkest Art. It’s a horrible book, really. It details the whole process. I think, if Dumbledore was only able to remove them after he became Headmaster, Riddle would have gotten all the information he needed from there.”
“Does it mention anything about putting yourself back together?” Ron asked curiously.

“Yes, but apparently it’s excruciatingly painful.”

Hero frowned. “How do you do it?”

“Remorse. You have to really feel what you’ve done. According to the footnote, the pain of it can kill you. Somehow, I can’t imagine Voldemort attempting it, can you?”

“Er, no. Seems just a tad far-fetched,” Ron said.

“Oh!” Hero exclaimed, whirling around and digging in her trunk. Ron and Hermione exchanged confused looks. Ron made a circling motion on the side of his head, looking at Hero out of the corner of his eye. Hermione looked away, trying not to laugh.

Finally, Hero emerged from her trunk with a jewelry box in hand.

Ron frowned at it. “Isn’t that the necklace Kreacher sent you for Christmas?”

“Yes. Yes, it is. I can’t believe I was so stupid!”

“Why? What’s it got to do with anything?”

She didn’t reply; she just opened the box and handed it to him. Sitting there, the same as it had for the last seven months, was a gold locket, the size of a chicken’s egg, with a large S inlaid in glittering green stones. Ron gazed down at it, understanding now.

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed. Dumbledore had no way of knowing which Horcrux was in that cave or that it had already been removed. But we could have destroyed this one a whole heck of a lot sooner.”

“But . . . how did Kreacher get it?” Hermione asked, staring at it.

“Ah. Well, see, I sort of started to suspect it when I read the note. It’s not very obvious, but only people who once followed him call him the Dark Lord. That’s who the note’s addressed to. Which means that, whoever R.A.B. is, it’s probably a Death Eater who defected.”

“Sirius’s brother was in the Death Eaters wasn’t he? Maybe this R.A.B. person gave it to Regulus for safekeeping,” Hermione speculated.

“Excellent application of logic, Hermione, but not quite. Sirius’s brother’s name was Regulus. And he defected.”

“Regulus Black. R.B. You don’t think . . . ?”

“Well, at least we know the answer to Ron’s question. No, he did not manage to destroy it. I doubt he would have had time. Sirius said he didn’t last long after he’d turned coat.”

Hermione shook her head. “You’re not the only stupid one. It was in the drawing room, remember? It was that locket none of us could open. We threw it away.” She paused, then frowned, looking up at Hero. “Wait a minute, if we threw it away, how did Kreacher get it?”

Hero laughed nervously. “Er, well . . . I sort of had Kreacher track down all the things Mundungus had stolen and bring them back. Actually, I think he sent me the locket as a way of showing he’d done as I asked. Well, at least we know where one of them is.”
“And two of them have already been destroyed,” Hermione pointed out.

“Didn’t you say Dumbledore thinks one might be the snake?” Ron interjected.

“Yeah. And, actually, I know what another one is. As well as the locket,” she said, nodding to it, “He stole something belonging to Helga Hufflepuff. A cup. We don’t know where it is, though. And we don’t really know what else he might have used.”

“Still, it’s a damn sight better than we thought we were,” Ron pointed out. They were cheered by this until Mrs. Weasley discovered them a few minutes later. Her hair was disheveled, her face contorted with rage. The three of them shrank at the sight.

“I’m so sorry to break up this cozy little gathering,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’m sure you all need your rest . . . but there are wedding presents stacked in my room that need sorting out and I was under the impression that you had agreed to help.”

“Oh yes,” said Hermione, looking terrified as she leapt to her feet, sending books flying in every direction, “we will . . . we’re sorry . . .”

With an anguished look at Hero and Ron, Hermione hurried out of the room after Mrs. Weasley.

“It’s like being a house-elf,” complained Ron in an undertone, “except without the job satisfaction. The sooner this wedding’s over, the happier I’ll be.”

Hero laughed. “Then we’ll have nothing to do except find Horcruxes . . . it’ll be like a holiday, won’t it?”

Ron started to laugh, but at the sight of the enormous pile of wedding presents waiting for them in Mrs. Weasley’s room, stopped quite abruptly.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

Hello, again! I moved back into college today. I can't wait to get started. Anyway, here's to you - and 40,000 hits!

The next morning at eleven o’clock, the Delacours arrived. The protective enchantments lay so thick upon the Burrow that it was no longer possible for anyone to arrive directly by means of magic. Mr. Weasley was meeting the three of them – Mr., Mrs., and Gabrielle – on the top of a nearby hill, where their Portkey would drop them.

Ron was forced to go back upstairs and put on matching socks, grumbling the whole way. Hero half-heartedly tried to tame her hair, knowing it was useless. Today, just like every other day of her life, it was curled and tangled like Medusa’s. The best she could manage was to tie it back at the nape of her neck and hope it passed muster. Mrs. Weasley sighed in resignation when she saw it, but declared both her and Ron acceptable. Hermione, of course, didn’t have a hair out of place.

Hero had never seen the place looking so tidy. The chickens were shut away (Hero wondered what they thought about having to share with the remains of the motorbike), the yard had been swept, the gardens pruned and prettied. Hero preferred it in its wilder state, but no one had asked her. The collection of wellies had disappeared from around the door; instead, flanking it there were two Flutterby bushes which, though there was no wind, rippled attractively as if caught in a breeze.

The first sound of the visitors’ approach was an unusually high-pitched laugh, which turned out to be coming from Mr. Weasley, who appeared at the gate moments later, laden with luggage and leading a beautiful blonde woman in long, leaf-green robes, who could only be Fleur’s mother.

“Maman!” cried Fleur, rushing forward to embrace her. “Papa!”

Monsieur Delacour seemed an odd match for his graceful, elegant wife. He was a head shorter and rather plump, with a little, pointed black beard. However, he seemed eminently good-natured. Bouncing toward Mrs. Weasley on high-heeled boots, he kissed her twice on each cheek, leaving her flustered.

“You have been to much trouble,” he said in a deep voice, his French accent thick. “Fleur tells us you have been working very hard.”

“Oh, it’s been nothing, nothing!” trilled Mrs. Weasley. “No trouble at all!”

That upset Hero just a bit. After all, Mrs. Weasley may have felt it hadn’t been any trouble, but then again, she hadn’t been the one polishing silverware, color-matching the favors with the ribbons with the flowers, cleaning the yard, tidying the house . . . Alright, she’d been making canapes, but Hero had been helping with that, too. Suffice it to say, the fascination with wedding preparations had worn off. Ron relieved his feelings by aiming a kick at a gnome who was peering out from behind one of the new Flutterby bushes.

“Dear lady!” said Monsieur Delacour, still holding Mrs. Weasley’s hand between his own two plump ones and beaming. “We are most honored at the approaching union of our two families! Let
me present my wife, Apolline.”

Madame Delacour glided forward and stooped to kiss Mrs. Weasley too.

“Enchantée,” she said. “Your husband has been telling us such amusing stories!”

Mr. Weasley gave a maniacal laugh; Mrs. Weasley threw him a look, upon which he became immediately silent and assumed an expression appropriate to the sickbed of a close friend.

“And, of course, you have met my little daughter, Gabrielle!” said Monsieur Delacour.

Gabrielle was Fleur in miniature; eleven years old, with waist-length hair of pure, silvery blonde, she gave Mrs. Weasley a dazzling smile and hugged her. She smiled shyly at Hero with an air of... hero-worship. Hero began to fidget, uncomfortable with the attention.

“Well, come in, do!” said Mrs. Weasley brightly, and she ushered the Delacours into the house, with many “No, please!”’s and “After you!”’s and “Not at all!”’s.

The Delacours, it soon transpired, were helpful, pleasant guests. They were pleased with everything and keen to assist with the preparations for the wedding. On the downside, the Burrow was not built to accommodate so many people. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were now sleeping in the sitting room, having shouted down Monsieur and Madame Delacour’s protests and insisted they take their bedroom. Gabrielle was sleeping with Fleur in Percy’s old room, and Bill would be sharing with Charlie, his best man, once Charlie arrived from Romania. God only knew what it would have been like if Percy had come to his senses and joined them.

Opportunities for Hero, Ron, and Hermione to make plans together became virtually nonexistent, and it was in desperation that they took to volunteering to feed the chickens just to escape the overcrowded house.

“Oh, Merlin, what now?” moaned Ron, as their second attempt at a meeting in the yard was foiled by the appearance of Mrs. Weasley carrying a large basket of laundry in her arms.

“Oh, good, you’ve fed the chickens,” she called as she approached them. “We’d better shut them away again before the men arrive tomorrow... to put up the tent for the wedding,” she explained, pausing to lean against the henhouse. She looked exhausted. Hero, despite not appreciating her interference one bit, felt a flood of sympathy. “Millamant’s Magic Marquees... they’re very good, Bill’s escorting them... You’d better stay inside while they’re here, Hero, dear. I must say it does complicate organizing a wedding, having all these security spells around the place.”

“I’m really sorry, Mrs. Weasley,” Hero said contritely.

“Oh, don’t be silly, dear!” said Mrs. Weasley at once. “I didn’t mean... well, your safety’s much more important! Actually, I’ve been wanting to ask you how you want to celebrate your birthday. Seventeen, after all, it’s an important day...”

“I don’t want a fuss,” Hero said quickly, not wanting to put them under any more stress on her account. “Really, Mrs. Weasley, just a normal dinner would be fine... I mean, it’s the day before the wedding...”

“Oh, well, if you’re sure, dear. Shall I invite Remus? And how about Hagrid?”

“That’d be great,” said Hero. “But please don’t go to loads of trouble.”

“Not at all, not at all... It’s no trouble...” She looked at her, a long, searching look, then smiled a
little sadly, straightened up, and walked away. Hero felt the same as she had back at Christmas with Ron, that she seemed to know so much more than Hero had let on. With that sad, searching look, it seemed like she knew it was going to be Hero’s last birthday.

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She seemed to be walking cloaked in the mists and pale blue light of dawn. It was in the mountains, she realized. But of course it was in the mountains. Where else would she be? There was a village far below, nestled in the valley, swaddled in mist. As if that would protect it. Was the man she sought down there, the man she needed so badly she could think of little else, the man who held the answer, the answer to her problem . . .?

“Oi, wake up.”

She opened eyes she had not realized were closed. She was lying on the camp bed. Ron had pulled back the curtain, his expression concerned, not that Hero could make it out. Without her glasses on, Ron’s face was a peach blob. The sun had not risen yet; inwardly, she raised an eyebrow – it was early even for her. Pigwidgeon was asleep with his head under his tiny wing. The scar on her forehead prickled.

“You were muttering in your sleep.”

Hero blinked at this statement. “Was I?”

“Yeah. ‘Gregorovitch.’ You kept saying ‘Gregorovitch.’”

Hero squinted at him. “Who’s Gregorovitch?”

“I don’t know, do I? You were the one saying it.”

She felt the faintest tickle in her memory, the vaguest sense she’d heard it before. “I think Voldemort’s looking for him.”

“Poor bloke,” Ron muttered fervently.

All that remained of the dream was the last impression she’d gotten before Ron had woken her – of being high up on a mountain and looking down at the little village.

“I think he’s abroad.”

“Who, Gregorovitch?”

“Well, him, too, but Voldemort. Wherever he’s gone looking for Gregorovitch, it didn’t look like England.”

“You were in his mind again, weren’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

Hero sighed. “Look, do me a favor and don’t mention it to Hermione. At least not yet. I need time to come up with a way to stop her from coming down on me like a pile of bricks.”

“Right. I won’t go snitching, but if she brings it up, I’m not going to lie to her.” He shrugged.

“You understand. Anyway, happy birthday.”

“Oh! God, that’s right. I’m seventeen. Wow, that’s . . . wow.”

“Calm down. And I don’t recommend trying to use magic for your laces. It doesn’t work very well,
and it takes *ages* to fix.”


Ron rolled his eyes in fond exasperation. “Look, I know you haven’t gotten many birthday presents in your life, but that doesn’t mean you have to act like you’re five.”

“It’s the seventh time in my life I will actually receive presents for the anniversary of my birth. I think I’m entitled. I mean, really, what does a birthday celebrate but surviving another year? And I’ve had quite a few near misses.”

“Oh, fine. Here.” He handed her a leather-bound book; “It wasn’t easy, mind. What do you get for the girl who has everything but time and her health? And it’s no emerald-encrusted gold locket, but I think you’ll like it.”

She opened it to find pictures, wizarding pictures. They were mostly of her, Ron, and Hermione. She slowly turned through the pages, feeling as if she was walking through her years at Hogwarts. As she went farther, she found newspaper clippings. One page had a program and tickets from the world cup, with a news article to match.

“I, er, got it from before the match. Most of the ones from the next day were about the dark mark. I figured you probably wouldn’t want to remember that.”

There was a copy of the Quibbler article from their fifth year, the article following the battle at the Ministry. There were pictures of the Gryffindor Quidditch team every year, highlights of the games.

“I got the pictures from Colin Creevey. Apparently, he got better at not being seen and figured out how to turn off the flash on his camera. I know it’s a little disturbing, but he doesn’t have any photos left, or any of the film. I threatened him, he handed them over, and I made this. What do you think?”

Hero grinned at him, feeling close to tears. “I love it. It’s . . . it’s perfect. Thank you, thank you. Oh, God. I only got you Keeper’s gloves for your birthday,” she groaned.

Ron grinned back at her. “I happen to like my Keeper’s gloves. And this is for us as much as for you.” He looked down, his smile fading slightly. “To remember you when you’re gone.”

It was then that Hero did cry. When she’d calmed down and dried her eyes enough to be presentable, they walked downstairs. When they reached the kitchen, they found a pile of presents waiting on the table. Bill and Monsieur Delacour were finishing their breakfasts. Mrs. Weasley chatted to them while she tended the frying pan.

When she saw Hero and Ron, she beamed at them. “Good morning, Hero. Arthur’s already left for work, but he told me to wish you happy birthday before he went. He’ll be back for dinner. Here, this one’s from us.” She handed Hero a box.

Hero blushed and smiled shyly, slipping into one of the chairs to open it. It was almost like having parents. It felt even more like it when she opened the box to find a pocket watch with a face like the one they’d given Ron when he’d come of age in March.

“It’s traditional to give a witch or a wizard a watch when they come of age,” Mrs. Weasley explained. “That one used to belong to my brother Fabian. We thought it would be better than a watch with a strap – you’ve always been such a delicate thing, it’d be difficult to get one to fit your wrist. I’m afraid it’s a bit dented on the back, my brother wasn’t terribly careful with his possessions.
She cut off when Hero leapt to her feet and threw her arms around her. “Thank you,” Hero whispered. “It means the world to me.” It did. She knew how dear her brothers had been to Molly Weasley, which only made the gift mean all the more. It was akin to a family heirloom, the greatest gift they could have given her – a family to belong to.

“Happy birthday, Hero!” said Hermione, hurrying into the kitchen and adding her own present to the top of the pile. “It’s not much, but I hope you like it. I think they’ll be useful, anyway,” she added, winking. “What did Ron get you? I tried to get it out of him, but he hasn’t said a word.”

“I’ll show you later. I don’t think words could do it justice,” Hero told her. Hermione raised an eyebrow, impressed.

“Well, go on, then! Don’t leave us in suspense,” Ron said, nudging her.

Hero grinned and sat down again to tear into the wrapping paper. Hermione’s present was in a wooden box that was clearly wizard-made if the craftsmanship was anything to go by. She opened it to find a pair of boots in a slightly Victorian style made of dark brown leather with brass detailing.

“They’re lovely. Diagon Alley?”

“Well, sure. You don’t get stuff like that in the muggle world unless you’re willing to pay through the nose for it. But they’re not just pretty. They have . . . certain features.”

Hero raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“A wand-holster, for one. The leather is also curse, jinx, and hex resistant. And waterproof. And a few other things.”

Hero grinned at her. “You think of everything.”

“Well, of course. Go on, open the others.”

Bill and Fleur gave her a charm bracelet. “It’s fairy-enchanted. People’ll only notice you when you want them to.” She got chocolates from the Delacours and a hamper of the latest Weasley products. “Some of them aren’t out yet,” George said, tapping the side of his nose, Fred grinning next to him.

They didn’t longer long, as the arrival of the other guests made the kitchen uncomfortably crowded. Hermione scooped the presents out of Hero’s arms with a cheerful “I’ll just go pack these.”

There wasn’t a huge amount left to do for the wedding. They’d be putting up the marquee later and putting the finishing touches on everything. They’d hired caterers, so there wasn’t even any cooking to do. There was still her birthday party later, but there’d be someone missing, and it wouldn’t be complete without him. It had been almost a month since she’d last seen him. He was the first person she thought of when she woke up, and she usually fell asleep with memories of their time together floating through her head. Of course, this made her devoutly thankful Ron could not perform Legilimency.

She had no idea when she’d see him next. They both had things to do. Severus had a psychopath to covertly work against and she had pieces of his soul to destroy. She suspected it wouldn’t leave much time for dilly-dallying. There were things more important than either of them. They couldn’t be selfish. Not even if there wasn’t much she wouldn’t have given just then to have five minutes alone with him.
As Hero’s birthday dinner would have stretched the Burrow’s kitchen to breaking point even before
the arrival of Charlie, Lupin, Tonks, and Hagrid, several tables were placed end to end in the
garden. Fred and George bewitched a number of purple lanterns, all emblazoned with a large
number 17, to hang in midair over the guests. Hermione made purple and gold streamers erupt from
the end of her wand and drape themselves artistically over the trees and bushes.

“Nice,” said Ron, as with one final flourish of her wand, Hermione turned the leaves on the
crabapple tree to gold. “You’ve really got an eye for that sort of thing.”

“Thank you, Ron!” Hermione said, pecking him on the cheek. He caught her hand when she went
to go back to her work.

“Aw, come on. I’ve barely seen you all week,” he said, smiling at her.

“I’m not kissing you in front of everyone. That’s just asking for trouble. Later. Everyone’ll be
distracted, there’ll be plenty of time to sneak off for a snog.”

“If you insist.”

Hero looked away. It wasn’t that she was jealous of them. It was just that, whatever Hermione’s
reservations, they could snog in front of everyone, technically. I mean, Mrs. Weasley might start
planning their wedding there and then, but no one would try to curse one of them. For a moment,
Hero wondered what it would have been like to be involved with someone who no one would look
down on for choosing, someone who could have been invited to her birthday party and who she
could have spent the evening beside. She shook herself out of that disloyal thought – she wouldn’t
give Severus up for anything, certainly not just to have someone she could never love the way she
loved him. And even if he hadn’t killed Dumbledore and had still been a trusted member of the
Order, she probably still couldn’t have kissed him. He was, after all, her professor and twenty years
older than her. Either way, they were screwed.

“Out of the way, out of the way!” sang Mrs. Weasley, coming through the gate with what appeared
to be a giant, beach-ball-sized Snitch floating in front of her. Seconds later Hero realized that it was
her birthday cake, which Mrs. Weasley was suspending with her wand, rather than risk carrying it
over the uneven ground. When the cake had finally landed in the middle of the table, Hero shook
her head in wonder.

“That looks amazing, Mrs. Weasley! I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, dear,” she said fondly.

By seven o’clock all the guests had arrived, led into the house by Fred and George, who had waited
for them at the end of the lane. Hagrid had honored the occasion by wearing his best, and horrible,
hairy brown suit. Lupin and Tonks arrived within about ten minutes of each other. They both
looked rather miserable and trying their damnedest to hide it. Hero had a sneaking suspicion that,
while Lupin was depressed because he’d lost his light, Tonks was depressed because she’d found
hers and it was oblivious, or worse, uninterested.

Hero had lived that for two years, except she’d been a little better since they’d been so antagonistic.
It helped when you didn’t really want it to happen, even if a part of you did. Of course, sitting in the
car with him for thirteen hours once a month, at least prior to Christmas, had been a kind of hell. The
crueldest kind of hell, that at first seems a kindness. Poor Tonks.

She gave a brave attempt at a smile as she hugged Hero. “Happy birthday, Hero.”
Hero gave her a kind smile in return. “Thanks, Tonks.”

Lupin came up after Tonks and gave her another hug. “How are you, my dear?”

“I’m alright. What about you?”

“Oh, muddling along somehow.” Hero smiled sadly at him. He smiled back, shadows in his eyes.

“Seventeen, eh!” said Hagrid as he accepted a bucket-sized glass of wine from Fred. “Six years to the day since we met, Hero, d’you remember it?”

“Vaguely,” said Hero, grinning up at him. “Didn’t you smash down the front door, give Dudley a pig’s tail, and tell me I was a witch?”

“I forget the details,” Hagrid chortled. “All right, Ron, Hermione?”

“We’re fine,” said Hermione, her expression easy as Ron slipped an arm around her waist. “How are you?”

“Ah, not bad. Been busy, we got some newborn unicorns, I’ll show you when you get back—” Hero avoided Ron’s and Hermione’s gazes as Hagrid rumbled in his pocket. “Here you are, Hero—couldn’t think what to get you, but then I remembered this.” He pulled out a small, slightly furry drawstring pouch with a long string, evidently intended to be worn around the neck. “Mokeskin. Hide anything in there and no one but the owner can get it out. They’re rare, them.”

“Hagrid, thanks!”

“It’s nothing,” said Hagrid with a wave of a dustbin-lid-sized hand. “And there’s Charlie! Always liked him—hey! Charlie!”

Charlie approached, running his hand slightly ruefully over his new, brutally short haircut, courtesy of his mother. He was shorter than Ron, thickset, with a number of burns and scratches up his muscular arms. “Hi, Hagrid, how’s it going?”

“Been meaning to write for ages. How’s Norbert doing?”


“What—Norbert’s a girl?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Charlie.

“How can you tell?” asked Hermione.

“They’re a lot more vicious,” said Charlie. Hero tended to agree; she remembered the nesting mothers they’d gotten for the Triwizard Tournament and shuddered. Charlie looked over his shoulder and dropped his voice. “Wish Dad would hurry up and get here. Mum’s getting edgy.”

They all looked over at Mrs. Weasley. She was trying to talk to Madame Delacour while glancing repeatedly at the gate.

“I think we’d better start without Arthur,” she called to the garden at large a moment or two later. “He must have been held up at—oh!”

They all saw it at the same time: a streak of light that came flying across the yard and onto the table, where it resolved itself into a bright silver weasel, which stood on its hind legs and spoke with Mr.
Weasley’s voice. “Minister of Magic coming with me.”

The Patronus dissolved into thin air, leaving Fleur’s family peering in astonishment at the place where it had vanished.

“I shouldn’t be here,” said Lupin at once. “Hero—I’m so sorry—I’ll explain another time—”

She watched, bemused, as he quickly walked to the edge of the yard, hopped across the fence, and Disapparated. Mrs. Weasley looked just as bewildered as Hero felt.

A second later, Mr. Weasley popped into being at the gate, accompanied, of course, by Rufus Scrimgeour.

The two newcomers marched across the yard toward the garden and the lantern-lit table, where everybody sat in silence, watching them draw closer. As Scrimgeour came within range of the lantern light, Hero noted that he looked much older than the last time they had met, scraggy and grim.

“Sorry to intrude,” said Scrimgeour, as he limped to a halt before the table. “Especially as I can see that I am gate-crashing a party.” His eyes lingered for a moment on the giant Snitch cake. “Many happy returns.”

Hero raised an eyebrow and returned coolly, “Thank you, sir. It’s not every day one receives birthday wishes from no less elevated an individual than the Minister for Magic.”

“I require a private word with you,” Scrimgeour went on. “Also with Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger.”

“Us?” said Ron, sounding surprised. “Why us?”

“I shall tell you that when we are somewhere more private,” said Scrimgeour. “Is there such a place?” he demanded of Mr. Weasley.

“Yes, of course,” said Mr. Weasley, who looked nervous. “The, er, sitting room, you’d be quite welcome to use that.”

“You can lead the way,” Scrimgeour said to Ron. “There will be no need for you to accompany us, Arthur.”

They all followed Ron into the house, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanging worried glances behind them. Hero kept silent even as her mind was very busy indeed. It wouldn’t be about them dropping out of Hogwarts – frankly she doubted he’d care. Of rather more pertinence was their reason for doing so. Now, if Scrimgeour had figured that out, Hero owed him an apology for grossly underestimating him. Then again, what else could it be?”

Scrimgeour did not speak as they all passed through the messy kitchen and into the Burrow’s sitting room. Although the garden had been full of soft golden evening light, it was already dark in here. Hero flicked her wand at the oil lamps as they entered, which sparked to life, illuminating the shabby but cozy room. Scrimgeour seated himself in the sagging armchair that Mr. Weasley normally occupied, leaving Hero, Ron, and Hermione to squeeze side by side onto the sofa.

Once they had done so, Scrimgeour spoke. “I have some questions for the three of you, and I think it will be best if we do it individually. If you two”—he indicated Hero and Hermione—“could wait upstairs, I shall start with Ronald.”
Hermione’s smile was cold and rather condescending, “Surely you cannot expect me to leave my fiancé to deal with you alone.”

Hero, to her credit, didn’t even blink at this statement, though she made a note to have a very long talk with the two of them later. “Neither of us is leaving, nor shall any of us. You speak to us together or not at all, is that clear?”

“Crystal, Miss Potter, as always. Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, I had not heard of your impending union. Felicitations.” He paused for a moment, considering them. “You are aware, I expect, that I am here to discharge certain bequests from the last will and testament of Albus Dumbledore.”

“Goodness,” Hero said airily. “You came all the way for that? And here I thought one of the advantages of being Minister was that you could delegate. Of course, there remains the question of why, when the man died a month ago, those few things he wished to pass along have taken so long in being delivered to their new owners.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Hermione, before Scrimgeour could answer. “They wanted to examine whatever he’s left us. You had no right to do that!” she reprimanded fiercely, as if scolding a wayward puppy.

“I had every right,” said Scrimgeour dismissively. “The Decree for Justifiable Confiscation gives the Ministry the power to confiscate the contents of a will—”

“That law was created to stop wizards passing on Dark artifacts,” Hermione scoffed, “and the Ministry is supposed to have powerful evidence that the deceased’s possessions are illegal before seizing them! Are you telling me that you thought Dumbledore was trying to pass us something cursed?” Hero felt so proud she could burst; in Hermione’s tone was just the faintest hint of mocking.

“Do you plan to pursue a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?”

Hermione sniffed, looking away. “Certainly not. I intend to do some good in the world.”

Ron laughed and rubbed her arm, hugging her closer. Scrimgeour flicked him a glance before his gaze returned to Hero when she spoke again.

“So, I’m guessing nothing turned up then? No pretext for keeping them?”

Hermione snorted. “It’s because the one-month limit will have expired. They can’t keep objects any longer unless they can prove they’re dangerous.”

“Would you say you were close to Dumbledore, Ronald?” asked Scrimgeour, ignoring Hermione.

Ron looked startled. “Me? Not — not really . . . It was always Hero who . . .” Ron looked around at Hero and Hermione, to see Hermione giving him a stop-talking-now! sort of look, but the damage was done: Scrimgeour looked as though he had heard exactly what he had expected, and wanted, to hear. He swooped like a bird of prey upon Ron’s answer. “If you were not very close to Dumbledore, how do you account for the fact that he remembered you in his will? He made exceptionally few personal bequests. The vast majority of his possessions – his private library, his magical instruments, and other personal effects – were left to Hogwarts. Why do you think you were singled out?”

“I . . . dunno,” said Ron. “I . . . when I say we weren’t close . . . I mean, I think he liked me . . .”

“You’re being modest, Ron,” said Hermione, looking at her boyfriend with a tender expression.
“Dumbledore was very fond of you.”

Scrimgeour, however, did not seem to be listening. He put his hand inside his cloak and drew out a drawstring pouch. From it, he removed a scroll of parchment which he unrolled and read aloud.

“‘The Last Will and Testament of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore’ . . . Yes, here we are . . . ‘To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave my Deluminator, in the hope that he will remember me when he uses it.’”

Scrimgeour took from the bag an object Hero had seen before. It looked something like a silver cigarette lighter, but it had, she knew, the power to suck all light from a place, and restore it, with a simple click. Scrimgeour leaned forward and passed the Deluminator to Ron, who took it and turned it over in his fingers, looking stunned.

“That is a valuable object,” said Scrimgeour, watching Ron. “It may even be unique. Certainly, it is of Dumbledore’s own design. Why would he have left you an item so rare?”

Ron shook his head, looking bewildered.

“Dumbledore must have taught thousands of students,” Scrimgeour persevered. “Yet the only ones he remembered in his will are you three. Why is that? To what use did he think you would put his Deluminator, Mr. Weasley?”

Ron stared at it, looking thoughtful. “Put out lights, I suppose. My brothers sell this product in their jokeshop, it’s called Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. He also knew that I’ve always sort of felt like the most ordinary of all my brothers. This is way better than powder. Dumbledore always wanted us to remember that we were our own people. It really means a lot to me,” Ron said, smiling wistfully at the Deluminator.

After squinting at Ron for a moment or two, he turned back to Dumbledore’s will. “‘To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, in the hope that she will find it entertaining and instructive.’”

Scrimgeour now pulled out of the bag a small book that looked as ancient as the copy of Secrets of the Darkest Art upstairs. Its binding was stained and peeling in places. Hermione took it from Scrimgeour without a word. She held the book in her lap and gazed at it. Hero saw that the title was in runes; she never had learned to read them. As she watched, a tear splashed onto the embossed symbols.

“Why do you think Dumbledore left you that book, Miss Granger?” asked Scrimgeour.

“He . . . he knew I liked books,” said Hermione in a thick voice, her face contorting as she tried not to cry. She was rather unsuccessful, as the tears simply poured down her cheeks regardless.

“But why that particular book?”

“I don’t know. He must have thought I’d enjoy it.”

“Did you ever discuss codes, or any means of passing secret messages, with Dumbledore?”

“No, I didn’t. And if the Ministry hasn’t found any hidden codes in this book in thirty-one days, I doubt that I will.” She turned and started to cry into Ron’s shoulder. He grimaced and started rubbing her arm again, trying to soothe her.

Scrimgeour let this pass without comment, instead turning back to the will.
"’To Hero Juniper Potter,’” he read, and Hero’s insides contracted with a sudden excitement, “’I leave the Snitch she caught in her first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill.’”

As Scrimgeour pulled out the tiny, walnut-sized golden ball, its silver wings fluttered rather feebly. Hero almost felt sorry for it, pulled into all this, especially remembering that snitches were modeled on actual birds called snidgets. Still, she couldn’t help feeling a twinge of disappointment.

“Why did Dumbledore leave you this Snitch?” asked Scrimgeour.

“He understood, as well as anyone, how I’ve been struggling recently,” Hero said softly. “I think maybe he wanted to give me something to hang onto. Something to help me keep going, no matter the odds. Really, the reasons you just read out. To remind me of the rewards of perseverance and skill. He was kind, you know. Well, maybe you don’t, you didn’t get along terribly well. But he was. He was born to be a teacher, because he never could resist an opportunity to teach someone to see the value in themselves and to keep going, even when you thought all hope was lost.”

“You think this a mere symbolic keepsake, then?”

Hero glared at him with tears in her eyes. “How dare you? He was as near to me as blood! I loved him like a grandfather. There is nothing paltry about the sentiments that snitch represents,” she returned fiercely.

Scrimgeour appeared taken aback. “Forgive me for speaking out of turn, Miss Potter. Of course, you must be devastated. I merely referred to the fact that a snitch would be a very good hiding place for a small object. You know why, I’m sure?”

Hero sighed and shook her head. Hermione answered, however. Hero thought, not altogether kindly, that answering questions was such a deeply ingrained habit that she couldn’t help herself. “Because Snitches have flesh memories.”

“What?” Hero and Ron said together; both considered Hermione’s Quidditch knowledge negligible, because . . . well . . . it was.

“Correct,” said Scrimgeour. “A Snitch is not touched by bare skin before it is released, not even by the maker, who wears gloves. It carries an enchantment by which it can identify the first human to lay hands upon it, in case of a disputed capture. This Snitch” —he held up the tiny golden ball—”will remember your touch, Potter. It occurs to me that Dumbledore, who had prodigious magical skill, whatever his other faults, might have enchanted this Snitch so that it will open only for you.”

Hero’s heart was beating like a drum, loud in her ears. It seemed entirely plausible, and just like Dumbledore. She found herself smiling despite herself. And not just because taking it in her hands wouldn’t be a problem.

Scrimgeour noticed her smile; she supposed he could hardly help it. “Perhaps you already know what it contains?”

She gave him a sardonic look. “Are you suggesting that he planned his death in advance and made sure to tie up all the loose ends?” Because if you are, I haven’t been giving you nearly enough credit, she thought to herself.

“Not at all. Merely that he trusted you greatly, as a great many people know. It would not have been terribly odd for him to mention a specific object he intended to bequeath to you.”

Hero sighed again. “Well, he didn’t.” She held out her hand for the snitch. Scrimgeour dropped it
into her open palm. Nothing happened. She looked back up at Scrimgeour. “I hope you didn’t have your heart set on fireworks. Though I seem to recall Fred and George giving me some for my birthday. I might give you one if you ask nicely.”

“Well, if that’s everything, we really ought to be getting back to the party,” Hermione said, glancing out to window, where it was clear dusk had, indeed, fallen. “It’s not every day a witch comes of age, after all.”

“Not quite. Dumbledore left you another bequest, Miss Potter.”

“What is it?”

Scrimgeour did not bother to read from the will this time. “The Sword of Godric Gryffindor.”

“Where is it, then?” Hero asked, eyeing the drawstring bag which was clearly lacking a certain Goblin-forged, ruby-set sword.

“Unfortunately, the sword was not Dumbledore’s to give. It belongs to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“Hero pulled it out of the hat in her second year!” Hermione protested, glaring fiercely at the Minister.

Scrimgeour raised an eyebrow. “As, I believe, it would to any worthy Gryffindor who presented themselves in an hour of need. It is not the exclusive property of Miss Potter simply because she pulled it out a hat, even if that hat was, indeed, also once the property of Godric Gryffindor. It simply doesn’t work like that. Tell me, why do you think Dumbledore wanted you to have it?”

“Ooh, I do know this one. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but my Godfather perished last year on Ministry property, leaving me his sole heir. I haven’t really had a chance to do much with my inheritance, but I distinctly remember Dumbledore mentioning a house-warming gift. I suppose he must have thought it would like nice on my wall.” She smiled, fluttering her eyelashes at him.

“I’ll thank you, Miss Potter, not to waste my time with jokes. Do you think, perhaps, Dumbledore believed only the Sword of Gryffindor could defeat the heir of Slytherin? Did he wish to give you that sword, Potter, because he believed, as do many, that you are the one destined to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?”

Hero tilted her head, looking thoughtfully at her sparring partner. “Goodness, what a suggestion. I hesitate to ask, but has anyone at the Ministry looked into sticking a sword into him? I daresay your time might be better spent on that that stripping down Deluminators and covering up breakouts from Azkaban. But of course, who am I to tell you how to do your job?

“Tell me, Minister, is this what you’ve been doing, sitting in your office and trying to figure out the secret password to get into a snitch? If it is, my response can only be . . . shame. People are dying, sir. I was very nearly one of them. A former member of your force is dead. Alastor Moody may have been a paranoid old codger, but he gave his every breath to protect the wizarding world through his work with the Auror office. There hasn’t been a single mention of his passing in the Prophet. It’s a serious miscarriage of justice. Then again, of course, I believe we’ve established that those are your specialty.”

Ron and Hermione were staring at her in horror. Scrimgeour had leapt to his feet; his right eye was twitching.

“You go too far!”
“And you, sir, don’t go far enough. You expected me to make the Ministry look good. As I said last Christmas, I have far too many other things to do. I think you’ll find that, if you lent your forces to my cause, you’d solve your publicity problem all by yourself. I took you for a man of action. Dumbledore may not have gotten on terribly well with you, but I assure you that you had his utmost respect. Mine, you’ll find, you’ll have to earn.”

She got to her feet. “Think about what I said. We’ll talk when you’ve agreed to my terms. Do have a pleasant day, Minister, and thank you for taking the trouble to stop by.” She swanned out of the sitting room. After a moment, Ron and Hermione followed, leaving the Minister for Magic alone in the Weasley’s sitting room.

Back in the garden was a large group of anxious faces. “What did he want, then?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“To give us the things Dumbledore left us,” Hero replied. “They’ve only just released the contents of the will.”

Outside in the garden, over the dinner tables, the three objects Scrimgeour had given them were passed from hand to hand. They all ate rather hurriedly and then, after a hasty chorus of “Happy Birthday” and much gulping of cake, the party broke up. Hagrid, who was invited to the wedding the following day, but was far too bulky to sleep in the already overstretched Burrow, left to set up a tent for himself in a neighboring field.

“We’ll meet upstairs,” Hero whispered to Hermione, while they helped Mrs. Weasley restore the garden to its normal state. “After everyone’s gone to bed.”

Up in the attic room, Ron examined his Deluminator, and Hero filled Hagrid’s mokeskin purse, not with gold, but with those items he most prized, apparently worthless though some of them would seem to anyone else: the Marauder’s Map, the shard of Sirius’s enchanted mirror, and R.A.B.’s locket. She pulled the strings tight and slipped the purse around her neck, then sat holding the old Snitch and watching its wings flutter feebly.

At last, Hermione tapped on the door and tiptoed inside. “Muffliato,” she whispered, waving her wand in the direction of the stairs.

“Thought you didn’t approve of that spell?” said Ron.

“Times change,” said Hermione grimly. “Now, show us that Deluminator.”

Ron obliged at once. Holding it up in front of him, he clicked it. The solitary lamp they had lit went out at once.

“The thing is,” whispered Hermione through the dark, “we could have achieved that with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, just like you said, Ron.”

There was a small click, and the ball of light from the lamp flew back to the ceiling and illuminated them all once more.

“Still, it’s cool,” said Ron, a little defensively. “And from what they said, Dumbledore invented it himself!”

“I know, but surely he wouldn’t have singled you out in his will just to help us turn out the lights!”

“Oh, I doubt that’s all it does,” Hero murmured.
Hermione frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

Hero smiled wistfully. “Right up to his last moments, he was full of surprises. If something he
invented just had the one purpose, I’m a snidget. And I’m willing to bet anything else’ll only show
up when you really need it. Dumbledore always made sure to have backup plans. And backup
plans for those backup plans if *they* fell through.”

Hermione sighed. “We still don’t know why he gave them to us. I mean, obviously, he couldn’t
actually tell us in the will, the Ministry was bound to stick their noses in. But that still doesn’t
explain . . .”

“Why he couldn’t give us a little bit of a hint while he was alive?” Ron suggested dryly.

“Exactly. I mean, if these things are important enough to pass on right under the nose of the
Ministry, you’d think he’d have let us know why . . . unless he thought it was obvious?”

“Thought wrong, then, didn’t he?” said Ron. “I always said he was mental. Brilliant and
everything, but cracked. Leaving Hero an old snitch – what the hell was that about?”

“I’ve no idea,” said Hermione. “When Scrimgeour made you take it, Hero, I was so sure that
something was going to happen!”

A small smile slid across her lips. “Oh, ye of little faith. I was hardly going to actually try in front of
Scrimgeour, was I?”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

Hero laughed. “The snitch I caught in my first Quidditch match? Don’t you remember?”

Hermione looked simply bemused. Ron, however, gasped, pointing frantically from Hero to the
snitch and back again until he found his voice. “That was the one you nearly swallowed!”

Hero smiled. “The very same. It was kind of hard to forget nearly choking on the damn thing.”
With that, she pressed the cool metal to her lips.

It did not, to her disappointment, open. Hermione, however, cried out in excitement when she saw
the writing on it. There, in Dumbledore’s slanting cursive, were the words *I open at the close*.

“What’s it say?” Ron asked.

“I open at the close.”

He and Hermione frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

Hero frowned thoughtfully. “I think I might know.” At their blank looks, she explained. “It would
have been a subject on both our minds this past year. And I would only be able to figure out once
I’d accepted it, come to terms with it. At least enough to get the reference.”

She closed her eyes, remembering one of the poem’s she’d come across in one of Severus’s books,
“Crossing the Bar,” by Lord Tennyson. Softly, she quoted, “Sunset and evening star, and one clear
call for me! And may there be no moaning of the bar, when I put out to sea, but such a tide as
moving seems asleep, too full for sound and foam, when that which drew from out the boundless
deep turns again home. Twilight and evening bell, and after that the dark! And may there be no
sadness of farewell, when I embark; for though from out our bourne of Time and Place the flood
may bear me far, I hope to see my Pilot face to face when I have crossed the bar.”
She opened her eyes. Hermione looked like she was going to cry again; Ron looked bemused.

“It’s about dying,” Hero explained. “About the end of things, the close of all days. And maybe the opening of something else.”

“You think . . . ?”

“I think it would have taken the Ministry a very long time to chance upon the right set of words to open this snitch.” She sighed and brought the snitch up to her lips, whispering against the smooth metal, “The end is nigh.”

It broke open into two halves. Inside, by the light of the lamp, she saw a black stone, cracked in half. The stone that had been in Dumbledore’s ring.

“But, Hero, why would Dumbledore give you the stone from that ring?” Hermione asked, frowning, when Hero showed it to them.

Hero thought for a minute. “Dumbledore regretted a lot of things. And there aren’t many things in this world, I think, that would make him forget that ring was almost certainly cursed. I don’t know what it does. But I know that Dumbledore thought it was extremely important. Maybe we should be flattered he trusts us to figure it out.” She closed up the snitch again and put in the mokeskin pouch for safekeeping.

Ron sighed. “I don’t know about you guys, but I could really do with some condescendingly detailed, step-by-step instructions at the moment.” Hero couldn’t find it in herself to disagree.
Hi! Hope you're all doing well - especially those of you from Florida. Anyway, tell me what you think.

Hermione had seen to her hair. It was now flaming red as the rest of the Weasley’s, and even moderately well-behaved thanks to a few drops of Hermione’s bottle of Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion. The plan was to introduce her as just one more of the many Weasley cousins. She was going to be Cousin Beatrice. They’d done it before breakfast, then gotten dressed in their finery. It was a good thing the green dress she’d picked would go just as nicely with red hair as black.

After breakfast, she’d been sent out with Ron, Fred, and George to greet the guests and show them to their seats. A host of white-robed waiters had arrived an hour earlier, along with a golden-jacketed band, and all of these wizards were currently sitting a short distance away under a tree; she could see a blue haze of pipe smoke issuing from the spot. She scowled at the sight. She didn’t know if wizard smoke caused cancer, but she knew Muggle smoke did, which was enough of a reason for her to get her wand in a knot.

The entrance to the marquee revealed rows and rows of fragile golden chairs set on either side of a long purple carpet. The supporting poles were entwined with white and gold flowers. Fred and George had fastened an enormous bunch of golden balloons over the exact point where Bill and Fleur would shortly become husband and wife. Outside, butterflies and bees were hovering lazily over the grass and hedgerow. It was a beautiful day – you couldn’t ask for a better day to get married. It almost made all the agonies of the past week worth it. Almost.

“When I get married,” said Fred, tugging at the collar of his robes in the heat, “I won’t be bothering with any of this nonsense. You can all wear what you like, and I'll put a full Body-Bind Curse on Mum until it’s all over.”

“She wasn’t too bad this morning, considering,” said George. “Cried a bit about Percy not being here, but who wants him? Oh blimey, brace yourselves – here they come, look.”

Brightly colored figures were appearing, one by one, out of nowhere at the distant boundary of the yard. Within minutes a procession had formed, which began to snake its way up through the garden toward the marquee. Exotic flowers and bewitched birds fluttered on the witches’ hats, while precious gems glittered from many of the wizards’ cravats; a hum of excited chatter grew louder and louder, drowning the sound of the bees as the crowd approached the tent.

“Excellent, I think I see a few veela cousins,” said George, craning his neck for a better look. “They’ll need help understanding our English customs, I’ll look after them . . .”

“But not so fast, Your Holiness,” said Fred, and darting past the gaggle of middle-aged witches heading the procession, he said, “Here—permettez-moi to assister vous,” to a pair of pretty French girls, who giggled and allowed him to escort them inside. George was left to deal with the middle-aged witches and Ron took charge of Mr. Weasley’s old Ministry colleague Perkins, while a rather deaf old couple fell to Hero to escort inside.
When she came back out, she found Lupin waiting. He smiled at her, then it seemed to fall off his face. He looked like he’d seen a ghost. She frowned at him.

“What is it?”

“You . . . you look so much like your mother. Shorter than her, of course, but otherwise, I’d think she was standing right in front of me.”

“Oh. People only ever say I have her eyes.”

“Most of it’s the hair, I think. It’s normally so impossibly messy, and almost the exact shade James’s was. But that shade of red . . . it’s so Lily.”

“Thanks. That . . . that helps, somehow.”

“Budge up, you’re holding up the line, Remus,” Tonks said, her eyes crinkling as she teased him. For a second, she looked like her old self, albeit rather more restrained without her bubblegum pink hair.

“Right. Of course. I only really wanted to apologize for running out last night. The Ministry’s being rather anti-werewolf at the moment and I thought my presence would make things worse.”

“It’s alright, I understand. I don’t mind.” With a tight smile, she gestured for them to follow her to their seats. When she came back, she found Ron with a rather odd-looking wizard. Slightly cross-eyed, with shoulder-length white hair the texture of candyfloss, he wore a cap whose tassel dangled in front of his nose and robes of an eye-watering shade of egg-yolk yellow. An odd symbol, rather like a triangular eye, glistened from a golden chain around his neck.

“Xenophilius Lovegood,” he introduced himself, extending a hand to Hero, “my daughter and I live just over the hill, so kind of the good Weasleys to invite us. But I think you know my Luna?” he added to Ron.

“Yes,” said Ron. “Isn’t she with you?”

“She lingered in that charming little garden to say hello to the gnomes, such a glorious infestation! How few wizards realize just how much we can learn from the wise little gnomes – or, to give them their correct name, the *Gernumbli gardensi.*”

“Our do know a lot of excellent swear words,” said Ron, “but I think Fred and George taught them those.”

He led a party of warlocks into the marquee as Luna rushed up.

“Hello, Hero!” she said.

“No, no, they don’t want people knowing I’m here. Call me Beatrice.”

“Oh, I see. Well, the red suits you, I suppose.”

Like her father, Luna was wearing bright yellow robes, which she had accessorized with a large sunflower in her hair. Once you got over the brightness of it all, the general effect was quite pleasant. At least there were no radishes dangling from her ears.

Xenophilius, who was deep in conversation with an acquaintance, had fortunately missed the exchange between the two girls.
Bidding the wizard farewell, he turned to his daughter, who held up her finger and said, “Daddy, look, one of the gnomes actually bit me!”

“How wonderful! Gnome saliva is enormously beneficial!” said Mr. Lovegood, seizing Luna’s outstretched finger and examining the bleeding puncture marks. “Luna, my love, if you should feel any burgeoning talent today—perhaps an unexpected urge to sing opera or to declaim in Mermish—do not repress it! You may have been gifted by the Gernumbles!”

Ron, passing them in the opposite direction, let out a loud snort. Hero rolled her eyes; she knew that, particularly when Hermione wasn’t around, his tact was borderline nonexistent, but his time around Luna should have inoculated him against the abnormal.

“Ron can laugh,” Luna remarked with the serenity of someone confident in their convictions as Hero led them inside, “but my father has done a lot of research on Gernumbli magic.”

“Well, you know Ron. He’s never been terribly up-to-date on that sort of research. Or any research, really. But are you sure you don’t want to put something on that bite?”

“Oh, it’s fine,” said Luna, sucking her finger in a dreamy fashion and looking Hero up and down. “You look very pretty. I told Daddy most people would probably wear dress robes, but he believes you ought to wear sun colors to a wedding, for luck, you know.” Hero didn’t, but she didn’t really want to have a protracted debate on the subject.

As she drifted off after her father, Ron reappeared with an elderly witch clutching his arm. Her beaky nose, red-rimmed eyes, and feathery pink hat gave her the look of a bad-tempered flamingo.

“. . . and your hair’s much too long, Ronald, for a moment I thought you were Ginevra. Merlin’s beard, what is Xenophilius Lovegood wearing? He looks like an omelet. And who are you?” she barked at Hero.

“Oh yeah, Auntie Muriel, this is our cousin Beatrice.”

She snorted. “Another Weasley? You breed like gnomes. Isn’t Hero Potter here? I was hoping to meet her. I thought she was a friend of yours, Ronald, or have you merely been boasting?”

“No, she, er, couldn’t come—”

“Hmm. Made an excuse, did she? Not as feather-brained as she looks in press photographs, then.” Hero couldn’t even be bothered to take offence. She’d lived with the Dursleys, after all; and she’d read far worse than “feather-brained” in newsprint.

“I’ve just been instructing the bride on how best to wear my tiara,” she shouted at Hero. “Gobлин-made, you know, and been in my family for centuries. She’s a good-looking girl, but still—French. Well, well, find me a good seat, Ronald, I am a hundred and seven and I ought not to be on my feet too long.” Hero suppressed a snort; Dumbledore had been all of 115 when he died, and he’d been spry the whole time she’d known him. If this woman was in any way feeble, Hero would eat one of those over-decorated witches’ hats.

Ron gave Hero a meaningful look as he passed and did not reappear for some time. By the time he reappeared, having escaped the old bat’s claws, Hero had shown a dozen more people to their seats. The marquee was nearly full now, and for the first time there was no queue outside.

“Nightmare, Muriel is,” said Ron, mopping his forehead on his sleeve. “She used to come for Christmas every year, then, thank God, she took offense because Fred and George set off a Dungbomb under her chair at dinner. Dad always says she’ll have written them out of her will—like
they care, they’re going to end up richer than anyone in the family, rate they’re going . . .” he cut off, blinking rather rapidly as Hermione came hurrying toward them. “You look stunning,” he said, and Hero did not doubt he was entirely sincere. Particularly as Hermione certainly was.

“You’re sweet,” she said, smiling softly as she went to peck him on the cheek. She was wearing a floaty, lilac-colored dress with matching high heels; her hair was sleek and shiny. “Your Great-Aunt Muriel doesn’t agree, I just met her upstairs while she was giving Fleur the tiara. She said, ‘Oh dear, is this the Muggleborn?’ and then, ‘Bad posture and skinny ankles.’”

“Don’t take it personally, she’s rude to everyone,” said Ron.

“Talking about Muriel?” inquired George, reemerging from the marquee with Fred. “Yeah, she’s just told me my ears are lopsided. Old bat. I wish old Uncle Bilius was still with us, though; he was a right laugh at weddings.”

“Wasn’t he the one who saw a Grim and died twenty-four hours later?” asked Hermione.

“Well, yeah, he went a bit odd toward the end,” conceded George. “But before he went loopy he was the life and soul of the party.” said Fred. “He used to down an entire bottle of firewhisky, then run onto the dance floor, hoist up his robes, and start pulling bunches of flowers out of his—”

“Yes, he sounds a real charmer,” said Hermione; Hero couldn’t decide whether to be disgusted or amused.

“Never married, for some reason,” Ron added.

“You amaze me,” Hermione returned dryly.

They were all laughing so much that none of them noticed the latecomer, a dark-haired young man with a large, curved nose and thick black eyebrows, until he held out his invitation to Ron and said, with his eyes on Hermione, “You look wonderful.”

“Viktor!” she shrieked, and dropped her small beaded bag, which made a loud thump quite disproportionate to its size. As she scrambled, blushing, to pick it up, she said, “I didn’t know you were—goodness—it’s lovely to see—how are you?” Hero watched, fascinated. She hadn’t really meant it when she asked Hermione if she still fancied Krum. Hermione never had answered though. It might just be old-boyfriend jitters, though.

She glanced over to gauge Ron’s reaction. His ears had turned bright red again. After glancing at Krum’s invitation as if he did not believe a word of it, he said, much too loudly, “How come you’re here?”

“Fleur invited me,” said Krum, eyebrows raised. Of course she had. If he’d still been alive, she probably would have invited Cedric, especially considering Mr. Weasley and Mr. Diggory were friends, or at least worked together.

Hermione’s laugh was nervous and slightly high-pitched.

“Hello, Victor,” Hero said, smiling, hoping he’d stop paying attention to her two best friends who she really did have to have a talk with, about a great many things, it seemed.

“Hero Potter? Is that you? I barely recognize you with red hair,” he said, smiling as he leaned in to kiss her on both cheeks.

“Oh, good. It’s my disguise for the wedding.”
“Ah. I wish I had thought of something of the kind,” he glanced at where Ron was still red-faced as Hermione tried to calm him down.

“Come on,” Hero said, taking his arm, “I’ll show you to your seat.” He went with her, relief evident on his face.

As he’d predicted, his appearance caused a stir, particularly amongst the veela cousins: he was, after all, a famous Quidditch player. While people were still craning their necks to get a good look at him, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George came hurrying down the aisle.

“Time to sit down,” Fred muttered to Hero, “or we’re going to get run over by the bride.”

Hero, Ron, and Hermione took their seats in the second row behind Fred and George. Hermione looked rather pink and Ron’s ears were still scarlet. After a few moments, he muttered to Hero, “Did you see he’s grown a stupid little beard?”

Hero pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. She leaned over and whispered, “She’s with you, so give it a rest, alright?” Ron’s lips twisted, but his ears seemed to dim slightly.

A sense of jittery anticipation had filled the warm tent, the general murmuring broken by occasional spurts of excited laughter. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley strolled up the aisle, smiling and waving at relatives; Mrs. Weasley was wearing a brand-new set of amethyst-colored robes with a matching hat. A moment later Bill and Charlie stood up at the front of the marquee, both wearing dress robes, with large white roses in their buttonholes; Fred wolf-whistled causing an outbreak of giggling from the veela cousins. Then the crowd fell silent as music swelled from what seemed to be the golden balloons.

“Ooooh!” said Hermione, swiveling around in her seat to look at the entrance. A great collective sigh issued from the assembled witches and wizards as Monsieur Delacour and Fleur came walking up the aisle, Fleur gliding, Monsieur Delacour bouncing and beaming. Fleur was wearing a very simple white dress and seemed to be emitting a strong, silvery glow. While her radiance usually dimmed everyone else by comparison, today it beautified everybody it fell upon. Ginny and Gabrielle, both wearing golden dresses, looked even prettier than usual, and once Fleur had reached him, Bill did not look as though he had ever met Fenrir Greyback. Indeed, his face seemed to emit a radiance all its own, of a rather different sort.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” came a sing-song voice from the front of the marquee. Oh, Lord, Hero thought, a sinking feeling in her stomach. Sure enough, it was the same small, tufty-haired wizard who had conducted Dumbledore’s funeral. Was there a single officiant for the entire wizarding community, that they were all stuck with this fellow? “We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls.”

In the front row, Mrs. Weasley and Madame Delacour were both sobbing quietly into scraps of lace. Trumpetlike sounds from the back of the marquee told everyone that Hagrid had taken out one of his own tablecloth-sized handkerchiefs. Hermione turned and beamed at Hero; her eyes too were full of tears.

“. . . then I declare you bonded for life.”

The tufty-haired wizard waved his wand high over the heads of Bill and Fleur and a shower of silver stars fell upon them, spiraling around their now entwined figures. As Fred and George led a round of applause, the golden balloons overhead burst: birds of paradise and tiny golden bells flew and floated out of them, adding their songs and chimes to the din. It was all quite fascinating, Hero thought, as she watched, her lips parted in wonder.
“Ladies and gentlemen!” called the tufty-haired wizard. “If you would please stand up!”

They all did so, Auntie Muriel grumbling audibly; he waved his wand again. The seats on which they had been sitting rose gracefully into the air as the canvas walls of the marquee vanished, so that they stood beneath a canopy supported by golden poles, with a glorious view of the sunlit orchard and surrounding countryside. Next, a pool of molten gold spread from the center of the tent to form a gleaming dance floor; the hovering chairs grouped themselves around small, white-clothed tables, which all floated gracefully back to earth around it, and the golden-jacketed band trooped toward a podium.

“Smooth,” said Ron approvingly as the waiters popped up on all sides, some bearing silver trays of pumpkin juice, butterbeer, and firewhisky, others tottering piles of tarts and sandwiches.

“We should go and congratulate them!” said Hermione, standing on tiptoe to see the place where Bill and Fleur had vanished amid a crowd of well-wishers.

“Nah. Don’t fret, we’ll have time later,” shrugged Ron, snatching three butterbeers from a passing tray and handing one to Hero. “Hermione,” he said, offering his arm, which she took, “let’s grab a table . . . Not there! Nowhere near Muriel—” Hero and Hermione nodded, wholeheartedly in agreement.

Ron led the way across the empty dance floor, glancing left and right as he went: Hero thought he was probably keeping an eye out for Krum, which was almost as adorable as it was annoying. By the time they had reached the other side of the marquee, most of the tables were occupied. The emptiest was the one where Luna sat alone.

“All right if we join you?” asked Ron.

“Oh yes,” she said happily. “Daddy’s just gone to give Bill and Fleur our present,” she added. Hero looked away, wincing. Luna was lovely under ordinary circumstances; though Hero hated to agree with Muriel on anything, she had to admit that his outfit was an eyesore. And he’d probably be even worse than Luna about Nargles and Wrackspurts and Crumple-Horned Snorkacks.

When she glanced back, she noticed Ron had a pained look on his face and Hermione was determinedly not looking at him, wearing an overly-innocent expression. Ah, that was alright, then. Clearly, Hermione had dealt with Ron before any harm was done.

The band had begun to play. Bill and Fleur took to the dance floor first, to great applause; after a while, Mr. Weasley led Madame Delacour onto the floor, followed by Mrs. Weasley and Fleur’s father.

“I like this song,” said Luna, swaying in time to the waltz-like tune, and a few seconds later she stood up and glided onto the dance floor, where she revolved on the spot, quite alone, eyes closed and waving her arms.

“She’s great, isn’t she?” said Ron admiringly. “Always good value.”

But the smile vanished from his face at once: Viktor Krum had dropped into Luna’s vacant seat. Hermione looked pleasurably flustered, but this time Krum had not come to compliment her. With a scowl on his face he said, “Who is that man in the yellow?”

Ron scowled at him. “He’s the father of a friend of ours, actually,” he said, a vague threat in his tone. It seemed he was not about to subject Hermione to temptation, as he abruptly shot to his feet and held out a hand to his girlfriend. “Care to dance?”
She smiled and readily accepted. Hero nodded in satisfaction, rather glad it hadn’t come to bloodshed or, perish the thought, one-upmanship.

Krum frowned. “Are they together now?”

“Yeah. Good few months now. They may or may not be engaged, I haven’t got a clear answer on that yet.”

“Tell me, Hero, do you know this man Lovegood well?”

“No. Luna’s a good friend, but I only just met her father today. Why?”

“Because if he was not a guest of Fleur’s, I would duel him here and now for wearing that filthy sign on his chest,” Krum growled, scowling at Xenophilius over the top of his drink.

“Really? You’ll have to enlighten me. I’m afraid I don’t recognize it.”

“Grindelwald. It was Grindelwald’s sign.”

It took Hero a moment to place the name. “Grindelwald, the Terror of Europe? The one Dumbledore defeated?”

Krum nodded stiffly. “The very same. Grindelwald killed many people, among them my grandfather. Of course, he was never powerful in this country, they said he feared Dumbledore — and rightly, seeing how he was finished. But this”—he pointed a finger at Xenophilius—“this is his symbol, I recognized it at once: Grindelwald carved it into a wall at Durmstrang when he was a pupil there. Some idiots copied it onto their books and clothes, thinking to shock, make themselves impressive — until those of us who had lost family members to Grindelwald taught them better.”

Krum cracked his knuckles menacingly and glowered at Xenophilius. Hero wasn’t quite sure what to make of the story. On the one hand, it took a great skill at acting to portray that level of emotion, and she felt quite certain Krum, for all his talents in other areas, didn’t have it in him. On the other hand, it seemed incredibly unlikely that Luna’s father was a supporter of the Dark Arts, and nobody else in the tent seemed to have recognized the triangular, rune-like shape.

“That’s terrible, really utterly dreadful, and were Xenophilius Lovegood a supporter of Grindelwald, I would fully support you in any course of action you should decide upon. However, I think perhaps he doesn’t know what it means. He prints a magazine – bit of a rag, to be honest, there’s a lot of conspiracy theories – full of tales of creatures that don’t exist. He might have been conned and been told it was a cross-section of a head of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

“What . . . what the hell is a snorkack?”

Hero patted his arm, a kind smile on her face. “Precisely my point. I won’t lie, he seems quite mad, but a harmless sort.”

Even so, Krum took out his wand and started tapping it against his thigh, causing sparks to shoot out of the end of it. Hero sighed; as long as he stayed sitting down, it would probably be alright. Then it hit her.

“Gregorovitch!”

Krum looked at her in surprise, his tapping pausing. “What about him?”

“Oh, it’s been bugging me all week. I heard someone mention it, and I couldn’t think where I’d
heard it before, except that it had something to do with Quidditch. I’d probably have done better if I’d remembered it had something to do with the Tournament,” Hero explained.

“Ah. Yes, of course. The weighing of the wands. It hardly seems like it can have been only a few years ago. So much has happened . . .”

“God, yeah. You going to finish that?” she asked, eyeing his firewhiskey.

He pushed it over to her, then frowned. “Are you of age?”

Hero rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry yourself. I turned seventeen yesterday.” With that, she took a long swallow. “So, where is Gregorovitch these days?”

“He retired several years ago. I was one of the last to purchase a Gregorovitch wand. They are the best – although I know, of course, that you Britons set much store by Ollivander.”

Hero grimaced, murmuring bitterly, “We can’t anymore. Not since he’s been kidnapped by Voldemort.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

Hero turned it over in her mind. So, the Dark Lord was looking for a wand-maker, seeing as the British one had failed him. A foreign, retired wand-maker, who might very well have settled in a little village. It stood to reason, considering what her wand had done; she wondered if he was looking for an explanation or a better wand. Quite possible both.

“This girl is very nice-looking,” Krum said, recalling Hero to his surroundings. Krum was nodding toward Ginny, who had just joined Luna. “You know her?”

“Yeah, she’s another friend. Ron’s only sister. Look, if you’re thinking of flirting with her, try not to lead her on. Her last boyfriend currently has a boyfriend. And she got slipped a love potion. And poisoned. Long story. Look, she’s lovely. But stay away from her unless you mean it. Of course, if you mean it, by all means. She could use a bit of cheering up.”

Krum nodded, looking thoughtful. After a few moments, he got up and went over to talk to Ginny, leaving Hero nursing the glass of firewhiskey.

The cake was a right treat when it came out; the topper was two model phoenixes that took flight when the cake was cut. Bottles of champagne floated through the crowd. As the night wore on, the revelry became more and more unrestrained. Fred and George had long since disappeared into the darkness with a pair of Fleur’s cousins; Charlie, Hagrid, and a squat wizard in a purple porkpie hat were singing “Odo the Hero” in a corner. It was as painful as the last time Hero had heard it.

Wandering through the crowd, Hero spotted an old wizard sitting alone at a table. His cloud of white hair made him look rather like an aged dandelion clock. He was vaguely familiar; wracking her brains, Hero suddenly realized that this was Elphias Doge, member of the Order of the Phoenix and the writer of Dumbledore’s obituary.

“Mr. Doge, do you mind if I sit down?” she asked politely, bending down so he could hear her over the noise of the crowd and the music.

“Yes, yes, of course. Please do.”

When she sat down and he got a look at her, he started. “Lily—?”
“No, no. I’m Hero, Hero Potter.”

“Ah, of course! My dear girl . . . I thought of writing to you,” he admitted, “after Dumbledore . . . the shock . . . and for you, I am sure . . .” Doge’s tiny eyes filled with sudden tears.

“I saw the obituary you wrote for the Daily Prophet. I didn’t realize you knew Professor Dumbledore so well.”

“As well as anyone,” said Doge, dabbing his eyes with a napkin. “Certainly I knew him longest, if you don’t count Aberforth—and somehow, people never do seem to count Aberforth.” Considering the rift between them, that was probably how they preferred it, Hero reflected.

“Did you see the article about Rita Skeeter’s new book, by any chance?”

Doge’s face flooded with angry color. “Oh yes, my dear, I saw it. That woman, or vulture might be a more accurate term, positively pestered me to talk to her. I am ashamed to say that I became rather rude, called her an interfering trout, which resulted, as you may have seen, in aspersions cast upon my sanity.”

“Well, in that interview,” Hero continued, “Rita Skeeter hinted that Professor Dumbledore was involved in the Dark Arts when he was young.”

“Don’t believe a word of it!” said Doge at once. “Not a word, Hero! Let nothing tarnish your memories of Albus Dumbledore!”

She wondered if he really thought it was that simple, that you could set it up on a high shelf like a silver tea service, protected from wind and weather. Her memories were raw and exposed, bare to all the opportunistic tidbits Rita Skeeter could fling at them. Of course, she’d already known that Dumbledore was a man with darkness in him, shadows beside the light that had been the other part of his soul. He had been both. The real question that she found she could not help asking, was which side had been predominant, and how it might have influenced his actions.

It seemed he could read the uncertainty in her face, for he began, “Hero, Rita Skeeter is a—”

But he was interrupted by a shrill cackle. “Rita Skeeter? Oh, I love her, always read her!”

Hero and Doge looked up to see Auntie Muriel standing there, the plumes dancing on her hat, a goblet of champagne in her hand.

“She’s written a book about Dumbledore, you know!”

“Hello, Muriel,” said Doge. “Yes, we were just discussing—”

“You there! Give me your chair, I’m a hundred and seven!”

Another redheaded Weasley cousin jumped off his seat, looking alarmed, and Auntie Muriel swung it around with surprising strength and plopped herself down upon it between Doge and Hero.

“Hello again, Beryl, or whatever your name is,” she said to Hero. “Now, what were you saying about Rita Skeeter, Elphias? You know she’s written a biography of Dumbledore? I can’t wait to read it, I must remember to place an order at Flourish and Blotts!” Doge looked stiff and solemn at this, but Auntie Muriel drained her goblet and clicked her bony fingers at a passing waiter for a replacement. She took another large gulp of champagne, belched, and then said, “There’s no need to look like a pair of stuffed frogs! Before he became so respected and respectable and all that tosh, there were some mighty funny rumors about Albus!” Hero did not think she, in any way, resembled
a stuffed anything, even if Doge, perhaps, did.

“Ill-informed sniping,” said Doge, turning radish-colored again.

“You would say that, Elphias,” cackled Auntie Muriel. “I noticed how you skated over the sticky patches in that obituary of yours!”

“I’m sorry you think so,” said Doge, more coldly still. “I assure you I was writing from the heart.”

“Oh, we all know you worshipped Dumbledore; I daresay you’ll still think he was a saint even if it does turn out that he did away with his Squib sister!”

“Muriel!” exclaimed Doge.

Hero, at least, knew enough not to believe that. His brother never would have forgiven him if there had been murder involved.

“Who said his sister was a Squib? I thought she was ill?” Hero inquired coolly, raising an eyebrow.

“Thought wrong, then, didn’t you, Beryl!” said Auntie Muriel, looking delighted to be the center of attention. “Anyway, how could you expect to know anything about it? It all happened years and years before you were even thought of, my dear, and the truth is that those of us who were alive then never knew what really happened. That’s why I can’t wait to find out what Skeeter’s unearthed! Dumbledore kept that sister of his quiet for a long time!”

“Untrue!” wheezed Doge. “Absolutely untrue! The reason Albus never spoke about Ariana, is, I should have thought, quite clear. He was so devastated by her death—”

“Why did nobody ever see her, Elphias?” squawked Muriel. “Why did half of us never even know she existed, until they carried the coffin out of the house and held a funeral for her? Where was saintly Albus while Ariana was locked in the cellar? Off being brilliant at Hogwarts, and never mind what was going on in his own house!”

Hero glared at her. Regardless of whether or not Dumbledore himself would have agreed with her, she was not about to sit idly by while his name was dragged through the mud.

Her voice cold and hard as steel, she murmured, “Madam, I would advise you to stop there. Dumbledore, whatever his faults, faults I’m sure he would have readily admitted, was a great man. Certainly, to the vast majority of the guests here today, he was a hero unparalleled. I can only urge you to hold your tongue, if only in fear of what will be said once you yourself are gone to where you cannot defend your actions.”

“Oh, dearie, I know exactly what they’re going to say when I’m gone. The same things they say behind my back now! I’ve earned every word, and I can assure you, so did he.”

“I had no idea senility came with the added benefit of hubris. Or perhaps that’s your own personal touch. It’s a wonder no one’s devised a potion to imitate the effects.”

Muriel smiled with relish. “Oh, you want to play, do you? Albus Dumbledore, champion of muggleborns? Well, I suppose it stood to reason, didn’t it, his own mother a muggleborn, no matter how she tried to hide it. His father was a pureblood supremacist, so I don’t suppose it’s any wonder she did. All high and mighty she was, even after her husband got sent to Azkaban for attacking a bunch of muggles. Bet you didn’t know that, did you, Beryl?” she said smugly, taking a long swig of her champagne.
“Dumbledore set far more store by what a person did than their abilities or where they came from. Whatever he was, wherever he came from, his actions must be allowed to speak for themselves. And they glow, madam, they glow with proof of his convictions and his values. But what would a miserable old woman like you know about values or convictions? The only thing you seem to value is being able to make everyone around you almost as miserable as you are. The only thing holding your old bones together is pure spite. Merlin knows what dark rituals you’ve done to keep yourself in motion.”

“Clever girl. But blood will tell. Look at the Blacks. They might tell you Sirius Black was a white sheep in a black flock, but there’s Andromeda Tonks and her daughter Nymphadora to think of. They’ve always been watered down, and it carries on. Now, the Malfoys . . . an old family, and every son looks the same. Acts the same too, I don’t doubt. No Malfoy will be anything other than a political opportunist on the shadowy side of things with more money than sense. It’s the way things are, girl. And Dumbledore came from distinctly dodgy antecedents. The man the whole wizarding world knows is a lie. Not your fault he fooled you along with everyone else.”

“Unfortunately, it’s obvious you didn’t know him very well. If you did, you’d know that if he lied, he did it with every fibre of his being, every drop of his soul. He acted, in all things, as the man the wizarding world believed him to be. And at that point, can it really be called a lie? Is blood stronger than a century of being all he purported to be? Blood will tell,” Hero scoffed. “It’s the sort of argument a person makes when they know the facts of the matter are entirely against them but believe they can still win the argument anyway. I feel sorry for you; I wouldn’t want to see the world through your beady, narrow little eyes for all the tea in China.”

She swanned off in search of a better table and ran into Hermione. They found a mostly empty table, but for a few people whom Hero didn’t recognize and who barely looked up when the two girls sat down.

“I simply can’t dance anymore,” Hermione panted, slipping off one of her shoes and rubbing the sole of her foot. “Ron’s gone looking for more butterbeers. I hope he doesn’t see Ginny. She looks like she’s having the time of her life with Viktor, and I would have to be very cross with him if he did anything to ruin it.”

“Ginny wouldn’t let him. I have it on good authority that she added pockets to that bridesmaid’s dress and has her wand ready to hand. She’d hex him before he could so much as open his mouth.”

Hermione giggled and was about to reply when something large and silver came falling through the canopy over the dance floor. Graceful and gleaming, the lynx landed lightly in the middle of the astonished dancers. Heads turned, as those nearest it froze absurdly in mid-dance. Then the Patronus’s mouth opened wide and it spoke in the loud, deep, slow voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

“The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.”
Hi! Yeah, I meant to update this this morning. Things . . . happened. Anyway. Just a quick heads up, the next chapter will come with a rating change. I'd love to hear your thoughts on the chapter, so drop me a line.

For long moments that stretched into eternity, there was silence. People seemed to not quite understand the words, as if they had been spoken in a language they did not understand. Once they digested the meaning . . . then people began to scream.

Hero and Hermione launched themselves into the melee. Guests sprinted in all directions. Many lost no time in Disapparating; the protective enchantments around the Burrow had broken.

Hermione’s head whipped around, her expression desperate as she cried, “Ron! Ron, where are you?!“

Hero went cold as she saw cloaked and masked figures appear in the crowd. She heard members of the Order shouting “Protego!” on all sides.

“Ron! Ron!” Hermione called, half-sobbing as the two of them were buffeted by terrified guests.

Hero seized her hand, loathe to lose her. Spellfire flashed on all sides; offensive or defensive, from friend or foe, Hero had no idea.

And then Ron was there. He caught hold of Hermione’s free arm, and Hero immediately felt her turn on the spot; sight and sound were extinguished as darkness pressed in upon them. All she could feel was Hermione’s hand as they were squeezed through space and time, away from the Burrow, away from the descending Death Eaters, away, perhaps, from Voldemort himself . . .

“Where are we?” came Ron’s voice, tight and sounding as he was trying valiantly not to panic.

“Tottenham Court Road,” panted Hermione. “Walk, just walk, we need to find somewhere for you to change.”

They half walked, half ran up the wide dark street thronged with late-night revelers and lined with closed shops, stars twinkling serenely above them. Hero envied them. A double-decker bus rumbled by and a group of merry pub-goers ogled them as they passed; Ron was still in his dress robes, of course, Hero and Hermione still in their dresses and high heels.

“But . . . we don’t have anything to change into,” Ron pointed out, his face creased with worry. They were all still holding hands, not liking to lose each other in this crowd any more than they had in the last one.

“Don’t worry, I’ve been packed for days. I have everything we need. Just try and act natural until – this’ll do.” She led them down a side street, then into the shelter of a shadowy alleyway.

“When you say you have everything . . .” Hero began, eyeing the small beaded bag that was the only thing Hermione had on her.
To her and Ron’s great surprise, she pulled a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and the Invisibility Cloak out of it.

Ron stared at the little bag in disbelief. “How the ruddy hell—?”

“Undetectable Extension Charm. It’s tricky on this scale, but I think I’ve done it okay; anyway, I managed to fit everything we need in here.” She gave the fragile-looking bag a little shake and it echoed like a cargo hold as a number of heavy objects rolled around inside it. “Oh, damn, that’ll be the books,” she said, peering into it, “and I had them all stacked by subject . . . Oh well . . . Hero, you’d better take the Invisibility Cloak. Ron, hurry up and change . . .”

Ron scowled and started pulling off his dress robes.

“I’ve had the essentials packed for days,” she admitted. “I packed your trunk this morning, Hero . . . I just had a feeling. Cloak,” she added to Hero with a stern look; Hero threw the Cloak over her head.

“You’re amazing, you are,” Ron said appreciatively as he pulled on his jeans. Hermione blushed.

“Everyone at the wedding . . .” Hero murmured, only now beginning to comprehend what had just happened.

“We can’t afford to worry about that now,” Hermione told her firmly, stuffing Ron’s robes into the bag. “We have to focus on staying hidden, you’re the one they’re after Hero. We would only put everyone in more danger if we went back.”

“Most of the Order was there, they’ll make sure everyone’s alright,” Ron added, though he himself did not sound terribly reassured. Hero’s heart gave a pang when she thought of all the people who were as dear to her as family that they had left behind.

“Come on, I think we ought to keep moving,” said Hermione. They moved back up the side street and onto the main road again, where a group of men on the opposite side was singing and weaving across the pavement.

“Just as a matter of interest, why Tottenham Court Road?” Ron asked Hermione. She cringed as the men on the other side of the road started wolf-whistling at her.

“I’ve no idea, it just popped into my head, but I’m sure we’re safer out in the Muggle world, it’s not where they’ll expect us to be.” Ron nodded. Hermione sighed. “I do wish they’d shut up,” she muttered.

“All right, darling?” the drunkest of the men on the other pavement was yelling. “Fancy a drink? Ditch ginger and come and have a pint!”

“Let’s sit down somewhere,” Hermione said hastily as Ron opened his mouth to shout back across the road. “Look, this will do, in here!”

It was a small and shabby all-night café. A light layer of grease lay on all the Formica-topped tables, but it was at least empty. Hero slid into a booth first and Hermione sat next to her opposite Ron. She had her back to the entrance and did not like it; she glanced over her shoulder so frequently she appeared to have a twitch.

After a minute or two, Ron said, “You know, we’re not far from the Leaky Cauldron here, it’s only in Charing Cross—”
“Ron, we can’t!” said Hermione at once.

“Not to stay there, but to find out what’s going on!”

“We know what’s going on! Vol—” Hero clapped her hand over Hermione’s mouth before she could say anything more.

Hermione’s eyes went wide. She turned slightly to Hero, who took away her hand. “What? What?”

“Er, Dumbledore mentioned the first thing he would probably do once he took over the ministry would be to put a taboo on the name. They’ll be able to find anyone who uses it. Go on. Just don’t say his name.”

Hermione swallowed. “You couldn’t have told us that before?! Alright. Er . . .” She visibly pulled herself together. “Volleyball has taken over the Ministry. Really, Ron, what else do we need to know at this point?”

He scowled. “I guess. I just feel so useless.”

Hermione reached across the table and took his hand. “I know. I know.”

The gum-chewing waitress came over and they ordered two cappuccinos, in large part because she looked like she was prepared to toss them out if they were going to take up precious space without giving their patronage in return.

“We need to figure out what to do next. I think I should be able to send a Patronus with a message to the Order. After that . . . maybe we should escape to the countryside? I mean, Snape can get into Grimmauld . . .”

Hero shook her head. “I think the risk is negligible. I think Kreacher would have come and told me if the place was swarming with Death Eaters. We should be safe, and it’s better than staying out in the open.”

Hermione nodded, frowning thoughtfully.

Ron went to take a sip of his cappuccino and made a face. “God, that’s revolting.”

The waitress heard; she shot Ron a nasty look from where she was wiping down a nearby table in the stubborn hope that someone else would come in. If people knew what the coffee was like, it wasn’t really any wonder they were the only ones there.

Ron set the coffee down. “I don’t know how I feel about paying for that, but can you?”

“Yeah, I emptied my savings account before I modified my parents’ memories.” Hermione sighed. “I’ll bet all the change is at the bottom,” she said, reaching her whole arm into the little bag and searching around for the coins.

“Grimmauld is a bit of a walk. I think it’s . . . what, couple miles? It would probably take at least half an hour to get there. And I’d prefer not to make myself a target for that long,” Hero commented frankly.

“I should have enough for a cab.” Hermione bit her lip. “It might be difficult to get Hero in seeing as she’s invisible, but we should manage it.”
“Sounds like a plan.”

In the end, they paid for their coffee and went out to hail a cab. Ron opened the door for Hermione, who stalled long enough for Hero to slip inside by rummaging in her bag. Hero squished to the side in order to take up as little space as possible.

They got out, Hermione paying while Ron lingered, leaning against the open door so Hero could get back out.

The cabbie gave him a dirty look when they went to walk off. “Bad form, letting the lady pay!”

“Oi! It’s the 1990s, mate! Besides, I paid for dinner,” Ron protested. The cabbie drove off, muttering about the youth of today. Ron rolled his eyes and gave him the finger.

Hero, after making sure no one was around to see, took the Cloak off. They quickly made their way up the steps and through the front door. The interior was still in excellent shape; Kreacher had obviously been cleaning recently.

Hermione looked around curiously. “This place looks better than I expected.” Her expression became suspicious. “Much better. Hero?”

“Er . . .”

“You might as well tell them,” a familiar voice advised. Hermione spun in alarm, Ron pulled his wand out of his pocket, and Hero slowly turned to face Severus as he stepped into the hall. Her expression was a peculiar mix of sour, rueful, and affectionate.

“You could have let me explain things first.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

She glared at him, while he smirked back at her. Ron looked between them with mounting confusion and dwindling patience.

“Hero, this is the man who killed Dumbledore. What the hell is going on?”

Hero pinched the bridge of her nose with her left hand while her right flapped in Ron’s direction. “This is exactly what I meant!”

“Calm down, darling. Kreacher has the kettle on. We’ll all go down to the kitchen and have tea, and everything will be just fine.”

Hero sighed. Tea sounded beyond wonderful just then; the adrenaline rush was clearing her system, the events of the day catching up with her. “I suppose.”

“Excellent.” He glanced at Ron, who still had his wand leveled at Severus’s chest. “I’ve been your professor for six years, Weasley. I know what you’re capable of.”

“Boys, behave,” Hero warned as she swanned past, leading the way to kitchen. Severus fell into step beside her. Ron glared at his back, but shoved his wand back into his pocket. Hermione grabbed his wrist without looking at him and towed him to the kitchen.

Kreacher had tea waiting for them when they reached the kitchen. Ron and Hermione sat across from Hero and Severus, Ron’s expression wary, Hermione’s nervous.

“Hero,” Ron advised in a carefully controlled voice, “start talking.”
Hero laughed nervously. “Not really sure to begin, really.”

“I’ll start then, shall I?” Severus suggested. “I did not murder Albus Dumbledore.”

“Yes,” Ron said slowly and deliberately, his face red and his hands shaking, “you did.”

“I do not deny that Albus Dumbledore died at my hand. I would never have done it had he not insisted. Vehemently. I tried to renege on the agreement, but he would not permit me. He had a very clear idea of how the game would play out, and his death was an essential component of his plan.”

“You know he was dying already,” Hero added. “He wanted to cement Severus’s place with the Dark Lord.”

“You’re . . . you’re calling him the Dark Lord,” Hermione whispered, her eyes wide and afraid. “Only his followers ever call him that.”

“And those close to those who have to spend extended periods of time with him. It bothered Severus to hear the name. I got into the habit,” Hero explained, trying to keep her tone reasonable.

“How long, exactly, has this been a ‘habit’?” Ron demanded, glaring at her.

Hero swallowed. She’d known it was always going to come to this eventually. “I kissed him before Christmas. He kissed me the day Remus’s letter arrived.”

“You’ve been together since January?” Hermione asked tremulously. “Well . . . I suppose that explains . . . what I heard in March.”

Hero froze. After she’d composed herself sufficiently, she asked, “What exactly did you hear in March?”

Hermione ducked her head, embarrassed. “It was the day you went down to talk to Snape about your Dementor essay. You were gone so long, I . . . I worried. So . . .” she hauled in a breath, “I went to find you. And I . . . heard you . . . and him. Together. It sounded . . .” She promptly turned bright pink. So did Hero.

“Oh. Oh. I see. You never said . . .”

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I sort of figured . . . you knew what you were doing. It didn’t sound like he was taking advantage of you. And . . . you sounded happy, really happy, for the first time in, oh, ages. And I suppose I felt like you deserved that, considering everything else. I tried to forget it, honestly. And I couldn’t very well say anything after Dumbledore . . . I thought it would be too painful, to have your . . . to have seen Severus kill him right in front of you. I’d stayed quiet that long, after all. If you’d wanted to talk to me about it, I figured you would have before.”

Beside her, Ron looked like he didn’t know which way was up anymore.

Hero’s gaze was unfocused, directed somewhere on the table between her and Hermione. “Ah.”

“Wait . . . what were you doing?” Ron asked, looking like he was dreading the answer.

Hero sighed and looked up at her oldest friend. The words “deliberately obtuse” were at the forefront of her mind. “We were snogging. On the sofa.”

“You were snogging with Snape?” he asked, his nose wrinkling as if he’d gotten a whiff of a
Hero had had about enough by that point. “Yes! Yes, I was. And I know that’s a difficult concept to wrap your head around, but please, for the love of God, try! I’m not planning on dumping him anytime soon.”

“Gratifying, I’m sure,” Severus murmured, his expression sardonic even as he slid an arm around her waist. Hero, pretending not to notice, took a sip of her tea.

“I can’t believe you’re dating a Death Eater,” Ron muttered.

Hero surveyed him over the top of her teacup. “He is what he’s been for as long as I’ve known him: a spy. Which means it probably wouldn’t be a bad idea to trade information.”

Even Ron had to concede this was a good idea. Severus inclined his head and spoke.

“Draco wasn’t permitted to participate in the chase the night you left Surrey. I’m not sure how much information he’ll gather at this point; the Malfoys in general have rather fallen from the Dark Lord’s ever-ephemeral good graces. The Dark Lord has taken Malfoy Manor as his new center of operations, though, and Draco, of course, spends more time there than I. Especially considering I’ve been appointed headmaster of Hogwarts.”

Hero stared at him? “You have? How’d you manage that?”

“He trusts me as he trusts few others, even amongst the rest of his inner circle. As well, I’ve been a professor for sixteen years. The Dark Lord values education, insofar as he can put it to his own ends. He’s not such a fool as to ignore the fact that the staff and students are a volatile group requiring delicate handling. I may have killed Dumbledore, but I’m still a better choice than the Carrows, for example. One’s going to be Dark Arts professor, the other’s going to be in charge of Muggle Studies. Dumbledore intended me to take over for him. Part of his grand plan was, of course, to keep the students as safe as possible.”

Hero smiled wistfully. “Of course. Never one to leave things to chance.”

“What have you been up to?” he asked her.

“Well, Ron’s brother married Fleur today,” she said, nodding to her best friend. “A couple hours into the reception, we got the message from Kingsley that the Ministry had fallen and Scrimgeour was dead. Hermione Apparated us to Tottenham Court Road. After that, we came straight here.”

“You got away from Surrey alright?”

Hero sighed. “It didn’t exactly go off without a hitch, not that we expected it to. Dung fled. Mad-Eye’s dead. The Dark Lord came after us, but you know that already.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Which reminds me. You cursed George’s ear off!”

“Yaxley was about to cast the Killing curse at Lupin. I was aiming for his wand arm. I missed. I would hardly have harmed Weasley on purpose. Especially considering I couldn’t be sure he wasn’t you.”

“Apologize to Ron,” Hero ordered, nodding to the redhead.

“What?”

“Apologize. It’s his brother who’s missing an ear now.”
“I deeply regret the harm I caused your brother, Mr. Weasley. I dearly wish I had hit what I meant to.”

Ron nodded. “Right then. So long as you’re sorry. I suppose we’d all prefer an earless George to a dead Lupin,” he murmured, his voice gruff. Hermione squeezed his hand.

Hero cried out as a sharp pain shot through her scar. She shut her eyes tight as she tried to stay in her own head. Even so, fury pulsed through, as sudden, brief, and intense as an electric shock.

“Hero? Hero, what is it?” Hermione asked, frowning, concern bright in her eyes.

“The Dark Lord,” she gasped. “He’s angry.”

“What did you see?” Ron demanded, concern constricting his throat. “Did you see him at my place?”

“No, I just felt anger—he’s really angry—”

“But that could be at the Burrow,” Ron interrupted. “What else? Didn’t you see anything? Was he cursing someone?”

Hero glared at him, rage that wasn’t her own still infusing her. “I didn’t see anything! I just felt the anger. I don’t . . . know.”

Hermione asked in a frightened voice, “Your scar again? But I thought the connection had closed!”

Hero sighed. “It did for a while. I think it’s opening again, when he loses control.”

“But then you’ve got to close your mind!” said Hermione shrilly. “Hero, Dumbledore didn’t want you to use that connection, he wanted you to shut it down, that’s why you were supposed to use Occlumency! Otherwise You-Know-Who can plant false images in your mind, remember—”

“Miss Granger, she knows. The fact is, their connection goes beyond mere Legilimency. However, that does not mitigate the necessity of learning it,” he said firmly, turning to Hero. “We’ll start tomorrow. It’s important to make sure your head stays private. So to speak.”

Hero snorted. “I think that stopped being possible when the surgeons started poking around up there.”

“I know, darling. I know,” he said, caressing her side. Hero laid her head against his shoulder.

“Scrimgeour stopped by yesterday, to give us the things Dumbledore left us,” she murmured. “I feel a little sorry about some of the things I said to him, considering he was dead 24 hours later.”

“What did he leave you?”

“He left Ron his Deluminator, Hermione a version of something called the tales of Beedle the Bard in ancient runes, and he left me my first snitch with the stone from the Horcrux ring inside it. Also, the Sword of Gryffindor, but apparently I’m not allowed to have it.”

“You know why?”

“Not really.”

“Do you, Miss Granger?”
Hermione blinked in surprise at being addressed. Her gaze unfocused as she considered the question. Her eyes lit up as she realized. “It’s goblin-made, and Hero stabbed the basilisk through the roof of the mouth with it.”

“Precisely,” Severus said, his tone approving.

“Eh?” Ron asked, frowning in confusion.

“Goblin made armor has special properties,” Hermione explained patiently. “It doesn’t rust, it doesn’t tarnish. It imbibes only that which strengthens it. Which means it’s infused with basilisk venom.”

“And basilisk venom is one of the only ways to destroy a Horcrux,” Ron added, nodding in understanding now. “Clever.”

“Yes, the headmaster did have a clever moment or two in his life,” Severus remarked dryly. Hero elbowed him.

“Anyway, lacking the sword, we need another way to destroy them. There are still all those fangs from the basilisk down in the Chamber,” Hero added.

“The Chamber of Secrets. At Hogwarts,” Severus stated flatly.

“Yes. What about it?”

“Well, I only know two people who speak Parseltongue, and one of them can’t show up where Death Eaters can find her, and the other wouldn’t be terribly sympathetic to her plight.” He held her gaze, then sighed. “I suppose we can figure that out when it becomes necessary. For instance, when you actually have a Horcrux to destroy.”

A wicked smile slowly spread across Hero’s face. “But we do.”

“Oh?” Severus breathed, intrigued.

“Hermione?”

Hermione rummaged in her bag, finally coming up with the mokeskin pouch which contained the snitch and the locket. She handed it over. Hero opened it and drew out the golden, emerald-encrusted locket. Severus brushed the surface, reverently tracing the inlaid s with his fingertips.

“Slytherin’s mark,” he whispered.

“Yes, it’s lovely. Unfortunately, it contains a piece of volleyball’s soul.”

He handed it back, and she put it back in the pouch, which she gave back to Hermione. “Yes, that is regrettable—did you just refer to the Dark Lord who plans to raze the world to ash and build anew as volleyball?”

“I kept Hermione from saying the name on Tottenham Court Road, but she’d already said the first syllable. It only made sense to say something else that begins v-o-l instead. She said volleyball.” Hero fluttered her eyelashes at him. “I for one think it’s a brilliant idea.”

“Well, I suppose he can’t want you dead any more than he does already.”

“I knew you’d understand, dear,” Hero murmured fondly. “But you see, we do need a way to destroy it. The quicker we get rid of it, the better off we’ll be.”
Severus pursed his lips. “I could add a portal to the headmaster’s quarters. It’s a permanent linking of two areas of space, like sewing together two pieces of cloth. I must warn you, the risk of discovery is quite real. I can’t bank on maintaining my place until he’s destroyed. But . . . it would be a quick and easy way to reach each other in an emergency. What do you think?”

Hero tilted her head, considering the idea. “I rather like the idea of having you close to hand. If you fall out of favor, we probably wouldn’t stand a chance anyway. And who knows how long I’ll be around to worry about? Go ahead. Unless it bothers either of you?” she asked, glancing at Ron and Hermione.

“No, I suppose not. If need be, we can probably escape.”

Ron shrugged. “If we need to fight our way out, so be it.”

“Admirably pragmatic, if characteristically foolhardy.”

“. . . thanks?”

Hermione suddenly stared hard at Severus. “How did you get past the protective jinxes?”

His smile was thin. “Miss Granger, did you encounter any jinxes when you entered the house?”

She blinked. “. . . no.”

“No, you wouldn’t have done. I have a double mastery in Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I know how to exorcise malevolent spells. Frankly, I’m insulted that they assumed such weak protections would have been sufficient were I a loyal Death Eater.”

Hermione flushed. “Yes, sir.”

“Stop it, Severus,” Hero chided. “Hermione, he can’t give you detention anymore, you don’t have to call him sir. Don’t let him get to you. Severus, stop antagonizing her. You’re equals now.”

He rolled his eyes but said, “Yes, darling.”

Hero nodded, satisfied. “Right then. What’s our plan of action?”

“Oh, you mean you actually intend to plan? What a novelty,” Severus drawled.

Hero shrugged; she hardly had room to disagree. “To be honest, I really had something more akin to a checklist in mind. And we do plan. It’s just, I don’t think I can think of a single plan we’ve had that’s actually gone off without a hitch. We plan, we get there, all hell breaks loose. When I say plan of action, I mean an idea of where we stand and where we need to be. With lots of room for improvisation.”

“Oh, well, carry on, then, by all means.”

Hero ignored him. “Step one is destroying the Horcrux we’ve got. Step two is finding the rest of them. Step three is destroying them. Step four is destroying the Dark Lord. Simple enough.”

He stared at her, mouth open slightly. “That’s not so much a plan as your Christmas wishlist.”

“But I don’t expect Santa to hand it to me on a silver platter. Santa has never handed me anything, ever, silver platter or no. I expect to work toward them. They’re goals. Dumbledore expected us to do it, so we will. Simple.”
“I hope you aren’t deluding yourself into believing it will be easy.”

“Course not. But like I said, room for improvisation.”

“There’s nothing but room.”

“Well, there’s a little bit of a framework. I mean, there’s no justification for, say, going off to Aruba. Not that I want to, particularly.”

Ron and Hermione were staring at them as if they were a new species they had just encountered for the first time and weren’t quite sure how to quantify. Hero realized that neither one of them had had any input.

“Er, Ron, Hermione? Thoughts?”

“I really think we’re going to have to be a smidge more specific. Like, what the Horcruxes are, for instance. And where they might be,” Ron commented mildly.

“And what might be guarding them,” Hermione added.

“Well, we know he stole Hufflepuff’s Cup at the same time he stole the locket. Hogwarts was his home, he was attracted to things that once belonged to the founders. Like the ring, which was supposed to have Slytherin’s crest on it. The locket, the cup. The snake underlines the Slytherin connection. I’ve destroyed the diary. Dumbledore got rid of the ring. We have the locket here,” she said, nodding to it. “Dumbledore reckons there are six of them, which means, other than the snake and the cup, there’s one we don’t know about. Which could be anywhere.”

“What do you know about the other places he hid them?” Hermione asked.

“Er, let’s see . . . he gave the diary to the Malfoys. I think he always intended to use it to wake up the basilisk and purge the school of muggleborns. He left the ring in the shack where his mother’s family lived.”

“Where the last descendants of Salazar Slytherin lived,” Hermione corrected. “I doubt he did it for sentimental reasons.”

“Good point. The locket . . . the locket was supposed to be in that cave, but R.A.B. took it out before then. He’d been there on holiday as a kid, with the rest of the orphanage. He tortured some of the other children there. I don’t know, do you think it gave him warm fuzzies?” Hero suggested sarcastically.

“I think it would have represented one of the first uses of his magic – particularly, its use against those he considered less than himself,” Severus supplied. “It was a sign of who and what he would become: a wizard, and not just any wizard, but the terror of the new world he would be introduced to.”

“I think the only other obvious place is Hogwarts,” Ron said.

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, frowning at him.

“Well, it’s where it all comes together, isn’t it? The wizardry, the founders, even the Chamber of Secrets and where he really started to become, you know. I mean, he got his first followers when he was at school, didn’t he? It makes sense. And it was his home. Bit like you, Hero. I mean, if you were stupid enough to split your soul, where would you put it for safekeeping?”
She blinked, caught off guard. “Er... Hogwarts, I suppose.”

Ron nodded in satisfaction. “Exactly.”

“The thing, is, though,” Hermione remarked, “Hogwarts isn’t exactly a shack. It’s an enormous castle with seven floors of rooms, with towers besides. Searching it from top to bottom could take years.”

Hero exhaled in a gust, scowling. “We don’t have years. We might not even have months. Damn,” she swore fervently. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. “It’s hopeless, isn’t it?”

“Don’t give in just yet,” Severus murmured. “A lot can happen in a few months. And you’re hardly alone.”

Hero opened her eyes. “That’s a good point,” she admitted.

“Yes. Now, as it’s been a rather long night, I suggest we all get some sleep.”

They left the kitchen together, taking the stairs as a group. On the landing, they paused. After a moment, Hero grabbed Severus’s hand and led him in the direction of the spare bedrooms. Ron and Hermione watched after them.

“Is it just me, or is that really, really weird?” Ron asked.

“No, it’s not just you. Yes, it is really weird.”

“Oh, good. I was worried I was the only sane person here.”

Hermione rolled her eyes even as she tried in vain not to smile. “She’s happy. That should be all that matters.”

Ron looked at her in disbelief.

Hermione took his hand. “Come on, let’s not discuss it here.”

They made their way to Ron’s old room and sat beside each other on the bed.

“Wait a second, you knew about it. You knew about it, and you didn’t tell me.”

Hermione shrugged. “It wasn’t my secret to tell. I’m pretty sure she kept quiet about it because she was afraid of what we would think.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, she’s with the greasy git! And before you say anything, it’s not just because of that. He was horrible to her for five solid years. We all hated him, but he was harder on Hero than anyone else. What if he’s, you know... taking advantage of her, or, or abusing her, or...?”

“I know. I know. Believe me, the thought did occur to me. But I don’t think that’s what they’re like together. I think he actually cares about her. And do you really think Hero would stand for that?”

Ron frowned, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t know, Hermione. If she loved him, or thought she loved him... she might.”

“The second we see anything like that, we’ll step in. Until then, I say we give them the benefit of the doubt. Besides, wouldn’t it be nice to show Hero that she didn’t have any reason to hide it from us?”
“It’d almost be worth being nice to Snape just to see the look on his face. Besides, having him to keep her busy might just keep her from interrogating us about that little tidbit you let slip in front of Scrimgeour.”

Hermione blushed. “Sorry. I know you wanted to keep it quiet a little longer.”

“Mainly because of my mother, really. But outside anyone I’m blood related to, Hero’s the noisiest person I know. Merlin have mercy if she gets curious about you. Really, she practically is my sister.”

“Mmm, not disagreeing. I mean, I love her . . . but for someone who’s a champion liar, she really doesn’t like people keeping things from her. And I’m such a terrible liar anyway. I mean, I couldn’t even keep my mouth shut about us around her for a week!”

“Maybe that’s part of why she likes us.”

“It probably doesn’t hurt. Of course, we’ve all been best friends since the troll.”

“Thanks for that, by the way. I can’t remember if I ever did thank you for teaching me to say it right,” he murmured, brushing her hair aside and kissing up the column of her throat.

“You didn’t. As a matter of fact,” she sighed. “But I think, since you used it to save me from a troll, it evens out.” She grinned at him as he reached her jawline. “My knight in shining armor.”

“Well, daring, nerve, and chivalry.” He shrugged. “Comes with the territory. I’ll always be brave for you, though,” he said, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips. “And chivalrous.”

“Ronald Weasley, you are ridiculous in the best possible way.”
This is it. Many of you have been waiting for this since the Valentine's chapter. It was a little bit agonizing to write. I dearly hope I got it right. I really need input.

“Do you actually know where you’re going?” Severus asked mildly.

“Er, not as such. Mostly, I just wanted to give them time to process without us around.”

“An admirable goal. If you don’t mind, however, I have a suggestion.”

“Suggest away.”

“I have rooms here that were assigned to me at the beginning of the war. I haven’t used them much – I’m sure you understand why – but it might be easier to simply take them. At least for the moment, so we don’t have to wander around looking for a comfortable place to sleep.”

“Sounds great. You’re really going to let me make them my rooms as well as yours?”

“Hero, the whole house is yours,” he reminded her. “You may have any room you choose for the taking. But I take your meaning. Don’t fret; whenever you should wish to be near me, I won’t force you away if I can help it.”


The room was, as Hero supposed she should have expected, rather spartan. It was the bare bones of a room, without a single piece of decoration to speak of. Without seeming to think about it, she stepped out of her shoes.

“Does it look this way by choice?”

Severus shrugged. “Like I said, I never used it much. It was a place to sleep and little else.”

There was silence for a moment as Hero gazed around the room and Severus gazed at her. Finally, she admitted, “I missed you.”

A hint of a smile showed on his lips. “I missed you, too.”

Suddenly, she was in his arms, holding him as if she might never let go. She laid her cheek against his chest and simply inhaled.

“What are you doing?”

“I love the way you smell.”

“Ahh. Tell me, whose idea was it to make you a redhead?”

“Mine.”
“You look so much like your mother,” he whispered.

She drew back, her expression wary. “Lupin mentioned.” She simply eyed him, waiting for his reaction.

“I prefer you with black hair. I already told you, my attraction to you has nothing to do with your mother. I’d rather focus on you.” He reached up and stroked her cheek.

Hero smiled at him, more with her eyes than her mouth. She took her wand out of her pocket, touched it to her curls, and whispered, “Finite Incantatum.” The flaming red was gone in an instant, replaced by her usual raven black.

“Much better.”

“I’m glad you think so,” she said lightly, trying to keep hidden just how glad she was. From the knowing look in his eyes, she knew her success or otherwise didn’t really matter; he knew her better than that.

“Now, are you sure you want to share the room with me?”

“What do you mean?”

“There is, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, only one bed. It’s up to you, of course.”

Hero bit her lip, glancing toward the bed, lovingly made up with the covers turned back by Kreacher.

“Right. Right.” She glanced back at him. “The thing is, I don’t think I could bare to sleep alone. Would it bother you?”

“No,” he murmured, his voice rough.

“Well, then,” Hero whispered. She reached up and started unbuttoning his robes. She smiled slightly, laughter in her eyes when she looked up at him. “So many buttons.”

“And you in that lovely dress.”

She stood on tiptoe and whispered in his ear, “Yes, but mine has a zip.”

“Clever girl,” he murmured, reaching around her to slowly draw said zip down. She didn’t reply, her nimble fingers busy with the row of buttons down his front. She was undressed before he was, her dress in a puddle at her feet. Even when his waistcoat hung open, there was still his cravat and dress shirt to see to.

She snorted. “You don’t half cover up, do you?” she asked, standing on tiptoe as she worked at the knot at his throat.

“Well, when it’s woven through with shield charms, the more the better.”

“I suppose. I must admit, I rather like you in one piece.”

“Gratifying.” He squeezed her hips, caressing the indent of her waist with his thumbs.

Finally, they both stood in just their underwear. Hero hesitated.

Severus reached up to cup her cheek. “Tell me what you want.”
Hero laughed softly, then sighed. “I don’t know what I want. Well, I do, but . . .”

“We don’t have to decide anything tonight. We can just sleep; it has been a very, very long day.”

“It has, hasn’t it? That . . . that sounds nice. Oh, damn. Hermione never gave me my stuff. I don’t have any pyjamas. And I’m not about to go find her looking like this.”

“You could always . . . sleep as you are,” he suggested, looking appreciatively at the picture she presented.

“Mmm. I think I will.” She stood on tiptoe again, just brushing his lips with her own.

She stepped away and climbed into bed, Severus getting in behind her once he’d extinguished the lights with his wand. He drew her close until she was flush against him and wrapped an arm around her waist.

He kissed the back of her neck, murmuring, “Goodnight, darling.”

“Sweet dreams, dear.”

Her own weren’t. Once asleep, what protections she had managed to erect around her mind dropped.

* 

Draco watched, sick to his stomach and somehow feeling miles away, as Rowle lay under the floor, screaming and writhing. He stood in the room the Dark Lord had appropriated as his meeting room. It used to be the dining room. Whatever happened, Draco didn’t think he’d ever be able to eat in it again.

It was lit only by the light from the fire. The light fell upon Draco as he tortured Rowle and upon his supposed maser, the man who theoretically commanded them both.

The man – if he could be called that – spoke in a high, cold, merciless voice. “More, Rowle, or shall we end it and feed you to Nagini? Lord Voldemort is not sure that he will forgive this time . . . You called me back for this, to tell me that Hero Potter has escaped? That she has escaped again? She is a seventeen-year-old witch, not Harry Houdini. Draco, give Rowle another taste of our displeasure.”

Draco raised his wand, his hand trembling. Strong. He had to be strong. To pretend he was until it became the truth.

“Do it or feel my wrath yourself!”

Draco steeled himself, tried to calm the shaking that was spreading up his arm. “Crucio!” Rowle went back to writhing on the floor. A modicum of pleasure graced the Dark Lord’s features. It gave Draco the feeling of being submerged in pond scum. He suppressed a shudder, internalizing the disgust he felt. It was necessary. It was all necessary, if they were to win the war.

* 

Hero did not wake up screaming. She barely stirred. It was hardly out of the ordinary for her. After so long, it simply was. She woke feeling a little rested, but not nearly enough. There was, of course, the comfort of waking in Severus’s arms. His room had no windows, so she couldn’t be sure, but she suspected it was somewhere around sunrise.
She turned in Severus’s arms, coming to lie on her side, facing him. His face was a good deal more relaxed than it usually was. Whatever he dreamt of, it smoothed the worried furrow of his brow, the harsh set of his lips. It softened him, as he scarcely allowed himself to be while awake.

She reached up to lightly trace his cheekbones, the line of his jaw. She curled up, nestling closer, her hands against his chest, her head against his shoulder. He stirred, blinking blearily. His expression cleared when he saw her. A soft smile touched his lips.

Hero smiled back brilliantly. “Good morning. How’d you sleep?”

“Tolerably well. And you?”

“Not as well as I’d have liked,” she admitted. “But it hardly matters now. Is there anything you need to do today? Anywhere you need to be?”

“No, not yet. I think I can probably manage another day or so. And I’ll be back soon.”

“Good. That’s good.” She stretched her neck up, looking at him beseechingly. He obliged, kissing her softly. She was the one to deepen the kiss, burying on hand in his hair, reveling in the feel of it, like silk. His fingers spread, splaying across her lower back. She shivered at the sensation of those long, dexterous fingers against her bare skin.

She pulled away, starry-eyed. “You said we wouldn’t go any farther until we got to a bed. Here we are.”

“And I believe you agreed you weren’t ready. Has that changed?”

She hesitated a moment, biting her lip as she thought about it.

“It’s fine if it hasn’t—” he started to reassure her.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. I’m ready.”

The hand on her back drifted lower, coming to grip her thigh above the knee. “Tell me what feels good.”

“Mmm. I like it when you touch me.”

He leaned in, a wicked smile playing on lips a breath from her ear. “Where?”

She made a sound that was half-laugh, half-moan. “Everywhere.”

“That might take a while,” he remarked in a murmur.

She gave him a brilliant smile. “God, I hope so.”

“Do you?” he asked, his fingers ghosting up to the edge of her bra.

“Don’t stop there!” she gasped.

“Yes or no?”
“Bloody hell, yes!”

“If you’re sure . . .”

Hero huffed and rolled her eyes. “Now who’s not paying attention?!”

He suppressed a smirk and unhooked her bra. Hero wasted no time wriggling out of it and tossing it behind her.

Once she’d gotten rid of it, she pressed closer. “Don’t make me say it again,” she breathed.

He didn’t. With a reverent touch, he stroked the delicate skin of her breasts with the tips of his fingers, as if simply exploring. Even as she gloried in the sensation, at long last, of those long, potion-stained fingers, she wanted more. He hesitated a moment, then bent his head and brought one nipple to his lips, kissing it the same way he might have kissed her fingertips, delicately, courteously. And then, having tested the waters and found them to his liking, he drew it into his mouth, laving her breast.

Hero’s head fell back against the pillow as she surrendered to the onslaught of sensation. They’d never gone this far. They’d never really gone any farther than they had that day on his sofa – an interlude Hermione had heard, apparently. It was entirely new, the intensity of it a shock to her system. She was just coherent enough to acknowledge, He certainly knows what he’s doing.

He switched to the other one, treating it with the same care and attention. Hero felt as if she was floating. His eyes drifted shut as he laid his head against her chest, listening to the beating of her heart. His pressed a kiss to her sternum and sighed. Hero ran her fingers through his hair, feeling the whisper of his breath against her skin. The words were on the tip of her tongue: I love you. She didn’t say them.

Slowly, languorously, Severus began kissing down her front, mimicking her undoing of his buttons the night before. His fingers at her waist, gripping, stroking, weren’t ticklish at this point, but exquisite. She gasped as she felt his lips, his tongue, proceed down her front, past her navel.

“W-what are you doing?” Hero gasped.

His smile as he looked up at her was nothing short of wicked. “Touching you.” He returned to his task.

“I mean . . . oh . . . specifically,” she breathed, struggling to maintain a train of thought, coherence being a rather more distant consideration.

“Does it not feel good?” he asked, pausing and glancing back up at her.

“To call it good is an insult, and you know it.”

“Then why so many interruptions?”

“Well . . . what about you?”

That wicked grin was back. “I am enjoying myself excessively. Aren’t you?”

“Of course!”

“Then what’s the matter?”

She sighed, frustrated. “I want to touch you!”
“Nothing stopping you,” he told her, his tone mild.

“You don’t mind?”

“Hardly. Though, I must warn you, things may end rather quicker than perhaps you had in mind if you do.”

It seems coming as far as they had hadn’t robbed her of her sense of modesty; she blushed bright red at the implication. “Oh.”

“What’ll it be, hmm?” Her eyes drifted shut and she moaned at the feel of his voice rumbling through his chest.

“I . . . don’t really know,” she murmured, trying to gather her scattered wits. “What do you think?”

Severus sighed and shifted up the bed, laying his head against her breasts. “Perhaps I was moving too quickly. Forgetting steps. Now, I’m sure you know as well as I do that missed steps generally lead to undesirable results. Any number of things could go wrong. Especially when . . . exploring previously uncharted waters.”

Hero shivered delicately, the sound and sensation of his voice, the feel of his breath against her skin, almost more than she could bear. It seemed to have magnified tenfold from what it ordinarily did to her. There was a feeling in her stomach, almost like butterflies, but deeper. She’d felt it before, but never like this. Maybe it stood to reason; after all, here they were, practically naked in each other’s arms. If she’d have been on her feet, his voice against her skin would have made her knees buckle. In his bed, in his arms, it only engendered a hunger that had nothing to do with food.

She let out a shaky breath. “Alright. So, what’s the next step?”

“Well, when you imagined this, what happened?”

Was there really anything that could still embarrass her? Apparently so, since she blushed again. She bit her lip, deliberating. Finally, she answered. “Your hands. Everywhere.”

“Spectacular idea,” Severus remarked, his tone almost lazy as he smirked, his eyes hooded. His fingers, as lazy as his tone, began to wander south again, from the indent of her waist down the curve of her hip. They stopped at the top of her underwear. “Hmm?”

“Yes, yes!”

He worked slowly and confidently, as if they had all the time in the world and he intended to wring the pleasure out of every moment. He slid his fingers under the waistband, tugging them down. He tapped her other side. “Up.” She complied, and he slid them down and off.

His hand went back to the curve of her hip, stroking the soft, ivory skin. His fingers, feather-light, brushed over her hyper-sensitive skin, down towards the juncture of her thighs. Anticipation caught her breath in her throat. Those long, dexterous fingers smoothed over the curls there, playing with them as he stroked the skin beneath them. Hero let her head fall back against the pillow, giving up on the prospect of higher thinking for the moment.

Gently, with the greatest care, he nudged her inner thigh. She understood and acquiesced, opening her legs. She threw one over his hip and teased at the back of his leg with her toes. He chuckled, a deep rumble in her throat, and she hummed happily.

His fingers slipped between her legs, to where she was hot and wet, ready and waiting.
Her neck arched, her lips parting on a sigh. “Severus . . .”

At his touch, she opened like a flower in the sun. All the tension, all the worry, seemed to drain from her.

“Yes, darling, that’s it. I’ve got you,” he murmured as he set to massaging her swollen flesh. He kissed her, deep and lingering. She felt, for the first time in months, as if she was flying, higher and higher every second.

He pressed a kiss to the hollow of her throat as he withdrew his hand. “I think you’re ready. Do you?”

“Mmm. Severus . . .” She looked up at him through her lashes, her expression an approximation of innocence. “But what about you?” Her fingers went to the waistband of his boxers. “I think you’re overdressed.” He assisted her in removing them with all deliberate speed. That much accomplished, he smiled against the column of her throat.

In one smooth motion, he rolled on top of her and began kissing her. She lifted her other leg, wrapping them both around him. Slowly, with the utmost care, he slid inside her. At the barrier of her sex, he paused.

“This might hurt. As much flying as you’ve done, it’s possible there’s not much left of your hymen. But even though I’ll go as slowly as I can, you might still feel pain.”

She brought a hand up to his cheek, smiling softly. “I understand. Go on.”

He bent his head, kissing her as he pressed inside. She stiffened slightly, then relaxed. He waited a moment for her to adjust to the feeling. The discomfort, at least, went some way to clearing her head of the haze of pleasure.

She nodded, squeezing with her knees. “I’m good.”

He thrust into her. “You’re so beautiful, you know that? All of you. Every inch. And you’re brilliant. I don’t know how I never noticed. And you’re good. Better than I deserve.”

Hero slid her arms around his waist, pulling him closer. “Don’t say that. I wouldn’t change a thing. Don’t ever think you’re not worthy. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

As if unable to help himself, he kissed her fiercely. His thrusts got faster and Hero moaned into the kiss. They surrendered to each other, neither one losing. And finally, after what seemed an eternity, the moment arriving too soon, Hero came apart in his arms, his name on her lips. He followed soon after her, joining her in unconsciousness.

They returned to awareness slowly, as if the world faded into being around them. Hero felt safe and warm in the circle of Severus’s arms. He rolled so they were both on their sides again, face to face. He kissed the top of her head.

“Do you really think you don’t deserve me?”

He was silent for a moment. “You’re . . . young, and bright, and good. And I’m none of those things.”

“We’ve had this conversation before. I don’t want anyone else. And I don’t want you any different. You’re brave, so brave. And noble. And I promise I won’t tell anyone you’re secretly a romantic. You’re a genius. I love your sarcasm when it’s not directed at me. And you are good.
Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise, because I know better.”

“You make me a better man. You make me want to be a better man.” He glanced away from her eyes, to the stain on his left arm.

“Don’t. I know everything, and I still forgive you. Just be here, with me. Alright?”

He smiled and kissed her. “Alright. For you.”
It's a week late. I only just realized. It's a week late. I've been really worried about my family in Ireland, and my grandfather, who had a heart attack, so . . . there's that. In other news, because I write when I'm stressed, I've been thinking of starting a fic that would be a cross-over between the Harry Potter universe and Home Alone. Like, Kevin's a muggleborn who goes to Ilvermorny? It would eventually also add White Collar and a possible major breach of the International Statute of Secrecy. Tell me what you think. Cause, like, if it's crap, I don't want to waste the next two years of my life on it.

Eventually, as much as she never wanted to leave Severus’s bed and arms, her stomach had other ideas. As a particularly sharp pang made itself known, she sighed and turned to Severus.

“You ready to face the music?”

“I suppose we must.”

She sat up and got out of bed, only to realize Hermione still had her stuff. She swore creatively. Severus smiled, amused.

“There’s no need for that, surely. I quite like the way you’re dressed.”

She shot him a censorious look. “Not now.”

He got up, pressing a kiss to her throat. “Yes, darling.”

She smiled at him. “Any suggestions?”

“I could give you my shirt and keep my robes closed.”

“Tell me you’re not serious.”

“No. Put on your dress from last night and change later.”

“Right. I’m not thinking.”

“I’m flattered.”

Hero rolled her eyes, her expression fond nonetheless. “Come on. They’re probably wondering where we are.”

“Unfortunately, I suspect you’re right.”

Out of the blue, as Hermione and Ron were sitting in the drawing room, Hermione translating the Tales of Beadle the Bard, Ron reading through the copy of The Art of War Hermione had given him for his birthday, she spoke.
“I think I should go wake them up. Do you think I should go wake them up?”

“Definitely not.”

“What?”

“Hermione, there are some things that cannot be unseen.”

“What, you mean they’re . . . ? Ron!”

“What? They haven’t seen each other since, what, June? You think they’re playing chess?”

“Well . . .”

“Oh, Hermione. If I hadn’t seen you in months, my thoughts would probably be headed in the same direction. Besides, haven’t you known about them for ages?”

“I made myself not think about it. Ever. I almost forgot. It was the only way to keep from telling anyone. You . . . her . . .”

“And I’m sure she appreciates that. About as much as she won’t appreciate you barging into their room. Do you even know where it is?”

“Er . . .”

“No. No, you don’t. Leave well enough alone.”

“But what if he’s . . . kidnapped her or something?”

“Let me get this straight. You think they’ve been together for months, culminating in this one moment, just so he can kidnap her? Don’t you think Hero knows better than that?”

“You’re telling me you trust Snape?”

“You’re telling me you don’t trust Hero?”

“I suppose . . . when you put it like that . . .”

“Exactly.” He went back to his book.

Hermione tried to go back to her translation. A few minutes later, after only getting through a single line, she turned back to her fiancé.

“But why aren’t you worried?”

Ron sighed and looked up from his book. “The strategy doesn’t make sense, for one thing.”

Hermione frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, look at it this way. She’s been in his rooms. They’ve been, you know, close. For months. It’s pretty damn hard to lie to someone for that long and not let anything slip. And Hero’s smart. He knows that. It’s too risky. Besides, the whole idea of having Snape kill him when he was already dying stinks of Dumbledore.”

“You think?”

“It’s just the sort of convoluted, stupidly complex, intricately orchestrated type of thing he played
with all the time. I mean, think about all the things we had to get past our first year, then the mirror, which was set up in a way that sort of made everything else pointless. He took Lupin on staff, but it was probably at least partly because he knew he could trust Snape to protect us if Lupin did lose control. We don’t even have any idea of all the plans he put in motion with the Order. Where most people saw a straight line, he saw a maze.” Ron shrugged. “To be honest, I’d have loved to play chess with him, just to watch him work.

“Look, he knew he was dying. We knew he was dying. He never was the sort of man to let an opportunity pass him by. And besides all that, Hero trusts him. We have to trust her judgement, in this as much as anything.”

Hermione was looking at him strangely. “What? Have I got dirt on my nose again?” He started to rub at it, looking honestly worried.

“You’ve grown up.” She looked down, smiling faintly. “I’d hoped you had, but I wasn’t sure. I think I only just now realized how lucky I am to have you.”

Ron turned red. “Naw. I’m lucky to have you. Everyone knows it. It’s . . . it’s bloody obvious. You’re out of my league, and you always have been. And someday you’re going to realize it, and suddenly I won’t be so lucky anymore.”

“Oh, Ron. They only think that because they don’t know you. I know that . . . you’re everything I would have asked for if I’d known myself well enough to know what I needed. I need you, Ron. And every day, I’m more glad that I said yes.”

Ron was staring at her, speechless, his book forgotten in his lap. “You . . . you . . . oh, come here,” he said tossing his book aside. Hermione hurled herself into his arms, throwing hers around his neck.

“I love you,” she whispered, staring into his eyes.

He grinned. “I love you, too.” He kissed her, and that was how Hero and Severus found them when they came downstairs. They sprang apart, both blushing fiercely. A slow smile spread across Hero’s face and her eyes started to glint.

“Don’t stop on our account. After all, you’re engaged. Why shouldn’t you indulge?”

Ron swallowed, his gaze apprehensive. Hermione spoke up. “Hero, w-we were going to tell you, really, it’s just . . .”

Hero nodded. “No, of course, I understand. You didn’t mean to blurt it out in front of the Minister for Magic. These things happen.”

Hermione visibly relaxed. “Oh. Oh, thank God. I was so worried—”

“These things happen,” Hero repeated, interrupting her. “Like how I just might tease you about this for the next six months.”

“Aw, Hero,” Ron groaned.

Hero grinned brightly. “What are friends for?”

“Hero, leave them alone. Didn’t you want breakfast?”

“Oh, right. Yeah.” They wandered out of the drawing room, heading toward the kitchen.
Ron and Hermione exchanged glances.

“Do you think we should follow them?” Hermione asked.

Ron wrinkled his nose. “Probably. They might find a clue and swan off to Merlin knows where without us if we don’t.”

Kreacher was waiting in the kitchen, an earnest expression on his face. He bowed low. “Mistress Potter, good morning.” There was the slightest hesitation before he added, pivoting in their direction, “Mistress Potter’s friends.”

Hermione looked as if it was one of those rare occasions when words failed her. She glanced at Hero, her eyes imploring her for an explanation. Hero ignored her.

“Kreacher, would it be possible for you to make breakfast, or would it be better if I handled it?”

The elf looked vaguely insulted. “Mistress shall allow Kreacher serve. It is unseemly for the mistress of the house to sully herself with cooking.”

“Er . . . right. Thanks.”

“Is Mistress wishful of anything particular?”

“Oh, no, don’t trouble yourself. Whatever’s on hand is fine. We do have food – eggs, and bacon, and sausages, and the like . . . don’t we?”

Kreacher began wringing his hands in his tea towel. “No, Mistress. Kreacher has not liked to leave the house. It would be unseemly for an elf to be seen in public outside the company of a witch or wizard. Kreacher also has no money.”

“Oh, Kreacher . . .” Hermione murmured, looking distraught.

“Kreacher, I . . .” Hero paused. Apologizing would only upset him. She swallowed and tried a different tack. “For the foreseeable future, it’s probably going be impractical for one of us to go with you. Would it make any difference if I authorize you to make purchases and go out alone?”

Kreacher stared at her, looking at her with awe in his old, bloodshot eyes. “Mistress would . . . trust Kreacher to handle her affairs?”

“Of course. Your gift to me for Christmas proved just how valuable you are,” Hero told him kindly. “And actually, that’s something I’d like to talk to you about.” Her stomach growled. “Er, after breakfast.”

They gave Krecher a bit of money and sent him off. He popped back with bread, milk, eggs, sausages, bacon, and apples. He presented them for Hero to inspect. Soon after, breakfast was crackling cheerily in the pan. It didn’t take long for before Kreacher was putting the plates on the table and gesturing for them all to sit. Hero wolfed half of hers down before she thought about talking.

“Kreacher,” she began, her mouth full. She blushed and swallowed. “Sorry, sorry. So, Kreacher, the thing is, we’d really like to hear more about the locket. And . . . and about Regulus. Do you think you could tell us?”
Kreacher bowed his head and spoke. “Master Sirius ran away, good riddance, for he was a bad boy and broke my Mistress’s heart with his lawless ways. But Master Regulus had proper pride; he knew what was due to the name of Black and the dignity of his pure blood, as Mistress Potter does. For years he talked of the Dark Lord, who was going to bring the wizards out of hiding to rule the Muggles and the Muggleborns . . . and when he was sixteen years old, Master Regulus joined the Dark Lord. So proud, so proud, so happy to serve . . .” Severus was looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“And one day, a year after he had joined, Master Regulus came down to the kitchen to see Kreacher. Master Regulus always liked Kreacher. And Master Regulus said . . . he said . . .

Kreacher started to shake, tremors wracking his small, emaciated frame.

“. . . he said the Dark Lord required an elf.”

Hermione frowned. “An elf?”

“Master Regulus had volunteered Kreacher. It was an honor, said Master Regulus, an honor for him and for Kreacher, who must be sure to do whatever the Dark Lord ordered him to do . . . and then to come home.” His breath began to come in sobs.

“So Kreacher went to the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord did not tell Kreacher what they were to do, but took Kreacher with him to a cave beside the sea. And beyond the cave there was a cavern, and in the cavern, was a great black lake . . .”

Memory returned to Hero, as sharp and visceral as the moment it had been made; the hairs on her arms stood up. Kreacher’s voice seemed to come to her across the expanse of that black water.

“. . . there was a boat.”

Of course there had been a boat – so small as to carry only one wizard and one victim to the island in the center of the lake.

This, then, was how Voldemort had tested the defenses surrounding the Horcrux: by borrowing a disposable creature, a house-elf . . .

“There was a b-basin full of potion on the island. The D-Dark Lord made Kreacher drink it . . .”

The elf quaked from head to foot.

“Kreacher drank, and as he drank, he saw terrible things . . . Kreacher’s insides burned . . . Kreacher cried for Master Regulus to save him, he cried for his Mistress Black, but the Dark Lord only laughed . . . He made Kreacher drink all the potion . . . He dropped a locket into the empty basin . . . He filled it with more potion. “And then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher on the island . . .”

Hero felt as though she was no longer in the kitchen of no. 12 Grimmauld Place, but instead back in the cave, watching as the Dark Lord fed the deathly potion to the elf, those re eyes fixes pitilessly on the thrashing elf whose death would occur within minutes, whenever he succumbed to the desperate thirst that the burning potion caused in its victims . . . Yet here, the image stuttered to a stop, like the end of a roll of film. Kreacher was right here in front of her. Clearly, his death had not occurred. But . . . how?

“Kreacher needed water, he crawled to the island’s edge and he drank from the black lake . . . and hands, dead hands, came out of the water and dragged Kreacher under the surface . . .”
Hero stared at him with baited breath, caught up in it like any thriller in the cinema. “But,” she whispered, “how did you get away?”

Kreacher raised his head and looked at Hero with his great, bloodshot eyes. “Master Regulus ordered Kreacher to come home.”

“I know — but how did you escape the Inferi?”

Kreacher did not seem to understand. “Master Regulus ordered Kreacher to come home,” he repeated.

“Come on, mate,” Ron cut in, looking at Hero as if she was being thick. “Isn’t it obvious? He Disapparated.”

Hero shook her head stubbornly. “You couldn’t Apparate in or out of that cave, otherwise Dumbledore—”

“Elf magic isn’t like wizard’s magic, is it?” said Ron. “I mean, they can Apparate and Disapparate in and out of Hogwarts when we can’t.”

There was silence as they all digested this. It was blindingly obvious, right in front of their noses. How could Voldemort have made such a mistake? How could Hero have made such a mistake? If she’d remembered that, she wouldn’t have had to get the water from the cave, and they wouldn’t have had to face the inferi. Not that it would have made much difference, considering.

Hermione spoke, her voice was icy. “Of course, Voldemort would have considered the ways of house elves far beneath his notice, just like all the purebloods who treat them like animals . . . It would never have occurred to him that they might have magic that he didn’t.”

“The house elf’s highest law is his Master’s bidding,” intoned Kreacher. “Kreacher was told to come home, so Kreacher came home . . .”

“Well, then, you did what you were told, didn’t you?” said Hermione kindly. “You didn’t disobey orders at all!”

But Kreacher shook his head, still shaking.

“What happened next?” Hero asked him gently.

“Master Regulus was very worried, very worried,” croaked Kreacher. “Master Regulus told Kreacher to stay hidden and not to leave the house. And then . . . it was a little while later . . . Master Regulus came to find Kreacher in his cupboard one night, and Master Regulus was strange, not as he usually was, disturbed in his mind, Kreacher could tell . . . and he asked Kreacher to take him to the cave, the cave where Kreacher had gone with the Dark Lord . . .”

After all, Kreacher had known of the payment required for entry, of the tiny boat and how to raise it, of the stone basin in the center of the lake . . . And so, Kreacher went to that place a second time, this time not with the Dark Lord but with his beloved Master Regulus.

“And . . . and he had you drink the potion?” Hero asked, trying, for Kreacher’s sake, not to sound as repulsed as she felt. But he shook his head again, sobbing harder than ever. Hermione raised a trembling hand to her mouth, a look of horrified understanding gracing her face.

“M-Master Regulus took from his pocket a locket like the one the Dark Lord had,” said Kreacher, tears pouring down either side of his snout-like nose. “And he told Kreacher to take it and, when the
basin was empty, to switch the lockets . . .” Kreacher’s sobs came in great rasps now; Hero had to concentrate hard to understand him.

“And he ordered—Kreacher to leave—without him. And he told Kreacher—to go home—and never to tell my Mistress—what he had done— but to destroy—the first locket. And he drank—all the potion—and Kreacher swapped the lockets—and watched . . . as Master Regulus . . . was dragged beneath the water . . . and . . .”

“Oh, Kreacher!” wailed Hermione, who was crying by that point. She dropped to her knees beside the elf and hugged him. He looked as if he wasn’t sure what do in the situation and was already fairly certain he didn’t like it. He looked up at Hero with a look that said, *Mistress, please make her stop.* Hero got out of her chair, coming to kneel next to Hermione, and put a hand on the other girl’s shoulder.

“Er, Hermione, I don’t think Kreacher likes to be touched. So maybe if you could . . . not?”

Hermione nodded, getting up and wiping the tears from her face with the heels of her hands. She sat back down and Ron slipped an arm around her shoulders, rubbing soothingly. Hero slowly moved back to her own chair.

“You tried to destroy it?”

“Nothing Kreacher did made any mark upon it,” moaned the elf. “Kreacher tried everything, everything he knew, but nothing, nothing would work . . . So many powerful spells upon the casing, Kreacher was sure the way to destroy it was to get inside it, but it would not open . . . Kreacher punished himself, he tried again, he punished himself, he tried again. Kreacher failed to obey orders, Kreacher could not destroy the locket! And his Mistress was mad with grief, because Master Regulus had disappeared, and Kreacher could not tell her what had happened, no, because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him to tell any of the f-f-family what happened in the c-cave . . .”

He was sniffing, green snot dripping from his nose, his eyes redder than ever. It was ugly crying at a level not even Dudley could have aspired to, but Hero couldn’t help but think, *Poor dear.*

She was tempted to offer him a seat, but she remembered how well that had gone with Dobby and refrained.

It was several minutes before Kreacher hiccupped himself into silence. He sighed and sat on the floor, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes like a small child.

“Kreacher, I have some good news for you,” Hero told him, her voice kind.

He looked up at her, frowning. “Mistress?”

“We know how to destroy the locket. We need to get a few things, and then we’ll be able to. And Kreacher, I think it’s only right that you do it, to fulfill your orders from Master Regulus.”

He stared at her, his eyes shining with tears again, his lip quivering. Oh, God, what had she done now?

“M-m-mistress is good, and noble. Kreacher is sorry he did not wish to pass to her, for she is the greatest Mistress a house elf could wish.” With that, he started to kiss her feet.

“Oh, no, Kreacher, really, you don’t have to,” she told him quickly, but he seemed honor bound. She endured it. “Yes, thank you,” she said when he had finished and was once again staring up at her with eyes aglow. Ron was chortling. Hermione was trying not to look too appalled, which Hero
appreciated. She didn’t dare turn to look behind her at Severus.

Kreacher got to his feet and bowed low. He straightened (as much as he was capable of), and said, in what was almost a cheerful tone, at least considered relatively, “Kreacher will be cleaning the house for Mistress and her friends.” He bowed again and disappeared with the typical crack of Apparition.

With him out of the room, Hero felt as if she had recovered enough from her humiliation to face them. Ron was trying valiantly not to grin.

“I stand by what I said at Christmas. He definitely doesn’t hate you.”

“We certainly know we have the right R.A.B.,” Hermione added. “Have people really been wondering what happened to him since he disappeared?”

“Oh, yes,” Severus intoned. Hermione blinked, having almost forgotten he was there. “We all assumed he had displeased the Dark Lord in some way, but none of us had any idea what he had done. And it does no good to ask after those he disposes of. Half the time, he doesn’t even remember. Regulus was only in his service two years and did little to distinguish himself. He realized not long after he received the Dark Mark that it was nothing like the grand crusade he had been raised to believe it was.

“I knew him in school, I remember him. He was an idiot about it, but then we all were. Blind fools, in love with the idea of destroying the world and remaking it in our own image. We were too focused on our own imagined glory to see that we were all expendable. We had faith in the Dark Lord, believing that he would bring us what we thought we deserved. We were too idealistic to understand that he didn’t care, not really. His name should have told us all we needed to know. It’s French, because he always was a pretentious fuck with delusions of grandeur. It means flight from death. He didn’t care about blood purity – well, he wouldn’t, when he’s a half-blood, himself. He only cared about immortality. That certainly hasn’t changed in the intervening years. If anything, his mad obsession has further consumed him.”

“But Regulus?” Hero prompted softly, her hand alighting on his forearm.

The corner of his mouth quirked, and somehow it looked nothing like a smile. “Regulus Arcturus Black. He was a seeker on the Slytherin team. Small, dark. Quiet, kept to himself, mostly. He was a decent enough student; he was a member of the Slug Club with Lily and me. He was the favorite child. Raised to the Dark Arts practically from the womb. He adhered to the family traditions as firmly as his mother’s portrait adheres to that wall. They coddled him, and from the moment he joined the Death Eaters at sixteen, he was in over his head. It was perhaps to his credit that he quickly realized it. Most of us thought he must have tried to run away and been discovered. It would seem, however, that he discovered courage and conscience after all.” Severus smiled darkly. “In time for them to be the death of him.”

They were quiet, then, digesting this. It was Hermione who finally broke the silence.

“What do we do now?” she asked in a small voice.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? We keep going. In memory of Regulus, and Dumbledore, and my uncles, and Hero’s parents, and Sirius, and Mad-Eye, and Madam Bones, and Hannah Abbott’s mother, and everyone else who’s dead because of that bastard,” Ron said firmly.

Severus’s dark eyes glinted with approval. “Well said, Mr. Weasley.”
Hello, everyone. Thank you for the kind words about my grandfather - he's stable now, but they expect him to stay in hospital for another few weeks. No one wants to read a Harry Potter Home Alone crossover? Really? You're no fun. But, be that as it may, here's another chapter.

Hermione brought out the mokeskin pouch from her beaded bag. She handed it to Hero, who took out the locket.

“The question is, what do we do with it until we can destroy it?” Hermione prompted.

“Well, I mean, it’s a necklace. We could wear it,” Ron suggested.

“Weasley, my already mediocre estimation of your intelligence just dropped.”

Ron looked like he was trying to muster the energy to be insulted, but he was simply too used to it. Instead he asked in a resigned tone, “Why?”

“Any Horcrux is a powerful artifact of dark magic. It was made involving death, among other despicable acts. This, more than just a piece of a dark wizard’s soul, contains the Dark Lord’s soul. It contains a fragment of that most elemental part of him. And you want to hang it around your neck.”

“Well, what else are we supposed to do with it?”

“We can’t put it back in the cupboard,” was Hero’s contribution. “It was stolen while it was lying around the house. It needs to be somewhere for safekeeping.”

“Why not keep it in that bag of Miss Granger’s? Tricky bit of spellwork, Granger. Nicely done.”

“Thank you. And wouldn’t it be the first place anyone would look if they wanted something valuable?”

Severus snorted. “You’re not exactly going to be mugged. And really, it took you ten minutes to dig that out. How much bigger did you make it?”

Hermione blushed. “Er, well, quite a bit, really. I’m not entirely sure how much extra space is in there, but I imagine, even with everything else in there, the four of us could squeeze into it with room to spare.”

Ron turned to stare at her, his mouth hanging open slightly. “The four of us?” he asked flatly.

“Well, yes. I mean, the tents we had for the Quidditch world cup looked tiny, but they were quite spacious inside. It’s the same idea, the same area of magic. Bigger on the inside.”

“So it’s unlikely that they would find what they were looking for. And even if they did, Hero’s been keeping it in a bag made out of mokeskin, yes?”
“Yes,” Hero confirmed. “And?”

“Surely it’s been explained to you, by Miss Granger if no one else, that such pouches will only open for their owner?”

Hero blinked. “I hadn’t thought of that. That’s quite good.”

“Yes. And it keeps any of you from experiencing direct skin contact with the item in question. I’m sure we all agree that’s best avoided.”

They stared at it, not needing to speak to know that they were in agreement on that point.

“Okay . . . so what do we do now?” Ron asked.

“We search the house,” Hero decided. “The Order was in a rush to get out of here, they might have left things behind. And this is where Regulus Black lived. I for one want to get to know him a little better.”

“I think we should split up and meet at dinner to discuss what we’ve found,” Hermione proposed.

“Capital idea. Everyone got a watch?” Hero asked. They did, and so they went their separate ways to inspect their new residence.

As she had suspected, Regulus’s room was across the hall from Sirius’s. Posted on the door was a sign. “Do Not Enter Without the Express Permission of Regulus Arcturus Black.” It was written in an elegant, calligraphic hand. Arcturus; the A stood for Arcturus. It was probably a family name. Her breath still in her chest, she pushed the door open.

Like the rest of the house, it retained a sense of grandeur, now faded. Emerald and silver were everywhere, as if Regulus had wanted to remind everyone who set foot in his room that he was the good child, the child who dutifully followed the family traditions. Hero suspected his parents had not needed any reminding. It was the choice of someone insecure with their position. From the impression she’d gotten from Sirius and Remus, there was nothing their beloved second-born could have done to lose their favor – barring, perhaps, what he had. Even then, he was their last resort, since they’d disavowed Sirius.

Maybe she was wrong; maybe he’d taken pride in being in Slytherin. Maybe he had loved it so much, he’d assumed it as the greater part of his identity. Except it seemed a bit extreme. She couldn’t help but feel he wouldn’t have plastered his room with Slytherin banners unless he felt like he had something to prove. This impression was reinforced by the words painted on the wall above the bed, the Black family motto: “Toujours Pur.” Underneath it were yellowed newspaper clippings.

She approached, until she was inches away from them, to read them. She scanned them and realized they were all about Voldemort. As she sat down, a puff of dust rose from the emerald bed covers. There wasn’t much she could glean from them, other than that he’d been a fan for a few years before he’d joined up. She got up to inspect the rest of the room, rummaging through the drawers, searching through the photographs. The drawers proved boring – quills, old textbooks, a bottle of ink that hadn’t been opened in probably at least the last sixteen years, covered in dust. There was a photo of him as the Seeker on the Slytherin team. There wasn’t much to go on, really.

Frustrated and disappointed, she wandered out, finding herself facing the door to the room Sirius had shared with Remus. She’d seen it out of the corner of her eye coming up, enough to know that she was in the right part of the house for Regulus’s room. Now, she found herself staring at it. She’d distracted herself so well, she’d forgotten, and now to be reminded felt like a punch to the gut,
knocking the wind out of her. She braced herself against the side of the doorway, wrapping an arm around her middle, her eyelids sliding shut. She needed to breathe, just breathe. In and out. To forget everything else.

Maybe it had been a mistake to come here. She’d been repressing all memory of him all year. Over a year. It had been over a year since his death. A year and forty-five days. All that time, and it felt as fresh and raw as the days and weeks that followed. They’d never even had a memorial service, she realized. They couldn’t really have had a funeral seeing as there hadn’t been a body, but they could have had a memorial service, couldn’t they? Or maybe it wasn’t done in the wizarding world. She’d never asked, no one had ever mentioned. And now he was just one of so many, far, far too many. There wasn’t time to have a memorial service, and it wasn’t safe for people to gather. It wasn’t safe for them to be in contact with anyone.

The pain came as if it had never left. It burned in her lungs and her eyes. It felt like someone had ripped her heart out of his chest. Despite her best intentions, she found herself gasping for breath. Tears streamed from under her closed lids, as if the floodgates had been opened. She didn’t have enough air to sob.

She’d loved Sirius, even though she hadn’t really spent much time with him. More than just a tie to her parents, he’d been the closest thing she had to a parent. He’d advised her. He’d cared about her, and it had been such a novelty. She missed him, God she missed him. She’d tried so hard not to remember, to pretend she’d never met him. Only now, in his house, opposite his room, she couldn’t. She wasn’t better; she’d just refused to deal with it. That was no longer an option, and it was tearing her apart.

I’ll be dead soon, and then I’ll see him again. The thought didn’t help. If anything, it made it worse. She was beginning to choke on her tears now. She couldn’t breathe; she couldn’t breathe. Panic clouded her mind. She forced her eyes open, to find black spots eating away at her vision.

Suddenly, somewhere beyond the fog, she felt a hand on her shoulder. It startled her, bringing her some of the way back to reality. She turned to find Severus standing next to her.

“Hero, what’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“She-s-sirius,” she got out, her breath hitching, tremors wracking her chest, starting at her diaphragm. “H-his r-room.”

He enfolded her against his chest. “Oh, darling,” he whispered, resting his cheek against the crown of her head. Hero simply allowed herself to be held, to be comforted. It wasn’t lost on her that this was a man whom her godfather had hated and had been hated by in return. She just didn’t care. Couldn’t care. In Severus’s arms, her breathing finally began to ease as she calmed down.

Gradually, she became aware of him murmuring, “Shh, shh,” as he stroked her back. She pressed closer, taking deep slow breaths. She inhaled the scent of him, feeling her heart rate slow.

“Sev,” she whispered, nuzzling her cheek against his chest.

He gazed down at her, his eyes concerned. “What happened?”

“I-I saw his room, and, and I just . . . I couldn’t handle it.” She looked up at him. “It . . . hurts. I didn’t expect it to, not so much, not still. But it does. God, it does. And I miss him.”

It occurred to Severus that Black could have given her things he himself could not provide, and it rankled. Of course, he knew that one person could not be all things to anyone, that it wouldn’t be
healthy even if it were possible. But he still felt the prickling of jealousy. Never mind that it was a completely different relationship, that he didn’t even really have anything or anyone to be jealous of. It didn’t matter in helping him not feel it. He had more than enough self-control to keep it from Hero, however. She didn’t need anything else upsetting her, especially not anything else related to Black. His history with Black – not to mention the other Marauders – most definitely fell under that category.

“I know. There are times I wake up and still think I can owl my mother. Worse are the days I wake up and think that today will be the day I convince your mother to forgive me. It never really goes away. You need closure.”

“Closure?”

“You need to say goodbye.”

“How?” she asked, her voice cracking.

Severus nodded to the door across the hall that had set her off in the first place. “You have to face it.”

She glanced over at the door. “I don’t know if I can.”

“I’ll be here. Go on.”

Hero nodded and swallowed, gathering her courage. She walked the few steps across the landing and turned the handle of the door. It swung inward.

It wasn’t as dusty as Regulus’s room, which it seemed Kreacher had not been able to bring himself to disturb. Sirius’s room hadn’t been touched since June of ’96, Hero suspected for a rather different reason. It was like a museum exhibit; his space, as he had put it together, perfectly preserved. Well, his and Remus’s, because his touch was present as well. The wardrobe hung open, Sirius’s clothes in one half, Remus’s in the other. Their shoes sat on the bottom, neatly arranged. A slight smile touched her lips; Remus’s handiwork, she was sure.

The bed was unmade; there was a book lying open, facedown, on the bedside table. On closer inspection, she found it was *Finnegan’s Wake* by James Joyce. It was covered in a thin layer of dust, as everything else in the room was. She thought it was probably Remus’s, which meant he hadn’t been able to face the room to come back for it. Of course, he could have just bought a new one. But some intuition told her he wouldn’t have. He hadn’t come back for his clothes, either, and it wasn’t like he had the means to afford an entirely new wardrobe.

She wondered how far he’d gotten. If he’d broken down at the sight of the door, as she had. If he’d been able to so much as set foot on that floor, in the house at all. Sirius’s death had destroyed him, she knew. There was only one man with the power to put him back together, and his absence was the reason for the detonation.

Remus didn’t deserve this, to have all the things that made his life worth living systematically stripped away. He was good, and kind, and honest. And the world didn’t care. It didn’t care that, for all he was a werewolf, he was a man the rest of the month. It didn’t care that the man he’d loved, whose reputation had been ruined without so much as a trial, had been innocent and was now dead. Of course they didn’t care. What did it matter to them?

She sighed heavily and began to search through the room, as if excavating a long-forgotten tomb. The walls were covered in silver silk. Photos were hung here and there. One was of the four
Marauders, younger than Hero was now. Others were, perhaps predictably, of motorcycles. Where in Regulus’s room, there had been banners in silver and emerald, here it was scarlet and gold draped around the room.

There was a bookshelf, papers lying on top of the books. One was a letter, over two pages.

Dear Padfoot,

Thank you, thank you, for Hero’s birthday present! It was her favorite by far. One year old and already zooming along on a toy broomstick, she looked so pleased with herself; I’m enclosing a picture so you can see. You know it only rises about two feet off the ground, but she nearly killed the cat and she smashed a horrible vase Petunia sent me for Christmas (no complaints there). Of course, James thought it was so funny, says she’s going to be a great Quidditch player, but we’ve had to pack away all the ornaments and make sure we don’t take our eyes off her when she gets going.

We had a very quiet birthday tea, just us and old Bathilda, who has always been sweet to us and who dotes on Hero. We were so sorry you couldn’t come, but the Order’s got to come first, and Hero’s not old enough to know it’s her birthday anyway! James is getting a bit frustrated shut up here, he tries not to show it but I can tell — also, Dumbledore’s still got his Invisibility Cloak, so no chance of little excursions. If you could visit, it would cheer him up so much. Wormy was here last weekend, I thought he seemed down, but that was probably the news about the McKinnons; I cried all evening when I heard.

Bathilda drops in most days, she’s a fascinating old thing with the most amazing stories about Dumbledore, I’m not sure he’d be pleased if he knew! I don’t know how much to believe, actually, because it seems incredible that Dumbledore would ever have been friends with Gellert Grindelwald! I think her mind’s going, personally.

Lots of love,

Lily

There was a photograph as well. It was of a black-haired baby with wild curls zooming around on a toy broom, a man’s legs chasing after her. Her mother was laughing, her expression carefree. The only memories Hero had of her were from the mirror of Erised and the night she’d died. It was strange to see her laughing. Nice, but strange.

Severus had come to hover at her elbow. Wordlessly, she handed him the letter and the photograph. He smiled faintly.

“You were born to be a seeker, clearly.” He read through the letter and handed it back to her. “I can’t imagine what it must mean to you.”

“She makes her ‘g’s the same way I do,” Hero mused. After a moment, she added, “I never knew we had a cat.”

“Neither did I. She didn’t have one at Hogwarts.”

“I wonder what happened to it.”

“I wonder why Albus wanted your father’s cloak.”
“Right. He said before he doesn’t need a cloak to be invisible. Maybe he needed it for another Order member. Or maybe he wanted to remove the temptation so my dad wouldn’t be able to sneak out.”

“Either is perfectly plausible.”

They were quiet for a moment, just thinking.

“Do you miss her?”

“Of course. She was my best friend. These days, I wonder what she would have thought of the two of us.”

“Mmm. I wonder how long it would have taken me to tell them.”

“I rather think no daughter of James Potter in her right mind would tell him she was dating me until it was too late for him to do anything about it.”

“You’re probably right. Of course, you might have made up with Mum by then. She might have been supportive.”

“Or not.”

“Or not,” Hero conceded. “We’ll never know.”

“Is it helping?”

“Hmm? Oh. I suppose. I don’t know, I mean . . . at least it puts my suffering in perspective, I suppose.”

“Meaning?”

She gestured around the room. “Remus. He hasn’t been able to set foot in here since he died. It’s like . . . his heart beats, his lungs inflate, but he’s not really living. He doesn’t really want to live. It feels a little like a betrayal, but I understand it.” She laughed bitterly. “What does he have left to enjoy?”

“Life isn’t about enjoying things. You of all people ought to know that. It’s about doing your duty. I’m sure Lupin would and will welcome death, but he won’t bring it about prematurely. He’ll do what is required of him, what is required of us all. He’ll fight.”

“You’re right. Of course you’re right. I just . . . whatever I feel, it’s nothing compared to what he’s going through. What he’s been going through, all this time I’ve been coming to terms with things. Promise me you won’t do something so stupidly sentimental as lose all will to live when I’m gone.”

“It’s a different circumstance, darling. I’m prepared for the inevitable. Don’t waste your time worrying about me.”

“Good. Because I would have to be very upset with you,” she said, the beginnings of a smile showing on her face.

“How are you now?”

She sighed. “Better. I’m better. Not hysterical, at least. I’ll get through it.”

“Good. Shall I brew up a batch of Calming Draughts?”
“No, no. You’ve been busy with all my other potions. I took the collection of them from your rooms before I left, I’ve been taking them every morning, like you said.”

“I hoped you would. When will you need more?”

Hero shrugged. “Maybe two or three weeks.”

“I’ll see to it. Are you finished here?”

She looked around the room. “For now.”
Hi, all! Thanks for all the good wishes for my grandfather - he's doing much better. To those in the US, I hope you had a happy Thanksgiving. Anyway, without further ado, on with the show.

Unfortunately, Severus had to return to Hogwarts later that day – an extended absence was bound to be remarked upon, which was the last thing they wanted. He left Hero with a lingering kiss. Even so, she tried to follow his lips when he drew back.

“I’ll be back soon. Albus’s portrait will want to be kept up to date, I imagine. Don’t worry, darling. We all have our exits and our entrances, and at the moment, this is the part I must play. Yours is to stay here. It can’t be helped, but I’ll see about putting in that portal we discussed. You’ll barely have time to miss me.” With that, he kissed the top of her head and ducked out the front door.

Hero sighed; she knew he was right, but nowhere was it written that she had to like it. She wandered into the drawing room to find Ron and Hermione, both, oddly enough, with their noses stuck in books.

Hermione looked up when she came in. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Hero sighed, collapsing on the sofa in a sprawl. Ron turned a page and didn’t acknowledge either of them.

“How goes the translating?” Hero asked.

Hermione’s lips twisted. “It’s not bad, I suppose. It would help if I’d ever heard of whatever this book is.” She looked at the two of them, her expression verging on helpless. “I don’t suppose either of you know anything about *The Tales of Beadle the Bard*?”

Ron finally looked up, his expression incredulous. “You’re kidding.” He waited, staring at the blank expression on Hermione’s face. His look changed to one of elation. “I know something Hermione Granger doesn’t? I will never forget this moment, not for as long as I live.”

“Oh, shut up. What are they?”

“Well, all the old kid stories are supposed to be Beadle’s, aren’t they? ‘The Fountain of Fair Fortune’ . . . ‘The Wizard and the Hopping Pot’ . . . ‘Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump’ . . .”

Hermione’s mouth was hanging open; her expression could only be described as appalled. “It really is called that?! I was sure I was translating it wrong! And what do you mean, all the old kids’ stories? What about, oh, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella?”

Ron snorted. “What’s that, an illness?”

“Hero, help me out here.”
“Well, I don’t really know them very well. Dudley was never very interested in Disney princesses, and I didn’t exactly get read bedtime stories.”

Hermione and Ron were both looking at her as if this was the saddest thing she had ever revealed about her childhood, and Ron didn’t even know who or what Cinderella even was. Hero felt as if she had reached a new low.

“I know the general concept, I’m just not overly familiar with it,” Hero added defensively.

Hermione shook her head. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter at this point. But why do you think Dumbledore would give me an old book of bedtime stories?”

“Well, you know, it’s actually quite thoughtful of him. I mean, I know I for one have a hard time sleeping at night knowing the practically impossible task we have ahead of us,” Ron remarked, deadpan.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Ronald.”

He grinned unrepentantly. “I don’t know, do I? Why’d he give me a Deluminator? He was never the most straightforward bloke. We’ll figure it out, I guess. Or not.”

Hero looked over at him and raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you a right little ray of sunshine? Find anything interesting while you were going through the rooms?”

“We found some things Fred and George left behind. Extendable ears and the like,” Ron replied.

“That could be useful,” Hero noted, nodding.

“Unfortunately, the Order don’t seem to have left very much behind. I suppose they were worried enough about the Death Eaters taking things that they made sure not to forget much of anything,” Hermione added.

Hero sighed, but nodded. “It was mostly a hope. The stuff from the twins is more than we could have expected.”

“What did you find?” Hermione asked.

“Regulus’s room didn’t have too many clues, mostly what Severus told us.” She hesitated a moment, then admitted, “I went into Sirius and Remus’s room.”

Hermione set her materials aside. “And?”


Hermione grimaced in commiseration.

“God, Hermione, how did you manage it?”

Hermione frowned. “Manage what?”

“I can barely imagine what it must have taken to modify your parents’ memories. I don’t know if I would have been strong enough. Sirius wasn’t a parent, he was just the closest thing I had. What you did to protect them . . .” Hero shook her head. “It’s incredible.”

Hermione closed her eyes. “I kept changing my mind. Every day since I first decided to do it. Sometimes more than once a day. In the end . . .” her eyes opened, her expression bleak, “I knew it
was for the best. They needed to be safe more than I needed them. We all have to grow up.”

Ron reached for her hand as her expression crumpled, looking like she was trying not to cry.

Hero had thought she couldn’t feel worse. Face to face with everything her friends had done to help her, she found she had been wrong.

“And Ron . . . you’re leaving your family. Your poor mother . . . George’s lost an ear, and Percy’s gone over to the dark side, and they’re all in hiding, oh, God . . .”

Ron looked over at her. “Hero, shut up. You’re blaming yourself again. We’ve talked about this. Don’t.” He went back to comforting his girlfriend.

Hero looked down at her hands, clasped in her lap. Everyone kept telling her that, as if it was supposed to be easy. Year after year, don’t worry, Hero, it’s not your fault. Forget all the horrible things that happened because of you. But how could it not matter? When it hurt so much, how could it not matter?

Ron sighed and glanced back at her. “You’re still doing it, aren’t you? Look, go down to the kitchen and make yourself a cup of tea. Just . . . don’t think for a while, alright?”

Hero took a deep breath, held it a moment, then exhaled in a gust. She got to her feet and left the room. Hermione glared at Ron.

“What?”

“Was that really necessary?”

“Yes.”

“Did you really have to talk down to her? You know she can’t just not think about it!”

“It’s been gnawing at her for two years now! She can’t keep blaming herself. It’s not good for her.”

“I know that, and I’m sure a part of her does, too. But don’t you think if she could find a way out of blaming herself, she’d have done it by now? She really, honestly believes it’s her fault. I mean, a part of it is survivor’s guilt, but . . . the other part of it is . . . it makes just a little bit of sense.”

“What?”

Hermione winced at his thunderous expression. “Look, the fact is, if Hero had managed to master Occlumency, she wouldn’t have gotten that false vision. Whether she could have is another question. If she’d found another way of communicating with Sirius, she would have known it was false. If she and Cedric hadn’t both taken the cup, if she hadn’t given him the tip so he wouldn’t have scored well-enough to start so early in the maze, or any number of other things. All this has crossed her mind. The fact is, she’ll keep beating herself up about it because she can’t stop obsessing over the things that might have happened to avert tragedy.

“She’s been trying to bury it, which isn’t the same thing as getting over it. Going into Sirius’s room brought about what would probably have been inevitable at some point. Well, maybe not, considering . . . But it’s happened. It wouldn’t do any of us any good to go back and change things even if we could. Here, in this house, she has to process it.” Hermione shook her head. “It’s the last thing she needs, but it can’t be helped.”

“Apart from maybe Neville, she has got to have the rottenest luck of anyone I’ve ever met,” Ron
decided.

“Neville’s bad luck is mostly everyday disappointments. Hero’s been marked for it since she was a year old. And now we’re losing her.”

Ron put an arm around her. “I know. I hate it, too.”

Hermione sniffed. “You know, when we were younger, I sort of hoped she’d be my maid of honor at my wedding. I hadn’t realized how I felt about you yet, so I didn’t know who it was I would be marrying. But the first face I knew I wanted there, aside from my parents’, was Hero’s.” She paused, staring down at her lap. “There are so many little hopes and dreams and expectations you have tied up in a person, you don’t realize it until you know they won’t happen. I can’t imagine how much worse it is for her.”

Out in the corridor, Hero lifted her head from the door. For once, she wished she hadn’t listened. She didn’t need to know her friends thought these things about her. More than that, she really didn’t want to know. But Hermione was right; none of them could change the way things were. Unfortunately, knowing all that was now a part of how things were. Couldn’t be helped.

It occurred to her that they might decide to go down to the kitchen to check on her soon, and it would probably be prudent to actually be there, possibly with the kettle on. As quietly as possible, she hurried down to the basement kitchen.

Severus stepped out into the warm August air. If it seemed like a different world, it was perhaps because it might as well have been. The world inside the house was old, dedicated to ideas and ideals the muggles surrounding it had either forgotten or never been acquainted with in the first place. Inside the walls of a house that, to most, did not exist, it was quiet and still. It was like a fly caught in amber, frozen in a single moment while the rest of the world moved on. And irony of ironies, in that house lay the future of the wizarding world. Perhaps not so ironic; the future was dying.

Turning on the spot, he Disapparated. Inwardly, he sighed. As he rematerialized in the English countryside, outside the wards of Malfoy Manor, he cursed himself. He couldn’t think about that, not now. Like a cloak, he drew his persona around him, covering himself, hiding the truth that peered out of his eyes and peeked from the lines of his posture. He tucked it all away beneath the impenetrable identity of Severus Snape, Death Eater, Killer of Albus Dumbledore. Like a fairy story – every villain must have his terrifying, overblown titles, for without them, what is he but a man? The Dark Lord, the Potions Master, the Girl-Who-Lived. They would play the roles they had been cast in, because until the thing was done, the world would not let them do otherwise.

With long, confident strides, he crossed the wards. He ignored the opulence of the manicured grounds, the stately, pea-brained, pure-white peacocks. What had all their wealth done to save them in the end? Lucius’s connections had saved him from Azkaban at the end of the last war, but these days he was a shell of a man, a prisoner in his own home. It was sad, pathetic, and disgusting, and, of course, nothing less than he deserved for his disloyalty, compounded by his incompetence. His only use was in this place, his ancestral home, and the lives of himself and his son.

Severus marched into the foyer and took off his traveling cloak, casting it into the waiting arms of a house elf, leaving him with simply his usual billowing robes.

He looked down his nose at the pathetic creature, his lip curling. “Is the Dark Lord currently engaged?”
“No, sir. He is being in the Green Drawing Room, sir,” the creature squeaked, its arms full of his black robes. He swept away, not sparing it a second glance.

Of course the Malfoys had more than one drawing room. They had to be described. He knew which one the elf meant, which was more than he could say of six of the other nine. Who on earth actually needed ten drawing rooms? The answer came to him promptly – those with more money than sense.

The Dark Lord was, indeed, sitting in the Green Drawing Room, a contemplative, almost brooding expression on his face. Nagini floated in a bubble-like enchantment that hovered by the Dark Lord’s shoulder.

Severus bowed. “My lord.”

The Dark Lord looked up, brought out of his reverie. “Severus. Excellent, I was just about to send for you. One does like it when one’s servants are prompt, almost to the point of prescience. You do tend to be among that lucky few.” The words uttered in that cold voice were complimentary, but the set of the mouth they emerged from was almost suspicious.

“What does my lord wish to discuss with me?”

The Dark Lord gestured to the chair opposite his own. “Sit.” Severus did so, his face remaining impassive. The Dark Lord laced his long, skeletal fingers together and contemplated the dark, dour figure sitting across from him.

“You have done me a great service, Severus, in disposing of Albus Dumbledore. I trust you find your appointment in his stead sufficient reward.”

Severus bowed his head. “My lord is generous; I humbly accept what he condescends to grant me.”

“Very good. Yes. It certainly doesn’t hurt that there’s no one else level-headed enough for the task. It requires . . . delicacy. A scalpel is needed, I think, rather than a mallet. The disease must be cut out, the healthy tissue preserved. It does no good to destroy all the potential of the next generation by placing them in the less than tender mercies of some ham-handed brute. But you already know that subtlety and a steady hand are needed to deal with this particular collection. Who am I to tell you, a seasoned educator, how to do his job?”

“I bow to my lord’s wishes.”

“Of course, you shall need reinforcements. One cannot expect you to take on a school full of opponents who want your head. At least not alone. You shall have the Carrows siblings. Of course, you have the perpetual problem of supplying a candidate for that particular position. And I seem to recall that you are also in need of a Muggle Studies professor. I believe we need not teach the students merely to defend themselves. After all, a sound offense is the best form of defense, don’t you find? I think it would be entirely prudent to simply teach them the Dark Arts. Assign your deputies as you will. I place it all in your capable hands.”

“You honor me, my lord,” Severus replied, his voice toneless.

“Nothing less than you deserve. I trust you to use force . . . judiciously. Do try not to kill all the little things, though they are so fragile, are they not? Even discipline cases may prove useful . . . in one way or another.”

“I understand, my lord.”
“I expect nothing less. Now, I am sure you wish to become better acquainted with the Carrows. I think perhaps it would be best to show them the school. They did not have much opportunity to find their way about when they visited last June. And I cannot but believe that your colleagues are... aching to have you back in their midst.”

Recognizing it as a dismissal, Severus stood and bowed. “I live to serve, my lord.”

The Dark Lord gestured lazily, and Severus turned on his heel and exited.

*

The Carrows were out in the garden, using house elves for target practice. Severus simply stood by the hedge and watched them for a few moments. Alecto, the sister, was certainly a force to be reckoned with. Her aim left something to be desired, but when her curses made contact, they tended to have more power than her brother’s. This meant that the Cruciatus, of which she was a particular proponent, was some degrees more painful. Amycus hardly ever missed, but the spells didn’t have quite the same devastating effect.

“Amycus; Alecto,” he called out in greeting, having come to a decision.

They lowered their wands and turned to face him, ignoring the quivering elves.

Alecto raised an eyebrow. “Severus. What is it?”

“The Dark Lord has decided you will serve best at Hogwarts. Alecto, you’ll be Muggle Studies professor; Amycus, you’ll see to the Dark Arts. It’s a disgrace, really, what’s been going on while Dumbledore’s been in charge. We have much to rectify.”

Amycus’s grin was feral. Sick delight danced in his sister’s eyes.

“I’m sure it’s been some time since you last spent much time there. I had thought to give you the grand tour. If you’re not otherwise engaged, of course.”

Amycus shook his head. “Naw, naw, just passing the time, really. Been years since I attended Hogwarts. Paling around with the tykes... such fun.” From what Severus remembered of the few years their time at Hogwarts had overlapped, the “tykes” hadn’t found it much fun at all. Unfortunately, he didn’t have a choice.

Severus nodded sharply and headed for the edge of the wards, the siblings following after him. In the same instant, the three of them Disapparated.

The next instant found them at the gates of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Recognizing Severus as headmaster, they opened at his touch. As loathe as he was to lead the two Death Eaters behind him onto the grounds, he did not let it show. They trailed him silently, even as he fought the urge to will the gates to slam shut in their faces. Control was key while walking on the edge of a precipice; he who becomes dizzy is lost.

The staff typically went elsewhere during the summer; this year, they hadn’t. Likely, none of them had been sanguine about leaving the grounds unoccupied for fear of the Dark Lord coming to call. If only it had been that easy. As soon as he’d been instated as headmaster, he’d locked the gates, preventing them from leaving the castle and grounds. He hadn’t been able to trust that they wouldn’t go into hiding. If they had, the Dark Lord’s displeasure would have been the least of Severus’s worries. Instead of just having to deal with two Death Eater faculty members, he likely would have had an entire staff of them and little to no chance of protecting the students from them. He could not be everywhere, every minute of the day, after all.
He had contemplated how to approach the reunion. These were people he’d been working with for over a decade and a half who now believed him to be a cold-blooded killer. He didn’t need to worry about whether or not they would be too cowed to help him protect the students — to the contrary, he was far more worried about them crossing the line with the Carrows. So, for the moment, he needed them subdued, controlled. In a state where they wouldn’t get themselves killed, at the very least. He could feel a migraine coming on.

All the same, he marched into the Entrance Hall like a conqueror, the great doors of the castle, like the gates, swinging inward to admit him. He had never known it to be so empty, so lifeless. He had never relished teaching children and teenagers, but he’d gotten used to them. Even in the summers when he had regularly returned to the castle to escape the stifling environs of Cokeworth, it had never been like this. People had visited. The other professors had come and gone. Dumbledore had entertained friends and acquaintances, usually to discuss politics or areas of mutual academic interest. Today, there was not the slightest breath of air, not a sound. It was as if the enormous, vibrant life that had been a part of the castle had ceased to exist; as if the spirit of the school had died with Albus Dumbledore.

Severus told himself it was ridiculous — Hogwarts had existed for the past millennium, and in that time had seen many headmasters and headmistresses. The death of the last one was little more than the latest in a succession. It didn’t make the wound any less raw or painful.

He snapped his fingers and the elfin population appeared, recognizing the summons of their new master. One stepped forward from the rest.

“What can we be doing for Headmaster Snape, sir?”

“Get the staff. I want everyone here within five minutes. Don’t pay them any mind if they refuse.”

The elves bowed and disappeared to gather the staff, likely spread throughout the castle. They reappeared a few minutes later, staff members in tow. Their bewildered expressions changed to furious scowls when they realized just who was standing before of them. Minerva, ever the impetuous Gryffindor — and former Hit Witch — was the first to step forward and raise her wand. With an almost lazy flick of his own, Severus Disarmed her; catching her wand expertly.

“Now, Minerva. What sort of greeting is that to give your new headmaster? Why, you almost don’t look happy to see me.” The words were like drinking acid, but he said them with a smirk playing on his lips. Minerva’s lips thinned, her face going white with rage. Severus fought the urge to swallow nervously, suddenly feeling like a fifteen-year-old who had earned the ire of the Gryffindor Head of House again. His smirk broadened.

“This simply won’t do. Do you all feel this way?” They glared at him as a united front. “I had hoped for a better reception. But where are my manners? I don’t know if you are acquainted with Amycus and Alecto Carrow? Amycus will be taking the position of Dark Arts instructor, while Alecto will be taking over from the late Charity Burbage as Muggle Studies professor. I’m sure you’ll give them a warm welcome.” His eyes narrowed threateningly as his gaze swept across those assembled. “I would certainly hate to have to intervene if matters should prove . . . otherwise.”

Minerva stood stiffly, her hands curled into white-knuckled fists at her sides. Severus met her eyes, the phrase if looks could kill flashing through his mind as he raised an eyebrow.

“Minerva, I trust you understand that, in all things, it is the duty of the Heads of House to support the headmaster in all his endeavors. The same goes for you as well, Pomona . . . Filius . . . Horace,” he said, meeting their eyes in turn. “I would so hate to have any reason to . . . demonstrate my . . . displeasure. But it won’t come to that, will it? No,” he murmured, his voice silky. “I’m sure you
won’t force my hand. You’re all intelligent, reasonable people. You understand what’s required of you.”

Minerva held his gaze for a long moment, then stood down even as she held her head high. The other teachers stowed their wands, though they didn’t look terribly happy about it.

“Excellent. Amicus, Alecto, the elves can show you to your new quarters and give you the tour. I’m sure you’ll want to reacquaint yourselves with the castle. As for the rest of you . . . I’m sure you have things you need to finish working on. I’ll see you at dinner.”

With that, he swept up the Grand Staircase, heading for the seventh floor and the headmaster’s office. When he reached his destination, the gargoyle bowed its head.

“Headmaster Snape. What would you care to use as your password?”

Severus paused. He hadn’t considered that. His first instinct was to use Hero’s name, but it was so painfully obvious and such a giveaway that there was no way he could get away with it. Juniper . . . it had potential, especially since it wasn’t an uncommon ingredient in potions. In some backwater Scottish communities, juniper was used to bless a dwelling. It was also, in some people, a severe allergen. Hero was hardly ever referred to by her middle name, which was an homage to Lily’s family, who had a tradition of plant names.

“Juniper.”

The Gargoyle nodded again and stepped aside to allow him entry.

Severus ascended the staircase, entering the office that had belonged to Albus Dumbledore. The instruments had all been left to the school, along with the rest of the man’s possessions. It was untouched, looking exactly the same as it had in all the years Severus had ever known him – with one notable exception. On the wall with the other portraits of former heads now hung a painting of Albus Dumbledore, his eyes as bright and twinkling as they had ever been in life. He hung directly behind the desk.

“Severus, my boy! So, everything is going to plan, I take it, if you are, indeed, succeeding me?”

“Yes, Albus. It’s exactly as you predicted.”

“Good, good! How’ve you been in the intervening months?”

Severus glared at him, which only made the man’s eyes twinkle more brilliantly and his smile broaden.

“Adequate.”

“And Hero?”

Severus’s eyes narrowed further. “. . . dying.”

Albus’s portrait sobered. “Ah. Yes, of course. So sorry, my dear man. Where is she?”

“She, Granger, and Weasley are currently staying at Grimmauld Place. I have informed the relevant parties that you made Hero Secret-Keeper prior to your death, as you instructed; no doubt Death Eaters will soon be assigned to watch the street. Of course, seeing as they’re already there, they can Disapparate with the help of the elf, and anyone watching wouldn’t even be able to see them until they were on the footpath, it’s rather useless.”
“All to the good, of course.”

Now that that was out of the way, Severus saw no reason to delay. “Where is the Sword of Gryffindor?”

“Pardon?”

“Oh, don’t play the fool. I know he told you before he died. You’d be the only person he could trust, even if you are just so much paint and canvas. They have a Horcrux to destroy. I’d rather not have to sneak Hero all the way through the school so she can go down to the Chamber of Secrets and pry a fang out of the basilisk’s skull.”

“I see your point. They’ve really found one already?”

“The locket, actually. The real one. Apparently, Regulus Black stole it, and it’s been in Grimmauld Place ever since.”

“Well, that is a spot of luck!” The portrait smiled. “The sword is behind my painting. He wanted you told eventually, but he didn’t anticipate such fast results. Splendid.”

Rolling his eyes, Severus stalked behind the desk and took the portrait off the wall. Behind it was a hole, and in the hole was the sword, all shining silver and glittering rubies. He took it by the hilt and brought it out of its hiding place. He hung Albus’s portrait back on the wall.

“Do they have to complete any particular acts of heroism to deserve it, or may the headmaster simply bestow it?”

Albus’s portrait smiled ruefully. “If only. No, you’re quite right. He hadn’t thought they would need it before the freeze set in, in which case you would have placed it in a frozen-over pond or something. Obviously, that won’t work, considering that it’s August and I’m sure the weather’s just lovely.”

“Over 80 degrees Fahrenheit and dry.”

“Quite. Walking through fire might do. Hmm. Daring, nerve, and chivalry . . . a boggart? Oh, I long for the days when taking it from you probably would have been enough to qualify.”

“Yes, well. I think the fire should probably be enough. Especially if I propose Granger do it and her fiancée steps in in her stead.”

“Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley are engaged? How charming! In any case, I imagine that would do nicely.”

“Great. So, what do you want done with your things?”

“Done? Oh, yes, of course. I imagine the books might prove useful. You’re welcome to place everything else in storage. Feel free to make yourself at home. After all, you’re headmaster now, not me.”

“Right, then. I should probably settle in.” With a nod of farewell, he hefted the sword and took the stairs up to the headmaster’s personal quarters.
I should have updated Monday. It's been a rough week. A friend of mine died on Sunday. She had been battling cancer for a long time, but it's still a shock. I'm still processing. And it's finals week. Maybe I'm providing too much temptation, posting this now, but sometimes we all need a distraction. Merry Christmas, guys.

Draco was hiding in the music room. His aunt Bellatrix was looking for him. He didn’t know why, but whatever it was, it was sure to be horrible. He couldn’t believe she’d had a baby. His aunt had taught him Occlumency, an absolute nightmare, so he figured he was qualified to say that the woman on earth least equipped to be a mother was undoubtedly his aunt. He tried not to think about who the father was, considering it clearly wasn’t Rodolphus Lestrange. Everyone knew who it probably was, but he would make an even worse parent than Bellatrix. There were lots of other reasons not to think about it, and reasons whose reasons he didn’t even want to think about.

His aunt would probably get bored looking for him or get distracted and go torment someone else. Not cooing over Draco’s new cousin, because she just didn’t do that sort of thing. The Dark Lord was in the manner as well, holding court in the Green Drawing Room. Fortunately, the music room was in a completely different wing.

He wondered where his mother was. His father, he knew, was in his study, brooding over the mess his life had become. His mother might be in the garden, appreciating the roses. But you could hear the house elves scream when the Death Eaters tortured them from there, which rather defeated the purpose of relaxing in the garden. She could be in her and Lucius’s bedroom, still wrapped in her silk robe, not having bothered to get dressed because there was no point. He wished she was here with him, so that they might have each other for company. He hoped she wasn’t trying to save him from Bellatrix, because Bellatrix had never cared who got in her way, even if it was her own sister.

It was Draco’s mother who had taught him to play the piano. His father had sniffed and said it was what muggles used to make up for the fact that they didn’t have magic, but he had had the music room put in anyway. When he’d said it, Narcissa had smiled in that secret way of hers and not argued with her husband. Maybe she’d always known it was ridiculous bluster.

She hadn’t disagreed with him while he was in the room. She’d told Draco that she secretly thought music was in some ways better than magic. He’d stared at her incredulously and she’d laughed. Draco had always loved his mother’s laugh; it was warm and sincere and joyful. She hadn’t laughed in years.

But then she’d pulled him over to the baby grand and had him sit beside her. She’d play a passage, then he’d copy it. As she’d taught him more, from how to read music to Rachmaninoff, he’d come to realize she’d been right. Magic could do things, could create objects, but no magic could make you fall in love. Music could. Magic was brilliant, but it wasn’t achingly beautiful. There were whole worlds in music that magic couldn’t hold a candle to. Magic was amazing, but it couldn’t nourish the soul.

Draco found himself wandering over to the piano. There was sheet music set up, left from whoever had played last. It was Debussy’s Petite Suite for Four Hands. It was one of his mother’s favorites.
One of his, too. In happier times, he and his mother had spent long hours in the summers playing duets together, laughing and challenging each other, their hands flying over the keys in perfect harmony.

Why had he ever thought that wasn’t enough? Why had he thought that it would all be better when the Dark Lord returned? When, not if. His parents, or at least his father, had always made it quite clear to him that it would only be a matter of time. He’d been so foolishly eager for the dawning of a new age, it hadn’t really occurred to him to appreciate the one he was in. He’d have given an arm and a leg to have all that back. To have his father arrogant and assured, to have his mother smiling and laughing and playing Petite Suite for Four Hands with him.

First, though, they had to get through the nightmare before they could reach the daylight waiting on the other side. His fingers brushed over the polished ivory keys. Without really thinking about it, he sat on the cushioned piano bench. He wondered if his aunt was still looking for him. If she was, it probably wouldn’t be the best idea to draw attention to himself, he thought even as he began to sift through the rest of the sheet music. He pulled out Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor and placed it in front of him, his hands automatically positioning themselves on the keyboard.

As he played through the familiar piece, alone, he found his eyes drifting shut. He didn’t really need the sheet music once he started to play, the memory ingrained in his fingers. It was beautiful and sad, almost wistful, dreaming of a future you might never see. Painful, but so achingly beautiful. He poured his maelstrom of emotions into the piece, his anger and his anguish and his wistfulness and his hopelessness. The fierce love of his parents, his determination that they would all come out of this alive, if not necessarily whole. And, not that it made a grain of sense, alongside the hopelessness, hope, that the nightmare would end, that they would all wake and the horrors would be over. Someday, too far away to even begin to visualize, but someday.

The door handle rattled; he almost didn’t hear it over the music. Once he registered what that sound meant, his hands sprang back from the keys, the last notes resonating to nothingness. Who was it? His mother or his aunt? The angel or the demon, come to liberate or to destroy? The door opened, and it turned out to be neither.

“Father. What are you doing here?”

“Your mother thought you would probably be in here. Your aunt’s gone back to sharpening her knives, you’re safe for the moment.”

Draco didn’t speak, just stared at him.

Lucius gestured to the chair next to the piano. “May I?”

“Er . . . sure.”

His father looked as dreadful as Draco had come to expect – unshaven, unwashed, his clothes the same ones he’d been wearing the last several days. It didn’t seem possible that this man was the same one he’d known for the first sixteen years of his life, who never had a hair out of place and thought it the height of dishonor to be dressed incorrectly for any occasion. Then again, he hadn’t considered torturing people dishonorable in the least even then, so perhaps that wasn’t the best measure by which to judge.

“You play so beautifully, Draco. I never learned, as I’m sure you know. Your grandfather thought there were far better ways for me to fill my time. I’m glad your mother taught you. It’s something that has nothing to do with anything else happening in this house at the moment.” Lucius paused as if considering his next statement. “You must hate me.”
Draco stared at him almost uncomprehendingly. “Father?”

Lucius waved a hand to forestall comment, his expression growing frustrated. “Don’t play the fool. It’s my fault we’re in this mess. I know that, and if you don’t, then perhaps you are a fool. I have led us to ruin. I endangered you, neglected you. My failures resulted directly in the Dark Lord forcing you into his service. Don’t deny it. But . . . if there can be any absolution whatsoever . . . please know, my son, that I do love you. I love you and your mother with all my heart.

“I could tell you that I acted as I did because I wanted to provide a better future for you, but it would be a lie, and an insult, what’s worse. I acted selfishly, stupidly. I’m a politician, and a Slytherin. I should have kept to the legal side of things, acting according my beliefs. There is blood on my hands because I did not. I serve – we serve – a man who I am coming to realize will bestow no rewards on the Malfoy family. I have sold all our souls, and what have we gotten in return?

But I do love you, and I am so sorry. I’m so sorry, Draco. I can never make it up to you, I know that. Regret cannot absolve me of my crimes, but I need for you to know how truly, sincerely sorry I am.”

They were quite for a long moment.

“Mother sent you?”

“Yes.”

Draco nodded, deep in thought. On the one hand, his father was right. He hadn’t brought the Dark Lord back, but he’d gotten the Malfoys stuck in the thick of it. The blame lay squarely on his shoulders. On the other . . . if their positions were reversed, would Draco have acted any differently? He’d like to think he would have, but that uncertainty gave him pause. He thought back to just a year prior, when he’d thought he was the coolest guy in robes to have a special mission from the Dark Lord himself. He’d been excited to take the Mark. And maybe he’d been raised to believe that, but he was old enough to think for himself. He’d chosen his path, and no one had made him, not really. If he was going to hate his father . . . he’d have to hate himself, too. And then there was the question of whether he could even hate his father if he tried.

He’d been thinking along the same lines his father had. It was true, there was a fair amount of resentment, but nothing like hate. And even that much was melting like snow in the sun in the face of his father’s confession. It wasn’t spring, not yet, but it was a thaw, and Draco would settle for that for now.

He looked at his father, hard, only to find the man staring into his lap.

“Father. I forgive you.”

Lucius looked up, startled. “What?”

“I forgive you.”

His brow wrinkled. “Why?”

Draco ducked his head to hide a grin. It was almost comforting to see his father as his distrustful self.

“Because you’re my father and I love you. Malfoys stick together. We’ll all get through this. Slytherins stick together. I could never hate you. I’d rather just forget about it and move on.”
“So you’re forgiving me because . . . ?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Because I don’t have any reason not to. Not really. Who knows? I might have done the same thing, and how can I judge you then? Let’s just focus on getting out of this whole thing alive.”

Lucius nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry I interrupted your playing. Although, if you have a moment, your mother wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh. Alright. Where is she?”

“She’s in the Rose Sitting Room.”

Draco nodded and stood. He inclined his head toward his father and left the room. He did not run. Malfoys did not run. He simply walked very quickly.

He saw his mother before she saw him. She was dressed, at least, which was more than he had hoped for. She looked pale and tired, the toll taken by being effectively a prisoner in her own home. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders; her gaze was unfocused.

He entered the room and kissed her cheeks. She smiled, and it made everything seem a little better, even if it looked a little forced.

“Draco, dear, please sit.”

He took the armchair opposite hers. She stared into his eyes as if looking for something. Some of the tension left her face and he wondered what it was she thought she had found.

“Mother? You wanted to talk to me?”

She smiled, a little more sincerely now, though not all the creases had left her brow. “Talk to you, yes. And see you. My little boy. Though you’re not really a boy anymore are you? You’re a man. All grown up and determined. Risking your life.”

“Mother—”

“No, Draco, let me finish. We all must die. And seeing as we must, we may as well do it with a bit of style. It is . . . not something your father or I ever taught you, because no Slytherin prefers to give up and think of death. We seek to influence our circumstances upon this earth, never mind whatever comes next. But we should have taught you the value of dying for something you believe in. Neither of us want you to die, my darling boy, but . . .” she paused, her eyes drifting shut as a spasm of pain contorted her face, “if you must, die well. Die doing something you can be proud of. To some, death is death and the manner of dying makes no difference. I prefer to think that it makes all the difference in the world.”

Her eyes opened, as clear and hard and cold as diamonds, more intense than he had ever seen them before. “But that is a Gryffindor sentiment, my son, though I stand by it. From one Slytherin to another, from a mother to her son, I beg you to live for what you believe in. There are few motivators stronger than knowing that what you are doing is right and just. I know of only one.” She smiled again, and this time it shone like the sun. “Love.”

She rose and kissed his cheek. “Think on what I’ve said, Draco. You don’t need to tell me anything you decide. I trust you.” With that, she swept past him out of the room.

Once she was out of earshot, he gave in to the urge to snort inelegantly. Trust him . . . born
manipulator, his mother. She played people as well as she played the piano. Unfortunately, though he’d inherited her musical skill, Draco was more his father’s son in this respect.

He didn’t know how Severus did it, suppressing his emotions all the time, becoming unfeeling. He never broke character, never left the slightest hint that he wasn’t who he was thought to be. Then again, going off of what his mother had said . . . maybe he had something to believe in. It was obvious he was in love with Potter, no matter what Draco might think about it. But what did Draco have to believe in?

Love, his mother had said. He wished she’d told him that years ago, because he didn’t know that he loved anyone aside from his parents. He didn’t love Pansy; he’d never loved Pansy. She knew that; she didn’t love him either. It had been fun. Fat lot of good that did him now. Love . . . falling in love would have been a much better use of his time last year. He was never going to kill Dumbledore, it was always going to be Severus. Falling in love would have been an actual, worthwhile accomplishment. But then, he always managed to cock everything up.

He found himself disgusted with himself when he realized that the three people he loved most in all the world were his mother, his father . . . and himself. Useless. Utterly bloody useless. What did he have to live for or, or believe in? He couldn’t remember ever, in his life, being this fucking useless. People could die because of him. People would die because of him. Because instead of someone who had values and loved ones aside from his parents, they were stuck with that right arse, Draco Malfoy. That useless sod, Draco Malfoy. That complete hair-brained twat, Draco Malfoy. Was it any wonder he didn’t love anyone and no one loved him when he was this utterly incompetent and shallow? What was the point?

There came the crack of Apparition and Draco was brought back to his surroundings enough to realize he had his head in his hands, bent double in his chair as he hyperventilated. If he had bothered to lift his head, he would have seen a female elf dressed in what appeared to be artfully draped silk floral curtains.

“Master Draco should not be doing this to himself, sir! Trixy will be going to get master a cup of tea to calm him down.” She popped away again, though Draco barely noticed. Her words had gone in one ear and out the other.

“You’re nobody ‘til somebody loves you, so find yourself somebody to love.” One of Severus’s records had said that. He’d never really given it much thought. Or any, really, until now. Music, greater than magic. It made sense. He should have paid more attention.

Trixie came back with a steaming cup of tea, the same way he’d taken it since he was seven and had acquired enough class to stop pouring mountains of sugar in it. The elf set the cup on the side table. Some small, rational part of his brain that was standing off to the side watching proceedings expected her to leave after that. She didn’t. Instead, the long fingers on her tiny hands wrapped around his wrists, gently tugging them down to his lap. She picked the cup of tea back up and pressed it into his hands. He stared at her uncomprehendingly.

She pursed her lips. “Master Draco must drink. He is to be calming down.”

He was so shocked to be given what amounted to an order, from a house elf no less, he just did as he was told. She watched, her enormous eyes unusually sharp as she watched him drink. As he sipped at his tea, he started to calm down.

“Perhaps Master Draco can be telling Trixy what is being the matter,” she said, and again it was more of an order than a suggestion.
“Did my mother send you?”

The elf sent him a censorious look that reminded him for an instant of his gimlet-eyed grandmother. “Mistress Narcissa is trusting Trixy not to be needing specific instructions.”

“So that’s a no.”

“Mistress Narcissa is trusting Trixy to understand what is being called for,” the elf replied primly.

“Er . . . right.”

“What is being wrong?” the elf asked, abandoning all attempts at subtlety.

“Well, I . . . don’t know if I should tell you.”

A knowing look entered the elf’s eyes. “You is not being sure you can be trusting Trixy. You is thinking Trixy might tell people Master Draco wouldn’t want to know.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Draco said, his shoulders relaxing in relief.

But Trixy shook her head. “Trixy is being bound to the Malfoy family. We house-elves is serving our family and keeping their secrets.”

Draco scowled at her. “Doesn’t mean you wouldn’t tell my parents.”

The elf rolled her eyes. “Trixy is crossing her heart and hoping to die,” she said, deadpan, actually miming crossing her heart and cutting her throat.

“Oh, fine. I have to do something, but I’m not sure I can. I’m not sure I’ve got it in me. And I don’t believe in anything, and I don’t love anyone, and I’m useless.”

“But Master is making no sense. Is Master not doing this because he believes in it?”

“Well, I . . .”

“And is Master not loving his parents?”

“Well, of course—”

“Then what is being the problem?”

“Well, all of that’s already true. It doesn’t change anything.”

Trixys pursed her lips. “Perhaps you is not thinking about it enough. Perhaps you is needing to truly appreciate it.”

“So what you’re saying is that I’m a spoiled brat who takes everything for granted.”

She looked like she was trying not to smile. “I believe you is knowing whether you is being one or not. Sometimes we is needing reminding. We is all forgetting all we is having every now and then.”

Draco felt an unexpected pang of guilt. He’d never really thought about it, but . . . “You’re a slave. What do you have?”

Trixys looked like she wasn’t sure whether to be amused or irritated. “I is not being a slave. I is being a house elf. It is being a great honor to serve the Malfoy family, the same as my mother, and
her mother before her, and her mother before her. I is being head house elf, a position I is having earned through years of dedicated service! I is being proud of my job! Unlike some people, I is not being afraid of hard work!”

She abruptly flushed bright pink. “Trixy is not meaning Master Draco. She is speaking of a very strange elf who is used to be working here. Dobby is never liking working for the Malfoys, mostly because he is not knowing how to keep his mouth shut. He is being freed by Master Lucius some years ago. Trixy is hearing he is working at Hogwarts now, where he is having less opportunity to insult his employers. It is being for the best, Trixy is thinking.”

Draco wasn’t used to such frank conversations from a house elf, but it might be because he’d never spoken to who he now realized was the house keeper. All the elves he’d spoken to before had been fairly low-level, mostly foot-servants and chambermaids. Trixy, he was quickly finding, was of an entirely different caliber.

“But . . . that is not being important. Master Draco is having asked Trixy a question. Trixy is enjoying her job. She is having friends. She is having a good relationship with Mistress Narcissa, which not every house elf is having with her mistress. She is having a boyfriend who is being the head gardener. There is being lots of things for Trixy to be thankful for.”

“But . . . the Death Eaters torture you for fun.”

Trixy’s ears drooped at the reminder.

“That is being true, Master Draco, but one cannot be having everything. We is using elf magic to keep off the worst, and we is patching up the rest as best we is being able. We is knowing the masters would not be having them here if they could be avoiding it. We is knowing you is wishing them gone as much as we is.”

“You know we want them gone? Is it that obvious?”

“Only to those who is seeing you when you is thinking no one is looking. You is not to be worrying; they is not realizing.”

“Thank you, er, Trixy. Got any other advice?”

She tilted her head thoughtfully. “Trixy is quite liking Wenscell. You is not knowing who is being your Wenscell. That is meaning anyone could be being your Wenscell. Do it for all the Wenscells. If you is failing, you is probably not falling in love with anyone, because everyone is being dead.” She shrugged, then peered at his tea cup. “Is your tea being cold? Trixy can be reheating it for you.”

“Er . . .” He glanced down at the cup. “No, no, it’s fine. Thanks, Trixy. This has really helped.”

She smiled. “Trixy is being glad. If Master Draco is ever wishing to talk to Trixy, all he is needing to do is call her.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. Um, thanks, a-again.”

“You is not needing to thank Trixy. It is being Trixy’s pleasure.” She patted his hand and Disapparated. Draco sipped his tea, wrinkling his nose when he found it was cold after all. He directed his wand to it and reheated it, sighing. He had a lot to think about. Of course, he had even more to do.
Chapter 51

Merry Christmas, guys. Thanks for the kind words; I'm doing a little better. I hope this update finds you all well. It ends on a cliff-hanger, just so you know. You can find out what follows in the new year. Don't forget to comment!

Hero sat watching on the window seat, hugging her knees to her chest as she watched the street. The Death Eaters were watching the house. They hadn’t attempted to come in so far, though that didn’t mean they wouldn’t. It seemed the lie had been successfully passed on; they thought she’d been made Secret Keeper. Seemed no one remembered that there was a house-elf. Or no one cared.

Severus had been sending her Patronus messages, but he hadn’t been able to come back. The portal was giving him a bit more trouble than he’d expected. Hero had known they wouldn’t have very much time together, but she still missed him. They had other things to do, she didn’t have time to miss him. Except, to be honest, they weren’t really doing much of anything at the moment. Hermione was focusing on translating the Tales. She was making Ron read her copy of classic fairy tales she had brought along for sentimental value. He was making his way through them, though he looked increasingly bemused. Kreacher was going through the house and dusting. Every now and again as he came near, they could hear him whistling as he worked.

The house was almost pleasant, which a year before none of them would have thought possible. The décor was as dour and grim as ever, but maybe with some new furniture and a coat of paint on the walls . . . Not that they really had time to redecorate. Although, considering . . .

Kreacher’s whistling faded and it was quiet, interrupted only by the turning of pages. And then into the silence came the sound of someone tapping on the door, followed by the metallic sound of the locks undoing themselves. Hero unfolded herself and ran to the door. Severus hadn’t said anything about coming, but he might have wanted to surprise her, and she certainly didn’t mind—

Only it wasn’t. It was Remus. Hero struggled to swallow her disappointment. Of course, perhaps it wasn’t. Perhaps they wanted to take the three of them alive. Remus had been living with the werewolves, it wouldn’t have been too difficult to obtain a hair . . . but the Polyjuice potion only worked with human transformation. She decided to be paranoid and on the safe side anyway.

She aimed her wand at his chest. “How do I know it’s you?”

A hint of a smile touched his mouth. “Ask me a question, then.”

“What was the last piece of advice you gave me in your letter in January?”

“Ah . . .” His eyes drifted shut. “‘Mind that in following your heart, you don’t leave your head behind,’ if I remember rightly.”

Hero lowered her wand. Ron and Hermione had joined her by then, looking between them in confusion.

Remus was in a distinctly care-worn traveling cloak, but he looked happy to see them.
“No sign of Severus?”

“He was here when we got here, actually,” Hero replied, folding her arms.

“Ah. Is he here now?”

“No. He’s gone to Hogwarts to oversee things there.”

“Of course. As a new headmaster, I’m sure he’s . . . busy.”

Hero stared him down resolutely. “Spit it out.”

“Hero . . . are you sure you can trust him?”

She barked out a laugh. “I’d bloody well better be, hadn’t I? But yes.”

“Well, I just mean . . . he did kill Dumbledore. Even you admit that.”

“And I’ve told you, Dumbledore had the whole thing planned. If you think it’s not true, that means that you either think I was stupid enough to believe something without proof or that I know everything but I’m covering for Severus because I love him and would condone him murdering Dumbledore. Frankly, I’m not sure which I find more insulting.”

Remus sighed. “I’m sorry. Look, at the very least, we should exchange information. I have to tell the others something. They’re worried about you.”

Hero let her arms fall to her sides. “Alright. We can talk in the kitchen.”

They all made their way down to the basement kitchen, Hero leading, Ron and Hermione exchanging wary looks, Remus simply looking tired.

“Kreacher, could you make us a pot of tea?”

“As Mistress wishes,” the elf croaked, bowing before filling the kettle and setting it on the stove to boil. Hero took a seat and glanced back at Remus to find him staring at the elf. Ron and Hermione sat next to each other, watching the other two like a tennis match.

“How’d you manage that?”

“I’ve been nice to him. Helps that I don’t hate it here, really. Or him. But Kreacher and I have been getting on for several months now. He’s fine so long as you understand how to work with him. Sit. You look dead on your feet.”

He sighed and took the chair opposite her. “You’re not wrong. It’s been a hell of a time since the Ministry fell. I’d have been here three days ago, but I needed to shake the Death Eaters tailing me. You came straight here after the wedding?”

“Not quite,” Hermione answered. “We stopped for coffee in Tottenham Court Road.”

“Disgusting,” was Ron’s decided opinion.

A corner of Remus’s mouth quirked in amusement.

“I forgot to tell Hermione about the Taboo, and she nearly blew our cover, which of course is my fault, not hers,” Hero commented.
“Taboo?” Remus asked, frowning.

“You haven’t heard about that? They’ve put a Taboo on the name. They can find anyone who says it. Makes sense. The only people who use it are people who were close to Dumbledore. If they don’t know, and are captured before they can spread the word, it’d be like shooting fish in a barrel. Fortunately, I have a man behind enemy lines,” she said, teasingly putting a finger to her lips. Ron rolled his eyes.

“Er . . . right.”

“Tell us what happened after we left, we haven’t heard a thing since Dad told us the family were safe,” Ron said.

“Well, Kingsley saved us,” said Lupin. “Thanks to his warning, most of the wedding guests were able to Disapparate before they arrived.”

“Were they Death Eaters or Ministry people?” interjected Hermione.

A bitter smile crossed Remus’s lips. “A mixture, but to all intents and purposes they’re the same thing now. There were about a dozen of them, but they didn’t seem to have any idea you were supposed to have been there, Hero. Arthur heard a rumor that they tried to torture your whereabouts out of Scrimgeour before they killed him; if it’s true, he didn’t give you away.”

Unexpectedly, she felt guilt, alongside a rush of gratitude. She’d never really liked the Minister, and she hadn’t exactly made a secret of it. Even as polite as she’d been most of the time, her words had tended to be as cutting as she could make them. If the rumor was true, and she had no reason to doubt it, he’d protected her with his last breaths.

“The Death Eaters searched the Burrow from top to bottom,” Lupin went on. “They found the ghoul, but didn’t want to get too close, obviously – good thinking, Ron. And then they interrogated those of us who remained for hours. They were trying to get information on you, Hero, but of course nobody apart from the Order knew that you had been there.” He shook his head wonderingly. “It seems your disguise worked like a charm.

“At the same time that they were smashing up the wedding, more Death Eaters were forcing their way into every Order-connected house in the country. No deaths,” he added quickly, forestalling the question, “but they were rough. They burned down Dedalus Diggle’s house, but as you know he wasn’t there, and they used the Cruciatus Curse on Tonks’s family. Again, trying to find out where you went after you visited them. They’re all right – shaken, obviously, but otherwise okay.”

“The Dursleys?”

Remus shook his head. “I think they’re holed up in a rental property on an island. I can’t remember where exactly. I think it’s somewhere in the Hebrides.”

Hero blinked, trying to picture Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, Dudley, Piers, Dedalus, and Hestia crammed together in a little cottage in the back of beyond. Before, she’d have bet money Dudley would be begging to go back after three days without computer-access, but he had Piers to keep him company. Of course, that was a completely different kettle of fish.

“But . . . how did they get through all those protective charms?” Hermione asked, panic beginning to show in her eyes.

“What you’ve got to realize is that the Death Eaters have got the full might of the Ministry on their side now. They’ve got the power to perform brutal spells without fear of identification or arrest.
They managed to penetrate every defensive spell we’d cast against them, and once inside, they were completely open about why they’d come.”

“And are they bothering to give an excuse for torturing Hero’s whereabouts out of people?” Hermione demanded.

“Well,” said Lupin. He hesitated, then pulled out a folded copy of the *Daily Prophet*. “Here,” he said, pushing it across the table to Hero, “you’ll know sooner or later anyway. That’s their pretext for going after you.”

Hero smoothed out the paper. A huge photograph of her own face filled the front page. She noted absently that it was the same one from the battle at the Department of Mysteries, Dumbledore’s arm around her shoulders, guiding her out as she stared blankly around her. Ironic, considering the caption was, “Wanted for Questioning Concerning the Death of Albus Dumbledore.”

“Cheerful stuff,” she murmured, passing it back to him.

“So they’ve taken over the Daily Prophet,” Ron noted, his face grim.

“But surely people realize what’s going on!” Hermione cried, outraged.

Remus shrugged. “The coup has been smooth and virtually silent. The official version of Scrimgeour’s murder is that he resigned; he has been replaced by Pius Thicknesse, who is under the Imperius Curse.”

“Why didn’t You-Know-Who declare himself Minister of Magic?” asked Ron.

Lupin actually laughed. “He doesn’t need to. Effectively he is the Minister, but why should he sit behind a desk at the Ministry? His puppet, Thicknesse, is taking care of everyday business, leaving He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named free to extend his power beyond the Ministry.

“Naturally many people have deduced what has happened: there has been such a dramatic change in Ministry policy in the last few days, many are whispering that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named must be behind it. However, that is the point: they whisper. They daren’t confide in each other, not knowing whom to trust; they are scared to speak out. After all, what if it’s true? Their families and friends would be targeted. Yes, he is playing a very clever game. Declaring himself might have provoked open rebellion; remaining masked has created confusion, uncertainty, and fear.”

“And I’m guessing a lot of these policy changes involve me,” Hero said.

“A fair few, yeah. Objectively speaking, it’s a masterstroke. They take attention away from You-Know-Who and stick it on you instead. You would have been the natural rallying point for those who supported Dumbledore. Suggesting you had a role in his death causes doubt, alienating from you those who might have defended you. But that’s not all.” He passed the paper to Hermione this time, perhaps knowing Hero wouldn’t read it. “Look at page two.”

Hermione turned the pages with much the same expression of distaste she had worn when handling Secrets of the Darkest Art.

“Muggleborn Register,” she read aloud. “The Ministry of Magic is undertaking a survey of so-called “Muggleborns” the better to understand how they came to possess magical secrets.

“Recent research undertaken by the Department of Mysteries reveals that magic can only be passed from person to person when Wizards reproduce. Where no proven Wizarding ancestry exists, therefore, the so-called Muggleborn is likely to have obtained magical power by theft or force.
“‘The Ministry is determined to root out such usurpers of magical power, and to this end has issued an invitation to every so-called Muggleborn to present themselves for interview by the newly appointed Muggleborn Registration Commission.’”

“People won’t let this happen,” said Ron, not-looking terribly sure.

“I’m afraid it is happening, Ron,” Lupin replied bluntly. “Muggleborns are being rounded up as we speak. They’re sent to Azkaban unless they can prove at least one wizarding relative.”

“My God,” Hermione whispered, raising a trembling hand to her mouth. Ron wrapped an arm around her. She lowered her hand, her fingers curling into a fist. Her whole body shook with minute tremors. “What’s happening at Hogwarts?”

“I believe I can answer that, Miss Granger.”

They all twisted to look at the speaker and found Severus striding into the kitchen. Lupin had a strange look on his face, like he was trying very hard not to express something else. Hero didn’t notice, thankfully, her whole attention on Severus. For an instant, she thought she was going to keep her dignity and stay in her seat. She discarded the idea as quickly as it had occurred to her, shooting to her feet and launching herself into his arms.

Her smile glowed as she looked up at him. “Hi.”

He gave her a warm smile and kissed her cheek. “Hello, darling.”

Ron cleared his throat. They stepped apart, Hero blushing, Severus raising an eyebrow at the redhead, who refused to back down, staring back resolutely.

Hero rolled her eyes, still pink. “I can kiss him if I want.”

“Yes, fine. We have other things to worry about at the moment,” Ron said, exasperated.

Her blush returned in full force. “Oh. Right.” She went back to her seat, Severus taking the chair next to hers.

Hermione cleared her throat. “So, Hogwarts?”

Remus jumped in. “Attendance is mandatory, when it never was before. It used to be, parents had the choice to educate their children at home or send them abroad.”

Severus’s smooth tones flowed into the pause. “Of course, this allows the Dark Lord to have the entire magical population under his influence and eyes from a young age. It’s also been devised as a way of weeding out muggleborns from the moment they enter the wizarding world, as all students have to provide their blood status to prove they are of wizarding descent.”

Hero felt a pang as she thought of all the innocent, bright-eyed eleven-year-olds who would be poring over their Hogwarts letters, not knowing they would, in all likelihood, never see Hogwarts or their families again.

She looked at Severus. “What can we do?”

“What the Dark Lord doesn’t know won’t hurt us, and, as we all know, what the Dark Lord doesn’t know could fill libraries,” he replied. “As of a few days ago, for example, he had no idea Albus and I had anticipated this and removed the names of the muggleborns slated to attend this year. They can start once the war is over, I have their names and addresses on a separate list. He may even take it as
a sign that his goals are justified when no muggleborns appear. His arrogance has always meant that he was not as suspicious as he ought to have been.

“As to the rest, unfortunately, there have been two new additions to the staff—filling, of course, the Defense post and Muggle Studies following the death of Charity Burbage. The Dark Lord has given me little choice, which is to say none. I’m . . . I’m sorry, I wish I could have stopped it.”

Hero sighed. “Spit it out, Sev.”

“The Carrows siblings, Amycus and Alecto. He’ll be teaching Dark Arts—no pretense of defense. I shudder to think of what filth she’s going to be spewing at them.”

“They’re going to be around children?” Remus asked, horrified.

“Would you prefer Greyback?” Severus growled. Remus flinched. Severus’s lips twisted and he looked away. He sighed and looked back at the werewolf. “I’m sorry, that . . . was uncalled for.”

Remus blinked. “Er, it’s . . . fine.”

“What are things like back at the castle?” Hermione asked anxiously.

“It’s a very different place these days, Miss Granger. In comparison, I think you can count this place as warm, cozy, and inviting.” She winced. “If I’m lucky, I’ll be able to intimidate my colleagues enough that they won’t attempt a coup and get themselves killed, abandoning the students to the tender mercies of the Death Eaters.”

“You managed to set up the portal?”

“Yes, finally. I still don’t know that I’ll be able to see you terribly often. We’re all going to be up to our necks in work.”

“I know. Still, it’s better than nothing.”

Remus frowned. “Portal?”

“Oh. Severus has been trying to establish a portal between Grimmauld Place and the headmaster’s quarters.”

Remus was aghast. “But the risk! If anyone should invade his quarters, they could find it—and you!”

“Severus’s true loyalties are known by only a select few, only one of whom, other than Severus, is outside of this room. They wouldn’t dare enter his private rooms,” Hero argued.

Remus scoffed. “You put too much faith in honor among villains.”

“Not honor—self-preservation,” Severus retorted. “Albus Dumbledore was no fool. He knew quite well that his plan would set me up to take the place at the Dark Lord’s right hand. Not even Bellatrix Lestrange would dare go against me now.”

“Fine. On your own head be it. Hero, the Order’s under the impression that Dumbledore left you a mission. I’ll understand if the answer’s no, but can you tell me what the mission consists of?”

Hero glanced at Severus, Ron, and Hermione. “What do you think?”

Ron spoke first. “Frankly, Hero, I think we need all the help we can get.”
Hermione frowned. “We could probably use the help, but . . . I don’t know. Dumbledore seemed pretty clear on wanting this to stay as secret as possible.”

“Looks like you’re the deciding vote, Severus,” Hero said, gazing at him.

“He doesn’t need to know everything. Just enough to have a vague idea. He can help us, but won’t be able to give much of any information if he was captured.”

“You think I would betray you?” Remus demanded, outraged.

“I think it wouldn’t be up to you. The Dark Lord can pluck the information from your head simply by looking in your eyes. And I’ve seen stronger men than you break under torture. It takes a while, but they almost always give in . . . in the end.”

“Like with the flight from Privet Drive. Certain broader details, not the whole plan,” Hero summarized.

Severus inclined his head. “Precisely.” Remus was watching their exchange with growing bemusement.

“Alright,” Hero agreed, nodding. She turned to Remus. “Yes, he gave us a mission. It’s vital to the success of the war effort. It involves looking for certain objects and destroying them. I’m afraid it would give too much away to tell you why, even to hint at it. We have one at the moment, we just need a way to destroy it. Anything else you want to know?”

He leaned forward. “How can I help?”

“Don’t you have enough to worry about with the Order?”

He shook his head. “You said it’s vital to the war effort. If I can help out now and then, I could get more done than you on your own. The three of you can’t show your faces, and Severus will be needed in Scotland most of the time, from the sound of things. You might need someone on the outside.”

Ron snorted. Hero spoke up. “He’s right. You’re almost as infamous as us, certainly among the Death Eaters. Your face isn’t much of an improvement over ours.”

“But it is an improvement. They aren’t overtly attacking Order members, even the ones they know of. Arthur is still going in to work every day—”

“He’s being tracked,” Severus interrupted. The other four turned to stare at him, Ron’s expression intense. Severus raised an eyebrow. “It’s not like it’s terribly shocking. If they’re not moving openly against you, they’re monitoring you and biding their time.”

“Thank you. I’ll pass that along. I’ll make sure your name doesn’t come up. But they’re allowing us, at least for the moment, to go about our business. I’m not as easy to track because I spend little time in mainstream wizarding society.”

Severus frowned thoughtfully. “He’s not wrong. We could use someone unrelated to the mission itself who can pass information back and forth.”

Hero smiled fondly at him. “Ever the spy.”

“Naturally.”
“So, it’s settled, then?” Hermione asked. “Remus will help us when he can.”

“The risk seems minimal,” Severus noted. “Certainly not enough to outweigh the benefits.”

“Is there anything I can do at the moment?”

“I don’t know about you, necessarily, but someone has to do something brave and rather foolhardy,” Severus replied dryly.

Hero frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I have the Sword of Gryffindor, which is marvelous because we can destroy . . . the thing. Unfortunately, someone has to prove themselves a worthy Gryffindor before I can hand it over. It’s all quite annoying, but I’ve been assured that it can’t be helped. I don’t suppose any of you have any ideas, do you?”

Remus barked out a bitter laugh. “We’re living through times like these, when it’s brave just to survive, and a relic of a sword won’t consent to be handed over because that’s just not good enough?”

“In a depressing nutshell, yes,” Severus replied acerbically.

“Oh, well that’s just fan-bloody-tastic,” Hero interjected with a hard edge of sarcasm.

“Which one of us is it going to be?” Ron asked.

Hero’s expression turned thoughtful. “I think it should be you, Ron.”

“What? Me? But I’m . . .”

“Probably the most Gryffindor person here,” Hero finished for him. “These days, I’m just as Slytherin as I am Gryffindor. Hermione was almost a hat-stall because the Sorting Hat had such a difficult time deciding between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Severus is a very brave Slytherin who is still undeniably a Slytherin. Remus is one of the smartest people I know and probably could have gone to Ravenclaw. But you, Ron, are completely Gryffindor. You are relentlessly brave. You don’t back down. And don’t think I haven’t noticed how you’re always there for Hermione when she needs you. You’re the best fit. We just have to figure out how to prove that to the sword.”

Remus’s eyes lit up with an idea. “Spiders.”

Ron blanched. “What.”

“Your boggart was an enormous spider. Are you still afraid of them?”

Understanding flashed across Hermione’s face. “He’s terrified of them.”

Ron’s mouth fell open and he turned to glare at his fiancée. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

“The attic,” Hero suggested. Ron turned to stare at her, horrified. She went on, “I doubt Kreacher felt the need to clean the attic. It’s probably filled with spiders and cobwebs. We can have Kreacher put it up there and send Ron to go get it.”

Ron groaned. “You’re all horrible!”

“If you weren’t afraid, there wouldn’t be any point,” Severus reminded him. “Be grateful it’s spiders instead of walking through fire . . . or worse.”
Ron muttered something that sounded like “. . . doesn’t get much worse than spiders . . .” but it was difficult to say for sure.

“Excellent! It’s settled then,” Remus said, clapping his hands. He glanced at Severus. “Where is the sword, by the way?”

“It’s upstairs in my room.”

“Kreacher!” Hero called. The elf appeared with a crack of displaced air. “Could you take the silver and ruby sword that’s in Severus’s room and put it up in the attic?”

“The room Mistress has been sharing with Master Severus?”

Hero turned bright red and cleared her throat. “Er, yes. That one.”

Kreacher bowed. “Kreacher shall be doing so as quickly as may be.” He Disapparated again.

At the realization that yes, this was actually going to happen, Ron had begun to look more grey than white. Hero remembered his face at the age of thirteen, going into the forest to meet a colony of giant, man-eating spiders despite his fear. She remembered him at the age of twelve, sacrificing himself without hesitation so that they could defeat Voldemort. She felt a rush of affection and respect for her oldest friend. *I don’t deserve all these wonderful people*, she thought.

A few minutes later, Kreacher returned, bowing to her. “Kreacher has placed the sword.”

Ron swallowed thickly and looked around the group. He nodded, his face resolute, if slightly ill. “Right, then.” He got up and walked out of the kitchen, not looking back.
Salutations, fair readers. Hope you're all doing well in the New Year, and are happy, if not warm. Anyway, the conclusion of our hero's noble quest. Why did it have to be spiders, Ron? Because it's an important opportunity for personal growth. Or, if you're feeling more cynical, because I felt like it.

Ron made his way through the empty house alone. It was far from silent, his heart thundering in his ears. Why did it always have to be spiders? He really hated Fred and George right about then. He’d never been able to look at that teddy bear again without remembering. All this for a bloody stupid sword.

He kept going all the same, as he’d known he would. He cursed everyone and everything he could think to blame for the situation, but he continued to make his way through the house, up to the attic. It wouldn’t be that bad, right? It would only be filled with cobwebs, and dust, and spiders that would probably bite him because they weren’t going to like being disturbed. So, really, not that bad. His attempts to convince himself were, if anything, making it worse. He’d never realized before how long it took to walk up three flights of stairs.

Eventually, though, he came to the set of stairs that lowered from the ceiling, like back home, leading to the attic. He took a deep breath and murmured, "Discendio." The stairs, more of a ladder really, opened out and dropped to the floor. Ron closed his eyes, trying to steel himself to go up them. Of course, that wasn’t the hard part. He opened his eyes and glanced up into the darkness, like a yawning mouth. He lit his wand, holding it in his hands as he gripped the sides of the ladder. One foot in front of the other. That’s all he needed to do. He refused to think about what would come next. He closed his eyes again and just went by touch. One foot. In front of the other. Easy-peasy.

Of course, it wasn’t, but he got to the top eventually anyway. He lit his wand and looked around. The space was swathed in webs and dust, like the tombs they’d explored in Egypt. The spiders he knew were lurking were a lot more frightening than any mummies could hope to be, even ones with multiple heads. His skin prickled as he sweated. Afraid. He was so afraid. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and his skin crawled, as if he was already covered in the horrible things. He shuddered at the thought.

Brave. He needed to be brave. Why was that again? Right. The sword. So they could destroy Horcruxes. So Hermione and his family and everyone else could be safe. Hermione, he just had to focus on Hermione. If he did that, maybe he could forget the creepy-crawlies on all sides and get out without crying like a little girl.

Ok. Sword. He looked for a gleam of silver, a glitter of ruby. All he saw were cobwebs, covering every surface. He tried to swallow, only to find his mouth dry. His hands were shaking, his palms clammy. He took a deep breath. He’d have to go further into the attic in order to find the sword. Of course. It was supposed to be a test, wasn’t it? He had to prove himself worthy first.

He took a hesitant step forward. The dust showed his footprints like snow. He raised his wand, a light in the darkness. He tried to steady his hand. Slowly, he rotated, searching for that tell-tale gleam. If I were Kreacher, where would I have put it? he asked himself. Of course, that was
assuming such an ancient, powerful magical artifact hadn’t become sentient. It wouldn’t be the first time – Excalibur was only the most famous one. If he had to prove himself worthy to the sword, it stood to reason it would make things more difficult for him. He couldn’t even resent it. It wasn’t human, it didn’t live. It just . . . was.

The unfortunate fact, aside from the fact that he was doing this in the first place, was that No. 12 Grimmauld Place was a fairly large house. It wasn’t particularly wide, but it extended back much farther than it should have. Undetectable extension charms were part and parcel of most wizarding architecture. The Burrow had its fair share, which wasn’t terribly surprising considering how many people inhabited it. Really inconvenient when you needed to find something quickly, though. Then again, that was probably the point.

_Come on, if I were a mad house elf, where would I put a sword?_ he asked himself again, cautiously venturing deeper into the attic that really, really looked like a tomb. He almost expected to come to a stone grave sculpture like at Westminster Abbey, covering the body of Godric Gryffindor, the sword clasped in its hands. He shuddered and tried to put the image out of his mind.

As he crept forward, his eyes scanning the space, he realized it wasn’t empty, though it had seemed to contain little more than cobwebs and dust at first glance. The dust and cobwebs covered things that might have sat untouched for years or even decades. Paintings were tossed carelessly here and there, perhaps of those who had been stricken from the family tree, though it was impossible to tell through all the dust.

Statues were littered about, ugly statues. Ron wondered if they’d just run out of room or if even the Blacks had some degree of taste. Their eyes seemed to follow him, even filmed with dust and spider silk.

A voice not unlike the Sorting Hat’s popped into his head. “They sent you because they felt you were the most Gryffindor of them. But are you? You were placed in Gryffindor because you were a Weasley. Who’s to say you _belong_? Face your fears, Ronald Weasley, or leave emptyhanded.” It whispered in his ear even as it seemed to boom and echo through the attic. Maybe it was just in his head, maybe it wasn’t, but either way he knew what he had to do. Nowhere was it written that he had to like it.

Grimacing, full of trepidation, he went over to nearest bit of cobweb, hanging from the ceiling like a horrible lace curtain. His hands out, looking away, he ripped it down. In an instant, it seemed, spiders were swarming all over him. They weren’t even daddy longlegs, which he had, as much as he could, gotten sort of used to. No, they were _hairy_. Hairy and horrible. A scream was in his throat, but he resisted the impulse for fear they might crawl into his mouth.

It was everything he’d ever been afraid of – well, apart from them being the size of horses, but he’d already faced that fear. They came and they came, as if the gates of hell had opened and instead of fire, it was sending him spiders. The crawling on his skin he’d felt before was nothing compared to this. He’d invited it, knowingly. It was like putting your hand in a flame and holding it there. He held very still, subjecting himself completely to the experience. He had to conquer his fear.

After a few seconds, his stomach was starting to voice complaints about the situation, and he decided he’d done enough conquering to please anyone. He started to roll around on the floor, thrashing, trying to get them off. As he rolled, he felt something hard in his pocket – the Deluminator. There was no light in the attic other than the glow of his wand and the weak sunlight struggling to shine through the dusty dormer windows, but none of them had any idea, really, what the thing might be capable of. It was worth a try. He wrestled it out of his pocket, trying not to panic as the spiders kept coming, covering him, biting every inch of flesh they could find. Finally, he freed it.
from his jeans pocket and clicked it. Every spider on him was propelled several feet backwards. He leapt to his feet, staring down at the thing in his hand in wonder. Wondering if he could be lucky twice, he clicked it again. No ball of light came out of it, but it almost seemed as if there was a light inside himself. Suddenly, though he couldn’t explain how, he knew exactly where the sword was. He turned around and headed back towards the ladder. Hidden behind an old sofa with tattered upholstery was the Sword of Gryffindor. He reached and picked it up by the hilt, holding it high so it shone in the dim light. It almost seemed to sing in his hand. Something about the moment seemed so strangely, utterly right. Nodding in satisfaction, he clambered down the ladder, keeping hold of the sword with one hand and gripping the ladder with the other. He thought he heard a sleepy whisper from the sword saying, “You’ll do,” but he was probably imagining things.

Meanwhile, down in the kitchen, Hero, Severus, Hermione, and Remus were left sitting in awkward silence around the kitchen table.

“So . . . er . . . how’ve . . . you been?” Hero asked Remus.

“Same as everyone, I suppose. Trying not to piss off the new regime and get captured.”

“Right.”

They lapsed back into silence, as it was slightly less awkward than conversation.

“More tea, Mistress?” Kreacher asked helpfully, holding up the teapot.

“Oh, I suppose. Thank you.” She took a sip after he’d poured, then brooded into it. Severus reached for her hand and squeezed it.

Remus’s alert amber eyes didn’t miss the motion. He set his teacup down with rather more force than was strictly necessary. “How could you, Severus? How could you seduce her like this? She’s a child!”

Hero’s eyes blazed as she glared at him. “I am not a child! And he didn’t seduce me! I seduced him!” she snapped. “I thought I made that clear at Christmas.”

“No, you told me how you felt.”

“And I kissed him! Not the other way around! It took him ages to come around to the idea. He’s a damn sight too honorable. And look, I don’t need you telling me whether or not he’s good enough for me. I’m going to be happy while I can, and I’m done caring what anyone else thinks!” she finished, breathing heavily, her hand still in Severus’s.

“Hero, he only wants what’s best for you. It’s hardly his fault he’s wrong,” Severus murmured soothingly.

Hermione was, wisely, keeping silent as she watched the exchange and tucked it away for later consideration. When one listened, one learned all sorts of things. She’d known that from a young age, when she had learned by eavesdropping on her parents that they had tried to have children besides her but had been unsuccessful, all their attempts ending in miscarriages or simply nothing. After she’d first overheard them talking about it, she’d never asked for a sibling again.

“You’re defending me?” Remus asked, incredulous.
Severus shrugged. “I made a promise. I intend to keep it.”

“You said yourself that he’s a good man,” Hero pointed out.

Remus sighed. “I did say that,” he admits. “But I also knew him to be a man prickly enough to make a thistle sigh with envy.”

Hero stuck her nose in the air. “I like him. Thistle-y-ness and all. I may not like everything he’s done, but I like him.” Severus recognized the firmness of her chin and knew it’d be pointless to try to dissuade her; he hoped Lupin did.

Remus exhaled in frustration. “I just . . . want you to be happy. And safe.”

“You don’t trust him,” she accused.

“Frankly, no. It’s not that I don’t believe what you’ve told me, or even that I mistrust him in general. But I remember how he treated you, Hero. Pardon me if I find the whole thing a little disturbing.”

“He does make me happy. And who among us is really safe these days? The safest I ever feel lately is with Severus. And maybe it’s a lie, but I don’t want any other truth. I trust him. I trust him completely, with my life and with my death. Nothing you can say will change my mind. Once Sirius decided no one but you would do, do you really think anyone on Earth could have talked him out of it?”

A ghost of a smile tugged at his lips. “No,” he admitted.

“Well, then. Stop being a hypocrite. And your copy of Finnegan’s Wake is upstairs if you want it.”

The half-coalesced smile turned bitter. “I don’t. I’m sorry, I just . . . can’t.”

“I understand, Lupin. Whatever suits you, of course,” Severus replied. “We would never presume to judge your choices.”

Hermione winced at that. At that point, saving them from the prospect of further conversation, Ron came clattering down the steps to the kitchen. He stabbed the sword into the air triumphantly.

“I bring you the Sword of Gryffindor that you might slay the foul beast – my lady,” he said, hiding a goofy grin as he went down on one knee and presented it to Hermione. She stared at him for a second before bursting out giggling.

Still trying to hide his grin, he said, “Can’t say that was the reaction I had in mind, but I suppose it’ll have to do.”

Hermione, still stifling laughter, took the sword from him and laid it on the table. Ron got to his feet and glared at Hero and Severus. “And you two are evil. Evil.”

Hero waved a hand vaguely, dismissing the accusation. “Yes, yes. Just sit down.”

Grumbling and scowling, Ron did. He sighed. “So, what happens now?”

Severus cast him a jaundiced glance. “We destroy the artifact. Obviously.”

“Well, yeah, I know. I meant, who’s going to do the . . . stabby thing?” he asked, miming thrusting a blade. Severus just rolled his eyes, apparently not finding words with enough vitriol to fully express his opinion.
“I think Kreacher should do it,” Hero said firmly. The house elf’s head popped up.

“Mistress would allow Kreacher to do it?”

“Well, sure. I already told you I want you to do it. It’s all thanks to you that we have it. Regulus asked you to do it. It’s only fair.”

He looked like he was about to cry. Fortunately for all concerned, he managed to get ahold of himself, restraining himself to a deep bow.

“Mistress is wise, and most kind.”

Trying to ignore the fierce blush blooming across her cheeks, Hero swallowed and turned to Hermione. “Hermione, could you hand Kreacher the sword so he can get on with this . . . er . . . most noble work?”

Her face taking on a solemn cast, the other girl did so, presenting it to the elf as if she had just used it to knight him. He took it carefully; Hero remembered full-well how much it weighed. Hero was about to bring the locket out of the mokeskin when she realized that Remus couldn’t be allowed to know about the locket in case the information was taken from him. She glanced at Severus, her eyes darting to Remus and back again.

He nodded slightly in understanding. “Remus, could you step outside for a moment?”

He blinked, looking away from Hermione and Kreacher to focus on Severus. “What?”

“This is one of those things that, for all concerned, it’s better you don’t know.”

“Oh. I suppose that makes sense. I’ll just . . . be outside.”

“The drawing room might be better,” Hermione said, glancing at him over her shoulder.

He raised a hand, indicating he’d heard, as he left. Once he’d been gone long enough to probably be out of earshot, Hero drew the locket out of the pouch. She passed it to Kreacher, who took it reverently, as if it was a holy object. It was not, she knew, because it contained a piece of Voldemort’s soul, but rather because this would be the completion of his final task from Master Regulus, the last act of a commitment as all-consuming as religious fervor.

Ron tried to pry it open and frowned. He looked around at the group. “How do we get it open?”

It dropped into Hero’s head, and once it had, she couldn’t understand how she hadn’t seen it before. It was sort of glaringly obvious.

“I’ll ask it to open in Parseltongue. Kreacher, could you give it to me for a second?”

He did so, bowing and stepping back. Hero held it up by the chain, taking a deep breath as she focused on the glittering, inlaid stones in the shape of a serpent. “Open.”

It fell open to reveal panes of glass that seemed to cover twin infinities of dark smoke. And then, resolving out of the smoke, came two eyes, red as the rubies in the sword held in Kreacher’s trembling hands. Hero laid it on the table, the wood strong, heavy English oak.

“Hero Potter,” it whispered, “I have seen your hopes and your fears. Everything you wish I can give you – and everything you dread can also be yours from my hand—”

“You are wasting your time,” she interrupted. The Horcrux cut off, seeming to stare quizzically at
her. She nodded to Kreacher. “He’s your man. Elf.”

The old elf looked at her, unsure. The sword was held loosely at his side. Honestly, it wasn’t much shorter than him. She nodded at him, giving him an encouraging smile. He climbed onto a chair to get better leverage. He raised the sword above his head, his arms trembling with effort. The presence in the room seemed taken aback by this turn of events, but almost seemed to shake its head and soldier on despite the oddness of the circumstances.

“Elf. Listen now to your betters. What call do you have to interfere in the affairs of men? What business is any of this of yours? Put down the sword, and concentrate on the dwindling days left to you to serve wizarding kind.” Hero was the Girl-Who-Lived, and she’d never heard Tom Riddle speak so dismissively. Somehow, she’d forgotten how most wizards regarded house elves. She had offered Kreacher the chance because it had seemed the right thing to do. She hadn’t realized that, in the Dark Lord’s eyes, it added insult to injury.

Kreacher was looking down at the locket with a look of deepest loathing. “You are responsible for the death of my master, Regulus. You lost my poor mistress two sons, little though she wanted one of them. You hunt my new mistress, who, in her wisdom and kindness, has ordered Kreacher to destroy you. She is right.” With that, he punctured both panes of glass in short order.

There was a sort of scream as spirit, like that dark smoke, poured out of the wounds inflicted on the locket. The room went dark, darker than if someone had used Peruvian Instant Darkness powder. And then, like a summer storm that blows in in a minute and is gone just as quickly, the darkness cleared as if it had never been.

Hermione shivered, almost more of a shudder. Ron wrapped an arm around her, looking distinctly troubled himself. Kreacher had a thousand-yard stare, as if he had seen things that would never leave him for as long as he lived. They probably wouldn’t, whatever it had been. Hero found herself hideously grateful that they had no idea what he had seen and so could be spared, themselves.

She swallowed, struggling to maintain her composure. She gathered the locket in one hand and offered it to Kreacher. He stared at it uncomprehendingly.

She cleared her throat. “Kreacher, do you want it?”

His eyes shut tightly and his whole body shuddered. “No, Mistress. No. It is an evil object. Kreacher only tried to keep it for the sake of Master Regulus’s orders. Even with the spirit removed, it is . . . evil.” His eyes opened again, looking ages older than he had when he’d made them all tea.

Hero nodded. “Right, then. I understand. You don’t have to. Although, we, er, we do have the one that belonged to, to Master Regulus. Would you like to have that one?” she asked timidly.

His eyes grew as large and round as saucers, shining with joy. “Kreacher would, Mistress.”

She smiled and rummaged in the mokeskin pouch for the locket she had recovered with Dumbledore, complete with its note from Regulus. She slipped it over Kreacher’s head, the locket resting on his bony chest, in pride of place. It gleamed against his tea towel, which was cleaner than before, but still faded. He was no beauty, but the blazing joy in his eyes shone much brighter than his outward appearance could dim.
So, first week back at college, it's been a bit nuts. For example, I have my first exam next week. It's on a 250 page book and associated lectures and is worth 20% of my final grade. So, you know, that's fun. But here, have a chapter.

Remus stayed another twenty minutes before leaving in something of a rush. It might have been the house itself and the ghosts that haunted it, it might have been Hero’s hostility, it might have been the awkwardness of interacting with Severus. In all honesty, it was probably all three.

After he left, the four of them sat around the kitchen table. Kreacher was off dusting something. Occasionally, they heard his cheerful whistle as he moved through the house.

“What happens next?” Hermione asked, posing the question that was running through all their minds, like a dog chasing its tail.

Hero sighed. “We find the rest of the Horcruxes. We know what and where one is, what the second is, and no bloody clue for the third. The snake, which is a problem all its own, the Cup, and something else.”

Ron frowned. “What do you think it could be?”

“Dumbledore thought it was a founder’s object, like the locket and the cup. Beyond that, though, he wasn’t sure. Did he say anything to you, Sev?”

“I wasn’t supposed to know about them to begin with,” he reminded her. “But he didn’t expect you to work so quickly. He didn’t think you’d need the sword until winter. But if, indeed, the Dark Lord obtained an object belonging to a founder, it stands to reason there would be some record of it. Miss Granger, perhaps you could look through the Black library?”

Hermione went slightly pink. “Of course.”

“Do you think there’s going to be anything? We couldn’t find much information in there on Horcruxes when we looked,” Ron pointed out.

Severus gave him a sardonic look. “I think you’ll find, Mr. Weasley, that the Hogwarts Founders are a rather more mainstream subject than ripping apart one’s soul for the purpose of obtaining immortality. Any surviving relics would be common knowledge presuming one bothers to look.”

Hermione gave him a small, knowing smile. “A dangerous assumption.”

“What about where?” Ron asked. “It’s great if we figure out what it is, but we still need to know where they are before we can do anything about them.”

Hero frowned thoughtfully. “Dumbledore thought he chose the locations with as much care as he did the objects themselves. The ring, he hid in the last dwelling place of the line of Slytherin. The diary he gave to Lucius Malfoy. The locket was in a cave, which doesn’t seem to make sense.”
Severus’s expression became calculating. “Clearly, in his mind, it does. What do you know about the cave?”

“He went there as a kid, with the orphanage. He tortured some of the others there.”

“If he considers himself every bit as important as Salazar Slytherin, perhaps he thinks of that place as a stop for pilgrims. The beginning of his violent legacy,” Severus suggested.

“A mark of his origins and his triumph over them,” Hero added.

“Precisely.”

“Hero, you can get inside his head a bit. Where do you reckon he put the others?”

“Well . . . if I was going to go batshit crazy and make myself immortal, I’d probably put my Horcrux at Hogwarts. It’s my home, and I think he felt the same way.”

“Well, Hogwarts is basically a one-room shack, so it shouldn’t be too difficult to find, right?” Ron remarked sarcastically.

“Much as I hate to admit it, Mr. Weasley is correct. Hogwarts is an ancient building with seven floors, not including towers and dungeons. I doubt any living soul has seen every room, let alone gone through them. Added to that, as I’m sure you remember, it’s a labyrinth, with stairs that lead different places on Fridays, doors that aren’t doors, secret passageways, and more nooks and crannies than a crumpet.”

Hero waves a hand vaguely. “We’ll . . . figure it out. It’ll be fine. So, Hogwarts is one. Anyone else have any ideas?”

“If he gave one to Lucius Malfoy, he might have done something similar with another one,” Hermione suggested.

“Severus, can you think of anyone he might have given it to?”

“Only one name comes to mind: Bellatrix Lestrange.”

“He’d trust her with a piece of his soul?” Ron asked, disgusted.

Severus shrugged. “He trusted her enough to choose her to bear him an heir.”

They all stared at him in horror. “What?” Hero choked out.

He shrugged. “I would imagine that he would prefer the Slytherin line continued in some form beyond himself. In any case, they have a daughter. Neither one pays the child any mind. I believe she is left in the care of Malfoy house elves for the most part.”

“That poor little girl,” Hermione murmured.

“It’s quite unfortunate,” Severus agreed, “though one imagines she’s in better hands with the house elves than she would be with either of her parents. In any case, I can think of no one else he would trust with something of this magnitude.”

“Then maybe the question isn’t so much what Volleyball would have done with it, but where Bellatrix decided to put it,” Ron mused.

“Right. I’ll be sure to ask her the next time I see her,” Severus retorted acidly.
Hero laid a hand on his arm. “Maybe we can ask Draco what he thinks. She’s his aunt, I’m sure he knows her better than any of us, though that wouldn’t exactly be difficult. I mean, didn’t she teach him Occlumency?”

“True. Of course, trying to get time alone to talk to him is a problem all its own.”

“At least we have some idea of which one she has. It’s either the cup or the one we don’t know about.”

Hermione sighed. “I’ll work on the research. Otherwise, there’s not much we can do where the Horcruxes are concerned. Any suggestions?” she asked Severus.

“There isn’t much to be honest. You three can’t show your faces in public, at least not anywhere a member of the wizarding world could recognize you. We accomplished something important this afternoon. And we’re half-done. We’ll get there. I think, from this point forward, besides finding information on the Horcruxes, your – our – most important consideration needs to be secrecy. We’ll hardly get very far if the Dark Lord finds out what we’re up to. Unfortunately, one of us has a direct connection to his brain,” he finished pointedly, looking at Hero.

She sighed. “So, Occlumency?”

“Precisely. Though, if it’s any consolation, I shouldn’t think it will be anything like it was before.”

Hero frowned. “Why?”

“Well, you trust me, which is an excellent start. And I think you’ll find I’m rather more patient when I like you.”

It seemed, almost against her will, a smile crept onto her face. “Well, frankly, I can’t imagine how it could get much worse.”

He winced slightly, quickly hiding it. “Touché. When would you like to start?”

*Is never an option?* Knowing that it was not, she shrugged and said, “We might as well just do it now.”

A corner of his mouth curled into a smirk. “Magnanimous of you, I’m sure.”

Ron cleared his throat, and they glanced over at him, startled. Hermione was looking away, embarrassed. Hero blushed at being caught forgetting that her best friends were even in the room. Ron smirked knowingly.

“Where do you want to work on it?” Hero asked, trying to recover her dignity.

“The, er, drawing room should suffice,” Severus replied after clearing his throat.

Hero got to her feet. “Well, let’s get this over with.”

Not the most encouraging of sentiments, but Severus followed on her heels nonetheless.

*Ron and Hermione were left in the kitchen. “Well, that was awkward,” Ron remarked.

“I don’t know, I’m beginning to think they’re sweet together,” Hermione put in thoughtfully.*
He stared at her, incredulous. “Did we just witness the same conversation?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not entirely sure we did. Put aside what it’s like to interact with Professor Snape and focus on what he and Hero were like together.”

He frowned thoughtfully, recalling the way they’d spoken to each other, the way they’d moved around each other. The looks they gave each other that seemed unreadable, and probably were to just about anyone else.

“Oh.”

Hermione smiled. “Yes, oh. I mean, just think about what they’ve been like in class together recently. I didn’t really notice at the time, but looking back . . . I mean, think about when Seamus brought up that article on Mundungus Fletcher pretending to be an Inferius.”

It took him a minute as he searched his memory. He frowned, reliving the moment. “Oh. Oh, Merlin!” he cried, looking appalled. “They were . . .”

“Mmm-hmm,” Hermione confirmed, her smile becoming smug.

His horror faded, though he wrinkled his nose. “I suppose it makes sense, but . . .”

Hermione smiled, amused. “What’s wrong with you? You weren’t like this when you first found out.”

He cringed. “I know, I know! It’s just, it was all hypothetical then. Seeing it in person, it’s a bit different. And it’s not even that they’re all gushy and mushy and disgustingly in love. I mean, you can tell that they are, but . . . honestly, it sort of reminds me of my parents, or Bill and Fleur. Like . . . they’re so in love, they don’t have to act over the top about it. As if nothing and no one, not even my mother on the warpath could split them up.”

Hermione looked at him skeptically. “You think Bill and Fleur aren’t disgustingly sweet together?”

Ron laughed. “Well, not exactly, though they’re certainly better than they were at Christmas, when she was feeding him bits of turkey off her fork.” Hermione looked revolted. “But, I mean, my mother did everything in her power to make sure Fleur wouldn’t marry Bill. And none of it did a damn thing. That’s what I meant.”

Hermione looked at him skeptically. “You think Bill and Fleur aren’t disgustingly sweet together?”

Ron laughed. “Well, not exactly, though they’re certainly better than they were at Christmas, when she was feeding him bits of turkey off her fork.” Hermione looked revolted. “But, I mean, my mother did everything in her power to make sure Fleur wouldn’t marry Bill. And none of it did a damn thing. That’s what I meant.”

Hermione raised her eyebrow again. “And that’s horrifying?”

“Well, yeah! He’s the greasy git dungeon bat! And even putting that aside, he’s our professor and he’s never liked us. And it’s not even – or at least not completely – that it’s a professor dating a student. It’s really awkward because of that, but it’d be awkward anyway, just having my best mate date someone who’s always hated me.”

Hermione shook her head, smiling slightly. “No, he’s never hated you. You’d know if he hated you. He just didn’t – and probably still doesn’t – like you. Neville, he held in the deepest contempt. It was always Hero he hated. And you know what they say about the thin line between love and hate . . .”

Ron winced. “I get it, alright? I just want to know as little as possible about my best mate’s sex life. Same goes for my former professor, especially when it amounts to the same thing,” Ron said firmly.

Hermione laid her head face-down in her arms. Ron wondered if he’d said the complete wrong thing again. Was there a better way to phrase that sentiment? Odd sounds emerged that sounded
like his fiancée was sobbing; alarmed, he touched her shoulder.

She sat up, and he realized she wasn’t crying, she was laughing. Peals of laughter rang through the kitchen. Hermione kept laughing even after she started to cry.

Ron scowled. “It’s not that funny.”

“No, it is,” she got out, shaking her head. “Oh, oh, my sides hurt! Can’t—stop—laughing!”

Ron sighed and waited for her to stop, knowing there wasn’t much he could do. At least he could still make her laugh.

* * *

Hero and Severus made their way from the kitchen to the drawing room. Even though the circumstances were worlds apart, she could help but remember the last time they’d attempted Occlumency training. He’d told her here, in this very room. Sirius had been there then, and she’d had to keep them from trying to kill each other. At that point, she’d just started to realize hate wasn’t the only thing she felt for him. And now here they were, side by side. Even so, she felt like the memory of the way they used to be was a cold that was seeping into her bones.

Severus stopped in the cleared space in the middle of the room, then turned to look at her. He read the apprehension on her face as easily as a page from a book. His hand came to rest on her shoulder.

“Hero,” he said softly, “sit down.”

She did, her knees seeming almost to give out as she took a seat on the sofa. Severus settled beside her.

He looked at her with fathomless shadows in his eyes. “I will never be able to express the depth of my regret for how I’ve treated you over the years. Our last attempt at this is, I’m sure, not a pleasant memory for either of us. Be that as it may . . . I don’t want to lose you a second before I have to. It’s terribly selfish, I know, but I find I cannot help myself.

“Darling . . . it’s going to be different this time. I can’t convince you unless you let me try. Please.”

Hero took a deep breath, held it, then let it out slowly. She swallowed, then spoke. “Okay. But I need this to be completely different than it was last time.”

He reached up to cup her cheek. “Whatever you need.”

“Kiss me.” Kiss me until I forget my own name, until I forget what it was ever like not to love you, to be without you.

If he was surprised by the request, he didn’t show it. His hand moved to cradle her jaw, drawing her closer. He bent his head and met her lips, applying the lightest pressure. Hero surged up, twining her arms around his neck as she kissed back fiercely. She wanted him to fill her senses, to consume them. She threw herself headfirst into the experience of the moment, refusing to exist anywhere else.

When Severus drew back, they were both panting and she was practically in his lap. He looked down at her, pupils dilated, skin flushed, swollen lips parted, and wondered if he’d ever seen anything more beautiful.

“We . . . we should move onto the Occlumency,” he rasped, wondering how on earth he was supposed to concentrate now. Hero nodded, looking mildly dazed.
“Should . . . should I stand up?”

Severus shook his head. “It’s not necessary. Just keep looking into my eyes.” With that, as gently as he could, he slipped inside her mind.

It was an entirely different experience from a year and a half before. That had been violent, painful. This was gentle, like his hand as he had cradled her jaw just moments before, like his fingertips on her bare skin. Before it had been an invasion; this was a homecoming. On a sigh, she let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

Her thoughts were like kites, brightly colored, floating on an invisible breeze that carried them where it would. They drifted lazily, contentedly, brightly colored shapes against a clear, blue sky. This was nothing more than the veneer of her present state of mind, as changeable as the sea on a summer’s day, one minute calm, the next roiled by a thunderstorm. It was that storm-tossed sea he sought now; diving into the waters of her mind, beneath the stillness at the surface that belied the chaos hidden in the depths.

It was altogether a rather different experience from the last time. The landscape had been wilder then, less restrained. Even so, it retained an element of savage beauty. It was at once achingly lovely, and achingly sad. For even amid constructions of thought that were no less than art, there was decay. Most of the colors, once so bright, were tainted by a patina of death, faded with despair.

But that couldn’t be his primary concern at the moment. With more effort than he cared to admit, he closed off his emotional reaction from his conscious mind. She did not need his sympathy; she needed his help.

He caught a trail of thought, hung with memories like bunting. Around him, similar to a Pensieve memory, was the History of Magic classroom, glowing with the light of a shield Patronus. A Dementor was held back as Lupin looked on, pride shining from his face. A memory of night by the Black Lake, hundreds of Dementors swarming Black and Hero. It was an incongruous picture – how could Hero have seen herself? But then she raised her wand and cried out the incantation, and a silver stag cantered forward, driving the Dementors away. Beyond that, associations spun away in all directions. He caught snippets of Lily and James talking, Severus himself facing down Lupin that horrible night, a confrontation with two Dementors in an alley, and the Hogwarts chapel, the moment he’d kissed her.

There was no resistance to him viewing any of them. He supposed that made a certain sense, considering he was in a number of them. He let go, hunting for a different web of thoughts and associations – one she would be less inclined to allow him access to. He sifted through fleeting thoughts of spending time with Weasley and Granger, of talking to Black and being in this house with him. All were more or less open. He felt a growing sense of frustration and drew back. The drawing room re-materialized around him.

“Hero,” he began, sighing. “Nowhere is it written that because you allow me into your bed you must also provide me with unrestricted access to your thoughts and feelings. In fact, it would be rather helpful if you didn’t. You are entitled to your privacy. Your mind should be a sanctuary.”

She scowled. “I know, I know. It’s just . . . it feels like it isn’t. It feels like everyone and their brother’s had a poke around up there.”

“Even if they have, it doesn’t mean you have to continue to give them unrestricted access. Your mind must be protected, not merely because you know sensitive information, but because you deserve it. You can’t let me in because you trust me. Trust is a luxury you do not have. You need to be able to recognize an invasion of your mind and repel it, regardless of who it is. You cannot
hesitate.” He smoothed her hair back, brushing her temple. “Ideally, you shouldn’t even need to think about it. The protections should just be there so no one can get in in the first place. Now, will you try?”

She sighed. “I’ll do my best, but we both known I’m not very good at this.”

“Try anyway. Do whatever you think will work best to keep me out.”

Somehow, those words sparked an idea. He was just restating the basic idea of what they were attempting, but for some reason, she heard them in a way she hadn’t before. It was like looking up at the stars every night for years, then suddenly making out the constellations. She met Severus’s eyes and nodded. He stared deep into hers, slipping back into her mental landscape.

Restriction. That’s what it was about. This goes here, and that goes there, and a great big “Do Not Enter” sign plastered over most areas. Only, people breaking in anywhere aren’t usually the type to obey signage. Which is why people get security – or put bars on windows. To keep what’s on the outside out and on the inside in. Padlocks all down the door and bars on the windows of the first place you ended up. And beyond that, in case that wasn’t enough, a moat, and in that moat pissed off mer-folk. And beyond that, a maze, like the one from the Triwizard Tournament, with much more terrifying obstacles than jinxes and sphynxes. It was all quite familiar to Hero, and she might have even been able to get past it all in reality. But she wasn’t most people.

Beyond the maze, even then, was a mile of no man’s land in every direction, planted with land mines, edged with barbed wire. It was only on the far side of that that her ordinary mindscape began. Kites and seas of memories, and in those memories a whole world of things, like shoes and ships and sealing wax, and cabbages and kings. The only pieces of her in that sad place in the middle were those necessary to give it life. And she’d spent enough time there to have plenty of memories for that.

Severus found himself in a small room, the walls a sickly peach color. Behind him was a narrow bed. Before him was a chest of drawers. To his left was a wardrobe and a door covered in locks. To his left was a chair beneath a window with bars on it. It felt real, as if he could bend down and feel the texture of the carpet, smell the scent of the washing powder that lingered on the bedding and the clothes in the chest of drawers. It seemed far more than a simple construct of memory.

Suddenly, Hero was standing next to him. She looked up at him, her eyes bright behind her glasses. “I’ve redecorated. Do you like it?”

“What is this place?”

“This is my room back at Privet Drive. If you want to test my defenses, I would suggest the window. The bars were only there for a few weeks the summer I turned twelve, so I’d guess they’d be the weakest overall. The locks on the door have been there for years. I’m afraid I don’t think you’re quite thin enough to try the cat flap.”

Severus strode to the window and looked out. There was an expanse of water, with what looked to be some form of topiary on the other side. He looked down and noticed a merperson bearing its teeth at him.

“I’d rather not risk it,” he muttered, stepping back and looking back at Hero. She looked . . . pleased. Not smug, but satisfied.

“Would you like the grand tour?” she asked, slipping her hand into his.
“If you like.”

She walked, not to the window, but to the door, Severus following her, bemused. She turned the handle, and it swung open. She looked back at him with a grin.

He shook his head. “Clever girl. Clever, manipulative girl.”

“Heard that.”

He gestured for her to lead the way. He followed her along a corridor, down a flight of stairs, and out the front door. There was a small, grassy bank, then the water.

“Care for a swim?” she asked, smiling mischievously. He looked down and realized why; he was wearing swimming trunks. When he looked back at her, he saw she was wearing a bathing suit as well, so he supposed that was alright. She dove gracefully into the water, cutting through it easily. He shrugged and jumped in after her.

He reached the other side not long after she did, and they both pulled themselves onto the grass, dripping wet. They lay there together, breathing deeply from the exertion.

Once they’d caught their breath, Severus pointed out, “You realize the Dark Lord can fly? As in, without a broom?”

But she shook her head. “Not here he can’t. The water feels wet, but this place isn’t real. My mind, my rules.”

“So, is this the extent of your fortifications?”

She laughed. “Not by a long shot. The merpeople would have attacked if you’d come without me. They’re nasty buggers when they want to be. Next is my maze. And after that, good old no man’s land. Set up with barbed wire and landmines.”

He looked over at her, frowning in disbelief. “How did you put this together so quickly?”

“This is my life. These are all things I lived. Well, not the no man’s land, exactly, but lately I’ve been having nightmares about war. Stuck in the middle of no man’s land with my legs blown off is usually where it ends up. It started when Madam Pomfrey told me I couldn’t fly anymore. I’m sort of hoping if I stick it here, it’ll stop showing up.”

Severus hummed. “Perhaps.” They were silent for a moment, just lying on the grass that didn’t really exist. “How did you put this together so quickly?”

“Hmm?”

“I remember what you were like. To put it bluntly, you were pathetic. You tried shielding, tried pushing me out. It hardly ever worked, less so when you were emotionally engaged. What changed?”

Her eyes opened. “Oh. Well, I’m not a bubbling cauldron of rage anymore. Fifth year was . . . it was awful. It probably would have been awful anyway, with Tommy boy digging around in my head and dealing with the graveyard, and Cedric dying . . . but no one believed me, and Umbridge and her awful quill, and . . . and I was fucking fifteen.” Her fingers started idly playing with blades of grass. “I was emotional and hormonal and pissed at the whole world, and things only went downhill from there. I was a mess. And then, I think sometime that spring, the tumor started
growing. And everything turned to shit.

“I’ve . . . well, I’m not at acceptance yet, but I’m getting there. I’m a bit more stable. Course, that’s probably going to go out the window in the next few months with regrowth. But I suppose . . . the way you said it just now, I just kind of understood, you know? It clicked. I can see what you meant then, about it being related to resisting the Imperius. Mental discipline. I spent my entire childhood doing chores or locked up when my relatives didn’t want to deal with me. I definitely don’t want to deal with Volleyball. And so, into my bedroom he shall go.”

“You didn’t even lock the door!”

She laughed again, and he reveled in that sound, in the fact that she could still laugh. “Not with you, I didn’t. You’d be surprised how often people see a door covered in locks and assume. Don’t worry, I’ll lock it in future.”

“And the bars on the window? You said they might be weaker.”

She turned her head to look at him and raised an eyebrow. “Even if he does get out, which is probably more likely than not, I’ll admit, he’ll be doing a second story swan-dive into the waiting arms of a lot of angry merpeople. Assuming he makes it over here, he’ll have far worse things to contend with. Things his stupid plans meant I had to go through. And worse.”

“Well, it’s an excellent beginning. Of course, it must be considered that you are letting me through at the moment. Eventually, I’m going to have to test your defenses against a concentrated assault.”

She nodded, the hand that had been playing with grass drifting over to stroke Severus’s fingers. “I get it. I think I want to go to the beach.”

“What?” Severus asked, thrown for a loop by the non-sequitur.

“The beach, swimming in the ocean. I’ve never been. I think I’d like to go and have a picnic. You know, while I still can.”

“Ah. I can’t see too many problems with that. It’s unlikely the Dark Lord or the Death Eaters will suspect you of taking time off to see the sea and have an ice.”

She laughed again. “God, I can just imagine him showing up. ‘Can this wait? You’re blocking my sun. Mind you put some sunblock on your nose . . . oh, wait.’”

Severus shook his head. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I laugh at death!” she declared, a superior expression on her face as she tipped her head back. She sighed. “Sometimes it’s all you can do.”
Nothing Left to Do but Talk

Hi, all. Bit shorter chapter this time - sorry about that. But some of you had expressed an interest in seeing what the Dursleys had been up to. I mean, this was already written by that point, but . . . here you go.

As it turned out, there was fuck all to do in the Outer Hebrides. Dudley thought his mother was slowly going mad away from middle-class enclave she’d spent twenty years in. No one here cared about what sort of car you drove – given the size of the island, most didn’t have cars to begin with. They seemed confused by the idea of a dinner party. It wasn’t like there were many people to provide interesting tidbits, and gossip was quite thin on the ground due in large part to the simple fact that very little of consequence ever happened.

Really, it was a perfect place for a safe house. Not that that made his mother feel any better. And his father . . . Vernon Dursley was a shell of his former self. He was even more put out than his wife about the rather un-materialistic nature of their new neighbors. He was a nobody in a place where no one cared that he’d once been a company director. No one listened to him, and he really didn’t seem to have any idea what to do with himself. Dudley rather thought the whole experience would be very beneficial to his father.

The first place his mother looked when she had nothing to do was her Dinky-Diddydums. It didn’t take long for Dudley to realize his best option was to make himself as scarce as possible. He’d taken to wandering the island, what of it there was – which was only about three and a half miles all told. Of course, he dragged Piers along with him, not that Piers was inclined to object.

He’d never really appreciated nature. He didn’t even like nature documentaries. But there was literally nothing else to do. There wasn’t even a telly. Well, there was, but the antenna was a twisted coat hanger, and even then, the picture was fuzzy, and it only got three channels. And he’d left his PlayStation behind anyway, not that he could have hooked it up to the telly, which looked like it was from the ‘50s. So, nature.

It wasn’t bad, really. Sort of pretty, especially the beaches. And the company was nice. And quite fit.

They were on a hill at the moment, watching the sea. Piers looked over at his boyfriend. “What are you thinking about?”

Dudley smiled back at him. “You.”

Piers scoffed, blushing and ducking his head. “You’re such a pansy.”

“No, I’m the shirt-lifter. You’re the pansy. And according to my father, we’re both Nancy boys.”

Piers sighed and looked over at his boyfriend. “Do . . . do you think you’re ever going to tell him?”

Dudley let his head fall back. He closed his eyes as he thought about it. Finally, he said, “I don’t know. If nothing else, we’re all confined to this island for the foreseeable future. We have to be able
to survive seeing each other every day, and living in the space of 3.7 square miles, even if we’re not under the same roof. To be perfectly honest, I don’t exactly have a dearly held ambition for my father to rend me limb from limb. And I want that to happen to you even less than I want it to happen to me. But something makes me think if I don’t tell him, he’ll find out anyway. And I’d prefer to be able to control how and where he does, in case we need to leg it.”

“So, were you kidding when you said your mum’d never let him do it? Run you out of the house or hurt you?”

“I wasn’t kidding, but I’m not kidding now, either. I don’t know. That’s all. And I’m worried.”

“There is the fact that it’s technically illegal,” Piers added unhelpfully. Dudley glared at him. “What? It’s true, innit? You know the law as well as I do. Sexual contact isn’t illegal between two consenting adults, which means two men 18 or older. You don’t turn 18 till next June, Dud. I don’t know if they’d toss us in a lockup for it here in the back of beyond, but I do know we’re not supposed to leave this fucking island. And I think your old man’s going to react much worse if you don’t tell him yourself. Like, he might report us himself. I don’t think he’d physically harm us – or not much, at any rate – but he likes the rule of law, your dad. Especially when it works in his favor.”

“Damn it. You’re right. I don’t want to tell him. On the other hand, the other option isn’t exactly appealing.”

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Piers murmured dryly.

Dudley smirked. “Since when is that a problem?” He leaned over and kissed Piers’ cheek. Piers turned his head, meeting Dudley’s lips. Dudley smiled and deepened the kiss. Eventually, they came up for air, Piers lying in Dudley’s arms. They were quiet for a long moment, content to just be. Piers nuzzled Dudley’s neck with his nose and Dudley sighed contentedly.

“You know,” Dudley said thoughtfully, “right here, right now, I don’t even miss telly or the PlayStation. I could stay here with you forever, and I wouldn’t regret a thing.”

Piers smirked, still tucked against his boyfriend. “Sweet-talker.”

“I’m serious. There’s no one I’d rather be stuck on this stupid island with than you. I love you, Piers.”

“And I love you, stupid. Are we stating the obvious now?” Piers teased.

Dudley snorted. “Tosser.”

Piers’ eyes lit up. “Now there’s an idea.”

*

Later, Dudley walked into the cottage he was sharing with his parents, a determined expression on his face. Piers trailed in behind him. Vernon was at the kitchen table, staring unseeingly at the wood grain. He didn’t even seem to hear the door slam shut, didn’t look up when his son came to stand in front of him.

“Dad.” There was no response. “Dad!” Vernon started, looking up at his son. He frowned, bemused.

“Dudley? What is it?”
Dudley’s jaw firmed. “I’m going to talk, and you’re going to listen. Alright?”

His frown deepened, but he nodded.

Dudley took a deep breath. “I don’t fancy girls. I never have. I like blokes. I’m a shirt-lifter. A Nancy-boy. A pansy. A fag. All those names you use. I’m your son, and I’m gay. And I’m in love with Piers.” He reached behind him, and Piers gave him his hand. “I love him and there’s nothing you can say to change how I feel. We’ve been together for years. If you want nothing to do with me from now on, fine. But I’m done lying. Come and find me when you’re ready to talk.” With that, not letting go of Piers’ hand, he turned around and walked right back out again.

Vernon stared after them. It felt as if what was left of his world had been overturned like a chessboard. What was true anymore? It started when you found out magic was real, and ended on a godforsaken island in the middle of the north Atlantic when your son told you . . . He sighed. Nothing made sense anymore.

Petunia emerged from wherever she’d been and took the chair opposite her husband. Whatever he expected out of her mouth, it wasn’t what came out.

“He finally told you, then.”

Vernon stared at her. “You knew?” he asked, his voice hoarse from lack of use.

The exasperation in her expression was tinged with fondness. “I’ve known for years. You’d have seen it too if you hadn’t been ignoring all the signs.”

“What signs?”

His wife’s gaze turned sharp. “Has he ever, once, brought a girl home? Has he ever spoken to you about having a crush on a girl? Who does he spend every minute of his time with?” Vernon opened his mouth to object, but Petunia glared at him, and he thought better of it. “It’s not just because Piers is the only person his age on the island. It’s been that way for years. Since before they went to Smelting’s together. Oh, Dudley always had friends, but he wasn’t close to anyone the way he was close to Piers, even then.”

“But . . . but that wouldn’t necessarily have meant . . .”

Petunia shook her head. “You obviously haven’t been paying attention. If you had, you’d have seen the way they look at each other. You don’t look at friends like that. And, not that they have any idea, I first caught them kissing three years ago.”

Vernon looked at her with an expression of utter betrayal. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What would you have done?” she challenged. “You’re my husband, but he’s my son. He was fourteen.” She closed her eyes, her face pained. “I couldn’t take the chance. I’d love to know that I misjudged you. I can think of nothing better than having to apologize for it.”

Vernon, for what felt like the thousandth time in the past month, didn’t know what to say. What would he have done then if he’d known? The fact that even now he wasn’t sure . . . he’d never admit it, but he knew she was right not to have told him. He loved his son, his pride and joy. He had always assumed it was unconditional, that love. He hadn’t accounted for this sort of condition, and he hadn’t decided yet whether or not it changed anything.

He rubbed at his face, feeling centuries old, and so very tired. “I need to think.” He tried unsuccessfully not to glance at his wife’s face. It was filled with bitter disappointment. An ember of
indignation sparked. Damn it, he was only human. He hadn’t gone roaring after Dudley to disown him or beat him. He needed time to sort out how he felt and what he thought. If that wasn’t good enough for her, so be it.

As he stormed out of the cottage, it started to rain. Lightning split the sky and thunder rolled. Vernon glared impotently up at the sky, mustache bristling. Perfect. Just perfect. Soon, it was coming down in buckets, and he was soaked to the skin, even through the thick woolen jumper he had on. It was all his niece’s fault anyway. If she hadn’t come to stay with them, they wouldn’t be in hiding, and he and his family wouldn’t be on yet another godforsaken rock. Only this time, the fix was a lot harder than just getting a tail removed.

The rain started to come down harder and he glanced wistfully toward the distant lights of cozy cottages. It would have been nice to knock on one of those doors and be welcomed inside, where it was warm and dry. They’d offer him a cup of tea and perhaps a towel, and provide a sympathetic ear. Except for the fact that they wouldn’t. There wasn’t a soul on this godforsaken island with the possible (and at this moment dubious) exception of his wife who would be prepared to look kindly upon him.

He wanted to blame his blasted niece. It was because of her and her lot that they were here. Except none of the people in those cottages had ever met her. Their impressions of the Dursleys were based on the Dursleys alone. They had no one to blame but themselves. And as he gazed at those lights amidst the greyness and the rain, he was forced to admit to himself that the reason he could not bring himself to ask for help was that he felt ashamed.

He’d arrived ashamed, that was true. But he’d been ashamed then of not having a car, or a job, of being thought to be a failure. His shame now was more personal. He feared them thinking badly of him and what he had done . . . because he thought badly of himself. He knew they disapproved of what little they knew about him. No matter his shame, his basic personality remained for the most part unchanged, and Vernon Dursley had always cared what other people thought of him.

He’d surrounded himself for so many years by people who judged others by what they had owned and how they had appeared; now, instead of living in upper middle-class suburbia, they were on an island that would have made most English country backwaters look metropolitan. Their neighbors, if you could call people that when they were a few minutes-walk down the road, instead seemed to judge people on other merits; virtues, one might call them. Patience, kindness, compassion, diligence, that sort of thing. They were not the sort of qualities nurtured by time in Privet Drive, if one had had them to begin with.

Here, they saw you for who you were, blind to the trappings of material wealth. Vernon felt naked, judged, and found wanting. He’d had a lot of time to think, and he was slowly coming to the realization that he could not blame them. Vernon Dursley, it turned out, was very much a product of geography. In the cacophony of so many similar voices, he had not been able to make out his own. In the silence of disapproval, he heard his own bluster, loud and obnoxious. With half his life over, he was having to face a lot of uncomfortable truths, not least now the revelation that his son was gay.

You can take the man out of suburbia, but can you take suburbia out of the man? It hadn’t been entirely for the sake of appearances that he had behaved as he had in Surrey. He had spoken and acted according to his beliefs. Normal was sacrosanct, magic was disgusting and wrong, homosexuality even more so. But he loved his son.

The day Dudley had been born, he had felt as if some part of his life that had been missing was now right where it belonged. The infant in his wife’s arms was his to raise and protect; his son, his greatest contribution to the world. From the moment he’d first welcomed Dudley into the world,
above his position at Grunnings and even his place as Petunia’s husband, his favorite role had been that of father. Petunia clucked and cleaned and did house-wifey things. He loved her, but Dudley was like a clone of Vernon himself. He felt like they had understood each other from the very beginning.

They never disagreed, and he’d thought Dudley always told him everything. Apparently not. He felt like he didn’t even know who his son was anymore. If he had kept this, what else might he be hiding? Worse, though, was the reason why. And how justified it was. Putting aside questions of right and wrong, Dudley shouldn’t have had to worry about violence at the hands of his own father, no matter the circumstances.

What kind of a man was he that the people closest to him had assumed that would be his reaction? What kind of man was he that he wasn’t altogether sure they had been wrong? If he had found out in Little Whinging, what might he have done?

As he settled on a moss-covered rock, no wetter than anywhere else, the question plagued him. He forced himself to be completely honest, to imagine the situation, meagre though the capacity was. His Dudley, his boy, his pride and joy. Relief suffused his chest as he realized that no, he would not have raised a hand to his son. He would have been furious, and perhaps, and it galled him to admit, he might have been tempted, but he wouldn’t have struck him.

But what then? Would he have turned him out of the house? Disowned him? His heart cried out at the thought, and he knew that even then he wouldn’t have had it in him. It would have taken him weeks, perhaps even months to come round to speaking to him again, but eventually he would have tried to make peace.

It occurred to him then to wonder if Dudley, by that point would have had anything to say to him. The day he’d been born, Vernon had promised the world, and Dudley had always looked at him like he’d hung the moon. To ignore him like that would feel too much like a broken promise, one that, once broken, could not be mended. Perhaps, even now, it was too late.

He found himself sick at the thought, of having lost his boy over something as small and insignificant as this. And it was. It really was. Piers made Dudley happy; what more could Vernon ask? His son was happy and in love. In love enough to fight for it, to defend his joy to his father of all people, one person he should never have had to worry about.

Vernon made his way back to the house, renewing his vow to his son as he went, swearing anew to support his every endeavor and give of his strength wherever and however he could. He found Dudley and Piers sheltering in a shed near the house. Without a word, he swept his boy into his arms, fierce and sorrowing. He held on longer than he might have otherwise, afraid to see the expression, the judgement in his son’s face, knowing he would abide by it, whatever it was.

Finally, he drew back, his eyes on the ground. Slowly, resolutely, he brought them up to meet Dudley’s. His son was beaming, incandescent. Happier than he’d been on birthdays, on Christmases, happier than Vernon thought he’d ever seen him. And relieved. Vernon winced; he shouldn’t have had reason to be so relieved.

Dudley just kept grinning at him. Finally, his voice thick with emotion, he murmured, “Thanks, Dad.”
Giving Him a Piece of My Mind

Chapter Notes

So . . . I should have updated about a week ago. I'm sorry about that. But my list of excuses is impressive, I assure you. My grandfather died three weeks ago. My computer is currently being worked on. I have my dad's computer. I had a conference last week and didn't have access to wifi. I had a paper to write. I had tests to study for. Life, in general, sucked. But here you are. Sorry about the cliff-hanger.

_The more things change, the more they stay the same_, Hero reflected, a little bitterly. The whole world – or at least hers – had turned upside-down since the previous summer. Dumbledore gone, Voldemort back, the Ministry fallen, the three of them in hiding, her relationship with Severus . . . And yet, here she was, once again, back in Dr. Warren’s waiting room. She’d had a short visit before they’d abandoned Little Whinging, long enough to discuss her latest scans, which showed minimal regrowth, and for him to give her another month’s supply of meds. But of course, “minimal growth” was never going to last forever. It wasn’t a question of good news or bad at this stage; it was a matter of degrees.

Severus was back at Hogwarts, ruling the staff with an iron fist. He didn’t need to tell her for her to know he hated it. The other teachers, particularly the other heads of house he’d worked with over the past seventeen years, had his utmost respect. They hadn’t been quite what you’d call friends, because Severus simply didn’t rub along well with the vast majority of people. It galled him, what they would think of him in the coming year and believe him capable of. And Hero hadn’t the slightest clue of what to say to make it even the slightest bit more bearable. Of course, there wasn’t much he could say to her to make dying easier to live with, so she supposed it was an equitable arrangement.

“Miss Potter, the doctor’s ready to see you now,” the receptionist told her, bringing her out of her reverie. Hero got to her feet and smiled tightly at the receptionist, going back to the office like always. She opened the door and Dr. Warren looked up. He didn’t smile at her. He usually smiled at her. Even when the news was bad, he smiled at her first. Which either meant his wife was divorcing him, or it was very bad indeed.

He met her eyes, and God, that was worse, because they were full of compassion. Not pity, never pity, but an honest appreciation of her condition. He always looked like that when he had bad news.

“Hero. Please, sit down,” he said, waving to the chair facing his desk. “How are things?”

“Allright. I’m staying in London now. Dropped out of school. Not much point when I’m only going to get worse.”

He nodded. “It makes sense. And you being in the city will be more convenient for appointments. On that note, I’d like to meet with you every two weeks. At the very least.”

“That bad?” she asked, brow furrowing.

He sighed. “It sort of is, yeah. It seems the surgeons weren’t as successful as we thought. And what was left has regrown – with a vengeance. It’s already half the size it was when we removed it.
I’m doubling your dosage of the temozolomide. It’s going to have some bloody nasty side effects, I’m sure, but there’s nothing else for it. If we have to operate again, I don’t like to think of the risks to cognitive function.”

Hero nodded, lips pressed together as she tried desperately not to cry, blinking furiously. After a few moments, once she felt like she could talk without bursting into tears, she asked, her throat tight, “How much longer do you think I have?”

“Wouldn’t like to take a guess,” he replied evasively.

“I’m going to think the worst anyway. I need to know how much time I have to . . . make plans.”

He exhaled in a gust, thinking about it. “Six months. Maybe.”

Hero swallowed, then nodded. “Alright, then. That’s that. What else will I have to do in the next few months? Medically, I mean?”

He shrugged. “We keep an eye on it. Medicate the symptoms as well as we can. I need you to call my office as soon as possible the next time you have a seizure, we’ll see what we can do with your anti-convulsants. In the end, depending on how things go, the seizures might be what kills you. But it could be any one of a number of things, or even a combination. It’s imperative that you avoid getting sick. The chemotherapy comprises your body’s ability to fight infection. The common cold could kill you. Even if it didn’t, you’d probably be severely weakened, which could result in the same thing. I will do my very best to keep you alive as long as possible, but we’re going to have to improvise as circumstances arise. That means we’re going to have to keep in touch. Okay?”

“Yes.”

“Any changes I should know about?”

She almost wouldn’t have thought it was possible given the topic of discussion, but she found herself blushing. “Er, yeah. I might need birth control?”

“Oh.” She could see him fighting a smile. “I see. Yes, pregnancy would be a very bad idea between your life expectancy and the chemo. I’ll fill you out a script. Are you pregnant at the moment?”

Hero’s mind went blank. “Not . . . to the best of my knowledge.”

Dr. Warren raised an eyebrow. “Have you engaged in activities that could have caused you to become pregnant?”

“Er . . . yes?”

“Have you taken a pregnancy test?”

“No.”

“Then it’s possible. I won’t go as far as saying it’s likely, but it is a real possibility. You can do a test here, it’ll take about fifteen minutes.” He reached into a desk drawer and brought about a small cardboard box – no different than you’d find in a chemist. He went over the instructions and made sure she understood before sending her off to the loo.

She came back, stick in hand, and they waited for the lines to appear. Thankfully, it was negative.
“Well, that’s a relief. There’s a slim chance it’s a false negative. If you miss your period, just take another test to make sure and we can sort it out from there. So, here’s your medication. Any other questions?”

After the appointment, Hero found a deserted alleyway and called for Kreacher, who Apparated her back to Grimmauld. She remembered what Dumbledore had said about Apparition possibly worsening her condition, but it wasn’t like she had a choice – the Death Eaters were still waiting for one of them to pop their head out the door.

Hermione was probably in the library, which she’d made her personal territory, woe betide any potential trespassers without the expression permission of Hermione Jean Granger. Ron had taken to tinkering with the wizarding wireless in the hopes of getting news updates. They couldn’t get the Daily Prophet delivered, it would be too obvious, but they could try to get an idea of the propaganda being spread against them. He was getting mixed results; they seemed to be relying primarily on the Prophet to manipulate and the wireless to pacify with lots of Weird Sisters and Celestina Warbeck and their contemporaries, none of which did a thing to improve anyone’s mood. Hero wondered how long it would take him before he gave up.

It was strange to have Grimmauld so empty. Hero had only ever been there over the summer or during the Christmas holidays. There had always been Order members coming and going over the summers. She’d thought it had been empty the Christmas of fifth year, but they’d had Ron, Ginny, Fred, George, and Mrs. Weasley as well, and they were enough to make any house seem warm, and cozy, and filled to the rafters. Not so now. Now, it was just the three of them, far enough away that they couldn’t even yell for help and be heard. If Hermione fell off a ladder getting a book off a high shelf, she might not be found for hours. Hero, having anticipated this in her pessimism, had instructed Kreacher to check on them every half hour.

While that solved the practical issues, it did little to stop Hero from feeling very lonely. They had jobs to do if they were to save the entire wizarding world from the Dark Lord’s tyranny. A part of her reveled in the knowledge of all that her life could still mean, even if it was going to be over rather quickly. There was another part of her that was just a seventeen-year-old girl who was dying and altogether unhappy about it. She reserved the right to not want to die, even if she had already accepted it as fact. As horribly selfish as she knew it was, she would have liked to spend a bit more time with her closest friends. That other part of her hated that she was so weak, but that didn’t change anything either.

Ron was really mostly messing with the wireless for something to do. Hermione was busy researching, and she didn’t trust either of them to do more than hold her back. Which, you know, fair enough. But until she found something, there was fuck all for Hero or Ron to do. It was slowly driving her mad.

“How have things been while I’ve been gone, Kreacher?”

“Uneventful, Mistress. Does Mistress have any particular preference for dinner?”

“No, I’m sure it will be delicious as ever, whatever it is. Is there anything you need at the moment?”

Kreacher ducked his head. “Mistress is most kind, but Kreacher is quite alright for the moment.”

“No be sure to tell me if anything comes to mind.” He inclined his head again and popped away.

She sighed and rubbed absent-mindedly at her scar. Her skin was already prickling uncomfortable in
the heat, but there was an extra surge through her scar in that moment. As if she didn’t have enough problems. She didn’t want to see even Ron or Hermione at the moment. She needed time to come to terms with her most recent prognosis, and by “come to terms” she meant rage at the world. Life wasn’t fair, and she knew it wasn’t, she understood that. Nothing in her life had ever given the impression that it was. But damn it, it really just wasn’t fair.

She wandered upstairs, listless, wishing she could talk to Severus. Of course, if he was there, he’d probably tell her to focus on her Occlumency. She didn’t see much point; Occlumency was one of those things where you either had it or you didn’t. You became the master of your own mind – and it wasn’t like she needed anything fancy to lie to the Dark Lord. If she did, there was even the chance he might recognize it as similar to Severus’s, which was a chance she simply wasn’t willing to take.

She was more interested in what she could do with her mental defenses. It was sort of the opposite of a city under siege. Unlike a city, the attacks started in the center and radiated outwards; it was all a matter of keeping him contained. So far, she hadn’t faced any problems, but, then again, she had yet to face an earnest invasion. It was nice, not to have anyone else in her head, but she had little real idea of whether what she’d learned would actually work. To her, the obvious solution was to pick a fight.

She hadn’t mentioned it to anyone because she had a fairly good idea already of what they would say. Hermione would be outraged. Ron would side with Hermione. Severus . . . Severus would warn her not to be a bloody little fool. This was one thing she definitely didn’t want to talk to him about, because a part of her was worried he was right. Hermione, she could ignore, because Hermione was a broken record on the subject. Severus knew, better than anyone else alive, what she would be getting herself into. But she had to try.

With a destination in mind, she set off at a rather more determined pace to the bedroom she shared with Severus. She sat on the bed and closed her eyes, slipping into her room at Privet Drive. The center of her mind, it was also, in a sense, the front door. This was where any intruder found themselves should they attempt to access her thoughts. The thing about a front door, though, is that it’s also where you leave from.

Her mind had traveled the path to Voldemort’s so many times, it was practically a major motorway. In a sick sense, it was like coming home. Like coming home to Privet Drive, chores, and hunger. But she knew the way better even than she knew the route the Hogwarts express took. Over the river and through the woods . . .

She knew what she was doing. She was quite aware that it was dangerous, and stupid, and possibly suicidal. When had any of those things, or even all of them combined, stopped her before? She was his opposite number, marked as his equal, for better or worse. This was her job, no one else’s. And if finding out she had six months to live played a role in her decision . . . well, that was no one’s business but hers.

In reality, Voldemort was nowhere near her. In all likelihood, he was somewhere on the Continent, looking for Gregorovitch, poor bloke. But that didn’t matter. He could have been in Australia, and it wouldn’t have mattered. Reaching for his mind was as easy as it would have been to reach for Severus’s hand if he’d been sitting beside her. Surprisingly enough, there was about as much resistance. She wondered if Voldemort even noticed the intrusion; shouldn’t he be putting up more of a fight?

The mind of the Dark Lord showed signs of organization, but it was rather haphazard. It was as if he’d once taken the time to find a place for everything and had recently stopped caring. Perhaps it
stood to reason – the only person he’d ever been afraid of was now dead, and he probably expected everyone else to be too scared of him to consider attempting Legilimency. Which, really, fair enough. He had no idea Hero even knew what Legilimency was, at least as far as she was aware.

That might have been another reason for her to draw back and reconsider. She would potentially be demonstrating an unknown strength, which was not a risk to be taken lightly by any means. It was a bit late for that, though. Oh, well.

After a bit of wandering around, she realized it rather resembled . . . Hogwarts. Which was a little sickening. It wasn’t the school as she’d known it; she doubted it was even the school as Riddle had known it. He was an idealist if ever there was one, and she had a sneaking suspicion it was what he wished it had been like – and might be in the future. Hero suppressed a shudder.

It made a sort of sense – different areas of the castle to represent different parts of his psyche. *If I were the Dark Lord’s memories, where would I be? The Transfiguration classroom? The library? No,* she realized. *Facts, useful information, and the like would probably be in the library. But personal memories were different.* She smiled when she realized the obvious place before setting off at a determined pace for the second floor.

In a way, it was genius. Hardly anyone, at least until recently, knew where the Chamber of Secrets was, and even then, you needed to speak Parseltongue to get in, and you needed a thorough knowledge of mental magics and brass balls in the first place. It was close to a perfect way for the Dark Lord to protect his memories. Except for that one glaring weak point.

It didn’t take her long to get from her entry-point in the Slytherin common room to the second floor. The entrance to the chamber was in the same place, but it didn’t look like a girl’s loo anymore. Made sense, she supposed. Who wants to have to constantly reminded that the ancestor they glorify was reduced by history to the point that one of his greatest achievements is located in a girl’s toilet?

Instead of a sink with a snake set into the tap, there was a statue of a coiled snake. At the sight of her, it raised its head.

It hissed, “*Approach, Ssspeaker, and asssk.*”

Maybe this wasn’t going to be so easy after all. Hero swallowed. “*I wish to enter the Chamber.*”

“*Are you authorized?*”

“*I believe so. I have had extensive dealings with the heir. Our relationship is . . . complicated.*”

A strange, rasping hiss emerged from the snake’s stone throat. It took Hero a moment to realize it was laughter. “*Yesss, I can sssee how that might be. Go on, then. I’ll not keep you.*”

Behind the snake, the stone wall dissolved to reveal a spiral staircase descending into the bowels of the castle. Tommy-boy had probably thought a slide was beneath his dignity, even if none of this was real in the strictest sense. There are even helpful torches in brackets on the walls.

Getting to the bottom of the stairs seemed to take forever, but maybe that was just the way time worked inside a person’s mind, like dream-time. The Chamber was spread out before her, all stone, and water, and statues. Memories . . . Did Slytherin have a secret office or something hidden here? The obvious next step was to do a bit of spelunking.

There were three pipes at the head of the Chamber, one of which was Slytherin’s mouth. The basilisk had come out of the one in his mouth. Hero really hoped she wouldn’t have to fight another one, even one that was just a mental construct. Could she die if attacked by a creature in someone
else’s mind?

She approached the front of the chamber warily, eyes sharp for the slightest movement. It was all rather anti-climactic when nothing slithered out to get her. She headed for the one on the left. It was large, dark, and raised off the ground. Hero, being short, found this problematic. It was within reach with her hands above her head, but she couldn’t jump high enough to get enough leverage to scramble inside.

Breathing hard, she folded her arms and glared at the ground. Shoes. She had on Converse trainers, with thick rubber soles. If she could get a good enough grip on the rim of the opening, maybe . . .

In the end, all she got for her trouble was scraped palms. You needed a rope to scale up a wall, and the rope had to be attached to something, and . . . Well, clearly that wasn’t going to work. It seemed like the cruelest irony to get into his mind and past a magical guardian snake, only to be defeated by architecture. Beginning to get desperate, she looked around the rest of the chamber. Maybe it wasn’t through the pipes. Maybe it was somewhere else . . .

She tapped the wall, the stone of Slytherin’s beard, but nothing rang hollow. Wondering if maybe one of the snake statues had a trick lever, she went over to them, tugging furiously at any bits that stuck out. After going through them all unsuccessfully, she collapsed against the one she was standing next to and stared into the water in the pools . . . only to realize it wasn’t water at all. Instead, it was gossamer silver threads of memory, neither liquid nor gas. The Chamber of Secrets was set up to be an enormous Pensieve. It came to Hero just how hard her task was really going to be.
You're not due until later this week, but the last one was late and ended on a cliffhanger, and I'm feeling generous.

Severus sat at Albus’s desk and looked over paperwork. It was never going to be his desk; that would be absurd, and sacrilegious, what’s worse. He glanced behind him to Albus’s portrait to find the subject gently slumbering – or appearing to, at any rate.

He was Albus . . . and he wasn’t. Albus had trained the man of paint and canvas to imitate him almost perfectly over the years, like a living diary. It was a very good copy, admittedly, but a copy nonetheless. Like any being with the slightest bit of consciousness, he was a sum total of his experiences, with a dash of something else. It was like onions; Albus the man had been an onion, while Albus the portrait was that selfsame onion missing a few layers. Whether or not those layers really mattered, Severus didn’t know; it felt like they did, but he wasn’t exactly unbiased.

Guilt was part of it, he supposed. Thinking of the portrait as Albus would be a way to absolve himself of guilt, something he had not earned. Something he likely would never earn. It felt as though he was drowning in guilt most days. His murder of his mentor was chief among the causes, but it was far from the sole catalyst. His behavior, required from him as a spy, against his colleagues and others – soon against his former students. He choked on guilt to be away from Hero, unable to help, and yet the guilt didn’t leave him when he was with her, for he was quite aware of his responsibilities at Hogwarts. He hadn’t asked for them, but there was no one else who could possibly fulfill them – he’d checked.

It nagged him even though he told himself it was little more than stepping from one room to the next with the portal he’d put in place. That was an oversimplification of the reality, however. They were two separate states of mind, and switching between them was by no means instantaneous. Being caught off guard could well lead to casualties, and that was the best of the negative scenarios.

The students and the other professors were his to protect, with any luck without them catching on. They’d take a beating, that was almost certain, over the coming year. There was nothing he could do to stop that, no matter how much he might have wished otherwise. The difficult part – the part that was like trying to balance on the edge of a knife – was making sure it didn’t go too far. They had to suffer, had to be seen to suffer, with Severus at the helm. There was no alternative that he could see, and he’d considered the problem in every spare moment.

He’d never liked being a teacher, and it showed. Bloody obvious, was what it was. He didn’t like teaching snot-nosed brats, though they were tolerable compared to the cocky, lazy teenagers. They insisted on mucking up and mucking about with his equivalent of religion, one of the few things he truly believed in. It would have tried the patience of a saint, and Severus Snape, to put it mildly, was no saint.

That being said, he did care. It wasn’t anything like what had impelled him to risk life and limb for Hero since her first year, but an emotional investment was present nonetheless. He didn’t like his students, but that was neither here nor there; he didn’t have to. He would have been a very poor teacher, indeed, however, if his charges’ safety and wellbeing were not constantly on his mind. He
would be sorely tempted to intervene against the Carrows in all of their punishments, rather than a select few. And he couldn’t. It galled him, almost worse than the idea of killing Albus had. It would mean more blood on his hands. He was determined that lives would not be lost, but innocent blood would most certainly be spilt.

And on the other hand... Hero. Who was essential to the fight with the Dark Lord, who was working on bringing him down with her every breath. Whose breaths were numbered. He loved her, more than he would have thought possible, more quickly than he could have been prepared for even if he’d known himself capable of it. His love for Lily... he saw it for what it was now – infatuation, obsession, and ultimately a pale shadow of his feelings for Hero. And both marked for death.

He kept coming back to it. Death haunted him. It was the hand he had been dealt, and he didn’t know the rules well enough to cheat. He was a spy; it was all one bluff after another, the truth so deeply buried at times, it seemed almost irrelevant. He was immersed in death, and yet, the reality in some ways did not touch him – at least it hadn’t until now.

She’d told him she was dying in November, and he’d been making potions for her since not long after. Not cures, because they didn’t exist, but methods of softening the end. And yet, somehow he’d avoided thinking about that very thing – about the end. It was a given, understood, but not internalized. Perhaps his subconscious was wiser than he’d previously thought; facing it now, he felt like was going to come apart.

He’d pledged his life to her sixteen years ago. At times, protecting her had been his sole motivation to continue on, the only bit of goodness in an otherwise useless life that had never done anyone much good, least of all Severus himself. For the last sixteen years, in her various guises and personas, his life had been about her. Perhaps, given who she was and the circumstances, it was inevitable that he should have fallen so deeply in love with her. In any case, he was left with a question he dreaded learning the answer to: what did one do when one’s reason for living was just gone?

His chest gave a pang then, like the tightness of grief, an echo in reverse. He’d contemplated suicide following Lily’s death, and Hero, the child he had loathed, had been his salvation. There was his life before that moment and his life after. There would, he was sure, not be a third chapter.

He blinked, coming out of his reverie. A stray glance at the clock on his desk told him he’d been ruminating for a good half hour in which he’d not got a bit of work done. He glanced down at the document in front of him that he’d read the first half of before his mind drifted off. He found he hadn’t the faintest idea its contents.

He placed his head in his hands, long fingers massaging his temples. Hero wanted him to live, wanted it perhaps as much as she’d ever wanted anything. She hadn’t said so, but it wasn’t difficult to figure out. If he killed himself because he couldn’t bear to live without her, she’d never forgive him. He tried to focus on that fact.

A part of him just wanted to give up. After Hero died, what would it matter if she wouldn’t have approved? She wouldn’t be there, and that was the entire problem. She believed in him. She was the only one left who did, and she...

He quashed that voice down, his jaw setting. If he loved her, truly loved her, he would respect her and her wishes. What was love without respect? Without trust? To live out her final months with every intention of ending his own life not long after the conclusion of hers, would be nothing less than a betrayal. Even after everything he’d told her, he still felt as if she believed him to be a better man than he was. When she looked at him, conviction in those beautiful, green eyes, he could not lie
to her; neither could he bear to disappoint her. And nothing would disappoint her more than knowing he hadn’t kept his word.

He sighed, rubbing his hand over his eyes. He wouldn’t get any work done in the state he was in, that much was obvious. Giving in to temptation was, in this case, the conscientious choice. At least he could be of good to someone.

He rose from the desk and went through to the private quarters. Sitting on a side table was a book of poetry. It was battered, the pages dog-eared, the cover worn, the binding cracking with age. He’d had it for close to twenty years; why should his books have come through those years unscathed when he hadn’t. He scowled down at his left arm, the mark covered by his sleeves. He picked it up and it fell open to one of the pages he’d visited more than any other. Dorothy Parker, “Resume.” He’d quoted it to Hero what felt like a lifetime ago.

Razors pain you; Rivers are damp; Acids stain you; And drugs cause cramp. Guns aren’t lawful; Nooses give; Gas smells awful; You might as well live.

Putting aside for a moment that she’d never forgive him and would be disappointed in him, she deserved someone stronger than that. She was dying, and even as the knowledge twisted in his gut like a serrated knife, he knew she had already accepted it. For her it wasn’t a question of avoiding anything, and she knew that. She hated it, but she accepted it. She had never wanted anyone to die for her. She deserved someone willing to live for her, even after she was gone. Someone willing to go on to do all that she could not.

Even as he resolved not to off himself, he knew it wasn’t going to be remotely easy. It was one thing to decide now, while she was almost close enough to touch. It was another matter entirely to make that decision every day of his life without her. But that didn’t matter now. Not yet.

He closed the book and, with it in hand, made his way toward the linen cupboard that now served as the portal to their bedroom at Grimmauld. He found Hero napping on top of the covers. She hadn’t even bothered to take her shoes off. He smiled fondly at the sight.

He took off his outer robes and shoes and set them aside. He sat on his side of the bed and settled in to find poems Hero might like.

Slogging through Tom Riddle’s memories was a peculiar mix of tedious and horrifying. None of them were in order, simply pooled for storage. Well, that is to say, it wasn’t anything resembling typical order. Some memories seemed connected thematically, but others seemed entirely random. They skipped about across the span of his life. It was like watching a slide show with all the pictures jumbled up and trying to figure out what the presentation was supposed to be about.

Half the trouble was that she had no idea what she was doing. She knew how to swim, but this was a rather different prospect. She was just floating and experiencing memory after memory. When she’d gone into Pensieves before, she had witnessed specific memories, most recently those carefully selected by Dumbledore. But this . . . she was completely at sea without the faintest notion of where she needed to go.

For a while, without an alternative, she let it flow past her, taking it in like scenery along the motorway, hoping to identify some sort of pattern. Unable to draw back from the stream and watch from a distance, dispassionate observation was the next best thing. Eventually, the pattern began to emerge, and it was like being slowly freed from the body-bind curse.
She allowed her mind to fill with the idea of Tom Riddle splitting his soul – specifically, of the night he spoke to Slughorn about the possibility of a seven-part soul. It came to her aching, agonizingly slowly, like treacle, but eventually it did reach her. She witnessed the moment again, from Riddle’s perspective this time. She wondered if Dumbledore had had any idea she could venture into his memories so deliberately. She wondered if, had he known, he would have let her.

She allowed the memory to play itself to its end, and from there pursued related memories. They came more quickly, filling her senses like breathing in a garden at the height of summer. She saw a Lucius Malfoy a good deal younger than she’d ever encountered him and the hand off of the diary, followed fleetingly by a memory who knows how long after of indescribable rage upon learning what had become of it . . .

The cup, safe, surely, with Bellatrix. She knew what he had entrusted her with, unlike her foolish brother-in-law. He did not know where it was, but that had always been for the best. The old fool had always liked to pry into the minds of others, but dear Bella seemed almost beneath his dignity. Each time the Dark Lord had asked, she had ensured him it was safe, and he knew to him, if no one else, she would not lie.

The locket, in a cave few could reach even if they knew, with hell awaiting them if they did. No, the locket was safe, he was certain. Dark humor tinted that recollection at the thought of his special surprise for anyone who dared to move against him.

Nagini, he knew, was quite able to look after herself, and as for the diadem, he could not but congratulate himself on the brilliance of that. It was thought lost to the mists of time. And to think, all those years, it had been under the old man’s nose, just down the hall from his office, hidden among the other unwanted, long-forgotten relics. He, Lord Voldemort, alone of anyone alive knew of the place, he who had the most intimate knowledge of the school since the Founders themselves.

And all his prizes Founders’ objects, indelibly marked as Lord Voldemort’s, imbued with his very soul. Could any lay as great a claim as he on the hallowed halls and history of Hogwarts? Could any man now deny him the right to spend as much time as he liked in the castle he had so thoroughly conquered?

With that, Hero had what she needed. Unsure how to escape the pool, she felt for her connection to her own mind and body. She was tethered, she found. The connection was like a rubber band stretched to capacity. All she needed to do was let go . . .

Beside him, Hero came to with a start, eyes snapping open. She sat bolt upright, as if she hadn’t been asleep at all. Either that or it had been a particularly ghastly nightmare. He leaned forward, concerned. Her head turned to look at him, but she seemed almost to look through him before she gave a whole-body shudder, her face spasming. He went to grasp her shoulder but hesitated a few centimeters away, uncertain.

Finally, she seemed to snap out of it with a deep, juddering breath, and she sagged against the headboard. She looked up at him, blinking dazedly.

“How long was I out?” he asked, frowning.

“Oh. How long was I out?”

“I’m not sure. I came through about an hour ago, and you were already asleep.”
She shook her head. “Not asleep. Reconnaissance. I went into the Dark Lord’s mind.” Severus turned white. She hurried to reassure him. “No, no, I’m fine. I’m fine. No harm done. Well, other than the fact that I feel like I need to take a shower to scrub off the residue,” she said, looking down at herself with an expression of distaste.

Severus’s eyes were intense, scorching. “You bloody. Blithering. Idiot! Did you even stop to think about what you might be getting yourself into before you charged on ahead like the quintessential Gryffindor?” he demanded, tone blistering.

Hero raised an eyebrow, expression cool. “As a matter of fact, I did. After a careful risk-reward analysis, I decided it was worth it.”

“A careful risk-reward analysis? And how long did that take? Such an agonizing decision, especially considering how much you couldn’t possibly know, I’m sure it took ages. Five whole minutes, possibly even ten.”

Hero realized, belatedly, that he was angry. Well, angry was rather an understatement. Furious was closer to the truth. It had been a long time since he’d been genuinely furious with her. Then again, this sort of reaction was his normal one to her walking brashly into danger. She’d known he’d disapprove, but she hadn’t anticipated this reaction. She should have, she saw that now. It was so typically Severus that she wondered why she’d thought he’d react in any other way.

It would not help to tell him she’d considered it for a full thirty minutes, not five, thank you very much. Instead, she rolled her eyes and retorted, “I had to do something. We’re running out of time, or had you forgotten?”

His eyes bulged, his lips turning white. Apoplectic was the word that came to mind. Finally, he gained enough control of himself to be capable of speech. “And it’s such a magnificent use of that time to go skipping merrily into the Dark Lord’s skull.”

“It is, actually, considering what I found out,” she said, enunciating her words so carefully she was practically spitting.

“You couldn’t possibly know that you would be able to find the information, let alone emerge unscathed! This may well be the most foolish thing you’ve ever done.”

She scoffed. “I think we both know that’s not true, even if this might make the top five. Besides, you risk your life with every breath you take! Are you the only one out of the pair of us who gets to take risks?”

“I’m not as valuable as you are!”

“The hell you’re not! I’m dying already. Just who would take your place at Hogwarts? There is no one. You are indispensable. I’m living on borrowed time as it is. I don’t stop you doing things I know might get you killed. I hate it, but do I complain? No!”

They glared at each other, neither willing to give an inch, for a long moment. Finally, the corner of Severus’s lip started to twitch. He tried to quell it, but eventually it became a full-blown smile, and he started to chuckle. Confused, still trying to glare at him, Hero tried not to laugh with him.

“What?”

“We’re quite a pair. I don’t know that I’ve ever met someone who understands quite so well. Sometimes we’re too alike, perhaps.”
He sighed. “You’ll take risks, and I won’t like them, but you’ll take them anyway because neither of us has much of a choice. That much has always been true. And neither of us can apologize because it would be a lie and we will likely act no differently in the future. But it’s past now, and you’re fine, and my being . . . upset . . . will change nothing.”

Hero cocked her head, a soft smile on her lips as she considered him. “Do you want to know what I found out?”

His jaw firmed for a moment, as if he was holding back from saying something he would regret. “Of course, darling.”

“I got into his memories.” His eyes widened, his gaze suddenly intensely focused. “I know which objects he made into Horcruxes. And I know what he did with them.”

Severus blinked, his face blank. After twenty seconds with no response showing on his face, Hero leaned in, concerned.

“Sev?” She stroked his cheek. “Dearest?” He blinked, his gaze refocusing, as if coming out of a trance.

“You . . . go on.”

She took a deep breath. “Well. He gave the cup to Bellatrix. He didn’t want to know what she did with it, I think because he was worried about Dumbledore, and he hasn’t asked since. As far as he knows, only the diary has been destroyed. He’s quite sure the others are safe. And the last one, the one we don’t know about . . . is at Hogwarts.”

“Where is it? What is it?”

“It’s a diadem, a sort of tiara-looking thing. It’s in the Room of Requirement, in the Room of Hidden Things. I might need a bit of help. I’m fairly familiar with the room, but I don’t think I’ve ever needed the Room of Hidden Things.”

“Draco might be of some help once school starts. It would not be unusual to meet with him to discuss certain matters, such as the wishes and expectations of the Dark Lord. You know he practically lived there, last year, trying to get that damned cabinet to work.”

“Right. Of course. Do . . . do you think I could be there?”

He started. “In the school itself? It’s unquestionably risky, and quite unnecessary, I should think. We shouldn’t have a problem finding it. If you mean when it’s destroyed, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Hero nodded and pretended that was what she’d meant. No need to cause a fuss, not so soon after a tiff. “That’s fine. Who do you think should destroy this one? Do you want to do it?”

“No, thank you,” he said distastefully. “I saw what the locket tried to do to you. It is not something I’m in any hurry to experience myself. Do you want to do it?”

“Ah, no. I destroyed the Diary. Don’t want to be greedy, do I?” she replied flippantly. He rolled his eyes. “So, a couple weeks, then we can get it over with?” She grinned suddenly, wickedly. “Hermione’s going to be so disappointed.”

“I can’t imagine why. She can move onto the rather more challenging quarry of where Bellatrix Lestrange might have hidden a piece of her beloved’s soul and how to get close to a Dark Lord’s
killer pet. I imagined that will keep her occupied for at least the next month. If she figures it out in less time, well, then, I really haven’t been giving her enough credit.”

Hero stroked his cheek again, bringing his mouth to hers for a kiss. “I’m so glad I’m the only one who knows you can be sweet.”

He smirked at her. “Only for you, darling. Only for you.” He slid an arm around her waist and went in for another kiss. After a few moments, Hero drew back.

“As wonderful as this is, I wasn’t kidding about getting a shower. I feel all . . . tainted. Won’t be a mo.”

He let her go, knowing she kept her promises.
Chapter 57

Hi, guys. I'm a day late. But my dog died yesterday, and I wasn't really in any fit state to do much of anything. Hope you like this.

After the shower, Hero felt about a thousand times better. Rather than pestering Ron or Hermione, she went back to Severus, who she found reading his book again. He glanced up at her over the top of it, something warm and dark in his eyes.

“You're reading poetry again,” she noted, climbing onto the bed and cuddling up next to him. “Anything good?”

“Do you mean anything of appreciable quality or anything you in particular would like?”

“The second one.”

“Two, I think, from two rather different men who nonetheless shared, at least in one instance, a muse and happened to be alive at the same time.”

“Go on.”


‘Twas on a lofty vase’s side, Where China’s gayest art had dyed The azure flowers that blow; Demurest of the tabby kind, The pensive Selima reclined, Gazed on the lake below.

Her conscious tail her joy declared; The fair round face, the snowy beard, The velvet of her paws, Her coat, that with tortoise vies, Her ears of jet, and emerald eyes. She saw; and purred applause.

Still had she gazed; but ‘midst the tide Two angel forms were seen to glide, The Genii of the stream: Their scaly armour’s Tyrian hue Through richest purple to the view Betrayed a golden gleam.

The hapless Nymph with wonder saw: A whisker first and then a claw, With many an ardent wish, She stretched in vain to reach the prize. What female heart can gold despise? What Cat’s adverse to fish?

Presumptuous Maid! With looks intent Again she stretched, again she bent, Nor knew the gulf between. (Malignant Fate sat by, and smiled.) The slipp’ry verge her feet beguiled, She tumbled headlong in.

Eight times emerging from the flood She mewed to every watery god, Some speedy aid to send. No Dolphin came, no Nereid stirred: No cruel Tom, nor Susan heard. A fav’rite has no friend!

From hence, ye beauties, undeceived, Know, one false step is ne’er retrieved, And be with caution bold. Not all that tempts your wand’ring eyes And heedless hearts, is lawful prize: Nor all, that glitters, gold.
He glanced over at Hero. She had a strange expression: eyes narrowed, brow furrowed, lips pursed.

“What?” he asked.

“I sort of feel like I should be a little insulted.”

“Why should you be?”

She raised an eyebrow. “An emerald-eyed maiden goes places she shouldn’t and gets her comeuppance?”

He chuckled. “I hadn’t made the connection. I thought you might find it amusing. A ridiculously over-blown elegy about a cat trying to get to a bowl of goldfish.”

“Oh. It is funny, I suppose, the contrast between the language and the subject matter. What’s the other one? You said there were two?”

“Jubilate Agno” by Christopher Smart. He was imprisoned for refusing to convert from Catholicism. His cat was one of his few joys.”

“Alright, then.”

“For I will consider my cat Jeoffry. For he is the servant of the living God duly and daily serving him. For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way. For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness. For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer. For he rolls upon prank to work it in. For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself. For this he performs in ten degrees. For first he looks upon his fore-paws to see if they are clean. For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there. For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the fore-paws extended. For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood. For fifthly he washes himself. For sixthly he rolls upon wash. For seventhly he fleas himself, that he may not be interrupted upon the beat. For eighthly he rubs him against a post. For ninthly he looks up for his instructions. For tenthly he goes in quest of food. For having consider’d God and himself he will consider his neighbor. For if he meets another cat he will kiss her in kindness. For when he takes his prey he plays with it to give it a chance. For one mouse in seven escapes by his dallying.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“Hmm?”

“The title?”

“No, I only studied Latin to the degree required in order to create spells.”

“Ah, well. During my brief flirtation with Catholicism, Father MacIntyre tutored me a bit in Latin. You know, so I could understand the parts of the Mass that were in Latin. After I told him I didn’t feel comfortable confessing, he insisted I still learn it. Thought it might be a useful skill.”

“So, do you know what it means?”

“It means . . . Rejoice in the Lamb.”

They were quiet at that, Hero reflecting on her recent crisis of faith (was it really “recent” if it hadn’t really ended?), Severus thinking of that conversation with Dumbledore. His words came back to him, “. . . like a pig for slaughter . . .” He’d professed himself in love with her then; he’d barely
known the meaning of the word. The rest of what had been said came back to him, too. Had Albus
told her? He doubted it, if for no other reason than he’d had little opportunity between that night and
the night of his death. Another, more disloyal question gnawed at him. Had Albus ever intended
to tell her? It wasn’t like he could ask, either, not without giving it away. He wasn’t sure if he cared at
this point, but he knew better than to act before coming to a decision.

“Today . . .” Hero started softly, trailing off uncertainly.

“What is it, darling?”

She closed her eyes and decided it would be best to say it quickly, like ripping off a plaster. “Dr.
Warren told me I have about six months to live.”

It took him a minute to figure out what she’d said. It took him another to process what it meant.

“Oh,” he finally said, his voice soft and filled with unknowable depths of pain and sorrow. Hero
flinched at the sound of it. She wanted to take it back, to spare him this, even if it was the truth. At
the same time, she knew he wouldn’t thank her for it.

“Yeah,” she said on a sigh, pressing closer to his side. “You know, in the beginning, he said most
people have six months. He told me I might have a year or two, depending on how I took to
treatment. I’ve had a year so far. I had no right to expect more. I’ve been better off than so many
others, when you think about it. And that’s before you count the fact that I have you. I never
thought I’d get this, here, with you. I almost think I’d rather have eighteen months with you than a
lifetime without you.”

He wanted to make her take it back, for all he knew that she’d been entirely sincere and taking it
back wouldn’t make it a lie. He knew, hypocritically, that if their positions were reversed, he’d
probably feel the same.

“I’ll have to start putting my affairs in order,” Hero mused. “That’ll probably mean a trip to
Gringotts. I’m the last of the Potter line after all, and I don’t want the Dursleys getting my things.
There a few specific bequests I’d like to make, too. God, how am I going to get to Gringotts in
broad daylight under the Dark Lord’s reign of terror?”

He held her closer, kissing the curls on her crown. “We’ll figure something out, darling, I promise.
We shouldn’t have trouble once we’re inside the bank; the goblins have always stayed neutral.”

“Right,” Hero murmured. Experience – especially recently – had taught her that things were rarely,
if ever, as simple as they appeared.

“Did the good doctor say anything else?”

She blushed; he could feel the rush of heat against his neck. “I sort of . . . mentioned I might need
contraceptives? He asked if I was pregnant.”

“And?” Severus asked, aiming for casual, as if he didn’t have a vested interest in the subject.

“Well, I said no, but he had me take a test to be sure.” She looked up and met his eye. “I’m not.
Just in case you were worried.”

“Right,” he murmured, the word barely audible in his gravelly tones. It was a suggestion, a rumble
in his chest she more felt than heard. “I’ll endeavor to be more careful in future.”

In the quiet following that remark, he tried to memorize the feel of her in his arms, the scent of her.
Assuming he survived the war and didn’t give in to the urge to kill himself after her death, these memories would be all he had left of her. He bent his head further, pressing his lips to her throat, feeling her pulse against his skin. *My life, my heart, my darling* . . . His Hero, his salvation, might well be the end of him. It seemed fitting.

Hermione frowned down at the text. She’d started with references to the Sword of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff’s cup and used them to find other sources. Unfortunately, it appeared that anything of Ravenclaw’s hadn’t been seen since her death. There were whole books of speculation on the whereabouts of objects the brilliant witch might have once possessed, but little of anything concrete.

Across the many histories of the Founders were repeated references to a legendary diadem that had once belonged to Ravenclaw and was believed to have cleared the wearer’s mind and granted wisdom. There were fanciful drawings of what it might have looked like. No one was sure what had happened to it, and it was presumed lost to the mists of time. If that was true, then Voldemort had made something else into his Horcrux, and she’d spent the past week and a half neglecting food and sleep in pursuit of a dead end. There were few things Hermione Granger hated more than unproductive research.

She slammed the book shut and glared at the stacks of books around her, most of which she’d read through. It galled that they might be defeated by something as useless and potentially nonexistent as time. Not for the first time, she cursed the fact that they had destroyed all the Ministry time turners. She folded her arms and laid her head in them.

A few minutes later, she was startled upright by the sound of people entering her library. She turned in her chair to see Hero entering into her space with a determined stride, Snape following in her wake. Hermione was pleased to see a spark in her friend’s eyes that hadn’t been there as much recently.

Hermione frowned, her exhaustion beginning to hit her. “News?”

“I know what one of the Horcruxes is. And even better than that, I know where it is.”

“What?”

“It’s something from Ravenclaw, a tiara sort of thing. It’s in the Room of Requirement.”

“Oh my god! Well, what are we waiting for?!”

“The opportune moment, Miss Granger. You have run yourself ragged in pursuit of this and are currently in no fit state to go anywhere except to bed. Furthermore, none of us are familiar with the version of the Room in which the diadem is hidden. We will have to wait until the first week of September at the earliest to have someone to assist us.”

“Who?”

“Draco Malfoy,” Hero cut in. “There was a cabinet in the Room of Hidden things that he used to get the Death Eaters into Hogwarts.”

“And we’re trusting him? We’re trusting him?!”

“He swore an Unbreakable Vow to me,” Hero told her quietly. Hermione swallowed, taking that information in.
“Okay. He’s going back to Hogwarts?”

“I doubt he’ll be there all the time, but yes. The Dark Lord has decided it would be best to have as many of his followers among the student population as possible. Teachers cannot be everywhere,” Severus replied.

“Right. And it works for us because he gives us a source behind closed doors. People are going to be wary around Severus for obvious reasons, but they might let their guard down a little in front of Malfoy, whose whole family is known to be in disgrace,” Hero added.

“Although, doing so really ought to be considered foolish in the extreme. A tiger is at its most dangerous when cornered after all,” Severus remarked.

“But they see him as not just a disgraced Death Eater, but a disgraced Slytherin. There are few crimes worse than having an advantage and throwing it away. They’ll think he’s harmless,” Hero pointed out.

Severus eyed her with amusement. “True. I’ve been a bad influence on you.” Hero grinned at him.

Hermione watched them with a friend’s bemusement and a psychologist’s fascination. They fit together. Hermione was one of Hero’s best friends, and there were times she hadn’t the faintest idea how Hero’s mind worked. Hero and Severus weren’t like the twins, completing each other’s sentences, but they spoke to complete each other’s thoughts. Hermione had never known anyone to be so completely on Hero’s wavelength, and clearly that went both ways.

“So, wait, it is the diadem? But it’s been lost for centuries!”

“Well, apparently he found it,” Hero replied, shrugging.

“And how on earth did you find this out?!” Hero glanced away with a guilty expression. “What did you do?” Hermione demanded.

“I kind of, sort of, slightly . . . went into Tom Riddle’s head and went through his memories?”

“You did WHAT?!”

Hero sighed. “Don’t make me say it again.”

Hermione glared at her. “The risk, Hero! Do you just want to throw away everything we’ve worked for?! I know you’re dying, so it might be hard to care, but I actually would like to see my parents again someday. I want to marry Ron and remember my friend, who died too soon but did so much before she did. I hate that you’re dying, but I intend to survive this war. If that’s going to happen, I need you to not be reckless,” Hermione finished, every bit as fierce as she’d been to begin with.

Hero was taken aback. A part of her wanted to point out that, yes, she was dying. Dying, thank you very much. With limited time and options, reckless was the best way forward, really. On the other hand, Hermione was hard to argue against under normal circumstances. And it wasn’t like she didn’t have some good points. The only thing to do at the moment was defuse her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think we had much to lose with my Occlumency barriers improving. I’ll try not to make unilateral decisions in the future. I should have trusted in your research skills.”

And didn’t that let the wind out of Hermione’s sails? She looked away. “Well. I’ll forgive you this time. Did you, erm, learn anything else?”
“Nagini’s definitely one, and so is the cup. He gave it to Bellatrix and doesn’t know what she did with it. She knows what it is.”

Hermione eyes narrowed as she was torn between exclaiming over this wealth of information and her previous sentiments. She settled for a compromise of sorts and did neither. “Right. What do we need to do next?”

“I’ve been brewing antivenin to work against Nagini. I can administer injections of it to build up our immunity. That’s only part of the problem, however. Her venom is capable of long-term damage in terms of healing of the wounds she inflicts, which you saw with Arthur Weasley. More pressing is her speed in striking. If she gets to a major blood vessel – or something else important – you’ll be dead in a matter of minutes. This obviously means you have to kill her before she kills you. Unfortunately, that’s easier said than done.”

“Hang on – wouldn’t you need access to her venom in the first place to make an antivenin?” Hermione asked, frowning.

“Yes. I requested a quantity of it from the Dark Lord to use in potions experiments.”

Hero broke into peals of laughter. “He . . . he handed you the venom you’re going to use to neutralize his snake?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact he did. Arrogance and oversight are often a lethal combination.”

“Okay, so how do we kill it?” Hermione asked.

“Well, I’m our resident snake-killing expert,” Hero quipped. “In my experience, stabbing usually works.”

Severus sent her a withering glance. “The basilisk, if I recall correctly, was blind at that point because of Fawkes. Unfortunately, he hasn’t been seen since Albus’s death.”

“So what you’re saying is we’re s-o-l,” Hermione put in.

“Well, not necessarily. It could be done if Nagini was sleeping, for example. The trouble with that is, he constantly keeps her in a protective bubble. I can’t remember the last time he sent her out to do his bidding.” A whisper slipped through Severus’s mind at that. Once the moment arrives when Voldemort ceases to use her as a tool and weapon and instead keeps her by his side under magical protections . . . then, I think it will be time to tell Hero. The moment, it seemed, had arrived.

He swallowed, feeling faint stirrings of panic. He wasn't ready! The moment wasn't right, it would only upset her, he needed to figure out how to break it to her gently. He knew he was making excuses, and that none of them really mattered. But perhaps it would be wise not to bring it up in front of Miss Granger.

“Do you think we could get Draco to do it?” Hero asked him. “I mean, the Dark Lord’s staying at their manor.”

Severus pursed his lips as he forced himself to consider the idea. “Perhaps. There could be no question of him remaining as a spy after that, however. It would have to be perfectly timed, not just in terms of Nagini being incapacitated, but the broad strokes of the war, as well. He’s an invaluable agent, or he could be at any rate.”

“Alright. So it’s a last resort,” Hermione stated. “And the cup, which Bellatrix has in her talons?”
“Yeah, the answer would seem to be Draco again,” Hero admitted, rubbing the back of her neck sheepishly. “She trusts him to a certain extent, it wouldn’t be completely out of the question for her to send him to fetch something.”

Severus sighed. “He’s going to be just insufferable, isn’t he?”

Hero shook her head. “It’ll give him a bit of hope. I’m sure none of this has been easy for him.”

“I really think you’re going to have to pick,” Hermione pointed out.

“What?”

“Malfoy. He can help find the diadem, fine. But killing the snake or getting the cup, his cover would likely be blown after either of those.”

Severus scowled. “Damn it. She’s right. Still, we don’t have to decide anything today. We can ask Draco what he thinks when we see him in a few weeks. Now, shall we give Mr. Weasley the good news?”

“Sure. Maybe you can help him with the wireless. He hasn’t left the thing alone in ages,” Hermione commented.

“Yes, why not?” Hero gave him a suspicious look, which he ignored.

They left the library and made their way towards the drawing room, where Ron was, indeed, fiddling with the wireless and wearing a frustrated expression. He looked up when they entered, and the frustration faded. Hermione held out a hand and tugged him over to the sofa.

Ron looked between them, frowning. “What’s up?”

“We know where the next Horcrux is!” Hero burst out, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Bloody hell, that’s brilliant! So what are we standing around for?”

“It requires planning. Delicacy,” Severus replied tersely.

“And, unfortunately, Draco Malfoy,” Hero added.

“What? That nosy ferret?!”

“He’s on our side. And he has information we need,” Hermione said, patting his hand.

“Alright. So why are you all here?”

Severus realized Mr. Weasley was more perceptive than he had hitherto given him credit for.

“We know of two further horcruxes, but not their exact location. The cup is with Bellatrix; the snake is somewhere safe. Potentially easier to find, perhaps more difficult to destroy.”

“So that’s it. You’re just keeping me up to date?”


Hero’s suspicious look was back. Noticing that Ron and Hermione were making eyes at each other and were unlikely to be disturbed by anything short of an explosion, she took Severus’s hand and marched him out into the corridor.
“What’s the matter? I’ll find out eventually, so all things considered, it’s really better you just tell me now. Out with it.”

“Before he died, did Albus . . . mention anything to you about your scar?”

“No. Why?”

“Damn. It means I have to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Why . . . you have a connection to the Dark Lord’s mind. Why you can speak to snakes. Why . . . the prophecy exists. ‘Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.’”

Hero swallowed. “Just tell me.”

His eyes slid shut. “The night he failed to kill you, the curse rebounded on him. His soul was already unstable, and . . . a piece broke off. And latched onto the only living thing in that house. It latched onto you. And so, according to Albus, you must die, and it must . . . it must be at the Dark Lord’s hand.”

Hero raised her hands to her mouth and sagged against Severus’s chest. He wrapped his arms around her and found that she was trembling. He pressed a kiss to her hair. There was nothing to say, no platitudes that could be offered. The horror was unabashed, unadulterated, unapologetic. Perhaps they should have been used to such truths by that point.

“So-so . . . so I have to . . . I can’t just let the cancer kill me. He has to.”

“I think so.”

She swallowed thickly. “Alright. Alright. At least it’ll be painless. Better than . . . a-a brain hernia, or the common cold, or a seizure, or—” The tremors had only gotten more violent as she spoke. He tilted her face up and found she looked distinctly green about the gills.

“Hero. Hero, sweetheart, listen to me. This is not the end. Not yet. You don’t have to go to him until you’re about to die anyway. You . . . have six months left. This won’t necessarily make it much shorter. We’ll deal with problems as they arise.”

“Am . . . am I a problem?” she asked, her voice broken.

“Oh, darling. Never. You are a blessing greater than I ever expected or deserved.”

“Shush. I know I’ve been horrible. You’re always there for me. And you always tell me the truth.”

“I shudder to think what state I might be in without you. After everything that’s happened over the last year . . . no, I need you every bit as much as you need me.”

She cuddled closer, starting to feel a bit more in control of herself, if not her destiny. “So, what are we going to do?”

“Precisely what we have been, which is to say doing our best to accomplish the various tasks assigned to us. We’ll do our best, and hope to any power that hears that it’ll be good enough.”

She gave a weak chuckle. “So, like any other year, then, is what you’re saying.”
“In essence.”

“I think, for the moment, I want to just forget. Let me forget.”

“And how would you propose we do that?” he asked, his voice a rumble in his chest she more felt than heard, pressed as she was against him.

“Dance with me.”

“Here?” he asked, amused.

She smiled slightly. “No. In the drawing room, to one of the records I brought down in February.”

“Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are there.”

“I know. Let them see. What’s the harm in a dance or three?”

“Are you feeling well enough to go back in, then?”

“I think so.”

“Then you’re going to have to let go of me.”

“I don’t want to.” After a moment, however, she sighed, and stepped back.

He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face up. She smiled at him, a real smile this time. He kissed her, just a brief brush of lips, but it was enough to make her heart beat a little faster. Her eyes shone as he drew back, and he felt a pang in his chest that was bittersweet in equal measures. He wondered if Tennyson really had it right: ‘tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Trite though it might have been, he hoped to God it was true.

She took his hand and they went back to the drawing room. Ron and Hermione, who had been snogging on the sofa, sprang apart when they came into the room. Hermione surreptitiously wiped her mouth.

“You don’t mind if we put a bit of music on, do you?” Hero asked airily, her eyes twinking wickedly.

Ron cleared his throat nervously. “No, no, you, er, go right ahead.”

Hero smiled sweetly at him and went to pick out a record. Finally, she held up two.

“Sinatra or Benny Goodman?” she asked Severus.

“Sinatra.”

She put it on the turntable and set the needle on it. The soft strains of “Fly Me to the Moon” filled the room. Severus held out his hand; she took it and allowed him to draw her closer. He put his other hand on her back and she put her hand on his arm. He led her into a foxtrot, holding her close. She sighed contentedly and laid her head against his chest.

Ron and Hermione, their blushes starting to fade following the embarrassment of having been interrupted, were quite distracted from their own activities. Instead, they stared as Severus and Hero moved gracefully through the clear space, seemingly in their own world. They exchanged looks.

Ron’s said, *am I really seeing this?*
Hermione’s said, *I think we are.*

*But they’re . . .*

*I know.*

*I don’t understand.*

*I don’t either. We don’t have to.*

They sat back and simply watched the couple. After a few moments, Ron got a look like he was having a brainwave. He mimed writing something. Hermione Conjured up a notepad and a pencil and handed it over.

*I think I’m starting to see it. Them.*

*Really?* she wrote back.

He nodded and scribbled, *They really love each other.*

*Yeah. I think they do.* Once Ron had read her last message, she Vanished the notepad and reached for Ron’s hand. They quietly left the room. Neither Hero nor Severus noticed, too wrapped up in the moment, a place where nothing existed but the music and each other.
Hi, guys. So, I have news. It's not . . . terrible. I think. But my computer needed to be worked on, and it is now fixed, but meanwhile, I was using my dad's new computer, which had the screen fail, and then it turned out the hard drive was faulty. So I lost, like, three chapters. I'm working on rewriting them, and second drafts are usually improvements anyway. At least, that's what I tell myself. Also, chapter 60 is currently incomplete. I'm going to work on finishing it in the next four weeks before it's due to be posted, but there might be a delay. But in this chapter you have a reforming Draco and a sex scene, so . . . that's got to make things a little better, right? Sorry, I'm babbling. I'll just . . . go.

Draco tried to keep the tension off his face as he hurried through the Hogwarts Express, looking for an empty compartment. Some – Hero's friends – glared at him as he went past. Others averted their eyes, afraid. Still others watched, merely curious. But no one ignored him.

Self-loathing sat in his gut like indigestion. If only, if only he had known, perhaps he might have stopped it from coming to this. Except he knew that was a lie. He’d never been important enough to make a difference. He hadn’t even succeeded in the mission he’d been close to killing himself over. It hadn’t mattered.

There was a resistance to that, as had been happening more and more lately. It was small, still, embryonic, but there all the same. A bit of steel that parried the thoughts. It reminded him that he might not have done anything then, but he wouldn’t make the same mistake this time, and this time he’d be on the right side. He would make a difference. He’d do what no one else could. Pride. He sneered at the gawking students and stuck his nose in the air. He showed them what he knew they expected.


He wanted to shove her off his lap and tell her to get lost. But he couldn’t, because it would be too suspicious. Anything at all suspicious was too suspicious.

So he smirked and stroked up the outside of her thigh, lifting her skirt a little. “Have you?”

“Yes,” she said with a pout, and he knew she was lying. “It’s been ever so dull without you. You have all the fun. You got to have the Dark Lord in your very own home. I can’t imagine the pleasure . . . the honor.”

“Indescribable, really.” And it was true. How do you explain spending every moment sick to your stomach with fear and shame and disgust?

She pressed closer. “You have to tell me everything.”

“I’m afraid I can’t, Pansy, dear. There are things civilians aren’t meant to know. For your safety.” And mine. “And you haven’t got the Mark. It’s war, Pansy. One we haven’t won yet.” Lies
wrapped in truth, like pills coated in chocolate to slide easier down the patient’s throat.

He didn’t love Pansy. There was a time, certainly, when he’d been fond of her. But he would not mourn her loss. That was fine; she didn’t much love or care about him, either. Sentiment was weakness. At least, that’s what they’d been brought up to believe.

“Oh, you’re so noble, Draco. It’s so easy to see why he chose you.” He kissed her neck and smiled against the skin. He slipped into the part so completely, he wore it like a second skin. He’d lived inside it long enough, after all.

Severus caught him on his way out of the Great Hall.

“There are things I need to discuss with you, Mr. Malfoy. If you could please follow me up to my office.”

Draco knew better than to ask what it was about while out in the open. Finally, they got to the Gargoyle and Severus gave the password: “Juniper.” They went on up to his office. Draco followed his godfather into the office. His hand twitched toward his wand when he realized they weren’t alone. He relaxed when he saw who it was.

“Potter. What are you doing here?” he hissed at her. She smirked at him from her position in the head’s chair.

“You’re going to love this, Malfoy. We need your help.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“My mission requires me to be here.”

“And you just popped up to Scotland from Merlin knows where?! How?!”

“That’s not your concern. Severus, do you want to explain, or should I?”

“You go ahead, darling. I’m exhausted.”


Draco replied, “Too well.”

“Do you remember seeing a tiara-looking sort of thing?”

“Um . . . yeah. I think so.”

“Great. You can show us where it is.”

“Why?”

“We need to destroy it.”

“Okay. Was that it?”

“No. Do you have any idea what he’s done with Nagini while he’s abroad?”

“He’s taken her with him. No idea where he’s gone, but he doesn’t leave her lying around Malfoy
Manor, if that’s what you mean.”

“We hoped,” Severus put in. “It’s no matter. Now, your aunt Bellatrix. Where might she put something valuable?”

“Well, her Gringotts vault. What does anybody do with valuables?”

“Something given to her by the Dark Lord. Something containing his soul.”

Draco decided to ignore that particular revelation. “Well, like I said, her Gringotts vault.”

“She’d put Hufflepuff’s cup in a bank vault?” Hero asked, skeptical.

“It’s one of the most secure places in our world.”

“Is there any way to test his theory?”

“Of course,” Severus replied. “Dumbledore had a fake Sword forged. It’s a Founder’s object. She would likely treat it with similar care were it to be presented to her.”

“You think a fake is going to convince her?” Draco asked.

“It’s a very convincing fake. Only a goblin would be able to tell the difference.”

“Well, that’s that problem solved, isn’t it? It’s not like Gringotts is mostly staffed with goblins or anything,” Draco retorted sarcastically.

“You really think they’d inspect anything your aunt brought in?” Severus asked raising an eyebrow.

Draco paused. “You’ve got a point there.”

“How do you think she’d react if you went in to Gringotts and asked for permission to access her vault.”

“Are you mental? She’d skin me alive.”

“Okay, then, we’ll wait on that. And how are you feeling about killing Nagini?”

“No. Just no. It’s in that protective bubble even when it’s asleep, as far as I’ve seen. And I don’t even know where he’s left it.”

“That’s fine, we’ll come up with something else.”

“Joy. Are we doing this or not?”

“Not yet. Not until after curfew. The students and staff will simply think you have been given some sort of task – which is quite true. The important thing is that there aren’t any witnesses.”

“Right. So, I’m just supposed to stick around your office for three hours?”

“More or less.”

“Why do you always want me to be bored?”

“Who says you have to be bored? Want to play Exploding Snap?” Hero suggested, mostly kidding.

“Thank you, no.”
“Then you can hardly complain about being bored, can you?”

“Don’t tease him. Draco, feel free to venture into Grimmauld Place should you wish. Perhaps you and Mr. Weasley can play chess. I know he’s dying for a distraction.”

“How am I supposed to get to the Black family seat, which is in London, from here?”

Hero got to her feet. “Come on, then. I’ll show you.”

Draco followed her, bewildered. She led him into the headmaster’s private quarters, to what had once been the door to a linen cupboard. It now led to another linen cupboard outside the bedroom she shared with Severus at Grimmauld. Draco gaped as he walked through.

“Come on, they’re probably in the drawing room.” Draco wandered through corridors located at the other end of the country from where he’d been before. Ron and Hermione were, indeed, in the drawing room. Fortunately, they weren’t snogging when Hero and Draco walked in.

“Hero. Back already?”

“Yeah. His highness is bored. Have you managed to unearth a chess set yet, Ron?”

“Yeah. I just have to dig it out of the cupboard I stashed it in. I’ve always wanted to play against Malfoy.” A gleeful light came into his eyes. Draco sneered.

“Right, that’s fine, then,” Hero said. “Hermione, do you want to come through yet?”

“No, I think I’ll just read a while longer. And I wouldn’t mind seeing this, myself, to be honest.”

“Please yourself. Ta.”

She returned to Severus, who had taken the headmaster’s chair back after she’d left. He looked up when she stepped into the office.

“We’ll be alone for the duration, I think,” she told him, hopping up to sit on the edge of his desk, facing him.

“Not unexpected.”

“How’d the feast go?”

“It was miserable. Like a funeral. Then again, perhaps it’s just me.”

“And most of the other teachers and students, I imagine.”

“True. I’m . . . disgusted with myself, with what I must do.”

“I know, dear. I know. But, needs must. When it comes to a lot of things.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Unflinching truth.”

“Mmm,” Hero murmured, brushing her fingers over the scars that read, “I must not tell lies.” She met his eyes again and asked, “How are the teachers?”
“They are determined to remain for the students, no matter what. Things look . . . grim, there’s no denying that. They’re fine for the moment, perhaps a little worse for wear. They’ll protect each other. As much as they can.”

“How can I help?”

“Keep things going on your end. I’ll keep you appraised of things here.”

“Thank you. So, what are we going to do for the next three hours?”

“You could help me with my paperwork,” he suggested.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. But not for more than an hour.”

“I was kidding. How much paperwork do you imagine I have the first night of the schoolyear?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Well, I don’t know, do I? What are we going to do, then?”

“No ideas? None at all?” he asked, attempting to sound innocent.

“I have a few. I wanted to know what you wanted.”

He smiled. “You. Always you.”

He stood and placed his hands on the desk on either side of her, bending down to kiss her. She slipped her arms around his neck and pressed closer.

The kiss began as playful, slowly heating. When Severus pulled away for breath, he looked down at Hero to see starry eyes and swollen lips.

“Perhaps,” he rasped, “it would be better if we moved this to a more appropriate location.” She smiled in a way that lit up the whole room.

“I was hoping you’d ask.” She went to slide off the desk, but he stopped her.

“I might never get to do this again,” he whispered in her ear as he scooped her up into his arms. She laughed in delighted surprise before pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“Secretly a hopeless romantic,” she teased while he carried her to the head’s bedroom.

The bedroom no longer retained the personal effects of its previous inhabitant, thankfully, but rather the few things Severus had collected over the years.

“Which you are never to tell anyone,” he teasingly threatened, his voice a growl.

“Not least because they’d never believe me,” she retorted as he dropped her onto the bed.

“There is that, I suppose. Now, where were we?”

She put a finger to her mouth as if thinking. “Um . . . right about here, I think.”

“Of course.” He lay next to her and caressed her cheek. “I remember now.” Leaning in, he kissed her gently, chastely, before moving to her jaw and kissing up to her ear. He paid homage to the column of her throat, inhaling the scent of her at the hollow between her collar bones.

“Beautiful,” he murmured against her chest.
“Yours,” she breathed, arching into the touch. He paused to undo the buttons of her blouse while she squirmed impatiently. To pacify her, he sucked and nibbled on the top of her breast. There was a quivery feeling in her chest like laughter, only giddier and more impatient. Once he’d finished with the buttons, she wriggled out of her shirt and flung it across the room. Severus smirked at her and slid his hands under her back to unhook her bra. He drew the straps down her arms slowly, carefully, his fingertips grazing her skin, making her shiver. Once it was off, he dropped it over the side of the bed.

Severus was only wearing a waistcoat and his over-robe instead of his usual frock coat. Hero grinned as she set to work on his waistcoat, followed in quick succession by his cravat, and finally his shirt buttons. He shrugged it off and she took it. Holding his eyes and grinning, she dropped it over the side of the bed.

He sighed. “Must you?” She didn’t dignify that with a reply, simply raised her eyebrows and pointed to his trousers.

“Demanding little thing, aren’t you?” he said, making quick work of his trousers. Hero snatched them up and sent them to join his shirt.

“I want you.”

“Yes, I know. We have three hours,” he pointed out. “We can afford to draw this out.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can wait,” she admitted, biting her lip.

“Flattering, but misguided. You wanted me to touch every inch of you, remember? I want you coming to pieces in my arms by the time you come.” He leaned in, taking her in his arms and whispering in her ear, “I want you begging me, desperate, delirious, delectable . . . when I finally give you what you want. And it will be all the sweeter for the wait.”

Her eyes slid shut as she moaned, arching against him. He smiled against the swell of her breast, nuzzling the soft, milky skin.

“ ‘A hundred years should go to praise thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze; Two hundred to adore each breast, But thirty thousand to the rest;’” Severus quoted.

“We don’t have that kind of time,” Hero teased him.

“No. But I stand by the sentiment.”

A small smile curled her lips. “Two hundred? To each breast?”

“Well, they are lovely, aren’t they?” He sat up and cupped them in his hands, squeezing gently, kneading, stroking. He bent his head as if to inspect one rosy-pink nipple. He looked up at her. “Don’t you think they’re lovely?”

She blushed, and he was fascinated to see the flush extended down her neck and all the way onto her chest and breasts. It rendered her skin a soft, delicate, petal pink.

“Does this feel good? Hmm?” He brushed a kiss to the top of one breast, then the other. She mewed like a kitten. “That’s it, darling.”

His hands drifted lower, his thumbs stroking down her sides, outlining the indent of her waist. He pressed a kiss to her sternum before moving south. He trailed down in a line of kisses, murmuring, “You. Are. So. Beautiful.” Hero moaned at the sensations and the sentiments.
“You’re quite handsome yourself. God knows I haven’t been able to take my eyes off you for three years,” she gasped back.

He paused at her bellybutton. “Make me understand why.”

She grinned, fond and just a bit feral. “Your eyes, for one. They go one forever. Whenever I look into them, I feel like I’m falling in, and I’m surrounded by you. When I look into your eyes, I feel safe, and comforted, and cared for. And your nose. I have no idea why I like your nose so much. I just do. It is, for some reason, enormously attractive. And your cheekbones look like you stole them from a Roman statue.”

He snorted. “They do not.”

“She’s disagree. And you’re tall, and dark. I like having to stretch up to kiss you – it makes me feel delicate.”

“You don’t need me for that.”

“Shush, I’m explaining. And ... you’re quite fit underneath those robes and buttons. Not muscle-bound, but lean. A flexible, agile sort of strong. You’d have made an excellent Seeker if you hadn’t been so tall. And your hands—”

“My hands?”

She smiled and took one of his hand in both of hers, cradling it as she lightly stroked over the back. “Your hands. Long, slender fingers, dexterous, talented. Elegant, pianist’s hands.”

“Well, I have come to a conclusion.”

“Oh?”

“You are quite mad. But the sort that would make me a fool to ever let you go.”

“Ha! You mean I’m mad about you.”

“Well, yes. I find I’m similarly afflicted with regards to you.”

“Sweet talker.”

“And yet my tongue isn’t on the list of your favorite attributes.”

“Well, you could prove me wrong,” she challenged.

“As you wish.”

He went back to kiss her skin, moving down further until his mouth hit the top of her panties. “I think we missed a step,” he observed, his voice gravelly. He peeled them off her slowly, drawing it out even as she begged him to hurry up. Once they were finally all the way off, he caressed the uninterrupted curves of her hips.

“What are you doing?”

“Admiring the scenery.” He stroked her skin, reaching behind to grip the curve of her arse and squeezing slightly. She batted his hand away, muffling laughter.

“Stop it.”
“What?” he asked, pretending innocence.

“It tickles. You know I’m ticklish.”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t know you were ticklish there. I’m exploring.”

“Well, now you’ve covered that, you can explore somewhere else.” He didn’t reply, instead opting to simply continue with said exploration.

His hands drifted down to her knees on the outside of her thighs, drifting up on the insides, only just skimming the skin with his fingertips. Hero let out a shaky breath at the sensation.

He slipped a finger into her sex, teasing the flesh there. His mouth was against her neck, the words half heard, half felt.

“Do you like that, hmm?” She gasped in reply. “I’ll take that as a yes.” He stroked her labia, encouraging her to open wider. Her legs parted further almost of their own accord. His fingers delved deeper, stroking.

“That’s it. You’re mine, completely mine. And I know just what to do to . . . make you scream.” She groaned, and he smirked against her skin. “Yes, that’s it, just like that. I love those sounds you make.”

Need was pulsing through her, throbbing in time with her heart. Severus’s fingers were driving her past all her boundaries, past coherent thought, past sanity.

Slowly, languorously, he kissed from her neck down to her breasts, to her stomach, finally meeting his fingers. Tenderly, he pressed a kiss to her clitoris. She let out a strangled cry at the shock of pleasure.

“Beautiful.”

Slowly, he opened his mouth, his tongue sweeping out to taste her. She half moaned, half gasped, a shuddering sound that he drank in like nectar. His exploration continued as he experienced her taste, feel, and infinitesimal motions with the sensitive skin of his tongue.

Had she thought his fingers were dexterous? They were nothing compared to this. The pleasure washed over her, and she succumbed to it, without hope or even thought of keeping her head above the tide. She sank beneath the waves, and he held her as she came apart.

They lay there for neither one knew how long, breathing heavily, drunk with pleasure. When she had finally recovered enough of her wits to realize he hadn’t come yet, she took him by the shoulders and flipped them so she was the one straddling him. At which point she was reminded that, while she was bare, he was only naked above the waist.

She leaned in and whispered into his neck, “You, sir, are overdressed. You’re always overdressed. It makes it that much more satisfying to strip you.”

She kissed and bit and sucked at his neck, confident his clothes would cover up the evidence, while her hands tugged at his shorts. She moved up to his mouth, nibbling playfully at his lips until he deepened the kiss. She pulled away after a second, laughing.

“No taking over. You’re mine tonight. Lift your hips.”

He did, holding her gaze, his eyes burning with desire. She drew his pants off, revealing her prize.
She reached for it, running her fingers over the skin. It was soft – the romance novels had gotten that right. But it was far too red to be called golden. She squeezed and he groaned. She took one hand and started to stroke the shaft, using the other to cradle his testicles. She stroked up to the head. He exhaled sharply and caught her hand.

“I don’t want to come yet.”

“What would you like?” she asked, her voice husky, her eyes smoldering.

“I want to be inside you. I want you riding me into oblivion.”

Hero smiled. “I think I can accommodate that.” She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his lips, then sat up and guided the head of his cock to her entrance. She slowly sank down, her hands coming to rest on his chest. Severus’s hands settled on her hips.

“You’re going to have to show me what to do,” she whispered. “We both know I haven’t done this before.”

“It’s difficult to get it wrong. And it’s not like we haven’t made love before. But I could guide you if you like.” He squeezed her hips and guided her up slowly, until she had almost lifted free of him, and back down.

Hero gasped, her lids sliding shut as she picked up the rhythm. “I love the feel of you, so close to me.”

“Never far from you, sweet Hero. You’re so tight, so good. I never want to let you go.”

“Yours. Always yours. Forever.”

Not long after that, she came with a cry, collapsing on his chest. He followed her an instant later. They lay together, boneless, in the afterglow. Eventually, Severus wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck, murmuring sweet nothings in her ear.

“Mmm. My Severus. I love you, so much,” she murmured, sounding three-quarters asleep.

Severus ran soothing hands up and down her back. “I love you, my darling. Always.” Shortly after, he set an alarm and followed her into sleep.

* *

After curfew, Ron, Hermione, and Draco came trailing into the office. Draco was scowling, while Ron was overjoyed. It wasn’t difficult to guess the results of the chess game. Hero and Severus were nowhere to be seen. They could be heard, however.

“We have to, darling. They’re waiting for us.”

“They’ll wait a little longer. Oh, fine. I think my shirt’s over on your side. No idea where my knickers are. Here’re your shirt and trousers. They’re a bit wrinkled. I’d say I’m sorry, but . . . I’m not.”

The three waiting in the office turned red. Ron clutched at his ears and muttered something about “my best mate’s sex life.” Draco thought that it was surely the first time he’d so wholeheartedly agreed with him. Hermione looked rather uncomfortable, but ever so slightly fascinated.

A few minutes later, the couple emerged, both looking slightly more rumpled than usual. Hero’s hair
“Hermione, have you got your handbag?”

“Yep.” She reached into, already knowing what her friend wanted. “Um . . . here’s your Cloak.”

“Thanks a million. You want to get under here? Ron can’t fit, but you should be able to hide him well enough with a Disillusionment Charm.

“Yes, I think that should be fine.”

“And the Sword?” Hero looked around at the three of them, the two-foot-long blade conspicuously missing.

“I put an Undetectable Extension Charm on Ron’s pocket’s. He’s got it.” Oh, right. Hermione had told her about it yesterday.

“Right. Right.”

“We have everything we need. Now we just need to finish the job,” Severus reassured her, taking her hand and stroking his thumb over the back of it.

She nodded and swirled the Cloak around her and Hermione once Hermione had Disillusioned Ron. They proceeded down the staircase and past the Gargoyle. It wasn’t very far from the Headmaster’s office to the Room. Draco walked in front of the blank stretch of wall three times, thinking of the Room of Hidden Things. On the third pass, the door appeared, and he led them inside.

It was a labyrinth of scandals and shame furtively hidden. Hero wondered idly which section was dedicated to Trelawney’s sherry bottles. Malfoy clearly knew the way, though. He followed what seemed to be the main path, diverging along an alley. There, sticking out of one pile, was the diadem. It was silver, wings centered around an enormous sapphire. Engraved on it were the words “wit beyond measure; man’s greatest treasure.”

Malfoy reached out and took it. They all stood, frozen, waiting for something to attack them. Nothing did. They took it out of the room and back to the head’s office. The office had seen two previous horcruxes, one arriving destroyed, the other leaving in that condition. Perhaps it was a good omen.

“Who’s going to do it?” Hermione asked, emerging from beneath the Cloak.

“I think Malfoy should do it,” Hero said. “We wouldn’t be here without him.”

“No, no, I couldn’t. Someone else, someone who deserves it.”

“No one deserves it more than you, Draco,” Severus told him. Surprisingly, Ron and Hermione nodded in agreement.

“Alright . . . I’ll . . . I’ll do it.” Ron took the Sword out of his pocket and presented it to Draco, hilt first. He took it, eyeing it warily. “So, how do I do this?”

“Just stab it,” Hero told him. “Slice it, destroy it. Destroy it so it can never be whole again.”

He nodded, taking the hilt in both hands. The diadem sat innocently on the desk. Draco swung the sword up and sliced it in half. A cloud of smoke billowed from it, accompanied by a high-pitched scream. Draco stood before the pieces, the Sword held loosely at his side, looking white and shaken.
Hero swallowed. “What do we do with it now?”

It was a fair question. It was too much of a risk to take the pieces back through the school, however briefly. Severus couldn’t be caught in possession of them.

“Could you take it back with you? Put them in that cabinet in the drawing room or something?” Severus suggested.

“For now,” Hermione said firmly. “But after the war, I think it should go to Ravenclaw House.”

“Admirable, but perhaps overly optimistic, Miss Granger. It will do.”

“So, what next?”

“The snake and the cup. Draco will work on getting into his aunt’s good graces. Miss Granger, I would appreciate it if you could brew a few things to lighten my load.”

“Of course. I’ll just need a list of potions and any ingredients I’ll need to pick up.”

“I’ll provide the ingredients. You can hardly skip merrily into Knockturn Alley.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “Oh. Those sorts of potions.”

“Indeed. Mr. Weasley, if there are any messages you wish to pass to your sister, I’ll try to find a way to smuggle them to her.”

“Thanks.”

“I’d also like you to meet with Draco once a week to discuss any intelligence he may gather. Draco, the password for my office will not change. Mr. Weasley, if you could write it all down and attempt to make sense of it, that would be very helpful.”

“Oh . . . er, sure.”

“Now, if you could all leave so I can have a moment to say goodbye to Hero, I’d appreciate it.”

There was a flurry of goodbyes as they all scrambled to leave.

Hero smirked at him. “You really know how to clear a room, dear.”

“Yes, it’s a particular skill I’ve cultivated.”

“I’m so glad.” She laid her head against his chest. “Come back to me. Be away as long as you need, but come back to me.”

He smiled and cupped her cheek, tilting her lips up for a kiss. “Always.”
Hello! It's a day early, don't you feel special? Eh, maybe not. Anyway, it looks like I'll be spending the summer working with refugees in Germany, which, obviously, is completely awesome. Real rollercoaster of a year, 2018. Hope you all are well.

Oh, and the bridge isn't mine. I first read about it in Laventadorn's Never-Ending Road series, which you should definitely check out if you haven't already.

Draco scowled at the parchment and pondered what to write. How did one go about getting into a mad woman’s good graces? It wasn’t like she was rational. She could smile at you and give you a sugar quill one minute and try to scratch your face off the next. Good graces. Goodness gracious.

He put the nib of the quill to the parchment and left it there, still thinking. The ink bled into the parchment, leaving a lopsided blotch. He sighed and got out a ruler and a razor and cut the inkblot away. He licked his lips and tried again.

Dear Aunt Bella, he began. No, it was stupid and pointless. She hated him, was disgusted by him. She’d never warm up to him enough that it would be plausible for her to give him access to her vault. But he had to try.

I hope this letter finds you and Delphini well. I find myself glad that one half of my lineage is worthy in the Dark Lord’s eyes. My father is a sickness on the family tree, one that rots and festers. I see that now. I wish I had been raised in the traditions of the Blacks, like you and Mother. I worry that having been brought up a perfect Malfoy will be to my detriment. If there is anything worthy in me, it comes from the Blacks.

I am sure you will raise your daughter in those rich traditions. They are, after all, part of the reason our Lord chose you for that highest honor. He could not have chosen a better mother for his heir. Even Severus, from his position as Headmaster, knows you are above him. None of our Lord’s servants can gainsay you now. You will surely go down in history as his Consort, his right hand. I would give anything to be more like you. As it is, I can only once again express my gratitude to you for training me as much as you have.

Yours,

Draco

Draco gazed at what he had written and felt a strange combination of pride and revulsion. It was ghastly. He could only hope it was ghastly enough to appeal to his aunt. He felt like vomiting, to be honest, but that wouldn’t matter if it was only worth it. Now, to cap it off, he should probably go down to the Common Room and kibitz with the other Slytherins and engage in behavior inappropriate to a public setting with Pansy.

* 

Draco,
You do yourself credit. Perhaps you aren’t as stupid and short-sighted as your father. Hopefully your mother’s weakness has also missed you. My sister never did have much stomach for necessary measures. It is one of her greatest failings as a Slytherin and a Black.

Do not expect to be accepted into the better crowd with one letter. Prove to me that you’re sincere, that you can be trusted, and I might put in a good word. I promise nothing. I warn you, Draco. My opinion of you before your letter couldn’t have been much lower. You have a long way to go before I’d consider so much as lifting a finger to help you.

Bellatrix

Draco held his aunt’s letter in a shaking hand, sweat beading on his forehead. She was terrifying. She’d been locked up until the past few years, and his mother hadn’t liked to talk about her much. He could understand why. Of course, his father had told him what she’d done to earn her incarceration. He’d been proud of it. Now, whenever he passed Longbottom in the halls, he suppressed the urge to wince.

It was clear that Longbottom and Potter’s other friends – sans Finnegan and Thomas who, rumor had it, had fled to Ireland – were resisting the new regime. Draco wished he could join them – he’d had to use the Cruciatus curse on other Death Eaters, and that had been bad enough, but first years? Despicable was too kind a word for the Carrows. He wished he could be standing with the group covered in bruises and dried blood, defiance shining out of their eyes. Lovegood – she didn’t just look defiant, she looked like the war had barely touched her. She was as bright and effervescent as ever. She didn’t even look militant, though she’d cast her fair share of hexes and curses. She didn’t look like she was fighting; she looked like they’d already won. It was comforting to Draco as nothing else was.

After destroying the diadem, he and Weasley had come to an agreement – a truce of sorts. For his sake, Draco kept an eye on his little sister. It wasn’t a hardship considering she was usually with Lovegood. The Weaslette seemed to be coping alright under the pressure – though she, like everyone, was a little worse for wear.

He got a letter from his mother not long after he got one from Bellatrix. It wasn’t terribly surprising – discreet, his aunt was not.

Dearest Draco,

I shall not beat around the bush; why are you writing to my sister? Any man hoping to stay in one piece knows to avoid her. I certainly hope this is not an extremely masochistic approach to suicide. You are to write back to me at once, and I had better find your answer satisfactory. You will find you will not care for the consequences if it is otherwise.

Love,

Mother

Draco squirmed in his seat at the Slytherin table. Incredible woman, his mother; she could make you feel uncomfortable from hundreds of miles away with nothing more than a paragraph. He could begin to see how his mother and Bellatrix were sisters. He glanced at his breakfast and wondered if he dared risk finishing it before writing to his mother. He chose breakfast, but it was a near thing.

After breakfast, he sat down at a desk in his dorm room to write.

Dearest Mother,
I appreciate your concern, but I know what I’m doing. Our conversation on allegiances and actions had a greater effect than you could have known. My letter to Aunt Bellatrix was in pursuit of what I believe we can agree is the noblest of goals. I accept your worries as inevitable but I must ask you not to interfere, however much it pains me.

There are those, both within the school and at large, who would oppose my actions should they become familiar with my plans. Having long been in the enviable position both as a daughter of the House of Black and the matriarch of the House of Malfoy, I am confident you understand. Please be assured that I shall contact you should the need arise.

Your loving son,

Draco

He rolled up the parchment and sealed it with a Sticking Charm before getting up to head to the owlery to send it off. He didn’t get that far. In fact, he didn’t get any farther than the Common Room.

His mother was standing before the fireplace in pale, icy blonde glory. She didn’t do anything so uncouth as folding her arms, but the sentiment was present in her raised eyebrow and lifted chin, in the censure in her eyes. Other Slytherins, little used to the aura she exuded, however far the Malfoy family had fallen, quailed in awe and self-preservation. Draco himself repressed the urge to do the same.

“Draco. Come greet your mother,” she murmured, her eyes flashing, steel wrapped in silk.

Somehow, he compelled his feet to carry him towards her even through the frosty corridor she’d made before her. He kissed her cheeks and drew back, conscious of the weight of her regard.

She sent a chilly smile around the Common Room. “It is more years than I care to admit since I was last here. Tell me, Draco, where might we have privacy so I might discuss certain delicate matters?”

He drew a persona around him and smiled lazily. “Surely, Mother, it hasn’t been so long you’ve forgotten the Confessor’s Bridge. Perhaps you’ve simply forgotten the way. Allow me to show you,” he said, extending his arm. She grasped it, clutching just tight enough for him to be conscious of her nails. Bellatrix was mad if she thought her sister weak, but then, he’d already known that.

They shortly found themselves on the Confessor’s Bridge, a sturdy stone construction that nonetheless allowed room for no more than single file. It crossed an impossibly deep chasm that really shouldn’t have existed, especially since they were already in one of the deepest sections of the castle. None could hear what passed between two confidants there, no matter the method. If Salazar Slytherin really had created it, as the legend went, he’d known his people well.

He turned to face his mother, who raised an eyebrow at him. “When I did not receive word, I became concerned.”

And wasn’t that just Narcissa Malfoy all over? Draco suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. “Mother, I got your letter not an hour ago.”

“And, had you sent a reply by Athena, I would have known of it. You did not.”

He was simultaneously surprised she’d put a tracking spell on his owl and furious at himself for underestimating her. “I was about to. You grow impatient.”

“Patience is one of many virtues war makes frivolous. Do not ask me to waste so much as a
moment; we can little afford frivolity of any kind, patience especially. Had you hurried, there would have been no problem.”

“You may consider me suitably chastened.”

“Might I? You said you finished the letter. Where is it?”

He’d written the letter having assumed she’d be hundreds of miles away from Scotland – and him – when she read it. Inwardly cursing his luck, he handed her the parchment. She scanned down the text and finally met his eyes again, her face inscrutable.

Finally, she spoke. “Admirable, if foolhardy. I see now why you wrote to my sister.” Draco braced himself. “Did it not occur to you that I might be able to assist you?”

It wasn’t what he’d been expecting, but it was hardly much better. “Mother, I . . . it’s not really your area . . . I would have thought you’d prefer to stay far back, as from a potion in case it splashes.”

“It is of little consequence provided one takes the proper precautions. Allow me to be frank, Draco: you oppose the Dark Lord and seek to put Bellatrix to some use against him. It’s characteristically sweet of you to wish to protect me, but it’s quite unnecessary. I am well able to handle myself. Your father certainly isn’t the one you received your backbone from.”

“What?” Draco demanded flatly.

Narcissa laughed. “Your father is a political actor, as Malfoys have been for time out of mind. The Blacks tend to take a more direct approach. Not, Merlin knows, my Aunt Walburga and Uncle Orion. But members of my family, when stirred to a side, have never hesitated. We fall to both sides of the divide between light and dark. To this point, I have been content to stand aside and let your father direct the family destiny. Now, however, in light of his failure and your having chosen a side – late in the game though you are – I believe the time has come for me to join the fray. Aside from the fact that you are my son and I will support you in your endeavors, especially one such as this, any chance of advantage for our family after the war should the Dark Lord emerge victorious has all but vanished. And between my two sisters, I know which one I should prefer to die beside, and it is most certainly not your aunt Bellatrix.”

“You other sister?”

“You’ve never met her. She was scorched off the family tree for marrying a muggleborn. Her daughter is a metamorphmagus and an Auror, so clearly she did something right. She is also a member of the Order of the Phoenix. She joined because she cared about their side, as I did not about the Death Eaters. You know Bellatrix is Marked, while I am not.”

“You’re a free agent,” he realized. “Committed to neither side.”

“Yes, a distinct advantage next to you and Severus who seem to have found yourselves on both,” she pointed out, her tone amused and slightly biting. Draco flushed. She laughed again. “But I’m sure that has advantages of its own. How is Severus?”

“Er, coping. It’s hard for him to be away from Hero, so . . .”

It seemed he’d finally managed to shock her as her eyes widened. “Severus and Hero Potter? As what, exactly?”

“Lovers. You should see them together. It’s scary how perfect they are, especially considering all the years they’ve been at each other’s throats.”
“Should we all live to see the light on the other side of this war, I think I shall have to pay them a visit.”

Draco’s face fell. “She’s dying. She has cancer. The war might outlive her.”

Narcissa sighed. “Oh, poor Severus. It’s just his luck to finally love and be loved in return only to have the whole thing turn up star-crossed.”

Draco sensed there was a story there, but let it pass in favor of something more pressing. “How did you know Severus was a double agent?”

“Bellatrix has suspected it for years. She may be a raving lunatic, but she brought up good points. I gained nothing by condemning him to death, and so I waited until the knowledge might be used to my advantage. I’m reasonably sure he knows I’m aware. It certainly worked in my favor when I forced him to swear to help you last year.”

“And me?”

She smiled and reached up to caress his cheek. “You, my darling, will always be an open book to me.”

He sighed; he suspected she was right.

“Now, what say you return to your Common Room while I go and find Severus?”

*

Severus felt as if he was drowning in paperwork. The little weasels generated so much of it, almost out of thin air. How ironic that their Transfiguration marks were rather poor on the whole. It would have been quite alright for him to loathe it under other circumstances, but the tale told by the mountain of parchment was one that required his utmost attention.

A cocky, smart-mouthed first year had talked back to one of the Carrows. Instead of writing lines, as he’d probably expected, he’d assisted the upper years in their spellwork – as the target of the Cruciatius. Little Danny Peakes was now in the care of Madam Pomfrey, mute, staring, and experiencing the tremors associated with prolonged exposure to the curse. He wasn’t quite catatonic, thank Merlin for small mercies. He was a Gryffindor, no surprise, and Minerva was in a mood to attack first and ask questions later – if at all. He could hardly blame her.

As he scowled at the papers littering his desk, wondering how on earth to handle the situation, a portrait behind him cleared its throat. He looked up to see Phineas Nigellus Black sending him a pointed look.

“Yes?”

“Narcissa Black Malfoy is outside. I believe it’s a matter of some delicacy.”

“Thank you.” He rose and descended the staircase to find, as promised, Narcissa Malfoy.

“Severus. Could we speak in your office?”

“Yes, of course.” He nodded to the gargoyle, which promptly jumped aside. He settled back into his chair as Narcissa perched on the seat facing his desk.

“Is something the matter with Draco?”
“Rather the opposite, I think. He’s finally starting to rise to the occasion and grow into the position in which you’ve put him. But did it have to include my sister?”

“Your sister is high in our Lord’s esteem; why should Draco not attempt to get into her good graces?”

“Because she doesn’t have any,” Narcissa returned bluntly. “You will not find the Dark Lord vulnerable through her, but then you know that. So, what are you attempting?”

“Who said anything about the Dark Lord being vulnerable?”

Narcissa smiled. “Come now, Severus. It took not five minutes to get it out of Draco. I come in peace. And I shall keep your secrets. Tell me, how is Miss Potter?”

“Fine,” he replied blandly, “I’m sure, considering she has yet to be captured.”

“And dying. I am sorry for your impending loss, Severus. You deserve to be happy.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his lips. “For the moment, I am.”

“Mmm. What exactly do you want with my sister?”

“Access to her vault, for one thing. And hopefully access to Nagini.”

“Why?”

“How good an Occlumens are you?”

“I have encouraged disloyalty against the Dark Lord in my son within my own house while the Dark Lord was in residence without him being any the wiser.”

“I take your point. What do you know about Horcruxes?”

“I know the theory.”

“That ought to be sufficient. Hufflepuff’s cup and the snake.”

“They’re . . .” she raised a hand to her mouth. “Oh, my.”

“Yes. So, they need to be destroyed.”

“Certainly. Just those two?”

“The others have been destroyed. Well, bar one, which will resolve itself.”

Narcissa wondered how that could possibly be true, but let it lie. “What are your plans?”

“We had thought to inveigle Draco into a position where he might reasonably have access to her vault. Unless . . . do you have access?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve never officially been her keeper. So, a half-baked idea at best.”

“Well, what would you suggest?” he asked scathingly.

“I don’t mean to impugn the concept; I merely wish to point out the stunning lack of thought that has gone into it.”
“It’s been less than a week.”

“Even so. Tell me, do you know of the Dark Lord’s plans abroad?”

“Only that he is, and that he’s searching for something.”

“And you are aware that Garrick Ollivander has, for some months, been languishing in the Malfoy dungeons?”

“It’s not a secret.”

“Do you know why?”

“No. Do you?”

“But of course. He wanted the same thing from Ollivander that he now pursues abroad. Information on the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny. After what happened to Lucius’s, he believes that Hero Potter’s destruction requires the Elder Wand.”

“How do you know this?”

“It is my home, Severus. My house elves tend to Ollivander, waiting, unnoticed, while he is tortured. There is nothing that goes on in my home of which I am not aware.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. Even your meeting with Draco following the meeting where you gave away the plans of your lady love.”

“The Dark Lord made a grave mistake in not utilizing your abilities,” Severus murmured, shaking his head.

“Perhaps. Our methods are too different, I think.”

“Point. What aid might I hope for from your hand?”

“Information, most certainly. And I might be able to lend a hand – or an elf – here or there, should I have an opportunity. I make no promises, Severus – but then, nor do I expect any, this time at least.”

Severus smirked. “Kind of you.”

“No, Severus. Not kind. If I again made you swear to protect my son, your broken word would only kill you. When I made you swear, it was a mercy, because it was not your fault. This time, it is, as you willfully place him in the face of danger, even death . . . I find at the prospect of the loss of my only child, I have no inclination to spare you. Should he come to irreparable harm because of you, your death will be slow and very, very painful.”

“I understand.”

She smiled. “I thought you might, old friend. Do pass on my regards to Miss Potter. We all owe her much, more than we could ever repay. Not that that sentiment will stay my hand regarding you, of course.”

“Of course.” He rose, as did she, and they walked to the fireplace. He embraced her, bussing her cheeks, and bid her adieu.
So, I guess I should warn for religion? You all know, or should know, that Hero’s faith is, as with many people in real life going through terminal illness, something she both clings to and struggles with. I think of this chapter as important for her character development. If religion bothers you, maybe think of it as a plot device? Or, you know, you could try to see it from her perspective and how she benefits from engaging with her faith.

In other news, good luck to everyone going through finals! I have 350 pages to read before Friday, so I share your pain, believe me.

Hero had found that, with her cancer, there were good days and bad days. During the school year, there hadn’t been too many days so bad that they’d defeated her, though those had come now and then. Since Dr. Warren had told her she’d have six months if she was lucky, she was finding that she had more bad days and bad days were worse than they’d been. Today, for example, she’d summoned enough strength and energy to haul herself out of bed, propel herself down the stairs, and collapse on the sofa in the drawing room. Kreacher brought her breakfast there, and cups of tea on the hour, taking away the old cup, stone cold and half full more often than not.

Ron and Hermione drifted out throughout the morning. After lunch, Hermione settled in a chair to hold vigil, a concerned frown perpetually creasing her brow. Hero scowled at her.

“Stop it. You’re making me feel like an invalid.”

Hermione refrained from pointing out that she was, in fact, just that. The fact of it didn’t matter; the feeling did. She sighed and tried to school her face into a more neutral expression.

“Would you like some music?”

“Not really. Most of the music I brought down makes me want to dance. Right now, that would just depress me.” Even more.

“Right. Is there anything I can get you?” she asked, going to get up.

“Hermione. Stop mother-henning me. I don’t need anything that can be fetched. What I really need right now is for you to sit there and talk to me while we both pretend that I’m not dying and there’s nothing strange about my lying on the couch all day. Alright?”

Hermione slumped. “Okay. Um . . . did I tell you what Ron wanted for our wedding colors?”

“No, what?”

“Chudley Cannon orange! Fleur avoided pink for fear it would clash with Weasley hair. Orange, I ask you! What can he have been thinking?”

“Well, the short answer is, like a guy. I mean, his devotion to the Cannons is endearing, and a good sign of his ability to commit. But, yeah, no, you’ve got to talk him out of that. My god. Orange. What colors were you thinking?”
“Maybe periwinkle or lavender, and pale gold. Cornflowers, bluebells, lavender, maybe foxglove, with baby’s breath and a few red roses in the bouquets and arrangements.”

“Pretty. Dress style?”

“A-line. Works on everyone, and you can do a lot with it. Or maybe fit and flare, sort of a retro look.”

“And are you going to have that horrible officiant? I don’t know if I ever asked whether you’re religious or not.”

“My mum and dad sort of are. I don’t know. I mean, I was baptized, and they went to church about once a month. I think that might have been to appease my grandparents, though. I don’t know what I think about it, honestly. I haven’t given it much thought. What about you?”

“I have been. I’m ignoring him at the moment. I suppose I’m in a bit of a strop with him because of how things are.”

“Him?”

“God. I’ll probably start talking to him again at some point, but . . . for now, I’m just really resentful.”

“Resentful? Because of . . . the c-word? And . . . everything else? Yeah, you know, I can see how you might be a little resentful.”

“Yeah, well . . . not like it bothers Him. There’s something so damn irritating about infinite patience. You rage, and you rage, and He just waits for you to tire yourself out, like a toddler throwing a tantrum. And the worst part? You know He’s right.”

“Hero . . .”

“No, no. Like I said, I’m . . . dealing with it. It’s between me and Him.”

“Okay, how’s that . . . going?”

“Difficult to say. Sometimes it’s like writing a letter and never getting a reply back. But you just keep writing because things change for the better. I believe in a higher power who looks out for me because if he doesn’t exist, my survival begins to get highly implausible. I mean, I don’t just believe in him because I should already be dead. But it is part of it.

“And having someone who knows you, all of you, and still loves you, is there for you. I’ve never really had that. You, maybe, but I can’t help but feel like, if you really knew me, you wouldn’t like me very much. Certainly not as much as you do. But that’s okay. That’s human. It makes the divine that much more powerful and humbling.”

“That’s really beautiful, Hero. I had no idea you felt that way. You never really talk about it.”

“I pick my battles, and I’ve never been confident enough of my reception to engage in religious debate with an areligious wizard and an agnostic Muggleborn,” Hero replied frankly.

“Fair point. Have you, um, thought about funeral arrangements?”

“Not really. It’s another thing I should probably put in my will, as well as discuss with you, Ron, and Severus. Uh, I’m going to have to buy a burial plot, aren’t I? Well, Hermione, I know what I
want for Christmas."

“Oh, stop. Anyone in particular you want to attend?”

“Anyone I know personally who’s still alive. Though, it might be difficult to get people together with the war. What about Ireland? Dean and Seamus are over there, and from what I’ve heard, it’s much quieter. Bury me on a hillside, with wildflowers. Somewhere pretty, maybe overlooking the sea. I think I’d like it there.”

“Th-that’s an idea. I’m sure it would be lovely. We could send Portkeys with the invitations.”

“Do people send invitations for funerals? I sort of figured you just let word spread and people showed up.”

“Of course you do, it’s an old wizarding custom. Plus, you have to know how much food you’ll need. And in this case, just letting word spread would be a very bad idea.”

“Point. If there have to be invitations, I want something . . . simple. Tasteful. Not colorful. It’s my funeral, not my wedding.”

Hermione winced. Hero ignored her, trying to picture her funeral. Severus, Ron and Hermione, the Weasleys, Dudley and Piers, maybe her aunt and uncle. The professors, her friends from Hogwarts. Maybe even Draco. She realized, even though she would never actually see it, she wanted all of them there. She wanted all of them there, alive, and, if at all possible, at peace. And if she wanted that, she had a lot of work to do.

It was an exhausting thought, but then, most things exhausted her on bad days. She wondered if she’d get to the point where just living exhausted her and she’d welcome death. Somehow, she didn’t think so. She almost questioned whether it would be better in the long run to welcome it or not, but there wasn’t a long run.

It didn’t matter. Like running and running, till your lungs feel like they’re going to explode, and when you stop and look around, you find you haven’t gone anywhere. Meaningless. But when you’re being chased, what else is there to do but run? As if you might run so far and fast that you don’t just leave your problems behind, you forget them entirely. But Death had her number, and here she was, waiting by the phone.

She wanted to get up from the sofa, like a cripple healed by Christ, and jab her finger in the air and proclaim the plan that would win them the war. But she was so very tired, in mind, body, and spirit. Giving up, at least for the moment, was so very tempting. Which was precisely why she could not do it.

With a great deal of effort, she sat up, straightening her spine. “Hermione, I’m going to need paper and a pen.”

“What is it? Do you want to start on your will or something?”

“No, not yet. I need to think.” Such a tide as moving seems asleep, too full for sound and foam, When that which drew from out the boundless deep, turns again home. Destiny was a funny thing. What would be, what must be, all wrapped up in and tied with the bow of human choices. We choose how we react, Hero knew, and she was tired, above all else, of feeling like she had no choice. That “To be or not to be” was not her question to answer.

Sometimes when she danced with Severus, she would look into his eyes, in the moment between notes, between heartbeats. It seemed to stretch into eternity, that tiny moment. How many boundless
moments, how many slivers of infinity, would there be between her next heartbeat and her last? It did not matter. She would make use of her every moment, down to the one in which her heart stuttered to a stop.

She would, because she chose to. It was still her life to live – and more importantly, perhaps – to give. Breath and beat and blood and bone. Life for life. A sacrifice so very much worth it as to be beyond question. Hero had always known that, in a hypothetical sense, she would be willing to die for her friends. It was a simple fact. Now she found herself embracing the idea, not just willingly, but warmly. She would die fighting for the people and the ideas she had believed in, not from cancer. Cancer was incidental. It would be a better death than many people got.

And suddenly her whole perspective shifted. Death became, instead of something happening to her, an event in which she was an active participant. Death became a choice. No one may choose whether or not to die, though the Dark Lord had given it his best shot. What was well within her means, however, was the ability to choose her manner of death. And by God, it would be nobler and braver than wasting away.

Part of her depression was due to the misery of inaction. It was part of why she’d been so pissed off in fifth year to have things kept from her – even she knew the pitfalls of acting on insufficient information. Which very well could have why they’d kept her in the dark. It hadn’t helped though – recklessness had outweighed commonsense in the end. Now, she had access to information and a clear goal to accomplish. It was time and physical capability that she now lacked. She could appreciate the irony; she just didn’t find it funny.

Hero summoned quill, ink, and parchment from the desk in the corner and got to work. She started by writing down the Horcruxes, and crossing out the ones they’d taken care of. She hesitated, but wrote down “me” at the end of the list. The cup, the snake, and herself. The words of the prophecy slithered through her mind, “Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.” She had to die, and the Dark Lord had to be the one to do it. But she’d known that for years – nothing was really materially different, even if she’d imagined there was a chance she’d kill him.

But the way to the other two remaining Horcruxes seemed to be the Malfoys. Of course, with the place filled with Death Eaters and locked up nearly as tightly as Gringotts, that was, naturally, problematic. What they needed was information and opportunity. Narcissa Malfoy couldn’t be everywhere, and Draco needed to be at Hogwarts the majority of the time. Anyone else familiar with the estate wasn’t on their side.

Except, she realized, Dobby. Dobby was a former servant of the Malfoy household, an elf and thus beneath notice, let alone suspicion, and a free agent. Dobby was, in fact, the ideal spy, especially since by all accounts Lucius was too far gone to recognize a house-elf he’d lost five years before, to whom he probably hadn’t paid a great deal of attention to begin with. She wondered how soon she could pass word to Draco or his mother.

Of course, the simplest option was simply to summon Dobby. She wasn’t sure she was capable of instilling him with restraint, though. Espionage required delicacy, a scalpel and not a bewitched bludger, if you will. It’s not that she didn’t trust Dobby, it was just that she couldn’t help but feel that circumspection wasn’t a virtue he had much experience with. Something to talk to Draco about – Dobby had been a Malfoy house-elf before, after all. Even so, she knew she could trust him with all the lives she carried with her.

So. Cup, Snake, Hero. Cup, Bellatrix. Snake, the Dark Lord. And Hero would sort herself out. The cup, she felt, should be their first target – as difficult a nut to crack as Bellatrix might be, she was
nothing next to the Dark Lord. Severus was waiting for Bellatrix to trust Draco just a bit more before he invited her to Hogwarts and presented her with the fake sword.

Hero sat back. So, they had the beginnings of plans. What next?

*

Next turned out to be a walk in a nearby park. It was beautiful, the leaves just starting to change. The weather had been crisp but sunny, a perfect autumn day. Hero tried to focus on the moment and appreciate it for what it was. It was difficult. She wasn’t any less tired outdoors than she had been in the drawing room at Grimmauld, though her surroundings were certainly easier to bear. It wasn’t even just that she tired more easily, though that was true. She was always tired, in body and, increasingly, in spirit.

As she was wondering why she’d bothered to ask Kreacher to bring her outside, she saw it, out of the corner of her eye. A church. Absurdly, she was suddenly seized by a desperate desire to go inside. It beckoned in the muted brilliance of the late afternoon sunlight, seeming to gleam like stars or Dumbledore’s eyes. She glanced down at her watch. Five minutes until six. Furtively, she hurried inside.

They were just about to start for evening services, the sanctuary half-full, and she took a seat in the back, trying to avoid notice. The service started, the acolytes coming to light the candles. There were announcements, different events happening in the area, etc. It was so utterly normal that it almost seemed unreal. The organist led them through a few contemporary praise songs, and then the worship leader led them in call and response. Hero joined, reading from her bulletin, one voice in the crowd.

The offering was collected, a hymn sung, and then the minister asked for those with troubles lying heavy on their hearts to speak. Troubles with sons and daughters, illnesses, traveling, financial difficulties, all were shared, along with the little miracles, a promotion, a new baby, seeing a friend or relative for the first time in ages. The last person to speak was a man whose wife was dying of cancer. He spoke of how she really wished she could have attended, but the chemo left her with barely enough energy to get out of bed. Hero stayed silent.

They prayed for those named, then recited the Lord’s Prayer. Scripture passages were read. Then began the sermon.

“Alexander Pope said, ‘To err is human, to forgive, divine.’ I know, I know, it’s a cliché. But the thing is, it’s true. We are imperfect creatures, and it’s in our natures to screw up. Constantly, over and over again. The only human being who never sinned was God in human form. But you know what? God forgives us anyway.

“In the Lord’s prayer, we ask for help in forgiving what others have done to us. I’ll be the first to admit that it can be difficult. Sometimes, it even seems impossible. We suffer all manner of things in this world at the hands of other human beings. Abuse, theft, murder, the list goes on. Every time someone sins against us or we sin against someone else, we sin against God. And there are no victimless crimes. And every time we do it, every little slip, we disappoint our Father, who gave us life, and breath, and joy, and love.

“But God forgives us anyway. There is no sin too great, no mistake that can’t be overcome in the eyes of the Lord. We can always be better, always. God is always extending that hand of forgiveness, calling us back to the right path and righteousness.

“But the thing is, you have to take it. You have to regret what you’ve done. You have to ask for
forgiveness. That’s the catch, isn’t it? In order to ask for forgiveness, you have to admit what you’ve done wrong. And one of the most common sins, I think, is lying to ourselves. God will forgive us anything. But we have to face our mistakes first and admit that we are flawed. But it’s not hopeless. We might never reach perfection, but we can always get better. As long as we’re honest, and put our faith in the Lord.

“That’s another tough one. To live is to suffer, and all too often, it feels like we have to shoulder the burdens alone. That asking for help makes us weak somehow. Well, there’s no avoiding that. We are weak. By ourselves, alone in a cold, cruel world, we’re not good for much. But we can do all things through Christ. He’s already taken on all our burdens, already died for them. The relief you feel when you finally give everything up, all your worries and your fears, is indescribable.

“Sometimes, we add to our own burdens. We feel guilt for not believing enough, for questioning. For doubting. But doubt and faith go hand in hand. Khalil Gibran wrote that doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is its twin brother. If you knew, it wouldn’t be faith. We reach out into the darkness, hoping we’ll encounter that helping hand, at the same time afraid that we won’t. And even when we firmly believe God exists, sometimes it’s difficult to trust that he’s looking after us. So many terrible things happen that we question what God can possibly be doing, allowing these things to happen. We don’t understand.

“We need to believe anyway. Believe that the all-seeing, all-knowing Almighty knows what he’s doing. We need to believe that he loves us, beyond anything we can imagine, completely and perfectly, unconditionally and forever. That he’s looking after us, and he knows what he’s doing. After that, everything else follows. If we listen to His voice and follow the path he lays out for us, everything will be as it should be. With God, hope can be found even in the darkest of places, for Christ is the Light and the Life.”

After that was the prayer of confession. The words seemed to fall from Hero’s lips with a strange weight, as if they meant more than they usually did. All around them, the silence into which they spoke seemed to lean in to listen.

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

When Hero left the church, her heart felt lighter than it had in months. A feeling like a comforting smile settled in her chest. She might have been dying, but she wasn’t doing it alone.
Hi, guys. I'm early, for once, because over the next three days I will be in five different airports traveling to Germany (by way of Ireland so I can spend an hour with my grandmother). Naturally, this means that wifi will be sketchy and I will be dead on my feet. I'm sure we'd all rather I gave you a chapter sooner than later. So, for those of you who expressed an interest, Trixy is back, as is Dobby. I'm hoping you'll like where I go with their characters.

“Alright, Malfoy. Any closer to getting on your aunt’s good side?” Hero asked. They were sitting in the drawing room at Grimmauld, sipping tea courtesy of Kreacher.

“Maybe? Difficult to say with her. Her moods change with the wind, and it’s generally a foul one.”

“In other words, no.”

Draco sighed. “No.”

“It’s a longshot anyway. I had another idea. You keep working on her if you can, but . . .”

“But what?”

“You had a house-elf named Dobby.”

Draco frowned. “What of it?”

“He’s loyal to me because I got him freed. He’s currently employed at Hogwarts. I want him to go back to work for your family, undercover.”

“What?! You can’t be serious.”

“I’m perfectly serious. Do you even remember him?”

“No, but the other elves might!”

“They’re loyal to your family, and you and your mother are on our side. Besides, servants can go anywhere, are utterly beneath notice, and hear all sorts of things. House-elves in particular are under-estimated.”

“Then why not use one of the actual Malfoy house-elves?”

“They can be an excellent source of information, but I need someone I can trust to act as a liaison. And as a free elf, he can disobey orders if need be.”

Draco scowled. “Fine. Summon him, then.”

“Dobby?” Hero called. An instant later, the elf in question appeared before them with a soft crack. He bowed to Hero.
“Hero Potter is wishful of something from Dobby?”

Draco leaned forward, eyes lighting with interest. “I think I do remember him. He’s the mad one, isn’t he? You think it’s a good idea to send him undercover?” he asked incredulously.

Dobby straightened with eyes even wider than usual and filled with alarm. He turned slowly to face the blonde.

“Young master Malfoy? How does one such as yourself come to meet with the Great Hero Potter?”

Draco’s nose wrinkled, probably at the “Great Hero Potter” bit. “We’re on the same side now. We’re . . . friends.” It wasn’t quite the truth, but it would do well-enough for Dobby.

“Oh, how wonderful, sir, that you have finally come to your senses!” Draco’s expression of distaste mirrored his mother’s in Diagon the year before: as if something putrid had been shoved under his nose.

“Yes, well . . . we have something we need you to do,” Draco told him. Dobby spun eagerly to face Hero again, face glowing with anticipation. Draco looked a little insulted; Hero hid a smile.

“Dobby, we need you to go back to the Malfoys and pretend to be just another elf. In reality, we need you to gather information and report back to me, Draco, Severus, Ron, or Hermione. Narcissa Malfoy if you can’t get to any of us, understand? For the most part, we just want you to listen, but there might be times we need you to do something specific.”

Dobby nodded, brow furrowed. “Dobby . . . understands. Should Dobby just go to the Manor?”

“Er, I think I should clear it with the housekeeper,” Draco interjected. “She is not an elf you want to cross.”

“Does young master Draco mean . . . Trixy?” Dobby asked, wringing his hands.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Yes. Problem?”

“No, no! No . . . problem. She’s . . . my aunt. She doesn’t . . . much approve of me.”

“Lovely, a little family reunion,” Draco drawled, uncaring of the elf’s distress. Dobby dove behind Hero’s chair. “Trixy!”

An elf, who appeared to be middle-aged going by the wrinkles on her face, popped into existence. Her lips were pursed, one eyebrow raised. She wore a spotless white apron over her teal-floral (curtain fabric) dress.

“This had better be being important.”

“Sorry to bother you, Trixy,” Draco began solicitously, leaning forward. “Dobby, who I’m told is your nephew—”

“Lord above, what is he having done now?”

“I believe you’re aware that my mother and I have turned against the Dark Lord’s cause.”

“Yes, Master Draco. And this is having what to do with my nephew?”

Draco gestured to Hero, and thus to Dobby, peeking out from behind her chair. “Dobby will be helping us.”
Trixy barely spared a glance over her shoulder for her nephew. “In what capacity is he to be serving?” she asked, eyes turning flinty.

“Officially, as an elf-of-all-work. Unofficially, as a spy. It might help if the other elves passed bits of information onto him, things they hear and see.”

“Master Draco is meaning to be turning we elves into an intelligence network,” Trixy summarized, not looking particularly put out at the thought.

“Yes.”

“Why is Dobby being necessary to that?” Trixy pressed.

“Because he is a free elf, who may do as he chooses. And I know and trust him,” Hero told her firmly.

Trixy finally looked to Hero. “Miss Potter. We elves is having heard quite a lot about you. Trixy is wondering how much of it is true.”

“Very little. I’m sure if you were to tell me the stories, I wouldn’t recognize myself. Suffice it to say, I will do everything in my power to see the Dark Lord ended. I’ll be dead before next summer, so I’d prefer to be quick about it.”

A corner of Trixy’s mouth lifted, and approval slipped into her gaze as she regarded The Girl Who Lived.

“Well enough, Miss. Now Miss must be telling Trixy of her acquaintance with my nephew. Dobby, you is to be getting out from behind that chair and not skulking, spy or not. We will be talking later. You is knowing full-well your poor mother is having been worried sick about you these last five years.”

Dobby emerged from behind the armchair, head bowed meekly.

Hero took a deep breath and launched into a run-down of how she’d met Dobby. Trixy was less than impressed but seemed for the most part resigned. Hero got the impression, not least from what Dobby had said all those years ago about being punished five times a day, that Dobby had had a lot of trouble fitting in and avoiding notice. She spared another thought to worry if he was really the best choice. But no, her other options were Kreacher and Winky – the old, stooped, arthritic curmudgeon or the depressed alcoholic? No, Dobby really was her best bet.

“Barring concerns over familial discord, then, do you think Dobby’s up to it?”

“Perhaps.” Trixy sighed. “We is not having seen him in four years. I am supposing I don’t really know him anymore. As disgraceful as being freed is being viewed by elfish society, I am thinking it was for the best. We shall be seeing. Come along, Nephew. We is having much to discuss.”

Trixy went over and straightened the collar of Dobby’s polo shirt. Her hand still on the material, they both Apparated to the quarters Trixy shared with Wenscell at Malfoy Manor.

Trixy folded her arms. “Talk,” she commanded in their native tongue.

Dobby wrung his hands. “Aunt Trixy . . . I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

“The truth. All of it. Preferably from the beginning.”
“That’s a bit of long story, Aunt Trixy.”

“Then you’d best get started, hadn’t you?”

Dobby sighed, his ears drooping. His aunt huffed in exasperation. “Oh, sit down, for heaven’s sake!” she snapped.

He took a seat in an elf-sized armchair. “I overheard the master planning to reopen the Chamber of Secrets by means of that foul diary in order to unleash the beast. People were going to die, Aunt Trixy. Children. And I wasn’t sure what you’d think the best course – whether you would choose honor or duty. I know we are supposed to eschew morals in favor of our master’s wishes, but . . . I couldn’t. It goes against all elven law, but I couldn’t let him kill children. I am sorry Mother’s been suffering.”

“She puts on a show for the other elves, presenting the appropriate shame at her son’s disgrace, but I think she always knew you couldn’t be content with just this life. You were a bit of a poor match here. Were things better at the Hogwarts?”

“A little. There was still, you know, the disgrace. But the headmaster took up my case. The late headmaster, excuse me. They started to accept me. It’s a bit selfish, but after Winky showed up, I wasn’t the most disgraced elf anymore.”

“Winky? Who is Winky?”

“And elf formerly in the employ of the Crouch family. Through no fault of her own, her master freed her in a fit of pique. She’s been at the bottom of a butterbeer bottle ever since.”

Trixy sighed. “Poor child. Is she a particular friend of yours?”

Dobby blushed. “She’s, she’s – well, you know, friend. I don’t know if friend is the right word—”

“You’re in love with her.”

“. . . Yes. Hopelessly.” He waited for the scolding to begin. Disgraced, depressed, butterbeer addicted? He really knew how to pick ‘em. To his surprise, she said nothing of the kind.

“Love is a wonderful thing. God willing, the circumstances will improve.”

“She’s, er, she’s doing, you know, much better.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’m happy for you, Dobby.”

“Th-thank you.”

“You know you must give up your clothes, don’t you? At least for a time. I’ll see if I can’t find some decent livery for you. And no, it really must be livery. I know you had some strange idea that running around like a Greek in a short tunic was a form of protest, but you’re not here to protest this time, are you?”

“The Greeks had great thinkers and philosophers, especially on the subject of destiny and self-determination!” he protested.

She went on, as if she hadn’t heard him. “And what was the fact that it was made from bed-clothes meant to signify?”

“It was the only way I could think of to make a tunic!”
“What about a toga? You could have used just about anything to make that.”

“Togas aren’t Greek, they’re *Roman,*”

“Oh, for the love of . . . No one got the reference in the first place, why does it matter??”

“So, livery,” he interrupted her mid-rant. “Am I working anywhere specific?”

“I think the idea was for you to be able to go anywhere. Something sturdy for outside, dark so as not to show dungeon stains, smart enough to be presentable to guests . . . There are some nice black, Egyptian cotton sheets just waiting for a few outfits to come out of them.”

“That sounds fine, Aunt Trixy,” Dobby rushed to assure her before her ideas got too out of hand. He’d always thought it a bit ironic that she’d had such difficulties with his ideas and dreams, his ambition. Where did she think he’d gotten it from?

*

So,” Hero began after the elves had departed. “News?”

“His Darkness is still abroad.”

“Hunting. Hunting Gregorovitch.”

Malfoy frowned. “Who or what is Gregorovitch?”

“He’s a wandmaker from the Continent.”

“Wandmaker . . . do you know who’s in the Malfoy dungeons as we speak?”

His mention of it brought back the vision she’d had over the summer. “Ollivander.”

“How can you *possibly* know that?”

Hero tapped her forehead over the scar.

“You mean it’s actually true that you have visions?”

“Yes. I see through the Dark Lord’s eyes, into his mind. And it’s pretty bloody awful.”

That surprised a dark laugh from him. “I can imagine. Merlin! What do you think he’s after?”

Hero frowned. “I don’t know. I haven’t gotten anything recently, but that’s probably because I finally figured out how to keep him out of my head. I could go back and look, I suppose.”

“What do you mean, ‘go back and look’? Look for what? Where?”

“Back into his memories to see if I can find the ones of his recent travels.”

Draco became even paler than usual. “That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard! Wait, *back* . . . you did it *before*?!”

Hero shrugged. “We needed information. It worked.”

“The ends justify the means? How very Slytherin of you.”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that. I don’t risk other people, just me.”
“And there’s the Gryffindor. I was beginning to worry someone had Polyjuiced as you. Was it really worth it?”

“I discovered the objects and locations of the remaining Horcruxes, so I’d say so,” she returned coolly.

Draco raised his eyebrows. “Merlin. And he has no idea? No suspicion?”

“He’s not the most rational or controlled of . . . beings. If he so much as suspected, don’t you think he’d have already thrown a fit about it?”

“He’s out of the country, maybe it’s given him a chance to acquire circumspection.”

“I very much doubt it. He seems to be getting less sane, not more. I mean, my God, he slept with your aunt!”

Draco winced. “You have a point. Can we change the subject? I’d rather not think about that.”

“Sure. So, how’s little Delphini?”

The wince this time was more of a violent twitch. “Gah!” He sighed. “She’s fine. Fortunate creature that she is, she spends less time with her mother than any of us. To be honest, I’m not sure what will become of her – regardless of if we win or if we lose. If we win, I’ve seen what happens to the children of the losers, especially when those losers are as hated as the Dark Lord and my aunt are. Whoever and whatever she came from, she’s a child. It’s not her fault. Who would be willing to look after her?

“And if they win . . . what then? She’ll become some dark princess? I don’t think so. They had her, and then they forgot about her. Who’s to say they’ll remember her afterward? I’m not sure which is worse.”

Hero frowned, half in thought, half in consternation. “Would they notice if you smuggled her out?”

“Probably not, but I’m not entirely sure. Unless and until I am, I don’t think I can risk it. I’ll . . . I’ll think about it. Anyway, why do you ask?”

“I just . . . if we come through this victorious, at least one and probably both of her parents will end up dead. And I hope to God her father dies at my hand. For her sake, I feel guilty already. I’m an orphan, I never wanted to make them,” she finished bleakly.

Draco had a strange look on his face. Hero frowned. “What?”

He shook his head. “I’m beginning to realize I never really knew you. You were my rival, my nemesis. After you rejected me back in first year, I stopped caring – if I ever did in the first place. In some strange way, you weren’t a real person, you didn’t matter, and yet I was obsessed with you. I’m . . . sorry about that. Really, actually remorseful.”

Hero smiled, a little bitterly. “Don’t feel too bad. I didn’t really see you as a person either.”

“And now?”

“You’re risking your life for the cause of right. It would be rude not to.”

He laughed. “Well, Merlin forbid we be rude. Or, perhaps more accurately, my mother forbid.”

“How is your mother, by the way?”
He smiled. “Consummate survivor, my mother, as I’m only now finding out. She’s an exemplary model of a Slytherin. And don’t tell me it’s an insult, if you please. We’re getting along so well,” he teased, but there was an edge to his voice that she was too wise to ignore.

“Well, it’s thanks to you that I’m not, actually. Fresh from meeting you, I was dead set against being in the same house as you.”

“I can’t even argue with that. You took longer than anyone expected, and I started to get worried.”

Hero laughed. “All’s well that ends well, I suppose.”

“The snidget-brained Seeker knows Shakespeare?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You see how little you know me? For goodness sake, I was named after Hero in Much Ado About Nothing. Severus and I recite poetry to each other.”

He made a disgusted face. “You two are sickeningly romantic, you know that? It’s entirely indecent.”

“No, indecent is what we did on his desk,” she corrected, straight-faced.

Predictably, he gagged. “Don’t tell me that! Bad enough I had to listen to you try to find your knickers,” he grumbled.

“Funny you should mention that, the desk is where we started. But I’m mostly taking the mickey, we only kissed – at least on the desk,” she admitted, grinning wickedly. He stuck his tongue out in an expression of disgust not unlike that of a child seeing his parents kiss.

Hero laughed, having more fun than she had in ages. “Oh, Malfoy. I wouldn’t do it nearly so much if you didn’t make it such fun. You remind me of my cousin, though recently he’s been more of a willing participant.”

“I remind you of a muggle?” he asked, sounding intrigued.

“Yes, of a muggle?” he asked, sounding intrigued.

“Mmm. In lots of ways, actually. Only child, bit of a spoiled brat, mother overprotective and absolutely loves him to bits. Fancy school that’s a family tradition, bit of a bully, eventually learned the error of his ways, and is currently living in opposition to his father’s beliefs.”

“Okay, so what’s your cousin like?”

She smirked. “I just described him.”

Draco snorted. “Oh, I see. Clever.”

“Mmm. So, Trixy’s a bit terrifying.”

He chuckled. “Yes. I only met her over the summer, myself. Like I said, not an elf you want to cross.”

“I can imagine. I feel a bit sorry for Dobby, actually.”
“That elf’s been in the middle of the madness of Hogwarts these last few years. I imagine he can hold his own.”

“I think that might be the nicest things I’ve ever heard a pureblood say about an elf. You remind me a bit of your cousin Regulus.”

“How do you know Regulus?”

“He stole the locket Horcrux in the first place. Gave his life to do, it actually. Most people would have sentenced the house-elf to die, but he told Kreacher to go, to leave him.”

“So, there actually were decent Blacks?”

“Well, there was Sirius.”

“Right, of course. Your godfather.”

“And Regulus was a Death Eater in the beginning. Signed on at the age of sixteen. Realized he was in over his head and worked against the Dark Lord from the inside.”

“Reminds me of something my mother said. When the Blacks care enough to pick a side, they’re a force to be reckoned with.”

“It’s a long and semi-honorable tradition. You just have to look at the family tree,” Hero said, gesturing to the tapestry that adorned the walls. Black marks like cigarette burns littered it. Draco looked around, fascinated.

“It seems so strange that you inherited the Black family seat.”

Hero shrugged. “Better me than Bellatrix. And besides, I’m a cousin. Dorea Black was my . . . great-grandmother?”

“And my mother is a Black,” he pointed out.

“What is it, cousin? Did you desperately want the house or something?” she mocked.

Draco looked around and shuddered. “No, thank you. Take it with my blessing.”

She laughed. “Uh-huh, that’s what I thought. You know, it used to be worse. A lot worse. What you’re seeing now is years in the making.”

He looked around again with renewed horror. “I don’t even want to think about that. You earned it.”

“Of course, there’s the question of what to do with it. I doubt Severus would want it – for the same reason Remus can hardly bear to set foot here.”

“Remus? As in Professor Lupin? What’s he got to do with anything?”

“He and Sirius were together. Their clothes are mixed together in their room upstairs, even now. He hasn’t been able to bear seeing it. Of course, it doesn’t help that Sirius absolutely hated this house and it became his prison. This house will be my death bed and my mausoleum. I can’t imagine Severus wanting to come back. I mean, can you?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Does this really have to be decided today?”
“I have less than six months to live. If I don’t do this now, when? The Wednesday after never?”

“I suppose. Still, I most certainly do not want the house. You could give it to the Weasleys?”

“No, they’d never trade the Burrow for this.”

“The Burrow?” It was clear from his expression and the flatness of his tone that he had no idea what it was. Whether it was uttered with fiercest love by its inhabitants or, as she might have expected, disgust, there was always inflection to the name.

“Their house. Towering into the sky, stories stacked on top of each other, looks like it’s held up by magic. I’d give this place up to be there in a heartbeat if I could.”

“Granger and Weasley?”

“No, for the same reason as Severus. And this is no place for their first house.”

“Longbottom.”

“No garden.”

“The Weasley twins.”

“Are currently living above their shop and can afford better anyway.”

“Okay . . . Cormac McLaggen.”

“Why on earth would I give a house to McLaggen?”

“Because it’s a horrible house. It’s a curse from beyond the grave.”

“You hate him too?”

“You expected me to like him? He’s a Gryffindor, and he’s absolutely the worst sort. I wouldn’t spit on him if he was on fire.”

“Yes, well . . . I couldn’t do that to Kreacher.”

“No, no. You pass him to me, and we can give him light work and a pension, and you give this hell-hole to McLaggen. Or,” he said, turning serious, “you actually give this place to Severus. He can do whatever he wants with it, but it would at least be his choice.”

“Maybe. I’ll give you that much and no more.”

“And further division of assets?”

“Do you have a burning ambition to become a solicitor or something, Malfoy?”

“Like any proper pureblood, I have an interest and training in law, especially estate law. Seeing as I rather doubt you do, I’m the best legal council you have to hand. And I can be seen in public, whereas you can’t. So. Any plans formulated?”

“Um . . . Firebolt to Ginny. Chaser’s got more use for it than a keeper. A few books and my jewelry to Hermione. My shares in Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes to Ron. Everything else to Severus.”
Draco raised an eyebrow. “The house?”

Hero hesitated a moment, then nodded. “Everything.”

“Well, that’s fairly straightforward, I think. I can submit it to Gringotts while I’m in London. Just write it up, sign it, and I’ll sign it as witness. Be sure to be specific. There can’t be any room for misunderstanding or interpretation. The language has to be *completely* water-tight, understand?”

“Yes. Now, be a lamb and fetch me quill, ink, and parchment out of the desk over there, won’t you?” she said, pointing imperiously across the room. Draco grimaced but did as she asked.

Using the cover of a book as a writing surface, she set out her last will and testament. It was, as Draco instructed, water-tight, listing specific bequests in detail. Bearing Dumbledore’s will in mind, she took it as an opportunity for one last message to the people she loved. That was the part that hurt the most, she realized. The stuff didn’t matter – she’d be beyond caring by the time it was distributed. What really tore into her was that this goodbye was final – the very last words from her they’d ever see or hear. When it occurred to her, she started to cry.

I’m . . . I’m sorry. I thought I was ready to do this. I thought I’d accepted it.”

Draco looked both desperately uncomfortable and like he was trying his damnedest to hide it. “Accepting something doesn’t mean you’re not bothered by it. I mean, it’s not an easy thing. Maybe . . . I think you push yourself too much. You’re so determined not to show them how much you’re suffering. But I know as well as anyone the toll it can take, always pretending to be something you’re not. At least when I’m here, I can let go a little. We don’t care what the other thinks. You don’t have to worry about saving face or staying strong for my sake. So, if you ever feel the need to let go . . . go ahead.”

She stared at him for a moment, tear-tracks glistening on her cheeks. Then something inside her just . . . broke. It was as if there was a container in her chest into which she’d been chucking all her unpleasant emotions. Eventually, it was bound to overflow, probably in a messy outburst in an inappropriate time and place. Draco circumvented that.

She buried her face in her hands and started to sob. Draco looked torn between a desire to comfort her and run for the hills. He settled for remaining where he was, hands clasped in his lap, looking constipated.

Finally, the tears ended, and she felt empty. Purged. She hadn’t had many opportunities to cry over the way things had turned out – the Dursleys had never liked it when she cried. She found it unexpectedly cathartic.

“So, erm, should I just . . . go?” Draco asked.

Hero sighed. “No, no. I’m . . . I’m better now. Might as well finish what I started.”

With stubborn determination, she poured her heart onto the page. Once she’d finished the herculean task, she handed the paper to Draco. He folded it and put in the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

“Have no fear, my lady. I shall see it delivered or die in the attempt,” he said, mock-serious, bowing, his hand over his heart – over the will. Hero managed a weak smile.

“It’s been nice getting to know you, Malfoy. I regret it didn’t happen sooner.”

He gave her a crooked smile. “I’m not sure this version of me existed before this year, and I’m pretty sure I have you to thank. I’ll be seeing you, Potter.” He mimed tipping his hat to her and left.
Hero smiled after him. At least some things had changed for the better.
Hey, guys. Sorry it's a bit late. I've arrived in Germany, and you know, that's awesome. Unfortunately, the internet was a bit touch and go. But here you are, anyway. And guess what? I have just three more chapters to write and a bit of polishing to do. Of course, the whole thing will be 75 chapters, so, with the regular schedule, you won't see the end for another six months. I might be persuaded to change my mind if you beg me enough.

Draco stepped into the lobby of the bank, Hero’s will like a hot coal nestled against his chest. He had to be brave with this after the bravery Hero had shown in writing it.

Yes, but she’s a Gryffindor, isn’t she? a voice in his mind whispered. Hardly the same thing, is it?

No, it’s not, he thought. All I have to do is have a meeting in an office with someone with no particular reason to betray me.

But, on the other hand, no particular reason not to, either. Goblins aren’t known for their sentiment, or for taking pity on wizards, that voice reminded him.

His chin came up slightly in defiance. Shut up, he told it firmly. It fell silent.

He strode over to a free goblin, who bowed when he saw who his client was. “Mr. Malfoy. How may we be of service today?”

“I need to speak to a bank representative in private. It’s a matter of some delicacy.”

The goblin raised an eyebrow. “Regarding?”

Rather than risk saying it aloud, he took the parchment out of his pocket, unfolded it, and slid it across the counter. Reading the heading, both the goblin’s eyebrows went up.

“I see. I shall set up a meeting with the goblin assigned to handle the account in question. Allow me to show you to his office.”

The goblin, who kept sending him glances out of the corner of his eye, led him to an area of the bank with which Draco had little experience. He was shown into a brightly lit office on an upper floor, with a large window looking out on the city. It could have been the office of any other London banker.

“Would you care for coffee? Tea?”

“I’m fine, thank you. I do have a separate inquiry you may be able to answer, though.”

“I shall certainly endeavor to do so.”

“What’s the bank’s policy on cursed or otherwise dangerous objects?”
“We require the client in question to give us a detailed description of the object. We accept cursed objects on a case to case basis. Liability, I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course. And, if an object were not disclosed at the time it was placed within a Gringotts vault?”

“There would be an inquiry, at the beginning of which we would have to require the client to take back the object in question. We may or may not accept it back.”

“And the vault of Bellatrix Lestrange?”

“Several objects have been placed there which have curse descriptions on file.”

“What about a cup? Golden, about a thousand years old. A badger carved into the side.”

“I can check if you wish, but I do not believe we have a record of any such object being cursed or otherwise constituting a risk.”

“Please do.”

The goblin bowed and departed.

Draco was left to inspect the office. The walls were hidden behind bookshelves containing many large legal tomes. Others appeared to be records of bank business. By their number, he presumed they dated back a very long time.

A few minutes after the first goblin had left, another entered the office. He nodded politely to Draco.

“Mr. Malfoy, I am Griphook. I am in charge of the Potter account. May I see the document?”

He handed it over. Griphook peered at it intensely.

“You’re the witness? You are not named in the will, are you?”

“No, sir. I am quite aware that that would make it illegitimate.”

“Good. It’s a point in favor of authenticity. Now, perhaps you can tell me why she decided to give everything to Severus Snape. From what I’ve heard, they hate each other.”

“They did. They longer do. It’s a bit awkward.”

“I imagine we’ll survive,” the goblin returned dryly.

“They’re lovers.”

Griphook stared at him for a long moment. Finally, he barked out a laugh. “Oh, that’s priceless! I never understand why people think being a banker is boring. Oh, my. Yes, I can understand now. Yes, well, everything appears to be in order.

“Now, as it happens, I also administer the Lestrange account. Why do you want to know about a cup, Mr. Malfoy?”

“Did the other fellow tell you my question?”

“Yes, he did.”

“And?”
Griphook sat back in his chair. “There is a cup matching the description you provided. Once belonging, I believe, to Helga Hufflepuff. Quite fine, though not of goblin make. We don’t tend to go in for the gold so much. We received no notification of a curse or anything similar at the time we accepted it. Do you have information of such?”

“What do you know about Horcruxes?”

“It is not familiar to me. Wizards have jealously guarded their secrets for millennia.”

“It is a means of achieving immortality. Killing rips the soul apart, and, if the killer enacts a certain ritual, he is able to take a piece of his soul and separate it from the rest, putting it in an object, a container. It is some of the blackest magic imaginable, and Horcruxes, as these objects are known, have been known to attack those who approach them. The opening of the Chamber of Secrets? That was due to a Horcrux. Albus Dumbledore had been dying for months due to a curse attached to another Horcrux. It is that very thing that now lies in the vault of Bellatrix Lestrange.”

The goblin raised an eyebrow, his expression carefully blank. “You expect us to alert her of this?”

Draco smiled slightly. “No, that would be suicide. I’m sure you know that. A copy could be made, such as was made of the Sword of Gryffindor. The original could be destroyed.”

Griphook’s eyes were sharp. “There is a copy of the Sword of Gryffindor?”

“Yes. Albus Dumbledore ordered it made. It is currently in the possession of Severus Snape.”

“And the original?”

“Now, that’s an interesting question. You see, Hero Potter stabbed a basilisk with it. Through the mouth, I gather.”

“Basilisk venom,” Griphook whispered, eyes wide.

“Indeed. Basilisk venom is one of the few methods of destroying a Horcrux in existence. The sword is our best weapon.”

“So destroy the cup and give the sword to us, as should have been done nine centuries ago.”

“The cup is not the sole Horcrux. It isn’t even the sole remaining Horcrux.”

“And you need it for the others as well, I suppose. Would you be willing to sign a contract stipulating that, upon the death of the Dark Lord, the sword reverts back to the goblins?”

“It is a historical artifact, like it or not. Could we come to an agreement that it’s displayed in the bank lobby?”

“I think that should be agreeable, though I’m not in a position to say for certain.”

“I think we could be able to hammer something out, were you in a position to make promises.”

Griphook smirked. “I’ll look into it. You realize, of course, that in agreeing to hand it over at all, you’ve acknowledged that it is rightfully ours. And in doing so, you’ve given us a license to demand other things in return for allowing you limited access to it.”

“Ah, but I have no more representative power than you do. I am a lone agent. I would really need to talk to my government – at a time when they would be more willing to make allowances, of course.”
The goblin chuckled. “Oh, yes, you’ll go far. Still. The future is beginning to look a touch brighter than we had expected.”

“Now, returning to the matter of the undisclosed cursed object currently in my aunt’s possession . . .”

Griphook laced his fingers together over his belly. “You expect us to just hand over the property of a client?”

“I’m a blood relative, and she’s in violation of bank policies. And, in this matter as in so many others, what she doesn’t know won’t hurt us.”

“Fair point, well made, Mr. Malfoy. Agreed.” He extended a hand across the desk. Draco shook it.

He started for the door, then paused. “And a copy?”

“Goblins don’t much tend to use gold often, but we’re just as skilled in it as in anything else. Give us a month to forge it and she won’t be able to tell the difference.”

“A month? That long?”

“You’re lucky it’s as small as it is. It could easily take six if it was the size of some other, similar artifacts. We’ll send word when everything is in place.”

“Thank you, Mr. Griphook. I appreciate your taking the time to meet with me.”

“Oh, the pleasure is mine. In the end, I believe we’re getting the better end of the deal.”

As Draco left the bank and returned to Hogwarts by way of the Leaky Cauldron’s fireplace, he thought that Griphook was probably right. Then again, one hardly expected anything else when negotiating with goblins. It was half the reason wizards tended to skip diplomatic solutions when dealing with them. This time, however, they were too desperate to do anything else. It was really a miracle it had worked.

When he stepped from the fireplace into the headmaster’s office, he found Severus scowling into the distance.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Something the matter?”

Severus blinked, coming out of his reverie. He sighed. “Oh, I’m wondering how to deal with discipline problems. I think I may be unique of any Hogwarts head in that, rather than wondering how to punish, my quandary is how not to punish.”

“The Carrows are giving you trouble?”

“Yes, though, naturally, I’ve taken care not to let them know. I need to find a way to stop the students from being subjected to the Cruciatus.”

“Yes, but you can hardly forbid them from using it. That would be far too conspicuous.”

“Indeed. Tell me, do they hand out their punishments with equanimity, or are they more . . . selective?”

“They punish the kids who talk back. Mostly, that’s Potter’s friends, which is hardly surprising. Everyone else tends to keep their heads down. They might misstep now and then, and there’s typically a few neutral parties in the detentions, but never the same faces. The core group that’s
always getting punished, that’s Potter’s group.”

“Well, it’s been almost two months. Clearly, the Carrows have not been successful in curtailing their misbehavior – which, in and of itself, is rather impressive. Now, as headmaster, it clearly falls to me to rectify their behavior, wouldn’t you say?”

Draco grinned. “Oh, yeah. Bring them up here, show them a few things, and I think you’ll find them much reformed. Next detention’s this evening, by the way. One wonders how they get any work done at all, the way they spend their evenings.”

Severus’s lips twisted. “I know the feeling.”

“Shall I pass word?”

“No, I shall descend into the school myself. One must, now and then, explore one’s territory.”

“Right you are, sir.” He nodded to the older man and exited.

It was just his luck that on his way from the seventh floor to the dungeons, he ran into Ginevra Weasley. She curled her lip when she saw who he was.

“Malfoy. Colluding with that piece of human excrement you call a headmaster again?”

“Mmm, I was,” he replied mildly. “I think you’re in for a bit of a surprise this evening. I hope you enjoy it every bit as much as I think you will.” Which, given that she would see her brother for the first time in months, would probably be quite a bit.

“Go die in a hole,” she muttered, brushing past him. Draco watched her go with immense satisfaction.

*  

Over dinner, Ginny learned what the blonde had meant – the headmaster announced over dinner that she and basically the rest of the DA would report to him for every detention from that night until Christmas at the very least. She’d lost track of how many detentions she’d gotten – she wouldn’t say earned – but she was pretty sure it would take them beyond Christmas. She turned her head to glare at Malfoy. He smiled charmingly and bowed from his seat. Ginny whipped her head back to focus on the Gryffindor table. Focusing on Malfoy would only get her riled up, which would inevitably lead to more detentions – and she dreaded to think what Snape had in store for them.

Dinner was, therefore, even gloomier than usual. There was no conversation above murmurs, and that only from the Slytherins. The Ravenclaws had devised an ingenious method of passing notes not unlike the Marauder’s Map, with writing which could only be viewed by the intended recipient. Since its development, their table had been practically silent. They declined to share it, citing an inability to know whom to trust.

After dinner, Ginny and her fellow inmates made their way to the headmaster’s office, only to realize no one had any idea what the password was. There were rumors not even the Carrows knew. Of course, that fit with what they all knew of Snape – paranoid and unappreciative of company. Not that anyone could blame him for not wanting to spend more time with the Carrows than he had to, even if they were on the same side.

The problem was solved when Snape emerged from his eyrie wearing a sour, pinched expression. “In,” he ordered sharply in much the same way he had ordered students into his classroom for years. Heads bowed, they obeyed.
They were rather a crowd in the head’s study, and Ginny couldn’t help but wonder what torments he had lined up for them. She hardly wanted to go back to the Crucius with the Carrows, but she figured there was truth in the old saying, rather the devil you know than the devil you don’t.

Sharp eyes scanned over the assembled group. “Here we are . . . at last. Surely you must have expected it to come to this. Before we go further, I have but one thing to say: know that you earned this. You deserve it.”

With that, he turned on his heel and led them through a doorway. They exchanged glances that were part-puzzled, part-wary. They followed him through a sitting room and down a corridor, finally stopping at a plain, unassuming door. Had Snape had time to set up his own torture chamber? No one would put it past him.

He opened the door to reveal, inside a bedroom . . . a linen cupboard. This was his punishment for them?! It seemed a rather small room for them all to fit in, as the office had. Surely this was going too far. Surely he would offer them death first! But, with little choice, they followed, heads hung as if they went to their executions.

And then he led them out again, and Ginny held back a gasp. It was Grimmauld Place! Well, that explained everything, she didn’t doubt Grimmauld had a torture chamber. She dearly hoped Ron, Hermione, and Hero would know better than to come here.

He led them into the kitchen, which was cheerier than it had any right to be. A fire crackled in the grate and the room was cleaner and more welcoming than she’d ever seen it.

“Sit, all of you. We have much to discuss.” It was at that moment that three other people came trooping down the stairs to the basement kitchen. There were loud exclamations of joy at the sight of them, to all appearances free and unharmed. Ginny was speechless.

Once she’d overcome her shock enough to move, she threw herself into her brother’s arms.

“Oof,” he grunted as she knocked the wind out of him. “Gin, you’d almost think you missed me.”

She was so happy by that point she was crying. “Shut up,” she sniffed, burying her face against his chest. He smirked and patted her back.

The others gathered around them like enthusiastic puppies, all talking nineteen to the dozen.

Hero laughed. “Alright, you lot, calm down. Sit down, and we’ll have a real conversation. Anybody hungry? I’m betting you didn’t have much appetite at dinner.”

There were emphatic nods as they took their seats. Ginny sat between Ron and Luna, Hermione on the other side of him. Hero took a seat next to Severus, which hardly seemed right.

She grinned. “It’s good to see you all. I can’t imagine it’s been easy going. You probably have questions.”

Ginny frowned and leaned forward. “Yeah, I have one to start with. What are you doing with Severus Snape?”

Hero promptly turned bright red. “Ah . . .”

Ron rolled his eyes. “They’re together. It’s weird, I know, but they’re sickeningly sweet. I try not to think about it.”
Hero glared at him without much heat. “Thanks, Ron.”

“Anytime.”

“But he’s . . .” Terry Boot began, wrinkling his nose.

“One of our greatest allies. Dumbledore was already dying that night. He’s our spy, and a damned good one.”

“But he’s old!” Lavender protested.

“I don’t believe that aspect of things is any of your business, Miss Brown,” Severus retorted pointedly. She blushed and shut up.

Hero turned a laugh into a cough. “Any other questions?”

“What’s the plan of action?” Neville asked, his gaze intent.

“Excellent question, but I’m going to be waiting to answer it until a few more people arrive. Anyone else?”

There were, naturally, demands for where they’d been and what they’d been up to. Hero answered patiently with input from Ron and Hermione.

“Alright, I have questions for you. Does anybody know where Dean and Seamus went?”

Ginny answered, “They went back to Ireland. They’re lying low in Donegal, last I heard.”

“Okay, great. Hermione, could you contact the other members of the DA? The ones who’ve graduated?”

Hermione pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Possibly, but seeing as this place is under the Fidelius, it wouldn’t do much. What we need is a neutral meeting place.”

“Which is easier said than done. Hmm. We’ll all think about it.” She was interrupted by the arrival of Draco Malfoy, whose presence was met with stares, and not particularly friendly ones at that.

“Ah, Malfoy, excellent. Have a seat,” she said, waving him toward the one next to Luna. Betrayed expressions stared back at her. She sighed. “He’s on our side, he’s a spy. Promise.”

Ginny remembered her encounter with him earlier. It made a lot more sense now.

“Didn’t think I’d see you again so soon,” he murmured, shooting a wry smile at Hero.

“I’m getting quite sick of you, if I’m being honest,” she said, but it seemed more teasing than anything.

“I talked to the goblins this morning. The extraction is commencing.”

Hero blinked, caught off guard. “That was fast. What happened to beguiling it out of your aunt?”

“I know a lost cause when I see one. She’ll never even know.”

“I hope for all our sakes that’s true. Okay, now, back to Neville’s question. Battle plans. With you all inside Hogwarts, we have an incredible advantage. We just have to be careful not to blow it. Ron, thoughts?”
Ron leaned forward and set loosely-clasped hands on the table. “Spiritual warfare, I think, is the best way forward. The same way they kept us uncertain the last two years, we keep them guessing. No outright attacks. We’ve got to be subtler than that. The gentleman in question kept to the shadows, remember, and that made him seem even more terrifying than he was. We have enough people among the general population, people he may not even know about, that we can have him wasting energy jumping at shadows with no idea where to turn. Question is, how do we do that?”

Hermione chipped in where he left off. “I think one good way forward would be to take back the media. We can’t do anything about the *Prophet*, but I doubt too many people look to it for a clear, unbiased perspective anymore.” There was muffled laughter at that. “That leaves us with the *Quibbler*,” she nodded to Luna, “and radio.”

“Actually, Fred, George, and Lee have set up a program called Potterwatch,” Ginny told them. “They don’t have a set schedule for broadcasting, and it’s on a password-protected pirate station. Password changes every time. We’ve been trying to keep up with it in Gryffindor Tower, but we’re all on alert.”

“Brilliant. We can work with them. And it can be a way to communicate between allies if people call in,” Hero remarked.

A lot of the wizard-born students frowned. “Call in?” Neville asked. “It’s a radio show – the whole point is, we can hear them, they can’t hear us.”

Hermione smiled. “No, no, have any of you heard of telephones?”

There were a few sets of eyes lighting up in understanding, but confusion still reigned.

“Telephones are devices that let you talk to people in real time across distances – like talking over the floo, but without being present, and not regulated by the Ministry,” Hermione explained.

“Well, we can hardly get that sort of thing into Hogwarts. From what we learned in Muggle Studies, you have to have a receiver, telephone lines, all sorts of things,” Michael Corner pointed out.

“True, but there’s a new take on the telephone. Mobiles, which you can carry with you.”

“But they still wouldn’t work, as electronics, at the castle due to the super-resonance of the magical residue,” Severus reminded her.

She shrugged. “So leave the phones here at Grimmauld. You’ll have access to them in an emergency, and we can handle attempts to get in touch while you’re not here. They’ll be completely inconspicuous in the muggle world and untraceable magically.”

Terry Boot had an admiring look on his face. “That’s ingenious.”

Hermione flushed. “Thank you.”

“Okay, so we have means. What do we do with it?” Hero asked.

“Daddy would be delighted to print interviews with the three of you in the Quibbler, or even just Hero,” Luna piped up. “And we can publish the truth, like we’ve been doing. Anything you want to say to the public can be passed on – anything anyone wants to say.”

“Okay, that’s good. What else?”

“I think the question is,” Susan Bones commented, “how can we engage in spiritual warfare while
still within the castle? And, vitally, how can we do it without getting caught?”

“You have a little more leeway now that I’ve taken on your detentions,” Severus put in. “A little. But I would stress that invisibility is still preferred. Do all you think you can get away with, but be aware that if my punishments are not seen to work, it places the whole operation in jeopardy.”

“Agreed. Any ideas of how to work within those parameters?”

“We could use house-elves,” Malfoy suggested. “There’s a whole castle of them, they’re overlooked, and they’re utterly loyal to the headmaster.”

“But we can hardly expect them to put themselves at unnecessary risk,” Hermione argued.

“Do you know what the Death Eaters do for fun in my home, Granger? They torture house-elves. This is not just a wizards’ war any longer. All magical beings have been tossed into the muck, and it falls to all of us to end it. They won’t fight, but they can handle spiritual warfare a lot better than we can. Dobby is with his aunt back at the manor, and the other elves are likely to be eager to participate. We can offer them a choice. Would you deny them that?”

Hero silently applauded the way he turned it around on her. Hermione made no reply, having no way to argue against giving house-elves some degree of agency without turning her crusade into one more about paternalism than rights.

“Okay, so what can house-elves do? Itching powder in the fresh laundry?” Colin Creevey suggested.

Draco snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous, Creevey. That’s far too noticeable. What we can do is give the house-elves slow acting potions to put in the Carrows’ food.”

Ginny’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, Skiving Snackboxes!” Grins spread round the table as others copped to what she meant.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “And those are . . . ?”

Still grinning, she explained, “Fred and George came up with these sweets. You chew one end and you become ill – fever, boils, vomiting, fainting, whatever you like – and it gets you out of class. You chew the other half and it cures your symptoms. Fairly harmless . . . so long as you chew the other end. If you don’t . . .” she trailed off, a wicked light in her eyes.

“Do your brothers have any other inventions which could be put to use?” Severus asked, eyes glinting in the firelight.

“Tons. It might be best if we just brought them here. They know better than anyone.”

Kreacher was dispatched to bring in the twins, who appeared a few minutes later wearing matching expressions of bemusement. They beamed and exclaimed in delighted surprise when they say their company.

While Fred hugged Ginny, George exclaimed over Ron. And then they noticed Severus.

The atmosphere cooled considerably. Fred pushed Ginny behind him while George reached for his wand.

Hero disarmed them both even as Hermione let out an anguished cry of “Stop!”
Ginny squirmed out of his grip and stood off to the side, arms folded and a mulish expression on her face. George turned eyes colder than she’d ever seen them on Hero. “So, that’s it, then? Get us here, trick us, and get rid of us? What have you done with them?”

“I am the real Hero, we’re all ourselves. Severus is on our side, he’s still a spy.”

Fred raised an eyebrow. “It’s Severus now? When did that happen?”

Ron buried his head in his arms. From them emerged, “They’re together. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and sniffed. “Drama queen.”

Fred and George exchanged comical expressions of dismay.

“You’re—”

“But that’s—”

“Gross!”

Hero crossed her arms, her expression waspish. “Shut up. Do you want to hear the plan or not?”

At that, they perked up.

“And what plan might that be?” George asked.

Fred began to grin. “And what manner of nastiness will be ours to distribute?”

“We need Skiving Snackboxes,” Ginny replied. “Lots of them, all different kinds.”

“Certainly, sister dear, but how are you going to get them into the castle? All the packages are searched.”

“Drop them off here, Sev can take them in and make sure they get where they need to go,” Hero told them, deliberately using Severus’s nickname, which she hardly ever did.

Their lips twisted and noses wrinkled, but they didn’t protest further. “Okay,” George said, drawing the word out. “What else?”

They explained the plan for Potterwatch and mobile phones. The twins were intrigued. They knew about the concept of telephones already of course, and had seen mobiles in the catalogues their father got delivered and hid from their mother. As they plotted and planned, lights of delighted menace shone brighter in their eyes.

They popped back to their workshop to pick up some experimental products – new recipes they’d been developing for the Snackboxes as a precaution in case the Death Eaters took power. These were specialized to mimic the effects of jinxes, hexes, curses, and other forms of torture – cuts, bruises, burns, etc. They dosed all the students before sending them back through the portal. After all, they could hardly emerge from a detention with the fearsome Severus Snape looking no worse for wear.

Ginny looked around the house on her way out with new eyes. She peered into the drawing room and realized it looked a lot cozier than it had a year before – less dusty, like people were actually living there. There was even a record player with a few record sleeves leaning against it. Signs of a friendly, human presence were visible elsewhere if you looked. The house-elf heads had been taken
down—she didn’t know quite how she’d missed that. Some rooms had been stripped of furniture and looked like they were about to be painted—which could only be an improvement.

Finally, the room they’d come in by, Snape’s room—didn’t look nearly so forbidding. In fact, it looked comforting, restful. She noticed Hero’s nightshirt on a chair and her dirty clothes in a hamper, which was...not so comforting. But it sort of was, in a way. He was definitely on their side. And, it appeared, the left side of the bed. Bit too much information, that.

The motley group, all looking like they’d fled a battlefield, trooped through the headmaster’s quarters. The headmaster was not with them, having decided to linger for reasons on which no one wanted to dwell. They made their way back to their respective Common Rooms, heads whirling with everything they had learned that evening.

*

With the DA returned to the school, things in the kitchen calmed down slightly. Kreacher made everyone more tea. Fred and George were still a bit bemused. They chatted to Ron, Hermione, and Hero, but they sent glances out of the corner of their eyes, watching the way Hero and Severus sat so close together; their hands held on top of the table.

As Fred and George were catching up with Ron and Hermione, Hero leaned over to murmur something in Severus’s ear. He murmured something back, and she smiled. Fred couldn’t help glancing over. Hermione smiled.

“I know. It’s like they’re in their own little world. Like when it snows, and everything’s muffled—nothing’s real except the person next to you.”

George frowned at her. “They’re like that a lot?”

“When they can be. He can’t be here as much as he’d like.”

“But when he is here—they’re like that?”

Ron shook his head. “Not always. But eventually it gets to a point where they can’t help themselves. They barely even know we’re here.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

Hermione shrugged. “She put up with us. It seems only fair.”

Hero got up and tugged on Severus’s hand. Smiling fondly, he followed her.

Ron frowned. “Where are you going?”

“Dancing,” Hero called over her shoulder.

Fred and George blinked at Ron and Hermione rapidly—she figured the message was something along the lines of “does not compute.”

Ron grinned at his brothers. “This you’ll want to see.”

They frowned at him. “We will?”

“Definitely. It’s one of the few things she still has energy for.”

They followed the couple up to the drawing room. They were just in time to see Severus place a
record on the turntable and hold out his hand for Hero’s. She gave it to him, her smile blinding, and he drew her to her feet. The soft melody and French lyrics of “La Vie en Rose” began to emanate from the gramophone.

They swayed from side to side, not even really dancing, more relishing being in each other’s arms, close enough to hear each other’s heartbeats. Hero closed her eyes, just resting her cheek against his chest. They rotated slowly and Severus noticed their audience. He winked at them.

He started to guide her into an actual dance, slow and sweet. She looked up at him and laughed softly. He dipped her, and the laugh became open and joyful.

They stood and watched for a while, feeling like outsiders. Soon, it seemed Severus, too, had forgotten they were, and Hero had never realized it in the first place. When the feeling of intrusion grew too strong to ignore, they quietly left the room.

Hero and Severus continued to dance, holding each other. There are some moments that seem to last forever. Unfortunately, they never quite do.
Heeeeeey, guys. I'm really, really sorry, I meant to post this a week ago, but events . . . transpired. First, some guy followed me, then I had my phone and wallet stolen. So, yeah, rough week. Anyway, I hope you enjoy the fruits of my labors.

Into the quiet of an autumn evening came a honeyed voice used to public speaking. Lee Jordan leaned closer to the microphone, smiling as he settled into the familiar rhythm.

“. . . apologize for our temporary absence from the airwaves, which was due to a number of house calls in our area by those charming Death Eaters. Fortunately, we’ve now found ourselves another secure location. As always, Rapier and Cutlass join me to discuss the affairs of the day. We are also joined by regular correspondents Romulus and Royal, who have managed to get away for a bit to give us on a report of their adventures.”

“I’m not sure I’d call them adventures, River,” came the deep, comforting rumble of Kingsley Shacklebolt’s voice.

“Artistic license, Royal. How are you this evening, gentlemen?”

“Tolerably well,” came the cheerful if slightly weary voice of Remus Lupin.

“That’s what we like to hear. Now, before we get onto other subjects, there’s one thing I think it’s important to say. We’ve advertised for the Quibbler and various Wheezes products, but today I’m going to encourage all our listeners to go out and buy a mobile phone. We’ll be able to talk to each other and it is completely untraceable by the Ministry of Magic. Some of you might be a little apprehensive about going into the muggle world, never mind muggle technology, but this could be lifesaving. The number here is, ah . . . 020 7224 1997. Again, that’s 020 7224 1997.”

“I’m sure that’s going to be very helpful for staying under the radar,” Lupin put in.

“Yes, and speaking of staying under the radar,” Kingsley added, “we’d just like to stress again that there’s a taboo on the name. For anyone tempted to follow the example of Dumbledore and Hero Potter – it’s probably best if you don’t.”

“Yes, I heard a charming variation from the lady herself last week,” George spoke up. “Volleyball.”

Fred added, “Pale, noseless, and begging to be punched twenty feet in the air.”

“Wait, you heard from Hero?!” River demanded.

“Yes,” George admitted.

“Surprise!” Fred added.

“You could have mentioned that before!”

“We’re mentioning it now?”
Kingsley chuckled. “He’s got a point, River.”

“Well, don’t just leave us in suspense! What happened?” Lee demanded.

“She’s alive and with Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. She’s currently in contact with various spies placed in Hogwarts and the Death Eater headquarters. She and her allies are working hard on a vital mission to counteract Volleyball’s power.”

“And how’s that going?” Lupin asked.

“Quite well, I think. And they’ve been able to conspire with the DA inside the castle.”

“Any word on how the students are being treated?” came Kingsley’s grave voice.

“Well, you know, not great. But not as bad as you might think. They’re still kicking. And you remember the new headmaster, who we all thought would be a disaster? Apparently he’s not.”

“What can you tell us about Severus Snape?” Lee asked cautiously.

“He’s definitely on our side. I don’t want to go into any more detail than that, though you’re welcome to contact Hero Potter. You can reach her at 020 7353 1980. Do try to keep it to urgent stuff or things for her only. Anything that can be passed through us, that’s probably best.”

“Alright, thank you for that . . . frankly shocking revelation. Now, I think it’s time to catch up with Romulus and Royal. Royal, what can you tell us about the situation from your vantage point?”

“Stan Shunpike is strongly suspected to have been subjected to the Imperius Curse while in Ministry custody. We would urge you not to use lethal force unless necessary. Unfortunately, in these dark times, it very well may be. His is a name to add to your list of Death Eaters and Sympathizers, as well as their victims.”

“Yes, it’s most unfortunate,” Lupin agreed gravely. “I would add that keeping out of sight can be an excellent way to avoid detection. Go into hiding as a muggle – go to the Orkneys, change your name, dye your hair. And if that’s impossible, don’t draw attention to yourself. You never know who’s watching. In times like these, paranoia is just good sense.”

“That’s a good point, Romulus. You can never be too careful,” Kingsley agreed.

“Any other news of our evil overlords?” Lee inquired.

“If you’re a muggle-born, get out while you can,” Kingsley replied grimly. “Hiding might not be enough with the Muggle-born Registration Commission – your best bet is getting abroad as quickly as possible. Don’t use magical forms of transportation. Catch a bus, catch a cab, hitchhike, if you can’t drive or don’t have a car. Find friends who do. Keep together. And I would apply that to the rest of the wizarding population, as well. If you don’t have to use something Ministry-regulated, don’t.”

“If you’re going to rebel, we suggest you do it quietly,” Remus added. “Mobile phones are another great way to coordinate efforts undetectably.”

“And we are currently asking for sponsorships of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes care packages,” George put in.

“Yes, we’ve discovered a way to smuggle tools in to the students, so we’re going to go for it. We’ll start small at first. If you feel you can’t risk yourself and your family by acting against the current
government—"

"Which is perfectly understandable—"

"You can help the students resist."

"Or, you can buy a kit for yourself. Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes has all manner of protective products, as well as those geared toward subterfuge."

"And they do owl-orders, so you don’t even have to leave your house!"

"Thanks for that, Rapier, Cutlass—"

"I don’t know if I want to be Cutlass. Do you think it sounds too much like gutless?"

"It’s fine—"

"Saber. I could be Saber."

"Whatever. That’s all the time we have, I’m afraid. So, keep checking the airwaves, the next password will be Moody."

"Keep safe, everybody, and remember, if you’re wondering whether or not it’s okay to eat that strange wild mushroom growing by your camp in the wilderness, the answer is probably no," Fred quipped.

George added, clearly grinning from the sound of his voice, “That’s right. And support Hero Potter!"

*

Severus had listened to the broadcast while sitting on the sofa in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place. Hero sat against him, his arms around her middle. Ron and Hermione were on the floor, Hermione leaning with her head against his shoulder.

The next morning, he could have sworn he saw Pomona wink at him. He blinked, startled, sure he must have imagined it. When he looked at her again, she was glaring coldly at him. Realizing, a little despondently, that she must have had something in her eye, he went back to his fried egg.

Next, Filius, sitting to his right, had a violent coughing fit. He muffled it into his serviette, then, once he’d recovered, put it to the aside – rather closer to Severus than it had been originally. Ostensibly still focusing on his egg, he noticed a scrap of parchment sticking out from under it.

Rolling his eyes, he set down his knife and fork. “Really, Filius, must you?” He snatched up the piece of linen, maneuvering the bit of parchment into his palm. “Elf!” he snapped. When one appeared, he held the fabric out to the creature and said, voice dripping with disdain, “Have this laundered. I don’t want soiled linens at the breakfast table.” The elf took it, bowed with a squeak, and disappeared. He could have sworn he saw a smirk curling the corner of the Charms’ Master’s lips.

After breakfast, once he was in the privacy of the headmaster’s quarters, he read the note.

Severus,

We all heard it, and we couldn’t be prouder. Don’t worry, mum’s the word.
All the other professors, barring the Carrows, had signed it. Even Madam Pince. It was written in Minerva’s handwriting.

* 

“Alright, let’s take another caller. Alright, caller, you’re on the air.”

“Oh, goodness! Sorry, sorry, not used to this mobile thing. It’s all a wee bit new.”

“Of course. Maybe you could start by telling us where you’re from?”

“Right, so. I’m from Ireland originally, as you can probably tell, North Tipperary. But I went to school at Hogwarts and I stayed in the UK after. I’m in London these days, working for St. Mungo’s. I just have to say, the number of people coming in is just outrageous! And the things wrong with them, my god! Now, things weren’t perfect before, not by any means. But before I went on my dinner-break, I finished spelling some poor eejit’s entrails back into him! You’d never see something like that before, now. I didn’t fight in the last war, but the way I see it, with this one, we haven’t altogether very much choice. And if I’m go’n’ to be hit with an Entrail-Expelling Curse, I’d rather be doing something, you know what I mean? I’d like to stick it to those bloody arseholes before I go!”

“Ah, thank you, erm, what’s your name?”

“Mary Donaghy. And if me mam’s listening back in Nenagh, I just want her to know I’m fine, and when I come home for Christmas, she can say ‘I told you so’ as much as she likes, but I’m still coming back to where I’m needed.”

“Well, that’s certainly admirable. Hat’s off to you, Mary. And, er, good luck with patching people up.”

“Aye, we’ll need as much luck as we can get. A very good evening to you.”

“Alright, who’s next?”

“We have a Toby Llewellyn.”

“Alright, Toby, go ahead.”

“Hello, River. First, I’d like to say that I really appreciate the job you and the others are doing on Potterwatch. Many of us aren’t up to open dissent, but you give us hope.”

“Well, not everyone can be a foolhardy Gryffindor.”

“You’re right there. Also, I need to report what is frankly a terrible pixie infestation here in Llandovey. I know lots of people are hiding, but unless you know how to deal with pixies, I’d advise you to steer well clear.”

“Well, I can’t imagine that’s a picnic. Thanks for the heads up. Oh, okay, he’s gone. Next, we have a report from Rapier and – what was it, Saber?”

“Yeah. Alright, there are reports of more dementors breeding – it needs to be said, little though anyone wants to think about reproduction and dementors in the same sentence.”

“Which means work on your Patronuses, guys. Even a vapor or shield Patronus is better than nothing.”
“Also, bear in mind that it’s becoming increasingly dangerous to read the Quibbler. I know for a lot of us, it’s our main source of news, but the thing is, they know that.”

“Yeah, and Xenophilius Lovegood is really pushing the envelope lately. He’s a brave man who, I’m sure, recognizes the risks, but it won’t help anything if you get dragged down because you don’t.”

“Secrecy is paramount, everyone.”

“Okay, how about we take another caller. What’s your name, caller?”

A whisper came, difficult to hear over the radio. “Reba McIntyre. I’m in Rutherglen, outside Glasgow. There’s a Death Eater raid at the moment, I think they’re headed into the city.”

“Reba, are you alright? Is anyone you know injured?”

“My husband’s been Stunned. They killed the dog. Who kills a dog?!” she whispered fiercely, her voice breaking.

“Are they still nearby?”

“Aye. They’re at the next-door neighbors’. They’re muggles, I think her sister’s a Muggle-born. Oh, god, those poor people.”

“Reba, I need you to stay calm. You rushing over there won’t help anything.”

“I-I know.” There was a pause and she began to sob quietly. “They – there was a green light. They’re . . . they’re gone.”

“What were their names?”

“Yvonne and Gregory Allen, and their twins. They were only three. Oh, god.”

“We’ll remember them. We would ask that our listeners observe a minute of silence to mourn the passing of the Allens.”

After a minute had passed, Lee spoke, his voice solemn. “We wish peace and health to Reba McIntyre and her family, as well as the loved ones of the Allens. Any tips for protecting muggle friends and colleagues?”

Kingsley replied, “Well, going by the laws I still try to obey, especially the International Statute of Secrecy, your easiest way is out – telling them the truth. If you hear about attacks nearby, warn them to be on guard, possibly ready to flee at a moment’s notice.”

“A lot of muggles know something’s up.” Lupin added. “They just don’t know quite what or why. That can work either for you or against you. They might be more inclined to listen to you because of some inexplicable sense of foreboding. On the other hand, they might be more likely to dismiss your concerns as part of the strange paranoia that seems to be affecting everyone lately. It all depends on how aware they are of the current state of affairs, consciously or subconsciously.”

“I hate to say it, but there’s only so much you can do while staying inside the law – which I highly recommend, by the way,” Kingsley said, the teasing note not hiding how serious he was.

“Indeed – there’s more you can do for the families of Muggleborns – people who, after all, are likely aware of the existence of magic and perhaps know something about the current climate, for lack of a better term.”
“Thanks for that, Romulus and Royal, that’s good advice.”

“Anytime, River.”

“So, ‘Rapier,’ could you please give us your take on the various stories we’ve been hearing about the Chief Death Eater?”

“Yes, River, I can,” said Fred. “As our listeners will know, unless they’ve taken refuge at the bottom of a garden pond or somewhere similar, You-Know-Who’s strategy of remaining in the shadows is creating a nice little climate of panic.”

“Mind you,” George cut in, “if all the alleged sightings of him are genuine, we must have a good nineteen You Know-Whos running around the place.”

“Which suits him, of course,” said Kingsley. “The air of mystery is creating more terror than actually showing himself.”

“Agreed,” said Fred. “So, people, let’s try and calm down a bit. Things are bad enough without inventing stuff as well. For instance, this new idea that You-Know-Who can kill with a single glance from his eyes. That’s a basilisk, listeners. One simple test: Check whether the thing that’s glaring at you has got legs. If it has, it’s safe to look into its eyes.

“Although if it really is You-Know-Who, that’s still likely to be the last thing you ever do.”

“And the rumors that he keeps being sighted abroad?” asked Lee.

“Well, who wouldn’t want a nice little holiday after all the hard work he’s been putting in?” asked Fred.

“Point is, people, don’t get lulled into a false sense of security, thinking he’s out of the country. Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t, but the fact remains he can move faster than Severus Snape confronted with shampoo when he wants to, so don’t count on him being a long way away if you’re planning on taking any risks. I never thought I’d hear myself say it, but safety first!”

“Although, from what I saw from Severus Snape the other day, he looked rather clean. Presumably his lady friend prefers it.”

“Lady friend?! First, you tell me he’s on our side, now he’s got a lady friend? I’m beginning to think you’ve made up an imaginary friend who just happens to have the same name as our fearsome Potions Professor.”

“It’s quite true, though for the lady’s sake, I’ll leave her anonymous. It wouldn’t do to give the impression someone had been kissing and telling.”

“Oh, come on! Whisper it in my ear at least.”

“Not on the broadcast. I’m pretty sure if I did, and we had censors, your reaction would get us kicked off the air.”

“If censors were listening to the show, we’d all be arrested,” Lupin pointed out dryly. “As it happens, though, I do know who you’re talking about, having encountered the happy couple myself, and I’m sure she’d appreciate your keeping her name out of it.”

“Oh, fine. You lot are spoilsports. Okay, let’s take another caller. Caller, you’re on with Potterwatch.”
“What the hell’s Potterwatch? I’m trying to get the chip shop.”

“Mate, you’ve got a wrong—and, no, he’s gone. Okay. Who else is on the line?”

“Yes, hello, my name is Arabella Figg. I wanted to know if you’re aware that your program is discriminatory against squibs.”

“How so, Arabella?”

“I have been a member of the Order of the Phoenix since its inception, despite the fact that I have no magic. Because I have no magic, I, and others like me, can’t input the passwords into a wizarding wireless. I have wizarding friends, but there are others who aren’t so fortunate. Do we squibs not matter?”

“No, of course, madam. However, in the interest of secrecy, I’m sure you understand the need.”

“I suppose I do. I must say, I like this new idea of using phones. Brings in a lot of people in hiding in the muggle world.”

“Well, that’s great. We’ll try to come up with a solution to your problem.”

“Thank you. Oh, and you tell that nice Hero Potter that Mr. Tibbles misses her.”

“Uh, I’ll be sure to pass that along.”

“Goodbye, gentlemen – why are you only gentlemen? Why not have a woman’s perspective?”

“We’re recruiting, Madam. It’s still early days yet.”

“Well, see that you find one. Have a pleasant evening.”

“Have you ever met a woman that terrifying? Did I say terrifying? Galvanizing, I meant galvanizing. And to Ms. Arabella Figg, I can only say, Ma’am, yes, Ma’am.”

“I wonder who Mr. Tibbles is,” Fred questioned.

“Quite an elevated personage, one assumes, if he’s met Hero Potter,” Lee put in.

“She’s going to get you for that. You mark my words, the next time she sees you, she’ll clock you on the head.”

“And I will relish the bruise from such an august hand. And, in other news, only just now remembered, we’re looking for a female contributor. Operators are standing by.”

“Are you ever at a loss?”

“No. And I think that concludes our show this evening. Keep safe, keep faith.”

“And support Hero Potter!”

“We at Potterwatch wish you all a good evening. Until next time, folks, when the password will be McKinnon.”

Minerva cornered him after supper and wouldn’t take no for an answer. Feeling like a child caught
in wrongdoing, he led her up to his office.

The first thing she did once they were safely in his office was hug him.

“Oh, Severus, it’s so good to know you’re on the right side. But, I have to know. Dumbledore?”

Severus scrubbed at his face with one hand, feeling immensely tired as he took a seat behind his desk. Minerva sat facing him. “He made me promise, and then he wouldn’t let me out of it. Mad, old bastard.”

“But . . . but, why, Severus?”

“He was dying. He wanted it to contribute to the war. I begged him to let me out of it. He refused, obviously.”

Minerva shook her head. “My god, that man. The burden he put on you, over and over again. I want to take him and shake him, like a terrier with a rat.”

“Perhaps it’s for the best that you can’t.”

“Aye, perhaps you’re right at that.” Her smile turned sly. “But what’s this about a lady friend?”

“None of your business.”

“You’re no fun. So, I suppose you’re not torturing the students when you take their detentions?”

“Of course not!”

“Just checking. It’s only . . . they come out of here looking so . . .”

“Smoke and mirrors, Minerva. You have my word. Truly, I’m . . . glad you’re all here. I can’t imagine trying to protect the students with a full staff of Death Eaters.”

She shuddered. “Don’t even say that! Those two are quite bad enough, thank you.”

“I know. There’s only so much I can do to minimize them without being obvious. At least you all try your best not to assign detentions.”

She scoffed softly. “As if we would do otherwise. It almost makes me long to have Dolores Umbridge back.”

“Surely you can’t be serious?”

“No, not really. But . . .”

“I know.” He paused, considering something. “If . . . if I had to go away – for a day or so – could I trust you to look after the school in my absence?”

She snorted. “Right, like the Carrows would let that go.”

“Not officially. You would just have to come up to the head’s office and come down looking harried and say, ‘Severus wants us to . . .’ what have you.”

She cocked her head, peering at him with a strange expression on her face. “Do you think it would work?”
“Probably. And you must admit it’s better than the alternative.”

“Do you anticipate leaving the school for days at a time?”

“Not . . . days. A day. Or two.”

“Why?”

He was tempted to repeat, “None of your business,” but knew that in this, she wouldn’t be satisfied with so little.

“My . . . lady friend . . . is ill. I may need to look after her.”

“If you’re thinking of leaving this place when it’s a powder keg waiting to go off, she’d better be dying.”

“She is.”

Minerva seemed to deflate. “Oh. I understand. God knows if my Elphinstone had had a long illness instead of that damn Tentacula bite, I’d probably have done the same. What is it?”

“Cancer. I try to be there for her when I can – not usually days at a time. Asking you, it’s just in case something goes very badly wrong.”

“I understand, and you need say no more about it unless you wish. I will need to know the password, however.”

“Ah, yes. Juniper.”

Minerva blinked, then seemed to take it in her stride. “Very well, then. Shall I go down in a strop, so?”

The corner of his lip curled. “High dudgeon. You’re too dignified to strop.”
Hey, guys. I'm late, as ever. Is it wrong of me to hope that you've been conditioned to accept it by now? In other news, I sprained my ankle a week ago and it's still pretty ugly. I mean, grey and purple along along the outside edge of my foot and across my toes, never mind just my ankle. Kind of wondering how many of you actually bother to read this, to be honest. I mean, I get it, I do the same thing sometimes. I could say anything. I mean, I'm rambling, but if you're not reading it, does it matter? Hope you guys are having more fun than I am. Anyway, enjoy the chapter. I've been looking forward to this for a while.

Hero woke up in a room that was both strange and familiar. She was quite sure she'd never been in it before, but she'd been in far too many very like it. The bed’s sheets were starched; a needle bit into the inside of her elbow; there was a soft beeping in the background. Not to mention, her whole body ached. She opened her eyes to see a curtain drawn around the bed. Yep; she was on a hospital ward.

Severus was slumped in the chair, one hand stretched out to hold hers. There were deep shadows under his eyes and his skin looked grey. What was he doing here? He was supposed to be at Hogwarts.

Ten or so minutes later, a young doctor popped his head in. He smiled. “Ah, Miss Potter. You’re awake, then.”

She opened her mouth to find it bone-dry. “Can I get some water?” she croaked.

“I’ll have one of the nurses get you some ice-chips.” His head disappeared for a moment, then he came all the way in with a cup of ice and a spoon. “Here you are. How are you feeling today?”

“Sore.”

“Yes, that’s to be expected.”

“What happened?”

“You don’t remember?” Hero shook her head. “You had a grand mal seizure. Your family was very worried.”

“I’ll bet. How long is he allowed to stay?” she asked, nodding to Severus.

“Indefinitely, unless you want us to kick him out.”

“No, no. Him being here makes it just a bit less awful.”

“Good. Because with a man that dedicated to staying by your side, I wouldn’t want to be responsible for sending him packing for love or money.”

“How long have I been out?”
“Two days. We’ve kept you sedated in case you had another seizure. I’d have to check your brain activity to see if you did or not.”

“It’s not important. Has he slept at all the past two days?”

“Cat naps. This is the first solid sleep he’s had.”

Hero nodded and tore her eyes away from Severus. “So, what happens next?”

“Your oncologist, Dr. Warren, is coming in later today. We’ll consult with him and go from there.”

“Right. When?”

The doctor glanced at his watch. “Three hours or so. It’s just gone eleven now. You can go back to sleep for a bit.”

“No, I’ve slept enough for the moment. I’m not sure I could sleep if I wanted to.”

“Well, whatever you like. Provided it doesn’t involve getting out of bed or moving very much. The monitors don’t like it.” He smiled again and left.

Hero looked back at Severus. There was a book wedged between his leg and the arm of the chair. Careful not to wake him, she tugged it free. It was something called *Deep Wizardry*, with a picture of whales on the cover.

She passed a pleasant hour and a half reading. Severus woke up then, and the book was set aside.

He stretched and cracked his neck, scowling.

Hero grinned. “Well, that’s what you get when you sleep in a chair.”

“Oh, fair cruelty! I’ll just leave, then.” He made no move to get up.

“I meant, you could come up here with me.”

“Now, why would I do a thing like that?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure it’s more comfortable than that chair. And I haven’t seen you in a week.”

“Actually, it’s been more than a week, Sleeping Beauty.”

“So, what are you still doing down there?”

“You need to rest.”

“Sod resting. I’ve done nothing else for days. And I won’t be comfortable unless I can feel you next to me.”

Heaving an enormous sigh as if she’d asked for the stars, he got to his feet and climbed onto the bed. There was a certain amount of awkwardness given they had to accommodate her IV, but they managed it in the end.

As she lay against his chest, at long last in his arms again, she felt the tension begin to seep out of her. He brushed a kiss against the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her.

“I like your book.”
“You can borrow it when I’m finished.”

“Mmm.”

Softly, he began to sing in her ear. “Oh, mistress mine, where are you roaming? Oh, stay and hear, your true love’s coming, that can sing both high and low. High and low, high and low.”

It reminded her of . . . a year ago – what felt like forever ago – when he’d sang along to the radio with her. His voice was every bit as warm and rich as it had been then, but the hesitancy was gone.

“Trip no further pretty sweeting.
Journeys end in lovers' meeting.
   Every wise man's son doth know.

What is love, 'tis not hereafter,
Present mirth, hath present laughter:
   What's to come, is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty,
Then come kiss me sweet and twenty:
   Youth's a stuff will not endure.”

“What’s it about?”

He smirked. “Settling. She’s waiting for her love to come to her when there’s a man in love with her right there. No one knows what will happen, so she should go with the sure thing, and maybe she’ll love him yet.”

She laughed. “I feel like it’s a little like us. Only I’m the one asking for you to accept me. Or I was, at any rate.”

“Not anymore. I’d fight tooth and nail to keep you here with me.”

She sighed and turned her head to meet his eye. “Except you can’t. You can’t fight death. It’s inevitable. And mine’s imminent.”

“I’d fight tooth and nail if it would do a damn bit of good. Or were you expecting me to roll over and surrender at the first sign of trouble?”

“No, no. It’s just . . . I worry. I worry what state I’ll leave you in. What sort of state you’ll be in because I’m gone. I . . . alright, saying it out loud is going to sound ridiculous, but . . . I hope I don’t mean much to you. I’m dying anyway, so it hardly matters. It’s better for you . . . if . . .”

“You really are stupid, aren’t you?” She flinched. She’d hoped for this, she reminded herself, hoped that he would find the very idea that he felt something for her ridiculous. It hurt more than she’d expected it to, though.

“Oh of course I love you. I would have thought it was fairly obvious. I understand that your tumor is affecting your thought-processes, and the chemo probably isn’t helping, but really. The way I look at you, the fact that I haven’t left your side in days . . . didn’t give you a clue? I despair, honestly, I do. Hero, how could you be so blind?” She felt gentle fingers under her chin, lifting up her face. He pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “I love you. Completely, and utterly, and . . . absolutely madly. And you’re just going to have to deal with it.”

A bubble of laughter burst out of her. “I love you, too.”
“Yes, I know. I, unlike some people, know what it looks like.”

She wacked his arm, curled around her waist. “Prat.”

“I never said I wasn’t. You knew what you were getting into.”

“Alright, so I did. Took me ages to come to terms with it, you know. You were horrible, and you hated me. And I loved you. It was absolutely miserable. And then we actually talked, and I kissed you, and you somehow turned into a romantic,” she said, her tone accusing.

“Well, yes, I suppose I did. I didn’t have reason to be before, I suppose. It’s entirely your fault.”

“Good. Got any poems for me?”

“Awfully demanding today, aren’t we?” He sighed. “Fine. Let’s see. Ah, yes.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters where it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand’ring bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it is, rather.”

“Love’s a funny thing. ‘It looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, and thus is winged cupid painted blind.’ Who could have seen this? Us?”

He smiled, the expression soft. “No one in their right mind. I’d have hexed Trelawney if she’d told me. Of course, she’s much more preoccupied with death than romance, so perhaps it wouldn’t have occurred to her.”

“She’s not wrong, though, is she?”

“You’re not on your death bed. Not yet.”

“Funny little word. Yet.”

“We all get there eventually. We are all born, and we all die. Life may be unfair, but death isn’t. It doesn’t discriminate.”

Hero laughed humorlessly. “It’s a lottery, and I’ve won.”

“That’s the spirit.”
“Oh, we are so bloody morbid.”

“If you can’t indulge in a bit of black humor when you’re dying, when can you?”

“Hmph.”

“Why’d the chicken cross the road?”

“What?”

“It’s a linguistic structure commonly known as a joke. Go on.”

“. . . I don’t know. Why’d the chicken cross the road?”

“To show his girlfriend he had guts,” Severus replied smugly, though what he could possibly have to be smug about, she had no idea.

“Ugh! That is terrible! On so many levels! Fine. Why did Severus Snape stand in the middle of the road?”

“Well, I’m sure I don’t know why I would do any such thing, darling.”

“So no one would know what side he was on.”

“Okay, I get it. Alright. I deserved that. Proton walks into a bar—”

“No.”

“You don’t like science jokes?” he asked innocently.

“Aren’t I suffering enough?” she asked, sighing dramatically.

He didn’t reply, and she knew she’d gone out of bounds.

“I’m sorry, Sev. I just . . .”

“It’s not your fault. It’s only the truth.”

Hero twisted to look up at him. “You make it better. You know that, don’t you? I can’t imagine going through this without you. I don’t want to. I’m sorry you’re stuck with me, but not sorry enough to change it if I could.”

“Good. I have no intention of giving you up, no matter come what may. So, if you’re thinking of telling me to sod off, it won’t work.”

Hero smiled and snuggled closer. “Best news I’ve heard all day.”

There was a sound of plastic against metal as the curtain was drawn back slightly. “Unfortunately, I’m here with more bad news,” Dr. Warren said, grimacing.

Hero froze. Her brow knitting, she asked, “Bad news?”

“I’m afraid so. The tumor’s growing, which is what triggered your seizure. Your brain is getting, well, claustrophobic, and the resulting tantrum, if you will, manifests as a seizure. They put you in the CT machine while you were out, I’ve seen the scans. It’s already bigger than a walnut.”

“W-what can be done?”
“Another operation – more invasive. Probably put a chemo port in your skull to attack it more directly.”

“So, I’m finally going to lose my hair. Earn my badge of cancer-strickenness.”

“That’s one way to look at it. We can have your hair made into a wig.”

“That . . . please.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “It’s stupid and vain, but . . . I like my hair,” she admitted, her voice breaking.

Severus pressed his lips to her temple. “Shh, shh,” he whispered in her ear. “It’s fine. It’s all fine.”

“You must be the boyfriend. I hope you’ve started using protection.”

A splotchy blush came onto Severus’s cheeks. He cleared his throat self-consciously. “Yes. I should have known better. It was . . . rather unexpected.”

Dr. Warren sucked his teeth and swept an assessing eye over the two of them. “Just so long as you’ve learned your lesson. I’m glad Hero has someone she trusts with her.”

“As am I.”

“So . . . surgery?” Hero asked, bringing them back to the subject at hand.

“Yes. We can book you into the operating theatre next week.”

“So soon?”

“The sooner the better.”

“R-right. Right. Can I go home in the meantime?”

“Yes, I don’t see why not. Just let me finalize the scheduling of your surgery, and you’re free to go.”

Back at Grimmauld Place, Hero closed her eyes and just clung to Severus, tears flowing down her cheeks. He wrapped his arms around her and murmured soothingly.

Finally, she pulled herself together.

“Oh. I’ve gotten your waistcoat all wet. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind.”

She looked up at him, tears glistening on her lashes. “Marry me.”

“What?”

“Marry me. You love me, I love you. I don’t want to be with anyone else for as long as I live. Marry me.”

“But . . . you won’t have all your friends, your family there.”

“I’ll have you. It’s the middle of the war, and even if it weren’t, I don’t have time for anything elaborate, anyway. Or do you . . . not want to?”
“Of course I do. I just don’t want to do something you’ll regret.”

“In the next few months? I think we regret the things we don’t do a lot more than the things we do.”

“You’re sure?”

“I have never been more certain of anything in my life.”

“All seventeen years of it.”

“Not this again! You’ve had plenty of opportunity to object to my age since we got together. And besides, seventeen years is a lifetime! My lifetime. You want to know if I’m sure? I’m sure!”

“Alright. Alright. Let’s get married.”

“What?” Hero asked, blinking, not having expected him to give in so easily.

“Let’s get married. If it will make you happy, why not? All I care about is that you’re happy.” He hugged her tighter and kissed the top of her head.

“But . . . I don’t want it if it’ll make you unhappy.”

“Marrying you could not possibly make me unhappy. It would be the greatest privilege and honor of my life. No matter what happens. Whether it’s for five minutes or fifty years.”

She took his face in both hands, standing on tip-toe to kiss him. “You are the sweetest man I have ever met. I can scarcely believe I get you all to myself.”

“No one will believe you if you tell them,” he threatened teasingly.

“I know. I like that no one else sees you like this.”

“If most people did, it would give them cardiac arrest,” he remarked, snorting.

“Mmm. I love you.”

“And I love you.”

*  

Hermione came scrambling into the drawing room, squealing as she threw herself on the love seat next to her fiancé. He blinked at her, looking slightly unnerved.

“This had better not be about a spider. We agreed that you’re the one who takes care of spiders in this relationship.”

“No, no, it’s good news! Wonderful, splendid, fantastic, spectacular news!”

“You-Know-Who committed suicide and all the Death Eaters have decided to come quietly?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I said good news, not a bloody miracle. Hero and Snape are engaged!”

Ron fell back against the loveseat, dust rising as he smacked against the upholstery. “Wow. Jeez. Who asked who?”

“Hero proposed. And they finally admitted they love each other! It’s like a book, or a film,” she told him, hugging herself and sighing dreamily.
“Ugh, you and your romantic comedies.”

“You liked When Harry Met Sally, admit it.”

“Well, that one was alright. The others, though . . .” He shuddered. Hermione whacked his shoulder.

“Anyway, our best friend is getting married!”

“Why’d she tell you and not me?”

“Well. She didn’t exactly tell me . . . per se.”

“You eavesdropped.” It wasn’t really an accusation, more a resigned statement.

“. . . technically. And she doesn’t know I know, so act surprised, won’t you?”

Ron groaned.

* 

“I didn’t realize planning a wedding involved so many things,” Hero commented wearily.

“I know. I’m starting to understand what Mrs. Weasley was going through with Bill and Fleur’s wedding. And they had a lot longer to plan things.”

“How are there this many details? I want a small wedding.”

“Yes, but we still have to finalize the guest-list, find a dress, find a location, get a florist, pick a caterer, set up a menu . . .”


“That was quick.”

“They fit a theme.”

“Which is?”

“Red and white, and either useful in potions, a little bit deadly, or both.”

“Okay, so you want the color-scheme to be red and white? Fitting for a winter wedding. So, red for the bridesmaids’ dresses, do you think?”

“I don’t know that I want a lot of bridesmaids. I mean, you as maid of honor, but . . .”

It was at that point that Ron tuned them out. He wasn’t terribly enthusiastic about planning for his own wedding, especially after his one and only suggestion had been shot down. Hermione liked his hair, didn’t she? So, really, what was wrong with Chudley Cannon orange? But, you know, whatever.

Suddenly, it hit him – blokes didn’t plan weddings, where they weren’t appreciated. No, they planned bachelor parties! Draco would probably be asked to be best man, so he was the one in charge of it, but he could probably use a bit of help. After all, all those people who were going to show up! Flitwick, Hagrid – well, maybe not Hagrid, actually – and . . . er . . . Kingsley! Dad, maybe. Lupin? No, no, best not. Would Tonks want to come to a bachelor party? She was always
good for a laugh. But she and Snape didn’t exactly get on. Neville? Maybe. What he really needed to do was talk to Draco. Yeah, it was going to be awesome!
Triumphs and Tribulations

Chapter Notes

This is really late. I had to type up the last section, which is complicated by the fact that my keyboard doesn't work. And then I spent five days in hospital because freshly boiled pot of tea fell on me, leaving me with second degree burns on my belly, right thigh, and calf. Makes the title of this a bit ironic, doesn't it? Anyway, I'll try to get 66 to you soon. Thanks for all your comments last time, they made for lovely hospital reading.

The next day was Sunday, the second of November. So much had happened since she’d gone to church two weeks before, it almost didn’t seem possible that it had only been a fortnight. But sometimes that was the way things happened – a lot of nothing, then everything at once.

She had to get out of the house. With the prospect of a wedding in a month or so, Hermione eyes were starting to glitter maniacally. Not that Hero didn’t understand. She’d just rather understand from a distance. She breathed in the cool air, the smell of the autumn leaves, and felt herself relax a little.

The whole thing had her tied up in knots. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to marry Severus – she did, more than she thought she’d ever wanted anything. But wasn’t eloping supposed to be easier? Then again, for all their relationship had thus far been conducted in the utmost secrecy, they weren’t really eloping. All the details of a normal wedding still had to be accounted for – they just had to be exceptionally cautious about it.

Hero strolled through the park, her hands in her pockets. She wanted to marry Severus and pledge her undying love to him. Really, what did that have to do with florists and caterers? She knew she was being a bit ridiculous, but . . . it wasn’t what she wanted. Of course, it would help a lot if she actually did know what wanted.

Her feet led her to the church she’d attended two Sundays before. The evening service hadn’t started yet – wouldn’t for another twenty minutes. She slipped inside.

She sat in the quiet of the sanctuary, in the back row again, and tried not to think. Of course, she’d never been particularly good at that. She found herself thinking of her parents, especially her mother. Parents tended to be involved in their children’s weddings, didn’t they? She could have asked her mother for advice, or just talked to her. Of course, the fact that Severus was the groom was a can of worms she was grateful not to have to deal with. But even so . . .

She wondered if this was what it had been like for Hermione, making plans without her mother to turn to. Her mother, who was alive, but living in Australia without the faintest clue she had a daughter. Maybe Hermione could give her some tips on dealing with it. Then again, Hermione didn’t really so much deal with emotional crises as ignore them until the pent-up anxiety exploded.

There had been times before when Hero had wanted to confide in her mother, but never like this. She’d wished when she was little while living with the Dursleys that her mother would arrive and whisk her away, like a fairytale. Her father was more of an afterthought. As she’d grown up, she’d abandoned that dream as it grew pale and hollow with years of going unfulfilled. Lupin had triggered it again, that yearning, when he reminisced about her parents – then more her father than
her mother. Then the Yule Ball, finding a date, a dress . . . Mrs. Weasley, despite how desperately she had wanted a daughter, didn’t have much experience with girls – witness Ginny’s dress.

And then, of course, there was her ridiculous crush on Severus. Wanting to talk about the wedding, now it had developed to that point, with her mother was really only an extension of that. Still, it hadn’t turned out too badly, she supposed.

Around her, the church began to fill. A helpful greeter handed her a bulletin with a smile. She managed to smile back before glancing through it. It was only then that she realized it was All-Saints Sunday – the day set aside for mourning those who have died. She wouldn’t have come if she’d known that – even now, some things hit too close to the bone. But she could hardly leave now.

The service began a few minutes later, the acolytes lighting the candles, the people being called to worship, announcements being made, and all the rest. And then came the center-point of the service. The minister asked for people to name those they had lost in the last year. Names of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children, and friends were given in voices almost too soft to carry. Then came the older deaths that people still carried with them, the empty spaces that never quite went away. Hero didn’t speak. Even if she had just been bitterly missing her parents, she didn’t quite feel she had a right to speak. After all, she had next to no memory of them. All she had was their deaths and a bit of conversation she might have made up. Can you grieve what you never really had? She almost named Sirius, but . . . it didn’t seem right, baring her grief to a crowd of strangers.

And, of course, the death she was mourning most was her own. Death past, death present, and death yet to come, all haunting her. Scrooge didn’t know how lucky he was.

When she was eleven years old, she had looked into the Mirror of Erised and seen her family, all dead, gathered together. She wondered if she would still see that if she looked into the mirror. She hoped so, because she was soon to get it, if not in precisely the way she might have imagined. She was afraid that her heart’s desire was more selfish now – not to be reunited with family, but rather to live. Maybe it wasn’t so terrible or selfish, wanting to live, but she had to die – the sliver of soul in her forehead had taken the choice out of her hands.

Except not really. She still could have chosen to live or die if not for the cancer – her choice just never would have been in doubt. She thought she had a right to be ever so slightly bitter about the whole thing. Not that it helped. Despite the fact that it hurt. And was exhausting, let’s not forget.

Why waste time and energy being bitter when it didn’t change a damn thing? She was about to get married. She’d never thought that would happen, but it was. Severus was with her, and he loved her. Her friends loved her and were loyal to the point where they would follow her to the ends of the earth. That was more than most people got in a century. So she was about to lose it, so what? Everyone did. Everybody dies. Life is never fair, but death is completely just.

She felt a spark of righteous fury at what Tom Riddle had gone and done. If she had to die, so did he, immortality be damned. No one was above final justice, especially not because they killed people and made their own soul a profanation. No. He would die; he was long past due.

She left the church at the end of the service with a renewed sense of purpose. Her mokeskin pouch, no longer containing the locket, was in the bedroom she shared with Severus, when he was free to come through. She sat on the bed and rummaged for the snitch. Holding it to her lips, she whispered, “The end is nigh.”

It popped open, and there was the stone, nestled inside it like a toy in a Kinder surprise egg. She dumped it out onto her palm and ran her thumb over it. She remembered from the story that she was supposed to turn it in her hand three times. She flipped it three times with her thumb, and there they
stood.

She bit her lip as she looked up at them. Her mother was smiling, though she also looked like she
was about to cry. Her father wore a proud smile, and his eyes were only a little less watery. Sirius
stood with them, wearing a roguish grin. He looked younger and handsomer than she’d ever seen
him in life, untouched by the ravages of his incarceration and the difficulties that had followed. Her
parents scarcely look older than she did. It seemed shocking to remember they hadn’t been much
older than her when they’d died.

Her mother opened her arms to hug her. “Oh, sweetheart.” Hero stepped into her mother’s
embrace. She was more solid than a ghost, but still not quite there – like a strong, warm breeze in
the shape of a woman.

“Hi, Mum,” Hero murmured, her throat tight with emotion.

“Oh, my baby girl. Only . . . you’re not a baby anymore, are you? You’re getting married.”

“I . . .”

“You’re worried, aren’t you, that we won’t approve?” her mother guessed.

“Well . . . yeah.”

“Oh, my darling. It’s your own life. You must live it for yourself.”

“Even if some of us think you’re making a mistake,” Sirius muttered under his breath. Lily shot him
a glare over her shoulder.

“If your relationship was abusive, or you were incompatible, or what have you, I might be saying
something. But it’s not. You’re happy. You make each other happier than I’ve ever seen you,
either of you. Don’t worry about what you’re afraid we might think. The same thing would be true
if we were alive.”

Hero narrowed her eyes and shifted her attention to her dad. “And what do you think?”

He shot his wife a glance out of the corner of his eye. “I completely agree.”

Hero folded her arms and raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Really? Pardon me if I don’t believe you.”

“Lily, she’s getting so much like Snape! I don’t like it!” Sirius protested.

“She’s standing up for what she wants. You’ll forgive me if I think that’s a good thing.”

“But he’s probably . . . brainwashed her or something!”

“Have we been watching the same series of events over the last year?” Lily asked, him, exasperated,
hands on her hips. “They adore each other! And he’s become a much better man. You can’t deny
that.”

James wrapped a conciliatory arm around her shoulders. “I know. I never thought I’d see the day
when I could call Severus Snape a hero, but he is. I might not exactly be over the moon that he’s
sleeping with my daughter, but I can admit he’s a good man. And he loves her. Any idiot can see
that. And Sirius, you have never been an idiot. Pig-headed, with said head up your arse at times, but
never stupid. Besides, there’s a fat lot we can do to keep them apart.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Nice going with the undercover forces, kiddo. We never could have
even imagined the stuff you’re getting up to. Puts all the stuff we did to shame.”

“Shame indeed,” Hero said, glaring at her father and godfather. “What you did to Severus was despicable.”

Sirius looked like he wanted to ask, “which bit?” but knew better than to actually say the words.

“Hanging him upside down and showing the whole school his underwear? Really? Although I think the prize goes to Sirius for luring him down to the Whomping Willow during the full moon,” she said, voice dripping with disdain.

Lily whipped around to glare at Sirius. “I never heard that story. Were you trying to get him killed? And if he had died, what about Remus? He would have been horrified! I can’t believe you used your boyfriend like that. It’s a wonder he ever forgave you.”

“Er, he doesn’t actually know. And believe me, James read me the riot act when it happened. He’s the one who saved Snape. So, you know . . . I know, alright? People say they’ll regret things to their dying day, well, I’m dead, and I still regret it, okay?”

“I’ll pass on your apology. But what should I do about the wedding?”

Sirius perked up. “You don’t want to go through with it?”

“Of course I want to go through with it! I’m just sick of all the details.”

“Well, most people take a bit longer than a month to plan a wedding, dear,” Lily reminded her.

Hero sat heavily back on the bed. “I want the people I love there to watch me get married. Except most of them hate Severus. And I want something simple, you know. But it’s caterers, and florists, and churches, and . . . if I’m being honest, it’s driving me up the wall.”

“Your father and I didn’t have a very big wedding – just close friends and family. My sister and that oaf she married didn’t attend, which isn’t all that surprising. It was nice, simple. I’d offer to let you have my dress, but you’re a fair bit shorter than me. And I don’t actually know what happened to it.”

“Yeah . . . no offense, Mum, but I don’t really want a dress from the ‘70s. Just . . . just saying.”

“Ungrateful child,” Lily said, scowling, but her eyes twinkled.

“Any other advice?”

“Yes. Take the burden off of Hermione. She’s aching to plan a wedding, but she wants to plan her own. If you let her loose, you’ll get her wedding instead of yours. And you know, you can have a small wedding and a bigger reception.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure. And a reception is a bit easier to plan than a wedding.”

Hero dissolved into relieved laughter. “Thank you. I knew I needed to talk to my mum about it.”

Lily smiled. “Trust that instinct. Even though this is our first conversation, a girl always knows when she needs to talk to her mother. And should you need me again, or any of us, remember, we’re right here,” she said, placing a hand over Hero’s heart. “We’re always with you.”
Hero nodded, feeling like a small child. Her mother bent down and kissed her forehead. In her ear, Lily whispered, “Tell him I forgive him.”

Hero looked around at the three of them and smiled, even if the moment was a little bittersweet. She set the stone down on the quilt, and they vanished.

* 

“What is it, Weasley? Severus said you wanted to see me.”

“Has he told you yet?”

Draco blinked, trying hard to control his irritation with ridiculous questions that conveyed no meaning whatsoever.

“Told me what, Weasley?”

“About the wedding.”

“No. What wedding?”

“His wedding. To Hero. That wedding. I expected him to have done it by now – I mean, it’s obvious he’s going to ask you to be best man.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. But he hasn’t mentioned a thing.”

“Well, presumably he will. Do you want help planning the bachelor party?”

Draco eyed the redhead. He appeared to be about to burst with the force of his enthusiasm. He thought about saying no for a second. He allowed himself to be immersed in the bliss that would surely follow the disappointed expression on Weasley’s face. But the fact was, if Severus did in fact ask him to be best man, he would need help with that end of things. And Ron undoubtedly knew how to have fun.

“Fine.”

“Great! Who were you thinking of inviting?”

“Well, considering I only just found out about it—” he began, his words coming in a carefully measured tone through gritted teeth.

“Ah, got you covered. I was thinking Flitwick, Kingsley Shacklebolt. Maybe my dad. They all seem to get on fairly well with him. You know, when they know he’s on their side. I wasn’t sure who else, ’cause, I mean, he doesn’t actually like people our age very much. Hero excepted, obviously.”

“If it was anyone else, I’d tell you that’s pathetic. But seeing as it’s Severus, three people, five including us, is actually pretty good.”

“Yeah. He’s a bit of a challenge.”

Draco barked out a laugh. “I think that’s the most generous description I’ve ever heard.”

“Yeah, well, he’s about to marry my best mate, and he’s going to be around a lot longer than she is. For her sake, I need to get on with him better. Merlin knows she’d never forgive me if I was horrible to him after she died. I could do without her nagging me for eternity.”
The blonde snorted. “Too bloody right. I don’t even want to imagine what that’s like.”

“Right? Besides, he’s not that bad. At least not now. Only got eyes for Hero. I mean, I get the occasional insult, but it’s almost like he doesn’t want to get out practice. I swear he’s not even trying. And I don’t even get insulted – I’m not sure I have it in me at this point. It’s just sort of the status quo, you know?”

“Granger’s been teaching you big-boy words, I see. Does she reward you with sex when you use them in conversation? Do you keep a notebook?” He ducked out of the way of Ron’s fist, laughing.

“How’s it going enduring Parkinson’s tender embraces?”

Draco scowled. “Someone really needs to teach that girl how to kiss. It’s like making out with the Giant Squid.”

“Well, you’re the one she’s kissing, and it seems like you’d be the greatest beneficiary, so why don’t you give her a few pointers?”

“Can’t be arsed. Besides, it’s not like I’m the only one she’s kissing. Monogamy isn’t her style. In which case, not improving her kissing is surely a form of spiritual warfare.”

Ron laughed. “We’ll make a strategist of you yet.”

“No, no, I’m a spy. We leave tactics and strategy to those who must be kept indoors lest they blunder into the field.”

Ron punched his shoulder. “Arse.”

“Never said I wasn’t. To be fair.”

Ron shook his head. “You willingly came when I asked you to. Why?”

Draco sighed. “You’re lucky, you know that? You trust the people around you. I can’t. I’m reasonably certain that any one of them would kill me if they found out the truth. It’s an extension of the thing with Pansy. Pretending, every minute of every day, to be someone you’re not. At least not anymore. Being with you lot is . . . freeing. I may not like all of you, but I don’t have to pretend. I don’t have to be anyone but myself.”

“I’m . . . glad, Malfoy. You’re a lot less of a git than you used to be, you know that?”

“Yeah, I’m . . . becoming aware of potential issues with my previous behavior.”

“Bit generous, yourself,” Ron noted dryly.

The other boy snorted a laugh. “Shut up.”

“So, how’s my sister?”

“You’ll probably see her next week, what are you asking me for?”

“She’ll tell me everything’s fine, and I’ll never get a straight answer out of her because she sees me worrying as some sign I think she can’t take care of herself. You’re an objective witness.”

“Your sister can take care of herself.”

“I know that. But it doesn’t mean I don’t worry. She’s my little sister.”
“She’s . . . fine, mostly. Spends most of her time with Lovegood and Longbottom. Got into a fight with a few Slytherins the other day, ended up with a split lip, I heard.”

“She physically fought them? Why?”

“With the way the Carrows are treating discipline cases, everyone is. They won’t let anyone go to Madam Pomfrey for help with, you know, serious spell issues. A fist-fight leads to a split lip, maybe a broken nose, a bit of bruising, all of which can be fixed with a simple Episkey. No one need ever be the wiser.”

“Surely they’d side with the Slytherins?”

Draco shook his head. “They don’t like anyone causing trouble. It’s six of one, half a dozen of the other to them, and that’s leaving out the fact that there are grudges within the ranks of the Death Eaters, which they can take out on kids. And nothing’s worth risking getting the Cruciatius Curse.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that. But Ginny’s fine?”

“She’s better than a lot of people, but it’s all relative these days. The detentions with Severus are helping. I think she’s been collaborating with your brothers on Potterwatch. It’s interesting – like apprenticeships with different parts of the war effort.”

“The mobile phones are working better than I would have thought. Because they’re able to maintain secrecy better, they’re broadcasting three times a week. At first, they thought they might be able to broadcast once month.”

“It’s weird, using muggle technology to fight him. But, I dunno, it feels . . . right.”

“Yeah. It really feels like things are changing.”

“All we have to do is win,” Draco said with a thin veneer of bravado.

“Easier said than done.”

Draco sighed. “Isn’t it just?”

*

Remus had been staying in a cheap London flat. Really, it barely deserved the term. There was a bed and a table, with a hotplate in one corner and a sink in another. He had to use the loo in the cafe downstairs. He could still barely afford it with the money he got from Potterwatch and consulting for Wheezes. It was a miserable place, but, he reasoned, no more miserable than the man in it.

A solitary, grey morning in November found Remus chewing on a breakfast of burnt scrambled eggs, courtesy of a temperamental hotplate. He reminded himself that he’d got it in a charity shop and was lucky it worked at all. After all, the poor, ancient relic of an electric kettle he’d bought with it hadn’t.

Just as the battered tin kettle he’d got to replace it started to whistle from its place on the hotplate, a large screech owl tapped on the window, a letter tied to its leg. First, he turned off the hotplate, then he went to let the owl in. From the glare it sent him as it hopped inside, it didn’t think much of his priorities. All well and good for an owl, but it hardly needed to worry about getting the security deposit back, did it?

The owl was a brindled brown, at once beautiful and unassuming. A school owl, if he was not much
mistaken.  Still glaring at him with intense orange-yellow eyes, it stuck it's leg out.

He hurried to untie it, groaning slightly at the sight of the distinctive handwriting.  What did Severus Snape want with him?

To put off finding out, he reached over to the table for a lump of egg.  The messenger had, after all, flown all the way from Scotland.  Well, maybe.  It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that Snape had carried it from the owlery, up to his office, through the portal, and released it from Grimmauld.  He thought it somewhat unlikely, though.

The bird turned its beak up at the egg.  Even if it had come all the way from Scotland, he couldn't really blame it.

There was nothing else for it; unable to stall any longer, he turned his attention to the letter.

Lupin,

_I am in Grimmauld Place.  If convenient, come at once.  If inconvenient, come anyway._

SS

Remus stared at the letter.  Then he stared at the bird.

"He can't be serious.  Can he?"

The bird stared back with an expression oddly reminiscent of McGonagall.  It was a look that said, "I believe you know quite well."

Remus sighed.  He took another look at the letter, then back at the bird.

He really wants a reply?  To this?" he asked it, holding up the letter with its scant message.  The bird stared straight back.

"Fine."  He pulled out a pen and scribbled a reply below the text.

S,

_I'll be there in twenty minutes.  This had better be good._

R. J. Lupin

He tied the missive back to the owl's leg and pulled the window wide.  The owl took off with what could only be described as a disgruntled flap of its wings.  _Owls_, he thought, rolling his eyes.  _So temperamental._

*

He took the Tube across London and ducked into an alley around the corner from Grimmauld.  Lips twisting in distaste, he Disillusioned himself.  He shuddered; he'd always hated the feeling, though he knew it was a necessary evil for security.

Effectively invisible, he continued on his way to what had once been the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.  Once inside, he reversed the spell, welcome warmth flooding through him.

He poked his head in the drawing room only to find it empty.  He meandered down to the kitchen, still wondering, as he had the whole way over, what this was all about.
Severus was waiting, seated at the end of the table, facing the door. Remus noted that he looked neither worried nor murderous, which he took to be a good sign. Still, he made sure to take a seat several feet away.

"I must apologize, my letter was rather abrupt," Severus said, breaking the silence.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

Severus smiled slightly. "Nothing's wrong. Quite the opposite, in fact. Hero and I are getting married."

Remus gaped at him for a second before recovering. "Oh, er, congratulations."

"Thank you. I've never been happier, never imagined I could be so happy. I won't hazard a guess as to your feelings," Severus remarked, his tone dry.

Remus flushed. "I'm . . . happy for you. Of course."

Severus eyed him for a moment but didn’t contradict him. He took a deep breath and launched into what sounded like a prepared speech.

"Yes, well . . . I can and do assure you that I love her more than my next breath and would do anything to secure her happiness. You are the last of the Marauders. Given that Hero is James's daughter, I believe it is past time to let bygones be bygones. I will understand if you do not feel similarly. I certainly have not been innocent in our encounters.

"However, as I said, I would do anything for Hero," he said, his voice becoming surer, sincerity shining from every line of his face. "So, the reason I asked you here. As a more concrete representation of the olive branch I'm extending . . . I'd like you to stand as my best man."

Remus blinked, thinking for a second that he must have heard wrong.

"Me? But . . . why?"

"Well, no offense to you, but I'm not exactly drowning in candidates. My relationship with Hero aside, we both know I'm not an easy man to get along with. I have colleagues, but few friends. I'm hardly about to ask Flitwick or Lucius Malfoy to do it. I might have asked Albus if not for . . .

"In any case, of the conceivable options, you know me the best. You are a long-time enemy who has also been colleague, ally, and comrade-in-arms. In other words, the closest thing I have to a close, adult male friend. I trust you, Remus."

"Thank you. I . . . that's . . . thank you."

Severus inclined his head. "So you'll do it?"

"Yes. It would be an honor."

"Good. Because I've already seen Ronald and Draco with their heads together, whispering about the bachelor party they think I'm going to let them plan. I shudder to imagine what those two might dream up. Really, I can't thank you enough," Severus told him fervently. Remus laughed so hard he cried.
Severus eyed the book currently lying innocently on his desk with the utmost distaste. The Dark Lord had sent it. It seemed, wherever he was, he’d heard about Rita Skeeter’s latest. He’d sent Severus a copy. He’d even sent a note.

Severus,

I thought you’d appreciate this biography of our late mutual acquaintance. As the school can hardly be giving you problems, you’ll have plenty of time to peruse it at your leisure, even if it is nearly a thousand pages. When I’m back in merry, old England, you’ll have to tell me if it’s as good as it looks.

Your Lord and Master,

Voldemort

Severus snorted just reading it again. The man always had been a pompous ass. Then his eyes drifted back to the book. The cover featured a full-color portrait of Albus Dumbledore, his eyes as blue as ever. Across his hat were written the words The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore. Across the bottom read: Rita Skeeter, author of the bestselling Armando Dippet: Master or Moron?

He glanced behind him at the portrait of the man himself, to all appearances gently slumbering. If it was true, Severus would swallow a snitch. He had no desire to read the scandal-mongering rag disguised as literature, but Hero had mentioned wanting to see just how bad it was. As much as he wanted to protect her from the contents, he respected her too much.

*  

Hero eyed the book with trepidation. She glanced at the snitch, resting on the desk beside her. Her fingers itched to snatch it up, to put it to her lips and whisper the words she knew would free the stone inside it.

No. No. She would read the book first. Then she would ask him. Not before.

This promise, it soon turned out, was one that would sorely test her. She tried to keep in mind the man she had known, who had loved her and deeply regretted a great many things. The picture Skeeter painted was difficult to reconcile with the man she’d known – at least, she thought she’d known him. With every galling, vituperative word, she became less and less sure.

By the time she’d finished the section on his young adult life, which chronicled his family life and exploits with a young Gellert Grindelwald, her expression had curdled to one not dissimilar to the dung-under-the-nose face of Narcissa and Draco. She wasn’t sure who she was angrier at, Rita or Dumbledore. Rita, for writing and publishing such awful things, Dumbledore for never telling her a word of it, Rita, because it was hard to think of a worse person to hear it from . . .

The stone held tight in her palm, she closed her eyes and thought furiously of Dumbledore. When she opened them, he was sitting on the chair across from hers. A look of strange, melancholy kindness lay across his face.

“Hello, Hero.”

“Hi.”
“You’ve called me here to drag me over the coals. Go ahead. I deserve it.”

She was abruptly reminded of the end of fifth year, when she’d trashed his office. “By all means continue destroying my possessions,” he’d told her then. “I daresay I have too many.” And then . . . “You will listen, because you are not nearly as angry with me as you ought to be. If you are to attack me, as I know you are close to doing, I would like to have thoroughly earned it.”

She sighed and shook her head. “I don’t want to rake anyone anywhere. I just want to talk.”

“Then, by all means,” he invited, spreading his hands.

“You . . . and Gellert Grindelwald?”

“Yes. We all – or at least most of us – have our youthful follies, and he was mine. I have always been both flattered and ashamed that you think me a better man than I ever was. I was, to put it mildly, an idiot. But that is not where the story begins. No, the story begins with my sister. With Ariana.”

“The fight . . . she was what Aberforth forgave you for, the night . . .”

“The night I died. Yes. Perceptive, once again. My sister had . . . a strange illness. She wasn’t a squib, as Ms. Skeeter has hypothesized. It likely would have been infinitely better if she had been. No, she suffered from an abundance of magic rather than a lack. When she was very young, she was in the garden one night, playing with magic lights. She couldn’t really control it – no witch or wizard can at that age. A few neighborhood boys saw. They wanted her to do it again. When she couldn’t . . . they decided to hurt her to discourage the little freak from doing it again. She was just a child. What they did was . . . unspeakable. It destroyed her.

“What happened to Ariana was something I fervently hoped the Dursleys would not create in you. I left a letter detailing my expectation that your aunt would treat you as her own. I confess I did not quite expect her to go that far, but I hoped that reminding her that you were her blood and she had an obligation to you would stay her hand.

“My sister from that point on refused to use magic, out of the fear instilled in her by those boys . . . but neither could she get rid of it. Instead, it turned inward, driving her mad. Most of the time she was sweet, but sometimes, she became violent. My father went after the boys, and as a result, was put in Azkaban. Many have tried to comfort me over my supposedly inferior relations. But I have never been ashamed of my father’s actions. Had I children, and had anyone done to them what was done to Ariana, I doubt I could have been so lenient. After all, he left them alive,” he said, his voice bitter and bleak.

“My mother was left to take care of Ariana, while my brother and I went to school. Not long after I graduated, my mother died. It was one of Ariana’s accidents. She had no idea what she was doing. Aberforth wanted to quit school to look after her. I wish I’d let him do it. A scholar my brother was not. But he was an infinitely better man. She might have improved under his care. And she certainly wouldn’t have died because I fell in love with Gellert Grindelwald.”

Hero’s eyes widened. “You what?”

“I loved him. He was brilliant, and idealistic, and devastatingly handsome. I assure you, I fell most thoroughly. I failed to notice that, for all that, he was not a very good person. You have never fallen prey to that, I think. Lockhart didn’t sway you, nor any other handsome swain. No, you chose Severus, who is forbidding in appearance and mannerisms, but a truly good man. For all my supposed wisdom, you are far wiser than I.
“But, in any case, we wrote letters. We wrote incessantly, sometimes many times a night. It’s a good thing our houses were so close, or else the owls would have run themselves ragged. Here, you see, comes the idiotic part. I thrived in his regard, the regard of someone I loved and saw as someone who was, at long last, my intellectual equal. Everything else, the rest of the world, fell away. My brother and sister were the last things on my mind. Until my brother, my wonderfully brave, infinitely better brother, reminded me of my obligations. I had gotten caught up in the dreams we were concocting, but he brought me back down to earth, where I should have been all along.

“I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want to hear any of it. And Gellert got angry. He used the Cruciatus Curse on my little brother, and something inside me broke. I tried to step in and stop them, they both tried to curse me, we were all fighting, and somehow in the middle of it all, Ariana ended up dead.

“Gellert left after that, fled the scene of the crime. We buried Ariana, which is when my brother broke my nose. I don’t begrudge him. I deserved far worse. Out of Gellert’s presence, away from his attention, I came back to my right mind.

“If there can be said to be any positive effects of the episode, it was that I learned my weaknesses. They say power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Perhaps there are exceptions, but I was not destined to be one of them. I did not have power over the lives of others – at least outside of my own family, and even that was questionable. But I dreamt of it. And the dream, that weak shadow of reality, was intoxicating enough that I planned the subjugation of other people. Really, we planned it.

“And therein lies my other flaw – love, or perhaps more accurately attraction. If I had morals prior to my affair with Gellert, I abandoned them without so much as a thought. I have realized that the person I was then – the boy, really – was desperate for attention. And to love a member of my own sex was no small thing then. I’m led to believe it’s still problematic, but it was far worse then. But he understood. He wasn’t disgusted – far from it, he returned my affections and attraction in full force. It was a heady feeling, almost more intoxicating than the power we promised ourselves.

“I have told you before that love is the power Tom has no conception of. I stand by that now. But it is vital to understand that there are different kinds of love. Victory, in whatever form it will take, requires clear-sighted love. I was blind to Gellert’s faults, to his cruelty, or perhaps I simply ignored it. I was infatuated, in love with the person I believed him to be, not realizing the image didn’t match the reality.

“Even so, the . . . affection I bore him did not fade entirely. Even still, I feel echoes of it, pangs of pain from a phantom limb. Our battle is recalled as a grand spectacle, the duel of the century. Perhaps it seemed that way to observers. It was, oh . . . all flash and no substance. Plenty of fireworks and things that looked complex, and thus dangerous. Killing him . . . I don’t think I could have done it. I didn’t, even when the fate of the whole wizarding world was at stake. And he didn’t strike any real blows either. Sometimes I think, maybe he didn’t want to hurt me any more than I wanted to hurt him. Maybe, in some way, he did care for me. Not that it matters. Forgive an old man’s ramblings, Hero.

“I have no fear of you loving blindly. You see people far too clearly for that. You understand that no one is all good or all bad. You have been faced with the flaws of those close to you from a regrettably young age. You have learned how to love them anyway. I admire you, Hero, deeply. And in terms of all you’ve accomplished, the many arenas in which you seek to enact positive change . . . you’re doing marvelously. I beg you to forgive my condescension.”

Hero laughed. She couldn’t help it. The man she had, for so many years, looked up to, and still did
in many ways, was professing his admiration and praise, and he was apologizing.

“IT’S fine.” Suddenly unable to help herself, she hugged his not-quite-there form. He smiled softly and laid a hand on her back.

“I’m glad.”

*

She’d know it was a bad idea. She’d known she would regret it, that, once opened, the demons could not be put back in the box. But the children had to read it. And if their love for Albus was less personal than hers, the shattering of their illusions would hurt just as badly. And so she and the other professors had read the vile volume entitled The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore. It hurt every bit as much as she’d imagined.

Of all the professors, she and Severus had probably been closest to Albus. It was to him she turned once she’d dried the tears that had come partially in grief and partially in rage.

When she gave the password to the gargoyle, it gave her a look she couldn’t read, but stepped aside.

"Oh, Severus--" she began, bursting through the door of his office. She cut off as she identified what she was seeing. Hero was in Severus's arms, her face buried against his chest. He appeared to be murmuring something into her hair.

I didn't mean to intrude, please forgive me. I'll just . . ."

Hero lifted her head. "No, it's fine. I take it you read Skeeter's book?"

Minerva pressed her lips together, eyes becoming flinty.

"Indeed."

"Then you're perfectly welcome to commiserate with us."

"I take it this is your lady?" The dying one, she thought, but did not add.

Severus cleared his throat. "Yes. Sorry for not telling you."

"No, no, I . . . understand."

"We should probably go somewhere more private. I believe both company and subject matter demand it," Severus remarked, leading them through to the private sitting room.

Minerva decided to start with the book which was, after all, why they were all assembled. Questions on a matter as delightfully frivolous as Severus's love life could wait.

Severus and Hero took the loveseat, while Minerva selected an armchair at an angle to them. Almost hidden by their bodies, the couple's hands were entwined, resting on the seat cushions.

"I can't stand it," Minerva groused. "And he can't even defend himself!"

Hero sighed and shook her head. "I'm not sure he would. He never spoke out against all those articles in the Prophet two years ago."

"Well, you were outspoken enough for the both of you," Severus reminded her dryly. Hero blushed and elbowed him.
"Even if he wouldn't," Minerva persisted. "Not the slightest hesitation to speak ill of the dead. It's just disgraceful." She shook her head, then sighed, frowning sympathetically at Hero. "But I'm sure you are already quite aware of that."

Hero grimaced. "Yeah, well... I'm not dead yet. Though I can't really defend myself anymore than he can, considering."

"It wouldn't be so bad... if there weren't truth to it," Minerva confessed. "How much is difficult to say."

"Yeah, that's it exactly. We just... have to deal with it," Hero said, sounding as weary as Atlas.

Severus let out a bitter laugh. "Easier said than done, my darling."

"Mmm. Talking to him helps, or at least it helped me. You can borrow the stone if you like."

"Thank you," he murmured, across the back of her hand.

Minerva blinked. "I'm sorry... what-what stone? Talking to whom?"

"Dumbledore found the Resurrection Stone before he died, and he passed it to me," Hero explained. "I... spoke to him."

Minerva leaned forward, suddenly desperate to hear more. "And? What did he say?"

"I don't think I should say. Better you hear it from him."

"You're welcome to the stone, either of you," Severus spoke up. "I... do not believe I will be able to face him for some time yet."

"Oh, Severus, " Minerva murmured, her expression pained. "I'm sure he wouldn't hold it against you. He didn't give you any choice."

Severus shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I'm rather angry with him at the moment, actually. For all that he's asked of Hero. The cancer won't kill her, you know. Albus has decreed that she must die at Voldemort's hand. As if he has not asked enough of her already, too much. And now... to cut a too-short life shorter... I am not certain I have it in me to forgive him."

Hero turned her head to meet his eyes. "Peace is yours to make, or not. But I have not the slightest doubt you have it in you. At least for me, it's hard to stay mad at him once you've talked to him."

"Precisely why I don't want to talk to him," Severus muttered, then sighed. "I probably will make peace in the end, but he's not my priority. I have you, until the end. Next to that, peace with a dead man will keep."

"If you don't mind me asking, how did the two of you come about? It seems, well, highly improbable," Minerva said, trying to be diplomatic about it.

Severus hid a slightly sheepish grin as Hero turned bright red.

Their old professor laughed. "I think this is a story I need to hear."

Hero went even redder, pressing her lips together until they all but disappeared. Minerva had never seen her former student so embarrassed and took an entirely indecorous amount of amusement in it.

"Severus, you tell it, since Hero seems incapable."
"Er . . . well, completely inexplicably, she developed a crush on me. I drove her to her appointments in London, and . . . we learned more about each other."

"And then I snogged him the night of Slughorn's Christmas party. Don't worry, he took a lot of convincing. Gosh, it was the end of January before he finally kissed me back."

"Nearly a year," she murmured, not sure whether she was more surprised not to have noticed or at how well they fit together.

Hero smiled at Severus. "Our wedding will be exactly a year after our first kiss."

"Wedding?!"

Severus smiled. "I love her. Desperately. And, though we won't be married very long . . . it's what she wants. And even a little is better than nothing.

"Actually, there's something I've been meaning to ask. As you know, both of my parents are deceased. I was hoping you would be amenable to standing in as mother of the groom."

"Oh! Severus, I would be delighted! I never said it because I wasn't sure how you would take it, but . . . these last few years, you've been like a son to me. Thank you."

Severus stared at her, not sure what to say. Hero shoved him lightly. He started but got too his feet and crossed to Minerva. He extended at hand and, when she took it, pulled her to feet and wrapped her in a hug. Overcome with emotion, she let out a sob. She wrapped her arms around Severus and let the tears roll down her cheeks.

*

Ron met Hermione's eyes. They kept eye contact, drawing strength from each other. He took her hands and squeezed gently.

"Whatever is in here, no matter what, it'll be alright. I'm here for you, and you're here for me, and we'll get through this, together. Alright?"

Hermione's brow was furrowed and her lips pinched, her cheeks pale, but she nodded. She took a deep breath. Pulling her right hand out of Ron's left, she opened the book. They both braced themselves for what it might contain.

*

Hermione shove the book away. Both looked the worse for what they'd read.

"Well," Ron began, voice weak and slightly shaky, "that was . . ."

Hermione let her head fall against his shoulder. "Yeah." She started to cry. Ron, arm around her shoulders, rubbed soothingly at her arm.

"I just . . . I feel like it was all a lie. Dumbledore! I mean . . ."

"I know. I'm having trouble digesting it. Do you . . . do you think she made it up?" he asked hopefully.

She wiped at her tears, laughing bitterly. "Say what you will about that parasite, but she has excellent research skills. She might have gotten a few things wrong. . . . well, we have the letters, letters he wrote. She didn't fake that, she didn't twist it. It's there. Black and white."
"Well, let's try to look at this objectively. We knew him, thought he could do no wrong. The smallest mistake would have disappointed us. We're too close. So, let's . . . give it a go."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Okay. Okay. Let's look at the facts. He sent the letters. They talked about ruling over muggles."

"But what he said is different from what he did," Ron pointed out. "As a professor, as a public figure, he did everything he could to defend muggle rights. He went to lengths no one else would even contemplate. Sometimes he got away with stuff just because people were too gobsmacked to object. You and Hero have only been here for the last few years. I mean, personally, before that, I was too young to notice much. But I've heard my parents and my brothers talking about it. You've seen it recently and you think it's bad. I mean, it is, but it used to be worse. He set a lot of people on their ears standing up for muggle and muggleborn rights. And the hardline conservatives made sure to kick and scream the whole way as he dragged them along. From what I what I hear, there'd be half as dozen editorials a week complaining about him in the *Prophet*. Never stopped him, though."

Hermione blinked. She might have come into a world of which she was completely ignorant at the age of eleven, but she'd read voraciously to catch up. It wasn't often that her beloved fiance could surprise her with superior knowledge, but it certainly happened now and again. Books were amazing, but you couldn't learn everything from them, something she'd had a hard time learning. All these little things you only learned through lived experience. And there, Ron would always have her beat. It was unexpectedly attractive.

Even that couldn't stop such a fine analytical mind, however. "But he did say they should rule muggles for their own good. Standing up for their rights might still be a symptom of a condescending, paternalistic affection."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Are you really trying to argue that defending rights, particularly as regards choice, freedom, independence, and self-determination, is paternalistic?" Because, really, you couldn't be around Hermione Granger and her unstoppable drive for quests and crusades and not pick up a few things.

Hermione looked at him, eyes sparkling with a heady combination of desire and the thrill of debate.

"He maintained control every step of the way, an iron fist in a velvet glove, all with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. He could offer freedom with one hand and take it away with the other, an the very people he was oppressing would blindly applaud."

"But he didn't. You're right, he probably could have. But he never did anything of the kind. Doesn't it say more about his character that he had that power and chose not to use it? To hold yourself back from taking what is well within your grasp, fully aware that the only person with power to stop you is yourself? There are very few people with that kind of strength and integrity."

"Alright. You're right. It's still hard to think about. Sure, he changed his mind, but he still, at least at one stage, though those things and planned to make them a reality."

"Yeah, but he wasn't much older than us, less than a year. And you know what Hero would say, don't you?"

Hermione nodded, smiling wryly. "To err is human, to forgive, divine."

*  
The book was required reading in Hogwarts – after the Carrows suggested it, it would have looked
odd if Severus hadn’t followed through. The Carrows made sure to give random pop quizzes to be sure people were actually reading it. Most of the castle was miserable.

Neville glanced down at his hand where there was still a faint scar of the words Umbridge had made him write: I will not break rules. Bit ambiguous in this case; it depended on whose rules you were following.

There were plenty of people in Neville’s life to tell him what to do. His family, his professors, the government. And Dumbledore. He had always done what Dumbledore had told him, because he trusted him. Believed in him. Most of the wizarding world had. Albus Dumbledore had been one of the most respected, even revered figures in at least the last two centuries. He had been beloved, a grandfather figure. Everyone had looked to him for an example. And now this.

Neville glared at the book, the acid-green edging of its pages like a toxic potions spill. It was face-down, Rita Skeeter smirking from the back cover. At least it was better than looking at the photograph of Dumbledore, which looked uncomfortably like a mug-shot. It was a stark contrast to the photo that had been used with Elphias Dodge’s reminiscence several months previous, the one with the kindly old man smiling as he gazed at the photographer over the tops of his half-moon glasses, the same way he had smiled at students for decades.

Dumbledore was a legendary figure in his own lifetime within the wizarding world, and not just in Britain. His discoveries and accomplishments were discussed with admiration all over the world. He was said by some to be the greatest wizard of the millennium. One of his greatest victories was his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald. Skeeter had certainly hit the jackpot there, Neville thought, wincing.

It wasn’t the implication that he was gay – okay, for some people, it was. But even then, it was more the idea that the greatest duel of the twentieth century was more of a lover’s spat than an epic battle over the fate of the wizarding world. Sure, Dumbledore had fought him and won, but it muddied the waters and ruined the story, that perfect, clean-cut narrative of good triumphing over evil in an all-out battle royale.

Everyone had looked up to him. Everyone. He had been Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Grand Sorceror, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards . . . Everyone Neville had ever known had looked up to him. For some people, that might have changed in recent years, but Neville’s belief in the man had never wavered. Until now, he acknowledged guiltily, looking back at the book.

But maybe . . . maybe it was a good thing. Skeeter had, it was almost certain, embellished considerably, but the basic facts were difficult, if not impossible, to dispute. Maybe perfect heroes didn’t really exist. Thinking that, it sounded stupid – of course they didn’t. No one was perfect. But all Neville’s life it had seemed like Dumbledore was.

For the first time in his life, Neville wondered what it would be like if everyone assumed you could do no wrong. To his surprise, he found the prospect just as anxiety-inducing as having everyone always assume you would do something wrong. And with the latter, he had a great deal of experience. Of course, that was for him, Neville Longbottom, perpetual screw-up. It was bound to be different if you were Dumbledore. He’d done so many great things . . . And maybe that made it worse, to have everyone always expecting the unbelievable, the extraordinary, the outstanding. Who can put up with that kind of pressure?

But this wasn’t late-age acting out, this was stuff he’d done when he was young, about the same age Neville was. And realizing that made the whole thing altogether easier to understand, and to forgive. What seventeen or eighteen year-old has his head screwed on right? Who doesn’t make
idiotic mistakes? Yeah, his mistake had led to the ideology behind the Terror of Europe and the death of his sister, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions

And it was a better story, anyway. Dumbledore in life had been more myth than man, a legend in his own lifetime, untouchable. Certainly, no one would dream of accomplishing anything like what he had. He was Dumbledore; mere mortals did not aspire to the sort of heights he inhabited. But that wasn’t true anymore. Now, he was a normal man who had made mistakes. And that brought him and his marvelous achievements a little closer to earth. Neville didn’t think that could be a bad thing, really, in the end.

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The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore had pride of place in the Slytherin common room. Everyone had a copy, and there were copies on just about every surface. Dumbledore, photographed at one ignominious moment or another, stared balefully from countless points around the room. There had, at least, been some attempt to keep the graffiti clean for the sakes of the younger years.

Draco warily eyed the copy on he side table next to him. He’d recently been befriending a lot of people he might once have considered enemies - secretly, of course. They were all distraught over the whole thing. It was as if the man had died all over again.

Draco himself had no particular love for the man. Hero and Severus's relationship with him had been ridiculously complicated, right up until the end. Draco had been raised to dislike and distrust him and then been ordered to kill him, only for the intended victim to comfort him and, in an almost perverse turnaround, offer him mercy. Perhaps it was complicated, but it wasn’t really what you could call a relationship.

So, all in all, the illegal beetle's latest was a rather different experience for him, and not an altogether negative one. It wasn't bimuyecaude he took childish glee in seeing the paragon of the Light brought low, as was the case for some of the other Slytherins. After all, it might have happened after the man had died, but they were on the same side now.

No, his - well, enjoyment would be going too far, but experience of the text was due to a real, heartfelt appreciation for having Albus Dumbledore’s flaws laid bare to the world. Not out of schadenfreude, but rather a desperate seizing upon of a kindred spirit, grasped with all the fervour of a drowning man having been tossed a life preserver. Because it meant that believing the wrong thing and making bad friends, even making decisions which had terrible consequences, didn't have to ruin your life.

Dumbledore had, if only briefly, looked down on muggles and plotted with Gellert Grindelwald (!) their subjugation. His association with the future Terror of Europe had led to the death of his sister. And, from at least one angle, that was wonderful. Because, even at terrible as it had been, it hadn't been the end of the world. It wasn’t the end of the world now, even if some people were acting like it was. Well, dear old Uncle Tom might bring about the end of the world, but it wouldn’t be because of a bloody book, he knew that much. No, no book, not even one that was a thousand pages, could do that.

And it might end up doing some good. Presuming he and Severus made it through the wa with breath in their bodies, they would have an example to cite. Should it come to it that they had to plead for clemency (and it was usually best to prepare for the worst), there before their judges would be the life of their hero. Instead of untouchable demigod, he could be painted as misguided youth who had mended his ways. Really, one could argue, were Draco Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore so different?

Draco wondered if this was why Dumbledore had fought so hard to have Severus cleared after the
last war. Had he seen himself in the younger man? Impossible to know. But interesting to contemplate.

It occurred to Draco that it would have been just like that kind, benevolent, wily old bastard to have his name besmirched and use that very moment of humiliation to help others. He remembered an old man, sunk to his knees in pain and weakness, offering understanding to the boy standing over him, intent on his death. He wished he could have known him better.
It's grievously late. I've had several hundred pages of very dry textbooks to read, in my defense. And the first section of the chapter was really hard to write. It flowed once I started, but it was hard to bring myself to do it. But here it is, in all its tragic beauty.

Really need to expand on the heart-wrenching-ness of this moment. Like with the flying. Quickly, need to post.

Hero clutched the edge of the bathroom sink and stared at her reflection, trying to etch every detail into her memory. It was like looking at someone else entirely. The green eyes, at least, were familiar and as bright as ever. The circles under them were deeper, though, and a deep shade of lavender. Her cheekbones stood out against the hollows of her cheeks, cheeks pale as paper. Her lips were cracked and dry.

And her hair. Still those wild, untamable curls, so black that in certain lights they looked blue. The only people who had cut it in years were her and Hermione. Who else was she going to trust with a sharp edge near her neck, even one as blunt as scissors? Not to mention it didn’t always work when other people did it. She remembered that time with Aunt Petunia, her whole head shaved but for her fringe. The horror of it was distant, scarred over. But it had been real enough to compel her magic to grow it back overnight. She’d been dreading having to go to school the next morning, and every morning until it grew back, all the days and weeks.

Most of the time she didn’t even think of her hair. It just was. Often, it was a nuisance – never behaving, never lying flat and neat. She’d been jealous of Cho Chang’s hair – a similar shade of black, but so straight and so neat. It had been like silk, shining so brightly in the light, so smooth you could almost see your reflection.

But since they’d told her before she left the hospital that she needed to shave her head before the surgery, her hair was constantly on her mind. All of a sudden, she loved her hair. It had character. It was as stubborn as she was. The untidiness of her hair was a symbol of resistance, to the man, to society, to the whole stupid system that complicated her life.

Thinking about not having hair made her hyper-aware of just how often she interacted with it. Brushing it out of her eyes, or tucking it behind her hair, or running her fingers through it, or raking her fingers back from her forehead, then patting the hair back down over her scar, or just playing with it. She probably did it a hundred times a day, if not more. She’d never noticed before, and now that she did, she was about to lose it.

Severus shifted from his position leaning against the door, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her. He met her eyes in the mirror.

“IT’s just hair. With the spell, it’ll be like nothing’s changed.”

“Yes,” she contradicted softly, “it will.” Because similar was not the same, and a wig, even one made of her own hair, was not the same as having that hair still growing on her head. She could pretend, but, really, she would know.
Severus didn’t argue. Even if he had believed his own words, and he wasn’t sure he did, he knew it wouldn’t make a difference. Words wouldn’t matter now. Words couldn’t make her feel differently than she did. They could not erase the pain of losing herself, of losing her life and watching as it slipped away. Slowly, bit by bit, the illness chipped away at all the little joys in life, and then it took all the great ones in one fell swoop.

Instead of words that wouldn’t matter, he pressed a kiss to her temple. Not to her hair, as he usually did. He would have to remind himself to kiss her from now on.

Hero sighed and relaxed into his embrace. She closed her eyes, shutting out the girl in the mirror.

“Do it. Just do it.”

He took his wand from his inner pocket and pressed the tip of it to the crown of her head. He performed the spell silently. The less she had to witness of the event, the less disturbing it would be, he hoped.

In an instant, it was done. The wild girl with the wild hair was now bald and wearing a wig. And all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Hero together again. Severus could only hold her as she broke apart.

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The last thing she remembered was counting backwards from ten with the anesthesiologist. She only got to six.

When she woke up again, the surgeons told her it had been a success, though they hadn’t been able to remove all of the tumor. She nodded dully, her whole head aching. She wasn’t really able to follow much. Unlike the last time, her head, now bald, was swaddled in bandages. In that moment, death almost seemed like it might be a blessing.

They kept her in hospital for a few days to recover. Severus visited on Saturday; thankfully, she was feeling a little better by that point. He sat in the chair by her bed and raised her hand to his lips.

“Hello, darling. Did you miss me?”

“I lost my mind with missing you,” she joked. “And I realized something.”

“Oh?”

“Turns out I need you like a hole in the head,” she said, tapping her temple through the bandages. He shot her a weak glare, trying to grimace even as the corner of his mouth twitched in amusement.

“I brought you something.”

“Is it chocolate? Because I swear I could murder a Cadbury’s bar – the food here is deplorable.”

“No, it’s not chocolate, though I did see some in the gift shop downstairs.” He reached into his pocket and brought out a small box in black velvet. “I know you proposed, but I couldn’t resist getting you a ring. When I saw it, I immediately thought of you.” He handed her the box.

She opened it to find a gold ring set with diamonds and emeralds, the emeralds forming the shape of an evergreen tree along the band. She looked up, smiling, her eyes shining with tears.

“You see, it’s a juniper. And the stones match your eyes.”
“And what am I going to get you, hmm? You’re always there for me in every possible way. And all I can do is lie here. And the ring . . . it’s such a beautiful ring. I don’t deserve you.”

“Hero Potter, you are the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. It doesn’t matter that I’m the one taking care of you – I know that if our positions were reversed, you would be every bit as dedicated to looking after me. We’re engaged, and I saw the ring and thought of you. That’s all. No one’s keeping score. And if they were, I think we’d be about even. You have saved me – my life and my soul. Knowing you love me makes me feel whole, even though I never suspected that I was lacking. Loving you makes me a better man. You are perfect. Don’t ever doubt it.”

“I’m not perfect. I have a temper, and I’m not tidy, and I don’t care about academics, and—”

“I know. We both have plenty of flaws. But without them, you wouldn’t be you. And you being you is why I love you. So, in all your imperfection, you are perfect.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. But then, I wouldn’t change a thing about you, either, so maybe it makes all the sense it needs to.”

“The beauty of paradox.” She held out her left hand and he slid the ring onto her finger. “It suits you. I knew it would.”

Hero reached up to cup his cheek and kissed him. “I love you.”

He placed his hand over hers. “I love you, too.”

They were quiet for a while, simply drinking in each other’s company.

“I, er, I spoke to my mother the other day,” she said into the silence, wincing as she heard the words aloud.

“Did you make use of a Ouija board?” he asked mildly.

“No, a stone. A Resurrection Stone. She said she forgives you.”

Severus closed his eyes against the onslaught of emotion those words prompted. “I never thought I’d hear those words.”

“And my parents approve of you.”

He opened his eyes, snorting. “Not bloody likely.”

“No, I promise. Dad, maybe under duress, but Mum was wholehearted. And it’s not like you care what my Dad thinks.”

“I’ll admit it’s a rather lesser concern than it might be if he was corporeal and thus able to challenge me to a duel. Well, seeing as I trust you not to perjure yourself, I suppose I must believe you.”

“And Sirius apologized.”

“Now you’re just making things up.

She smiled despite herself. “He did, I swear. He regrets a lot of things, now that he’s had time to reflect on them.”

“Sirius Black, thinking. What is the world coming to? Then again, I guess it was over his dead body.”
Fighting laughter, she flicked his arm. “Stop.”

“How would I stop when I finally got you to laugh? I hear it’s the best medicine, after all.”

“Promise you’ll stop before you bring in the Weasley twins.”

“Well, rest is also important, and, try as I might, I can’t recall anyone ever describing them as being particularly restful.”

That forced another laugh out of her. “You’re terrible.”

“By which, of course, you mean I’m brilliant.”

“Mmm. How’s McGonagall dealing with things?”

“I must say, it’s quite pleasant not to be hated anymore. But it’s a strain on all of us. I have to constantly remind her not to do anything that could get her killed, which is exhausting for the both of us. I’m quite tempted to dump some Draught of Living Death into the Carrows’ morning tea. But I’m not sure I could get away with it. The students whose parents are Death Eaters would probably report it, and in all likelihood, they’d only be replaced with other Death Eaters – worse prospects, probably, given that the Carrows were somehow hoodwinked.”

“Rather the devil you know.”

“Sometimes axiom is very much fact. At the moment, the best plan I’ve got is to end the war as quickly as possible.”

“To be fair, dear, it’s sort of the only plan. There might be different details depending on whom you ask, but that’s sort of all the plans in a nutshell. And to quote you, it’s not so much a plan as your Christmas wish list.”

He chuckled. “True. I doubt we’ll get it in time for Christmas, though.”

“Oh, God willing, we might.” She smiled. “After all, we have the elves on our side.”

* *

“How much longer?”

“Please, Mr. Malfoy, patience. It’s a delicate process.”

Draco snorted. “You and I both know that my aunt wouldn’t know Hufflepuff’s cup from an eggcup.”

“And if her gentleman friend should come inquiring?” Griphook asked pointedly.

“Then we’ve all got bigger problems than whether the arabesques on the handles are exactly right.”

“Mr. Malfoy, this is what we do, our highest art. Another week won’t make much difference to you, but we have a reputation to uphold.”

Instead of saying what he wanted, namely, “Sod your reputation,” he sighed and said, “Fine.”

“Excellent. We’ll contact you when everything is ready.”

“Yeah, yeah. Oh, and, I’m not actually sure if it makes any difference to Miss Potter’s will, but she
and Severus are engaged. They’re aiming for just before Christmas for the wedding – the winter solstice."

“Ah. As I recall, almost everything was given to her betrothed anyway, bar a few small bequests. I don’t think anything will need to be modified. Unless she wishes it, of course.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you. I get the feeling she’s moving down a checklist – once she’s got something taken care of, she stops thinking about it.”

“Perhaps. In any case, it is not my place to make assumptions regarding the wishes of my clients.”

“Yeah, given who some of them are, I’d imagine that’s probably for the best.”

“You would imagine correctly.”

“Does my aunt have a will?”

“She’s had one on file from prior to her incarceration. Why?”

“I wondered if she’d set up any guardianship for her daughter.”

“She . . . I don’t want to know. No, she hasn’t.”

“Not terribly surprising, she barely sees her. You’d think she’d care more about her lover’s child.”

“Your aunt is, to put it kindly, concerned with other matters.”

“To put it honestly, she’s batshit crazy with psychopathic tendencies.”

Griphook hid a smile. “Far be it from me to disagree with a client.”

“So, you’ll hurry it up with the cup?”

“No.”

Draco laughed. “I figured as much.”

“Seven days. No more, no less.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

*

Molly Weasley peered down at the wizened, old house-elf who had just appeared in her kitchen. She swallowed, suppressing the urge to shoo it away. Given that Hero was the Black heir, there was a strong chance that Kreacher – for it was, indeed, Kreacher – was in the Burrow for a very good reason.

She brought dripping hands out of the sink. She could have done the dishes with magic, but sometimes it was calming, the rhythmic motions giving her mind a rest. She dried her hands on a tea towel and turned to the elf.

“What is it?”

“Mistress Potter requires your company.” He bowed and offered his arm. She opened her mouth, not in the moment sure if she wanted to object or further question him. In the end, she closed her
mouth and took the proffered arm.

In the next instant, she was standing in the kitchen at Grimmauld. Upon seeing Ron, she threw her arms around him and started babbling. Ron endured it without complaining, though by his expression he didn’t look too happy about it. Finally, he disentangled himself.

“Yeah, Mum, it’s great to see you, too.”

“Oh, Merlin, we’ve been so worried! We haven’t had word for months!”

“Potterwatch gives regular reports of what we’re up to,” he pointed out.

“Briefly!”

“Don’t you talk to Fred and George?”

“And how would you suggest I do that? They’re as busy as anyone these days, it’s not like they have free afternoons to come home and see their mother.”

“Get a mobile, then. You can talk to them for ages without anyone having to go anywhere.”

“You expect me to trust some newfangled muggle device?”

“Everyone’s using them. It’s not like we can trust most magical forms of communication, and very few people can cast, let alone communicate with, a corporeal Patronus! We’re moving with the times. You-Know-Who hates everything to do with muggles. It only makes sense for us to embrace the muggle way of doing things.”

“I’ll . . . think about it. Lord knows for Arthur it would be like all his Christmases coming at once,” she admitted, rolling her eyes.

Her attention shifted beyond her son as she dropped into a chair. “Hermione, Hero, it’s so good to see you! How have you been, my dears?”

“Well enough, Mrs. Weasley,” Hermione replied, smiling.

“I’m getting married,” Hero told her, glowing with the news.

“Oh, how wonderful! I didn’t even know you were seeing someone!”

“Er, yeah, that’s sort of why you’re here. First of all, I want you and Mr. Weasley to stand in as my parents. I wouldn’t feel right otherwise – you practically are my parents after all these years.”

Mrs. Weasley reached across the table for her hand, tears in her eyes. “We would be honored. We love you as much as any of our own children.”

“Thank you, so much. Now, as to . . . the groom.” She looked around at Ron and Hermione. “Did I start with the wrong thing, do you think?”

“Hero, it’s fine,” Hermione reassured her. “She’s been listening to Potterwatch. Go ahead.”

Hero took a deep breath. “So, um,” she swallowed, “Severus Snape is on our side, and . . . we’ve been together since January. I love him very much, and we’re getting married.”

“. . . Oh. That explains why you’ve seemed a bit happier the last few months I’ve seen you.”
“So, you’re . . . okay with it?” Hero asked, eyeing her warily.

Mrs. Weasley sighed. “Knowing he’s on the right side, that he’s a good man . . . everything else I could possibly say, every objection I could possibly make, has already crossed your mind. You’re marrying him. I know you, Hero, the kind of person you are. You might make snap decisions, but you’re not reckless, not really. You don’t go into things lightly, without your whole heart. You’ve made up your mind, for better or worse. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, you are committed to marrying him. And you have good instincts. We all trust you in everything else. Why not your own life?”

Hero was speechless. No one else had simply accepted it, unquestioningly. No one but her own mother. Hero scrambled out of her chair and threw her arms around Mrs. Weasley.

“Thank you,” she whispered, a few tears escaping down her cheeks.

“Oh, you don’t need to thank me, dear. If Bill and Fleur have taught me anything, it’s that love is the strongest force in the world, and it often defies all reason. You love and trust him, and I love and trust you. It really is that simple.”

* 

“Good evening, ladies and gents. We here at Potterwatch have big news! Hero Potter is getting married! She and her betrothed, who shall remain nameless for his safety, will be getting married on the winter solstice,” Lee announced.

“We here at Potterwatch wish them luck, though I suspect they won’t need it, considering they chose the longest night of the year for the wedding night,” Fred added, waggling his eyebrows, his tone suggestive.

“Yes, well, enough of that. She’s a nice girl, and it’s not really any of our business,” Lee said, trying in vain to rein them in.

“But insinuations and double-entendres are my whole reason for being here!”

“Yeah. I’m covering puns and other forms of word-play,” George contributed.

“Anyway, the groom has asked our very own Romulus to be best man.”

“Which is an interesting turn of events, to say the least,” Fred put in.

“And I hear McGonagall’s standing in as Mother of the Groom, since, like his bride, the groom is an orphan,” Lee said, for a bit more fact to feed the commentary.

“If anyone had ever seen those two interacting, they’d be even more shocked than they were about Romulus.”

“Alright, we’re going to have a friendly little contest here—”

“Which we don’t expect anyone to win.”

“No, indeed. Call in and guess the name of the lucky groom!”

Lee leaned over and whispered in Fred’s ear, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Entertainment. Come on, Hero’ll love it.”
“And,” George added into the mic, grinning impishly, “we’ll give you another hint. He’s not a Gryffindor.”

“Alright, orphaned non-Gryffindor. Go.”

“Who’s our first caller?”

“Neville Longbottom,” Lee replied with an air of resignation.

“Alright, Neville, who do you think it is?” George asked.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? Draco Malfoy.”

“He’s not an orphan,” Fred pointed out.

“Oh. Right. Never mind, then.”

“Next up is . . . Luna Lovegood!”

“Elphias Doge?”

“Gryffindor, and ew,” George retorted.

“Ginny Weasley’s on the line.”

“I’m sure it’s Neville.”

“Gryffindor and not an orphan. Look, we know you guys all know who it really is. Knock it off!” Fred warned.

“But it’s fun,” Ginny protested.

“Ginny—” George started in a warning tone.

“If you want to keep your cover, you’ll leave it there, Gutless.”

“It’s Saber!”

“No one who listens to your show actually calls you that, you know.”

“Shut up!”

“Gentlemen, please. Ginny, you’ve had your guess, give someone else a turn,” Lee said, trying to break up the brother-sister spat.

“Fine. Hey, Romulus, you know my brother’s trying to plan the bachelor party?”

“Er, he had some interesting suggestions.”

“You’re too nice for your own good.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Lee cleared his throat. “Your next caller is Molly Weasley.”

If either of the twins had been of a religious nature, they would have crossed themselves.”
“Is it that nice Auror, Kingsley Shacklebolt? He’s a bit old for her, but that hardly matters if they make each other happy.”

“Er, no. He was in Ravenclaw, and both his parents are dead, but it’s not him. Good guess, though.”

“Ah, well, thought I’d at least try.”

“Next caller is John Smith.”

“Is it . . . is it Severus Snape? I remembered you said he had a lady friend who would remain nameless. It seems like either a very interesting coincidence or the scandal of the century.”

Fred badly hid a laugh with a cough. “That’s, erm, an interesting theory. Everyone knows how much they hated each other.”

“Wouldn’t that be something? I can’t imagine how something like that could happen. Alright, new question: how might Hero Potter and Severus Snape have gotten together—”

“I think we’ve had enough fun at Hero’s expense,” Lee interrupted. “Any other news?”

“I heard Rowle came down with a nasty case of stomach flu,” Fred volunteered.

“Which may or may not have been the result of a box of Puking Pastilles disguised as truffles,” George added.

“Which, again, may or may not have been the original recipe, which causes the consumer to projectile vomit uncontrollably.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah. And Royal is on a date,” George said, waggling his eyebrows.

“Oh, and will she remain nameless, too?”

“Who says it’s a she?” Fred challenged.

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Get on with it, then.”

“She’s a lovely lady by the name of Nymphadora Tonks,” George finally replied.

Remus smirked. “Careful. She won’t be happy if she hears you calling her Nymphadora.”

“You really think she’s listening? She’s on a date,” Fred scoffed.

“Hey, Rapier, Saber? Tonks is on the line,” Lee informed him, grinning gleefully.

“For our listeners who can’t see, I’m glaring at you right now.”

“You know better than to call me Nymphadora! If I didn’t stand for it from Alastor Moody, you’d better believe I’m not going to stand for it from you!”

“Aren’t you on a date right now?”
“Yeah. We decided to listen to your program on the way in.”

“Oh. You can get it on muggle car radios?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how you managed it, but you’re on 96.3 fm.”

“That’s great to know for our listeners in the muggle world without access to a wizarding wireless.”

“Yeah, yeah, back to the subject at hand, mister. What’s my name?”

“Tonks.”

“Right. So why did you call me Nymphadora?”

“Because it’s a radio program broadcasting to people across the British Isles, who probably don’t know you go by Tonks?”

“Well, now they do. So, in future . . . ?”

“We’ll call you Tonks.”

“Good boy.”

“How’s it going, anyway?”

“It’s great. Which is why I’m hanging up now.”

“Fair enough. Any suggestions to the lovebirds for what they should do on this or any future dates? You can call in. Just a reminder, we’re at 020 7224 1997. Again, that’s 020 7224 1997.”

“Alright, we have Lettie Crowley on the line.”

“Good evening, Ms. Crowley. What do you think?”

“Ice-skating,” came the voice of a woman speaking in a Yorkshire accent. “I remember when my husband and I started walking out together. My favorite thing to do was ice-skating. I’d pretend I didn’t know how to skate, and he’d hold me . . . very romantic. Very sweet. And it’s just the right time of year. And you can go for hot chocolate afterward!”

“Well, that certainly sounds like a good idea to me.”

“Now all you have to do is find a date!”

“Shut up.”

“Our next caller is Cyril Tomlin. Go ahead, Cyril.”

“Well, I think it depends a lot on what part of the country they’re in.”

“That’s a good point, Cyril. As far as I know, they’re in London.”

“Well, Hyde Park is generally a good bet. Or, if they’re looking for something a bit more unusual, there’s the street performers between Picadilly Circus and St. James Place. They’ve got all sorts – musicians, magicians, living statues. It’s a grand time.”

“Thanks for that, sounds like a great night on the town for anyone, dating or not.”
“Our next caller is Kieran Duncan. Kieran, you’re on with Potterwatch.”

“Wicked. What kind of music does the lady like? You blokes sound like you know her.”

“Ah, yeah, we do. Tonks is kind of hardcore. She likes the Weird Sisters, and she’s into muggle bands like Twisted Sister, Black Sabbath, Nine Inch Nails. I think Royal’s a bit more clean-cut.”

Kieran laughed. “Send them off to the opera or the ballet or whatever, and then pack them off to a club or a rave. It’s a shame they missed Alice Cooper. He and the band were in London in July.”

“Yeah, well, some of us were busy in July, mate.”

“No kidding. Still, it was a wicked show.”

“Yeah, I bet. Any clubs you’d recommend?”

“This chick’s as hardcore as you say, she already knows, you know?”

“Wouldn’t put it past her.”

“Not particularly helpful, but hey, we like a little color here on the show. River, my man, who’s next?”
Hey, guys! So, here's the deal. I have the framework for the rest of the story. It will be about 74 chapters plus any aftermath I decide to write. However, some chapters are finished, and some are not. The update schedule from here to the end is probably going to be somewhat irregular. I'll post stuff when I can. But we're almost done, that's pretty cool, right? Thanks for sticking with me this far.

Dobby kept his eyes averted as he removed a platter of artfully arranged pork. Hogwarts was unique in its system of serving and removing dishes, and so it was back to acting as wait-staff. Narcissa Malfoy picked at her food under the guise of ladylike delicacy – she had little appetite due to the nature of her dinner guests and their accompanying conversation. Her eyes met his and flicked to the left. He obediently refilled her wine goblet.

Lucius ate with single-minded efficiency, paying little attention to his surroundings. Dobby doubted he even heard the crude conversation that swirled around him. Narcissa endured it all with a brittle, icy smile. Her expression was remote and inscrutable. Dobby felt a rush of admiration for his former mistress – nothing ruffled her, even these ruffians.

At long last, dinner finished. At one time, Lucius would have led the gentlemen to the drawing for a drink, while Narcissa would have led the ladies into a parlor for tea and gossip. Of course, none of the guests present were worthy of being called ladies or gentlemen, and likely would have declined the offer if the Malfoys condescended to make it.

Instead, Narcissa left the room alone. She signaled to Dobby to join her in the music room, her arms at her sides, the motion almost imperceptible in the swish of her skirts. Dobby cast a furtive glance around the dining room – no one was paying any attention. Keeping his head bowed, he followed her out.

The only sound was her skirts rustling against the parquet floors. With a full staff of elves, even if their personal lives were falling into ruin, the marble floors gleamed. She showed no indication that she knew anyone was following her. Once she reached the music room, she sat at the piano, stretched her fingers, and placed them on the keys. As she began to play Chopin’s Op. 1 in B flat minor, she glanced over at Dobby.

He bowed low. “Good evening, Mistress.”

“Is it? I hope you will forgive me if I disagree.”

“What was it that Mistress wished to discuss?”

“Well, I would be a rude hostess if I did not begin by inquiring as to how you are settling in.”

“Mistress is kind to Dobby. Dobby is quite alright.”

“I'll take your word for it.” She switched to Elvish, her eyes still intent on the keys and the music. “What have you learned?”
“The snake is in the care of the house elves. None of the Dark Lord’s servants will go near it.”

“Would it be possible to kill the snake?”

“Perhaps. It would not be terribly difficult, I think, to poison its food.”

“Good. We’ll save that for the opportune moment. What else?”

“The Snatchers haven’t been having much luck lately. Seems people aren’t saying the name.”

“So, that radio program is working, then.”

“It would seem so. The Death Eaters are restless. Without orders, the other elves fear for what they may do.”

“Mmm. Idle hands are the devil’s playthings.”

“Yes.”

“What about my sister?”

“Bellatrix is currently in Kent. There was a rumor someone was sheltering muggleborns there.”

“Right. I can forge my sister’s handwriting and give orders for them to occupy themselves somehow. I’ll think of something.”

“But . . . might your sister not be upset that you’re using her to further your own ends without her consent?”

“She won’t notice. No one will talk to her about it because no one actually wants to talk to her. Besides, it would be just like her to use me as her representative so she didn’t have to associate with the dregs. I’m still, ostensibly, the mistress of the house, and disgraced at that. It is perfectly natural that she would use me. Frankly, I’m surprised she hasn’t already.”

“As you wish. What might you devise as occupation for them?”

“I wonder . . . the twelve labors of Hercules, maybe. Find and kill a Nemean lion, muddle about in the ocean looking for the hydra. Capture the Ceryneian Hind and Erymanthian Boar, and the Cretan Bull and Geryon’s cattle, and a Cerberus. Off to Portugal to look for the golden apples of the Hesperides, clean the stables of the Thestrals, capture a flock of griffins to, I don’t know, capture the power of Gryffindor or something. Steal the horses from Beauxbatons – that one’ll be fun, their headmistress is formidable, and the horses themselves aren’t exactly tame. And I hear they drink only single-malt whiskey. And, oh, I’m tempted to send them off in search of Atlantis. You know, why not?”

“You really think they’re going to buy that?”

“If they think it comes from their erstwhile master. The Nemean lion was supposed to be impervious to weapons as its coat was made of pure gold – useful in a fight. The hydra – we can tell them it can petrify people like a basilisk, and he wants to use a few heads as weapons. The hind is symbolic of Potter, given her patronus, and will weaken her power, as well as bringing protective charms. The boar . . . will turn the tide of the war. The cattle represent a time of plenty following our glorious victory. The apples of the Hesperides grant immortality. The Beauxbatons horses to send a message to the magical world and weaken an ally of the light. And Atlantis, the new world rediscovering the lost riches of the old. It’s hardly much more absurd than some of his other orders.”
“As you command. Why the thestrals? Don’t you think Professor Snape will object to so many Death Eaters entering school grounds?”

“Perhaps. Most of the Death Eaters are terrified of him, though. And he could order them to keep their distance from the school. Distant, but under his watchful eyes.”

“And if the Dark Lord comes back and finds you’ve sent his servants on fools’ errands?”

“We’ll act as circumstances dictate. You know he likes to make an entrance – we should have plenty of time to come up with something.”

He had serious reservations about improvising their way out a confrontation with Voldemort, but he did not voice them. He was sure she felt the same. Narcissa Malfoy was an old pro at putting on a brave face while she waited for the shit to hit the fan.

Dobby hurried to the kitchen once he was finished with his audience with Narcissa. The masters hardly ever ventured into the kitchen, and perhaps it was because of this that it became a central hub of house elf life. When you had nothing better to do, you usually ended up in the kitchen, and you were usually put to work on something. Dobby found himself kneading dough while his aunt stood across the counter from him, perched on a stepstool as she arranged flowers in vases.

Occasionally, elves dropped by or slipped past. Some whispered in his ear, while others left notes written in elvish on scavenged scraps of paper. The intelligence network was decent, though he got the same story from several elves. He wished there was a way for them to go deeper, or for him to train them to really listen and pick up the particularly incriminating bits. But they were, first and foremost, employed in the task of keeping the manor running, and his aunt wouldn’t stand for him interfering in that. It was, after all, a gargantuan task, especially given the complications of the unwelcome guests and the stupid peacocks.

His aunt glanced at him out of the corner of her eye as she inserted a peachy-pink peony into an arrangement.

“Have you spoken with your mother yet?”

“I . . . haven’t, really.”

She pursed her lips, casting a critical eye over her work. “Why?”

“Well . . . it’s a bit awkward, isn’t it?”

“One would imagine so,” she replied coolly, adjusting the placement of a few blooms, then drawing back slightly to view the effect. “However, awkwardness is certainly not a reason to avoid the exercise indefinitely, is it? You must talk about what transpired eventually, and sooner rather than later. Goodness knows it will only become more awkward the longer you wait.”

“You think?”

“Indubitably. Best to get it over with quickly, like killing a chicken.”

Dobby winced at the simile. He didn’t much care for violence, though some of the ancient philosophers had seemed to have a certain partiality for blood sports. He’d tried to channel them during Miss Potter’s second year. The complete disaster that had been had only further fueled his pacifism.
Trixy ignored his reaction. “I don’t know which of you to whom you do greater disservice in avoiding it so long, you or her.”

“But . . . what if there’s shouting?”

“Then there will be shouting, won’t there? You can hardly expect everything to be sunshine and roses just because you’re temporarily back. She has not forgotten the last several years. Nor have I, for that matter. You both need to move on. This issue has been rotting and festering between you ever since you left,” she said, pointing her pruning shears at him. “It’s high time you found other issues to divide you. At least they wouldn’t choke us all with the stench of them.”

Dobby wrinkled his nose. His aunt had always had a way with words. In another world, she could have been a writer, or a politician, or a diplomat, rather than somebody’s housekeeper. He felt a stab of resentment, though he quickly quashed it, knowing she would disapprove. She thought of her work as her birthright and her destiny and had always been furious when he suggested otherwise.

It was only recently that he was beginning to understand that he was as bad as anyone else in enforcing on her and other elves his own ideas of what they ought to be. He valued standing out and making his mark on history; they primarily valued happiness and the status quo. Perhaps they were wiser in that. In any case, it was their own choice to make.

He put the dough in a pan and placed it in the oven to bake into bread. He avoided his aunt’s eye, but finally asked, “Where is she?”

Trixy did not look up from her work. “In the dungeons, tending to the wand-maker.”

Dobby nodded and cleaned his hands before making his way down to the dungeons. Up until recently, the holding cells had been mostly used for brick-a-brack, wine storage, a haven in case of siege, and the like. It had been many years since they had actually held prisoners. Well, not anymore. Amidst the gloom and the grime was a man, so pale he seemed to glow in the darkness. His face was pale and far too thin, and lined with age. His hair was white and stood out in a shock around his head. His eyes looked like quicksilver, and were so bright that they almost appeared inhuman. At least, they did when they were open. Currently, they were not, as he was unconscious.

Silvy, Dobby’s mother, dabbed murtlap essence on his multiple wounds. A healing ward shone on Ollivander’s forehead, slowly working its magic. She glanced at her son, then back to her patient. One needed her far more than the other. One hadn’t needed her in a very long time.

Dobby winced at the icy regard he could sense from his mother, but figured he probably deserved it. He’d left, then he hadn’t talked to her in half a decade. She was entitled. He hung back, watching the scene. After a few minutes, she thrust a rag at him, still not looking at him.

“If you’re going to stand there, you might as well make yourself useful.”

He took it and started dabbing at the scrapes and contusions on the man’s arms. For a long time, they worked in silence. Finally, she spoke.

“You’d have had your father spinning in his grave if he had an inkling of what you’ve been up to.”

“I know. We never exactly saw eye to eye.”

“No. You have that problem with a lot of people, my dear.”

“Yeah, I know.”
Silvy sighed. “How have you been since I last saw you?”

“Alright. You know. I like working at Hogwarts. The headmaster was even madder than me.”

His mother smiled slightly. She’d heard stories about Hogwarts’ late headmaster; she could well believe her son had finally met his match.

“Did they let you read as much as you wanted?”

Dobby smiled in fond reminiscence. “They had a whole library. I couldn’t really get away while I was working, but the Come and Go Room gave us access to any of the books we wanted.”

“It was for the best, then. I hoped.”

“Were you . . . ashamed of me?”

“A little. But you were a very poor fit here, my son. All’s well that ends well, really. And now you’re back.”

Dobby was silent on that score. His mother was difficult to read at the best of times, and he had no idea what she really thought about his return. Finally, he gave the safest answer he could think of.

“Yes.”

She laughed a little. “You’ve become an elf of few words, I see. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Perhaps I’ve merely learned caution and the merits of thinking before I speak.”

“I never thought I’d see that day, either, so it’s six of one, half a dozen of the other. So, who’s the girl?”

“Girl? What girl?” he asked, keeping face and voice bland.

“Don’t play coy. Of course there’s a girl. A young elf, away from his home estate for the first time. It’s what happens. What’s her name?”

“Winky.”

She waited for him to say more. When he didn’t, she prompted, “You love her?”

“. . . Yes,” he admitted, heaving a sigh.

“I’m happy for you. You can tell me about her when you feel like it.”

“You won’t push?”

“No.”

Dobby visibly relaxed. “Thanks. How’s, um, your embroidery coming?”

“Quite well. The Mistress has been using my skills more and more on her dresses and robes. And, of course, I’m responsible for the livery.” She absent-mindedly fingered the raised embroidery of the Malfoy crest on her own dress. Unlike her sister’s rather more adventurous creations, it was a sober affair in navy with a white collar, made from an eiderdown and sheets. Even if the solid, dark color was a study in the unassuming uniform of a servant, the cut was exquisite. The hint of starched white petticoats just below the knee gave it a French flair which Dobby suspected had been
Narcissa’s influence.

“I’m happy for you.”

His mother finally met his eyes. She smiled, and it lit up her face. “You’ve changed. Before, you would have gone off on a diatribe about how I had no right to be happy because I wasn’t living up to my full potential.”

Dobby flushed and cringed slightly. “Did I really say that?”

She shrugged. “It’s the way it sounded. The way it felt.”

“I’m so sorry. I . . . I should never have tried to interfere.”

Silvy pursed her lips, her expression thoughtful. “I’m not so sure. Yes, I am happy. And yes, most elves are. But you were desperately unhappy. You can hardly be the only one who’s had trouble fitting into traditional roles. Choice can be a dangerous thing, and it can make people unhappy. But I wouldn’t give up what I do for the world, so I don’t see that it would make much difference. Fear can be a powerful motivator towards terrible things, fear of the unknown perhaps most of all.”

She reached up to cup his cheek. “One thing I have always loved about you, my son, is that you rush into the unknown without the slightest hesitation. You’ve lived long enough to know that whatever is waiting won’t always welcome you with open arms. But you rush towards it because it will come anyway, and you will meet it when it does. Some might label you a fool, and perhaps you are. But you’re a fool who is open to the possibility that he doesn’t know everything. I think your exile might be the best thing that ever happened to you. It’s taught you to be considerate of the views of others and to go forward with clear eyes and an open heart.”

“I am afraid, though. I just know that clinging to this little patch of what we know won’t do any of us any good. The world is changing, and we have to change along with it . . . or be left behind.”

“I think I’m glad you’re afraid. Only an idiot isn’t. And I would have hoped that a budding philosopher wouldn’t be an idiot. Tends to help things.”

Dobby laughed. “I don’t know how much of a philosopher I am, these days. I think I’m more of a revolutionary.”

“I think perhaps we all are. Just as you said – the dawn is coming, and we must be there to greet it, or be left in darkness. You give an old woman hope for a new day.”

“You’re not old.”

“You’re a good boy. I’ve missed you.”

He hugged her tightly, burying his head against her shoulder. “I missed you too,” he admitted.

*  

Two hours later, Dobby was alone in the cell with its permanent resident. He had explained to his mother that he needed to speak to the wand-maker alone. She’d made him promise not to tire the man out, as he’d been through quite enough.

The old man remained unconscious most of the time Dobby tended to him. Eventually, however, those silver eyes fluttered open.
“You’re . . . you’re a new elf, aren’t you? What happened to the other one? Is she alright?”

“She is quite alright.” A pause. “She’s my mother.”

“I take it, then, that I finally have the privilege of meeting the infamous Dobby?”

Dobby glanced up from the cut he was dabbing at. “Sir is knowing Dobby’s name?”

“Yes, your mother likes to talk while she works, and elves have always fascinated me. As a wandmaker, I work extensively with bowtruckles, which, if I do not misspeak, are cousins of a sort to house elves.”

“Taxonomically speaking, Sir would be correct. We are within the same genus, but they are several orders lower.”

“Ah! Your mother told me you were educated. I must confess, I was not entirely sure whether or not to believe her.”

“What does Sir find interesting about house elves?”

“Elves are capable of exceedingly powerful magic, unassisted by any external means of channeling the innate, raw energy. As well, your magic does not appear to be in any way restricted by that of wizards. I have always been a curious man, Mr. Dobby, and these questions are central to the field to which I have dedicated my life.”

“Dobby is not being ‘Mr.’ anything. Human titles don’t apply to us, any more than English titles are used in France or Germany.”

“You’re avoiding the question,” Mr. Ollivander pointed out. Dobby suppressed a smile.

“I don’t actually work for the Malfoys. You know that, don’t you? I’m a free elf.”

“To hear your mother tell it, the ultimate disgrace,” the wandmaker remarked dryly.

Dobby allowed a small smile onto his lips. “Yes, well . . . my mother is prone to melodrama.”

“She also seemed to imply that you were in the employ of Hero Potter.”

“In a manner of speaking. I have been officially in the employ of Hogwarts for several years. Lately, that has meant that Severus Snape has been my employer. However, my loyalty is owed first and foremost to Hero Potter, as it was she who freed me. Made me promise never to try to save her life again, which, given what happened, is fair. But, it just so happens that my two loyalties are not as divided as it might at first appear.”

Ollivander raised his eyebrows. “Do tell.”

Dobby glanced around the dungeon chamber anxiously. “It’s not safe here.”

“You’re probably right. One wonders how many confessions these walls have been witness to. I fear for what I have condemned the world to with my own confession.”

Dobby bit his tongue on a reassurance that he could hardly be held responsible for what he’d given away under torture when he felt a shiver go down his spine.

“What did you tell him?” he asked in a whisper, suddenly very afraid.
“There is a wand whose bloody history has been splattered across the centuries. A wand legend holds to have been created by Death himself. A wand that is almost unbeatable. He wanted to know where he might find it. And I told him.”

“That’s why he’s abroad? He’s looking for the wand?” Dobby demanded.

“We ought all thank our lucky stars he’s still abroad. It means he hasn’t found it yet, and thus we still have a chance.”

“You don’t think we’d have a chance if he got hold of it?”

“I think it would be vanishingly slim.”

“Who else knows of this?”

“Narcissa Malfoy knows. I have no idea to whom she might have divulged that knowledge. But it is imperative that he be stopped. Otherwise our gooses are collectively cooked, let me assure you. What I’ve been through here will appear as a spa treatment compared to what he has in store for the wizarding world.”

Dobby swallowed thickly. Yet another impossible task to complete in the face of imminent doom. Of course.
The Quest for the Golden Goose and Other Excursions

Chapter Notes

This was one of my favorites to write. Almost nothing plot relevant happens, but it's fun.

Narcissa Malfoy held up the coarse, black strand of hair. It was her sister’s. Fortunately, Bellatrix was away blowing off steam by hunting muggleborns, so impersonating her would be as safe as anything else. Which wasn’t very safe at all, but that hardly bore thinking about.

She held the hair over the glass of potion, which was at that point looked like mud. She dropped the hair in, causing the color to turn to a deep, reddish purple. The color of royalty, perhaps, but also of anger, hatred, pride. The consistency was just as thick as before. Narcissa did not snort – ladies do not snort – but the sentiment was there; her sister always had had trouble seeing past her own clouded perceptions.

Her lips curling in distaste, she opened her mouth and downed the potion in one. The taste was terrible, bitter and sour, like bile. Bellatrix always had been difficult to swallow.

She glanced at her reflection in the mirror; her sister stared back. She’d already changed into one of her sister’s outfits. It was a new one, intended to emphasize her position as the Dark Consort. It had a ridiculous high, ribbed collar in gauzy black silk. The dress was deep red, with black detailing and black leather corset. It all seemed a bit too spider queen to Narcissa, but that was Bellatrix for you. Madness and melodrama. Still, needs must.

She slipped into her sister’s self-confident swagger as she made her way to the grand hall, which had been made over as the “throne room.” With the Dark Lord away, the Consort would play. While he was gone, his “throne” belonged to Bellatrix. Narcissa collapsed onto it and assumed a careless, lounging position. She snapped her fingers. Dobby appeared.

“You. Elf. Summon the scum.”

He bowed low, his nose almost reaching the floor. Narcissa stretched out a foot and placed it on his head, forcing it lower, till his nose scraped the marble. She felt a twinge of guilt, but they both understood the role she needed to play.

“Elf. Show proper deference to you betters.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he gasped, playing along.

“Good. Go.”

Ten minutes later, the Death Eaters were all assembled. Narcissa, in the facsimile of Bellatrix, smirked at them. Several members of her audience flinched.

“Hello, good-for-nothing dregs. How would you like to be good for something? Ah, ah, ah. Not a question. Look up ‘rhetorical’ in the dictionary, filth. Now, mummy has a job you, something daddy wants done. A lot of somethings, actually.” She paused. They just stared at her, frozen in terror. She pouted. “No volunteers? How disappointing. Well, you’ll just all have to suffer, then. Your loss.
“Let’s see . . . how many of you are there? One, two, three . . . sorry, lost count, bored. Ugh, it’s so hard to care about you. Someone give me a rough count!”

“Er, a hundred or so, milady,” called out someone who was either very brave or very foolish.

“Lovely. The Dark Lord has a few tasks which must be completed if we are to guarantee our victory. Listen closely, because I don’t like repeating myself.

“The Nemean Lion, the hydra, the Ceryneian Hind, the Erymanthian Boar, the Cretan Bull, Geryon’s cattle, a Cerberus, golden apples of the Hesperides, the horses of the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, Ravenclaw’s diadem, a flame from the rebirth of a phoenix, and Atlantis. Oh, and he wants you to feed and clean the stables of the Hogwarts thestrals. They’re dumb beasts, but we can win them to our side with the right sacrifices.”

Someone hesitantly raised a hand. “Erm, so sorry, milady, but . . . why are we doing all this?”

Inside, Narcissa was delighted that someone had actually been brave enough to ask. Outwardly, she scowled.

“You dare question my will, the will of the Dark Lord? I am the Consort! You are filth! You know, I do believe there are extras among you. You do not have to go. After all, you’ll hardly be missed. And Nagini is ever so hungry. Perhaps you could feed her.”

The man who had raised his hand sputtered apologies. Narcissa glared around at her audience like the slash of a knife.

“Anyone else? No? Then get out of my sight.” They scrambled to do as they were told. Narcissa sat back in that terrible throne and smiled.

* *

Sigmund held up the map he’d stolen from Diagon before they’d all left London. He scratched his head as he puzzled over it. Gerard, standing next to him, frowned and leaned in to peer at it.

“It don’t make no sense, Sig. This here says that once we get to the edge of the Dover peer, we turn left. But that’s straight into the water, innit?”

Sigmund glared at his companion. “Ain’t you ever heard of swimming the Channel, Ger?” he asked, despite the fact that he had had precisely the same thought.

“Well, yeah, but it’s the middle of fuckin’ winter, innit? I ain’t swimmin’ the Channel under the best circumstances, which these most definitely are not. And I certainly ain’t doin’ it for no uppity bitch like Bellatrix Lestrange.”

Sigmund chortled. “Too right. All those airs and graces on her, they don’t suit. I mean, she ain’t exactly pretty after all them years in Azkaban. I don’t understand what milord sees in her.”

“Oh, I expect there’s something, alright. Just not the sort of thing we peons would be privy to, innit?”

“Well, alright, alright. Enough fun and games. Maybe there’s some sort of magic path or sommat?”

“What? Fru all that water? You must be joking, mate.”

“Well, I dunno. Magic.”
“Which of us actually paid attention in school?”

“Strictly speakin’, neither of us.”

“Yeah, alright. But if I know anything, I know that it is impossible to put any sort of passage across that distance, whether through water or solid rock. It can’t be done. Come on, then. Let’s hie ourselves back to London, double-quick, wherefore we may get ourselves an international portkey.”

“Aw, but you know them’s always a bleeding pain in the neck. We’ll have to deal with the damn Frenchies, innit? Morgana’s tits, but I hate the French.”

“Yeah, but it’s one of them things, innit? Urgent, unavoidable. Imp-something.”

Sigmund snorted. “Important? You’d better bloody believe it.”

“No. I mean, yeah, but . . . something else. Impy-rat. I dunno. Don’t suppose it matters, eh?”

“Naw, don’t suppose it does. What if we run into Madam Lestrange in the meanwhile?”

“I dunno ‘bout you, but I intend to make myself quite scarce. Scarcer than a brass galleon. Leave bravery to them stupid Gryffindorks, eh?”

“Ah, that’s the ticket, Ger. Cor, we’ll be off to the races, soon.”

“What races, Sig? You gonna enter them French ponies in a race?”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

*

Tungsten slipped his hand into his pocket, searching for the oiled pouch that had his gillyweed in it. He wasn’t the strongest of swimmers, and it was in case of emergencies. He had protested, naturally, when he’d been shoved onto the Atlantis expedition, but he preferred his ears and other extremities attached, thank you very much.

He wasn’t the only one less than thrilled to be on a boat in the middle of the sea looking for some damn island that had sunk over a thousand years before. Titanium and Cobalt would have much preferred to be somewhere they could intimidate people. Well, “intimidate” was a bit mild for their preferred activities. Then again, they were Death Eaters.

Tungsten considered himself to be a fairly reasonable pureblood – Muggleborns were obviously inferior, and it behooved any decent member of the wizarding community to exclude them from decision making or large-scale magical activity – people could get hurt. It wasn’t their fault – the poor things could hardly help being dumber than rocks. He didn’t think they should be harmed, though, merely kept away from magic and magical populations for everyone’s safety. Not everyone took to his way of thinking.

The idea of mudblood scum was becoming increasingly common among the ranks of the Death Eaters, which Tungsten found slightly troubling. They weren’t inherently evil, after all, only stupid. They seemed to mean well enough. Like children, really. Of course, as the majority took on a more militant opinion, he learned to keep his mouth shut. They were also taking on more foot soldiers who weren’t, strictly speaking, Death Eaters, but were keen to jump on the bandwagon and did everything they could to fit in.
And so, he found himself on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean, combing the seafloor for any indication of a lost city. He wasn’t entirely sure why they were looking, but then, it was usually best not to ask too many questions. Again, he liked his myriad bits.

From his knowledge of the scholarship, the location wasn’t terribly certain anyway. Some sources stated that it was in the Atlantic, off the coast of Africa. Some indicated off the coast of Egypt. It could take years of dedicated searching to find even a hint. Tungsten suppressed a sigh and tried to think of something else. It wouldn’t do any good to dwell on it, any more than it would be beneficial to think about how very hot the sun was, or his risk of getting burned, or his distaste for his companions.

*

“Ah, Jeromy, it’ll be fucking grand, won’t it, just us, relaxing on some white-sand beach in Portugal.”

“Watch your tongue, Patrick. We have a job to do. We have to retrieve the apples of the Hesperides and return them to the Dark Lord without delay. I’ll not stand for any of your nonsense.”

“My nonsense? Nonsense. And I don’t see how some apple is goin’ to change the course of the war. Not that we need it, eh? We’re fucking winning!”

“Don’t argue with your betters,” Jeromy told him tersely.

“I weren’t arguing with my betters, I was arguing with you, Me-me.”

Jeromy’s lip curled. “I ought to curse you into oblivion where you stand.”

“Yeah? Go on, then. You’ve only been threatening to do it for the past three days. I think it might be a relief to have me out of both our miseries.”

Jeromy sneered, but made no move to reach for his wand.

Patrick snorted. “Like I thought. Bleedin’ coward.”

“Who are you calling a coward?”

“The fuckin’ chicken what ain’t got the balls to curse me.”

Jeromy spun on his heel, his wand in his hand, pointed at Patrick. “Crucio!”

Patrick screamed, a high-pitched keen of agony. His expression contorted until it looked more like something painted by Picasso than a human’s face. As quickly as the torture had begun, it ended. Patrick sank to the ground.

Jeromy let his wand fall, his arm loose at his side. “Let that be a lesson. I won’t leave a mark on you. I won’t take your life. But make no mistake, it would be unwise to cross me.”

Patrick, taking deep, shuddering breaths, glared at his companion. His mouth worked, as if he was trying to find the strength and muscle control to speak. Instead, he spat at Jeromy’s feet.

Jeromy curled his lip in disgust. “Charming. Well, don’t just sit on the ground all day. We have work to do.”

*
Stanley was a half-blood. He tended to keep that hushed up. He didn’t like to admit the muggle half his heritage, especially in the group he’d rather stupidly joined. His muggle father, the good for nothing son of a bitch, had beaten him and his mother bloody before he’d left. His uncle had stuck around for a while, though. Stanley figured he’d felt bad about the whole thing. Up until he’d been thirteen or so, his uncle had met him every Saturday and they’d looked at comic books together. Then he’d left, too. He’d had a family of his own, and no time to spend with his nephew when the boy’s father couldn’t even be bothered.

No muggle he’d ever met had meant him well, especially not if they were aware of his magic. His mother had deserved better, had deserved someone raised to be a gentleman, as he had thoughts wizards were. Yeah, that belief was well and truly fucked. Still, the old-fashioned morals and gallantry had seemed initially to be a much better bet.

And now they were off on a hare-brained mission assigned by a madwoman to find a hydra of all things. When he thought of a hydra, he didn’t think of a many-headed sea monster. No, he thought of the villain in the Captain America comics, the old Nazi. Hail, Hydra, and all that. He tried not to think of the similarities in the two situations. When he’d been comics-mad as a teenager, he’d pictured himself as the hero, not the villain.

And that was what they were, he was coming to realize. They were the villains, the enemies of justice, goodness, and right. And it was too late to change. And so, here he was, stuck in a boat that was rowing itself, looking for something that would probably kill them. At least he was in the Mediterranean in winter, better than merry, old England. It might have been the only positive, but damn it, it was a positive.

He scowled under the brilliant Mediterranean sun and tried to decide which of his companions he should throw to the hydra first. You never knew when it might become relevant, and it was better not to waste time in that sort of situation.

*  

“You know, Ger, it has belatedly occurred to me that we may need more than just the two of us.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“Well, you and I can handle a lot, don’t get me wrong, mate. But we are talking twelve horses. Twelve flying horses, the size of elephants.”

“What’s your point?”

“I just think, it might be slightly more than the two of us can handle on our lonesome.”

“If you were getting lonesome, Sig, all you had to do was say.”

“It’s a fucking figure of speech!”

“Oi, watch your fucking language. Little ears are about.”

“Fuck it. Who do you think we should ask?”

“Orkan, he’s always good for a laugh.”

“Orkan hates horses.”

“So?”
“So? So he’s a terrible choice to deal with horses!”

“Well, yeah, but . . . fine. Silas. Don’t he raise horses or summat?”

“Alright. Silas. That’s one. Who else?”

“Burke?”

“Burke’s a bloody berk. I can’t stand him for longer than five minutes at a time.”

“Fair point. Reginald?”

“Ah, he’s alright. Not the brightest bulb, but I think he works a lot with animals.”

“Smashing. Whatcha fink, one more?”

“Thor?”

“Yeah, I reckon he might be useful.”

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a team! It’s gonna be brilly, innit, Sig?”

*

Frank and Henry were two middle-aged estate holders who had fallen into the Death Eaters more because it was a family tradition than out of any real evil intention. It was much the way people go to the same church their parents and grandparents go to; they sing the hymns and recite what’s printed in the bulletin, but there’s not really any drive or motivation in it.

Estate-holder sounds a lot grander than it actually is. The dwellings weren’t old manor houses, they were farm houses. Large and old, perhaps, not it wasn’t really the same thing. And the business of estate-holding was best described as farming. They were much like any other landed country gentry, except, of course, that they put on black robes and tormented Muggles on occasion. Well, it was more than on occasion now – it was fairly bloody frequent, if you want to know the truth. Frank and Henry didn’t like it – bad for the joints, which ached something awful after a night of spirited carousing for which they didn’t have the spirit in the first place.

Still, they were farmers – well-known, and not exactly a point of pride with the Death Eaters – and so they’d been sent off after some of the livestock based tasks their. . . imaginative mistress had sent them to fulfill. First up was the Erymanthian Boar. Frank and Henry, if asked, would have stressed one thing: boars were bad news.

They were awful creatures, really. Bad tempered, and huge, to boot. And that bulk wasn’t all fat; a lot of it, far too much, if you ask anyone who’s had to deal with them, was muscle. They also, like any other piggy sort of creature, ate just about anything, up to and including human flesh. Yes, boars were bad news.

Not that Bellatrix Lestrange knew any of that. Or would have cared if she had. But Frank and Henry, and all the other Death Eaters, were well used to that by now. The ones who weren’t were either in hiding or dead.

And so they found themselves on a mountainside in Greece, calling after a terrible boar like it was a lost dog.

“Here, Piggy. Here, Piggy-wiggy-wiggy,” Henry called.
“It ain’t your hunting hound, Henry. We need to set a trap.”

“I know it ain’t Fortinbras. I’m trying to appear as if I’m making an attempt, while, in reality, not.”

“Oh. I see. Yes, that makes sense. Can’t say I’m too eager to set eyes on the thing myself.”

“Wouldn’t even know what you’d bait a trap with to catch a boar. Or at least not this boar.”

“I heard summat about boars being used to hunt them expensive truffles. Maybe we could get some of them to lure the beast in.”

“Don’t you have to train the boar to look for the truffles first?”

“. . . Huh. You might do. Never much of a one for boar, myself. I prefer my meat from a decent butcher, especially pork. You do it wrong, you get all kinds of different sicknesses. No, thank you, my good man, I prefer my dinner to proceed through me in an orderly fashion.”

“Aye, you’re not wrong, there. Still, not much good at this point, is it?”

“Well, no. How’s the wife?” Frank asked.

Henry snorted. “Gone to stay at her sister’s. Says she married a decent pureblood, not some farmer reeking of slurry. Actually, she said she was appalled to know what slurry was.”

“Nothing wrong with slurry. Feeds the crops, don’t it? Don’t she like her fruits and veg? She won a prize for them at the show last year.”

“Not enough, apparently. She wants us to go to fancy dinner parties and things. She wants us to move to Town. I’m sorry, but I was born a country boy, and I’ll die one. Mildred can do whatever she likes. Nothing’s worth it, certainly not her. And what about you? Weren’t you seeing that rich widow?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t move fast enough. She died.”

“Hadn’t you been seeing her for three years?”

“Well, yeah, but she never came round much. Like your Mildred, she didn’t much care for the smell. Put a bit of a damper on things.”

“Ha, free and easy, eh? Ah, well, there are worse places to be. London, for one.”

Frank laughed. “Too bloody right. Quite nice here, I think. I saw quite a few farms on our way here. What do you think would be a decent subsistence crop in this sort of climate?”

“Olives, I expect. Maybe a bit of fruit, orchards and the like. And I think I saw some potatoes in the farmer’s market we passed.”

“Well, now, that sounds fairly pleasant. You know . . . we could just not go back.”

“Not go back? They’d have our heads.”

“Nah, they’d forget about us. Nobody’s going to care about two stupid country bumpkins. I bet they won’t even notice we’re gone. Better for all concerned, really, if you think about it.”

“I do believe you’re right,” Henry said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “Bet it wouldn’t even be too much work if we split it between us.”
“I believe we have ourselves a deal, my friend.”

* 

“Don’t like dogs, never liked dogs, me,” Elton said nervously. “Got bit by one when I was a nipper. And now we’re off after a bloomin’ Cerberus!”

“Shut it, you. We know how you feel about dogs. You never shut up about it, do you?” Dwight retorted.

“Well, then you should know I’m not about to stop now! Fuck, it’s a bloody hellhound, innit? Cor, I hate dogs.”

“So help me, I will hex you!”

“And it’s in a cave, in the middle of a dark forest. Oh, I don’t like this, Dwight. I don’t like this at all.”

“For Merlin’s sake, you’re a Death Eater, bout to piss hisself because of a wee puppy-dog!”

“But it isn’t wee at all, is it? It’s great, thumping humungous!”

“Should have left you behind,” Dwight muttered.

“To the tender mercies of Bellatrix Lestrange? No thanks, mate.”

“Then stop squealing like a little girl! Got a reputation to maintain.”

“Who even bloody cares? We’re in Greece, not like anybody even knows us here. Cor, I thought Greece was supposed to be all sunny, not dark forests and snow and that. I feel like I been lied to.”

“Whinging about it ain’t gonna change that.”

“No sympathy, none.”

“Not a drop.”

* 

Sig realized, too late, that trying to kidnap enormous flying horses was a bad idea. To most of us, this would be the obvious conclusion if you thought about it for half a second. But no, Sig, Ger, and company only realized it after they’d started. No one had mentioned that the damn horses only drank single malt whiskey, either.

The business of getting an international portkey had been just as painful as expected – both in terms of bureaucracy and physical experience. Now they were distinctly worse for wear – dirty, bedraggled, ever so slightly trampled. Not to mention sans horses. They were past the point of caring. It just wasn’t worth it anymore.

* 

So. His old nemesis had held the Elder Wand all along. His awesome, almost otherworldly power seemed rather more mundane now – it had lain in the strength of a stick of wood, not a man after all.

The Dark Lord, before going to fetch the wand from the tomb of his late enemy, decided to stop by the manor to check in on the state of affairs. He found it strangely empty.
He finally found Narcissa embroidering in the rose sitting room. She looked up when he entered and retained an admirable degree of composure after taking in his enraged expression.

“My lord. Welcome back to England.”

“Where is everyone?”

She narrowed her eyes, as if carefully calculating her response. Finally, she said, “I was led to believe that they were on a mission from you, my lord.”

“From me? I haven’t given any orders.”

“Nevertheless, that was what I was told.”

“What sort of mission?”

“Well, I must admit, I did think it a little odd. They said that you had sent them to fetch certain things, many of them from ancient mythology. I did not wish to question the sagacious judgment of your lordship, and so I made no comment.”

“What sort of mythological objects?”

“Oh, the hydra, Atlantis, the Ceryneian Hind, the Nemean Lion. That sort of thing.”

He ground his teeth in frustration. Clearly, someone had managed to infiltrate the ranks. He would have to hunt down all of his erstwhile servants if he wanted anything done. But first, the Elder Wand.
You should all thank Xenia_Moon. She made me guilty enough to finish this one up. I'm sorry there's been such a delay, but it's gotten to the point in the semester where it's really hard to find time to write. I'll try to make it a longer wait to the next one, but I can't promise anything, so you'll be getting a second chapter as well. We're close to the end, at least within the context of the narrative. Thanks for sticking with me thus far.

Even Voldemort knew it was rude to visit without actually greeting your host. His first stop, therefore, was the office of the headmaster. Severus might have been in his service, but the man had served him well, after all. And it would hardly do for him to chastise Hero Potter for her manners while lacking in them, himself.

He raised his wand and the gates swung open before him. As he crossed the grounds, he cast a longing, slightly impatient glance toward the white marble tomb. He pursed his lips and turned his attention toward the castle, the only home he’d ever known. The Elder Wand could wait.

It was a grey morning in early December, a Saturday. The halls were empty and seemed rather drearier than he remembered, bathed as they were in dim, watery sunlight. Still, better they be empty; the fewer annoying children he had to kill, the better for everyone.

He remembered the way to the head’s office, even after so many years. He didn’t bother to summon a house elf in order to announce his presence; courtesy only went so far, after all. Finally, not having met another soul on his way, he arrived before the headmaster’s gatekeeper.

The gargoyle seemed almost to blink in a double-take when it recognized the visitor. It gave an impression of drawing back and looking at him in suspicion.

“Is he expecting you?”

“No. Inform him of my presence.” He did not say please; Dark Lords did not say please.

The gargoyle coughed and nodded hurriedly. Its eyes glazed over as its essence transferred to the head above the lintel of the office.

Severus was startled out of his concentration on paperwork when the gargoyle cleared its throat.

He looked up at it, curious. “Yes?”

“A certain Mr. Lord to see you, first name Dark. Haven’t a clue what it's regarding. I didn’t dare ask.”

“Ah. Send him up,” he murmured, rummaging in his desk for the message parchment. He was half-finished with his communiqué when the door opened to reveal Severus’s ostensible master. He entered and took a seat across the desk from Severus. He raised an eyebrow when he saw Severus scribbling hurriedly.

“Am I interrupting?”
“No, simply making a note of something to be taken care of later.”

He quickly finished writing the message, whereupon it was sent and subsequently disappeared. It read:

_Draco, DA, Hero_

_DL here, retrieve EW. Hero, keep out of sight._

_SS_

He smiled politely at the Dark Lord. “The work of a headmaster is never done.”

“I’m certain.”

“How may I serve you, my lord?”

“I do not require anything of you at the moment. I was merely in the area and thought it . . . prudent to check in.”

“Of what did you wish to be informed?” Severus asked, trying to stall.

“The general state of affairs. Difficulties, successes.” He paused. “Go on.”

“Of course. I have been successful in keeping the students and staff in line; they recognize that they have little choice. I’ve only had a little token resistance, which has almost disappeared. In terms of education, we are moving forward about as well as I had expected. There has been a certain amount of . . . resistance to the newly implemented classes, but by now their spirits are largely broken. Indoctrination is progressing.”

“And muggleborns? Did you have many show up on the first of September?”

“None, my lord. I believe this is due to proper guidance over the enchantments; they are recognizing the true nature of muggleborns and have correspondingly ceased to send them invitations to attend.”

“Good. How have you dealt with discipline cases?”

“The Cruciatus curse works wonders, I’ve found, for repeat offenders. For first offenders, particularly the younger ones, we simply scare the living daylights out of them by sending them into the forest.”

The Dark Lord chuckled wickedly. “Delightful. And the Carrows?”

Severus hesitated. His uninvited guest raised an eyebrow.

“May I speak freely, my lord?” The Dark Lord gestured for him to continue.

“My success is more in spite of them than because of them. They push too hard, using force instead of guile. They are acceptable, but only just. Still, they are better than any of the alternatives, I suppose. One shudders to think of some of your other servants taking on the mantle of educator.”

“Shocking, to hear such things from you of all people, Severus. I didn’t think you particularly liked children.”

“They are the future,” he said simply.
“Indeed. Well, if you believe you have things well in hand, I shall leave you to it.”

“I am most grateful for your confidence in my abilities, my lord. How was your time abroad?”

“Trying. You of all people know that I am not a patient man, and my task required a meticulous tracing of information. In the end, however, I have triumphed. Victory, my dear Severus, is at hand.”

Severus smirked. “Best news I’ve heard all day.”

The Dark Lord laughed, a grating, barking sort of sound. “Wait until we’ve seized it. It will assuredly be glorious to behold.”

“I can hardly wait.” The sarcasm flew right over Voldemort’s head, thankfully.

“Now, I think I should get on with the rest of my business here,” he said, getting to his feet. Severus rose as well.

“Do you wish me to accompany you?”

“If you wish. I am sure you have a great many things to do. Far be it from me to divert you.”

“I insist; I would be remiss in my duties as headmaster if I did not.” It wasn’t, after all, that he wanted to spend more time with the man; it would be an excellent opportunity to stall further, however.

The Dark Lord cast dispassionate eyes over him. Even bright red, they bore an uncanny resemblance to a shark.

“As you wish.”

Severus followed his would-be master through the castle, hoping against hope that he’d given them enough time to get underway.

*

The Room of Requirement was a thing of immense possibility, limited only by Gamp’s five laws of elemental transfiguration and the user’s imagination. In the instance of the unexpected and less than welcome visit from the Dark Lord, it provided a shortcut to Dumbledore’s tomb on the shore of the Black Lake.

Neville, Luna, and Ginny were studying together in the library when the note came through; Draco was at a nearby table pretending to ignore them.

Almost as soon as the note had been sent, Ginny, Luna, and Draco ran for the front doors, barely caring if anyone saw them. In that moment, there were more important things than maintaining covers. Neville volunteered to keep watch and act as a distraction if needed.

Ginny, Luna, and Draco ran across the grounds, heading straight for the white mausoleum. The girls’ hair streamed out behind them in the winter wind, Ginny’s a fiery flash of color against the drab landscape. Even as their lungs burned, they ran on, conscious of all that rested on their efforts.

Neville leaned against the wall next to the enormous doors of the Entrance Hall, whistling and attempting to look innocent. It probably would have been more successful if he hadn’t still had a black eye and a split lip. The whistling didn’t really help, either.
Severus, trailing after the Dark Lord, sent Neville a glare. Neville’s eyes widened as if in protestation of his innocence, and he shrugged helplessly. Voldemort didn’t appear to notice. The pair exited the castle, Neville shadowing twenty yards behind. Still whistling, his hands in his pockets, he made an almost comical picture of assumed innocence. Severus couldn’t help but notice the boy, who wasn’t exactly the soul of discretion. Neither could he help but roll his eyes.

The white monolith stood by the shore of the lake. Draco had a sudden urge to laugh – he’d gone from would be murderer to tomb-raider. At least he knew the old man wouldn’t have minded. Even so, it was rather macabre.

Together, the three of them raised their wands and charmed the stone covering the body to float. Draco was the one to step forward and slip the wand out from beneath the old man’s fingers. There was a strange sense of rightness as he gripped the wood.

He took from his pocket Neville’s father’s wand, the one that had given him so much trouble in his early years. Tapping the Elder Wand against the wood of the other, he transfigured Frank Longbottom’s wand so that it was outwardly identical to the Elder Wand. Slipping the fake back into the tomb, he stepped away. Ginny and Luna replaced the stone over the grave, and they ran to hide behind the nearest tree.

A few minutes later, Severus and the Dark Lord arrived. Draco stuck his head out from behind the trunk and winked at Severus. Severus couldn’t roll his eyes hard enough; sure, they had been successful, but didn’t any of them have an ounce of discretion? No, they were teenagers, it was too much to hope for.

They were the same age as the woman he was going to marry, he realized. They seemed so much younger, so much less mature. He thanked his lucky stars he had Hero, and that she was far older than her seventeen years would suggest. Inwardly, he smiled, picturing her green eyes and her brilliant smile. He shook himself out of such thoughts; it wouldn’t do for the Dark Lord to catch so much of a hint of the truth.

He stood off to the side as Voldemort strode up to the tomb and removed the stone, as Ginny, Luna, and Draco had done mere moments before. He emerged with what he believed to be the Elder Wand, a smug smirk on his face.

Suddenly, there was a large commotion coming from the Forbidden Forest. The Dark Lord set off purposefully toward it, leaving Severus to trail in his wake. The four teenagers exchanged glances, but stayed behind, wary of being caught now that their task was finished. Even so, they did not return to the castle, too curious to see the outcome.

The sound had come from the thestral paddock. Severus had, of course, been expecting to see the lackeys at some point due to Narcissa’s ploy. It might have been possible for them to show up at a less opportune time, but none came to mind in that moment.

Those who are familiar with thestrals are quite aware that they are only visible to those who have seen and understood death. No one is entirely sure why, as it would seem to have no useful evolutionary purpose. What is rather less well-known is that thestrals have the ability to sense malicious murder on people. They are for the most part entirely peaceful creatures, even with those they know to be killers. They are perfectly fine with them provided they maintain their distance. The Death Eaters who had been assigned to feed and groom the thestrals and muck out their stables were not maintaining their distance.

One of the great, leathery-skinned flying horses was rearing, its hooves flying, its wings beating the air. The Death Eaters were backing away and cowering. Some of them were crying.
The Dark Lord’s eyes glowed with rage. “What. Are you doing?”

The closest Death Eater to them spoke.

“M-my lord! You’ve come to save us!”

“I asked you a question,” he remarked, voice full of soft, temporarily reined menace.

“We were told, my lord. We were told you had given orders for us to tend to the Hogwarts thestrals.”

“Who told you that?”

“It...” the man hesitated, sensing that telling him it had been Bellatrix Lestrange would not be the wisest choice.

“It was a letter, in your hand, my lord. Or so we believed,” he lied.

“I never send orders in writing, for this very reason, as should be well known. Why must I be saddled with such incompetence?”

The man, once again showing rather uncommon wisdom for a Death Eater, said nothing.

The Dark Lord sighed. “Severus, I leave this to you. I have better things to do.” With that, he turned back the way he had come. Everyone held their breath until he had disappeared.

“Master Snape, sir. It weren’t no letter what told us. It were Madam Lestrange.”

“You were right not to mention it. You’d do best to keep on not mentioning it.”

“Aye, sir. What are we supposed to do now?”

Severus considered ordering them to continue working, but not seriously, at least not for more than a half a second.

“Leave. Return to headquarters. I’m sure there will be some task in need of you there.”

The Death Eaters mimed tipping their caps and proceeded en masse for the edge of the forest and, beyond that, the gates. They left their raw steaks and curry combs and shovels on the ground. Curry combs, of all things. For hairless thestrals. Honestly.

He nodded respectfully to the still-rather-unsettled thestrals, then set out back towards the tomb.

The visitors had all already Disapparated by the time he arrived. At the sight of him, the four teenagers emerged.

Ginny crowed. “Went off without a hitch!”

“Yes, yes. Well done. Now, back to what you were doing,” he ordered tersely.

The four of them exchanged glances. Draco spoke up.

“Sir, with all due respect, do us all a favor and go spend time with your fiancée.”

Severus snorted. “Little blighter.”

Said little blighter just laughed. Severus conceded that he had a point. He waited a while before
following them into the castle, absorbed in thoughts of his lady love.

Neville, Luna, Ginny, and Draco walked back to the castle in good spirits, their hearts lighter than they had been in a long time.

So much had changed in a few months. A year before, Neville would have thought it impossible that he would be friends with Draco Malfoy. But he was.

Draco had as much trouble believing it as Neville. He was coming to realize he hadn’t really had friends before. There had been Crabbe and Goyle, but they weren’t really friends, in the strictest sense. They were more like goons, or lackeys. Dumb muscle. And the other Slytherins had been people his own age with whom he had spent time and at times even enjoyed himself. Any one of them would plunge a knife in his back at the first opportunity. He would have done the same to them. It was accepted fact, just the way things were. Trust and loyalty didn’t even enter the conversation. If anyone had brought them up, they would have been laughed out of the room.

This is not to say that that was the state of affairs among all Slytherins. It was only among the children of Death Eaters and their allies. Other Slytherins were perfectly pleasant, reasonable, amiable people. They mostly kept their heads down and befriended other moderate Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Draco had had little contact with any of them. Except for Blaise; Blaise kept himself carefully neutral, not by avoiding any faction, but rather by ingratiating himself with them all. Draco wished he’d done the same, but he’d never been that charming.

He glanced at Ginny and cursed his lack of charm as much as he ever had. At first, he’d only paid attention to her because she was always with Luna, and Luna’s optimism made the war seem so very far away. Gradually, he had gotten to know her, and he had found himself falling in love, or something like it.

She was beautiful, obviously. But there was so much more to her than that. She was a wicked duelist, ruthless in her attacks, with lighting quick reflexes. She was clever and talented and creative. She cared as much about Quidditch as he did. And she was marvelously funny. And fierce, and passionate, and strong. And she really was very pretty.

Not that it mattered. All those brothers, he was sure he’d be beaten to a bloody pulp with only a vague memory of life in human form before he so much as kissed her hand. It wasn’t like she needed their protection, either. She could do worse on her own, he was quite sure. If his mother had taught him anything, it was that one should never underestimate the capabilities of a woman. He’d certainly had ample opportunities to learn it growing up. And if Narcissa Malfoy hadn’t taught the lesson to him, Hermione Granger, Hero Potter, and most certainly Ginny Weasley would have.

It wasn’t like she could ever be attracted to a Death Eater, anyway. Being her friend was infinitely better than nothing.

*

A note was waiting on Severus’s desk when he made it back to his office.

*I’m in our bedroom. Come find me.*

*xoxo,*

*Hero*

He smiled as he pocketed the note and did as he was told.
She was sitting on the bed, waiting for him, reading a book. She set it aside when Severus sat beside her. She smiled and kissed him.

“Hello, dearest. How was work?”

“Later. For now, I just want to be with you.”

“You hopeless romantic. I missed you, too, so much.”

“Mmm, understatement. Massive understatement. There’s no sunshine when you’re gone,” he told her playfully.

Her smile widened. “You’re always gone too long, you know. Anytime you go away.”

“You’re, mmm, like air. Like... oh, a sea breeze in the summer, that smells of salt and flowers and sun cream. Intoxicating, exhilarating. The sort of thing you could feel every day for a hundred years and still long for more.”

She kissed him desperately, emotion welling up in her with the force of the tides, the force of her desire more akin to need than want.

“Oh, God, I love you,” she whispered against his mouth when she came up for air.

“As I love you. How have you been holding up?” he asked, reaching up to cup her cheek. She leaned into his touch, smiling at the sensation.

“I’m alright. As well as anyone, I suppose.”

“The stress is getting to you?”

She snorted. “You’re one to talk.”

“Ah, but I have a plan.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You and I are going to leave this miserable midden and spend a night on the town.”

“Superb idea. Where are we going?”

“I thought we’d see where the night takes us.”

“Look at you, being all spontaneous. How do I look?” she asked.

“Lovely, as ever.” It was true. Her t-shirt and sweatpants weren’t suitable for London in winter, but she looked lovely. She rolled her eyes, getting to her feet and starting to sort through her clothes.

“Do you think the night will take us somewhere formal or somewhere casual?”

“I think there might be dancing involved somewhere along the line,” he hinted. Which was really all it was, because there wasn’t any sort of plan.

Her eyes lit up and she beamed at him. “Excellent.” She pulled out the dress she’d worn for the wedding, which was knee-length and sort of vintage looking, and a lovely dark green. She quickly stripped off her t-shirt and sweats and threw the dress over her head, Severus looking on in appreciation. Hero sent a teasing glance over her shoulder before the dress slid on over her head.
“Minx.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

“Come over here and I’ll say things sweeter still.”

“Later, dearest. You promised me dancing.”

“I hinted. I never promised.”

She snorted. “Come over here and zip me up.”

“As my lady commands. Although, I must say, it seems counterproductive.”

“Don’t worry. What goes up must come down.”

“That is good news, indeed,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble that sent a shiver down her spine. It didn’t help when he pressed a kiss to her hair, his fingers brushing the nape of her neck.

“If you keep doing that, we’ll never leave,” she gasped.

“Sounds fine to me,” he murmured against her hair, slipping his arms around her waist.

She turned in his arms and cupped his cheek. “No. Later.”

“Tease.”

She just laughed, walking towards the door. She threw a glance over her shoulder. “Coming?”

“Oh, yes. Just admiring the view.” She stuck her nose in the air as she sashayed off, hiding a grin.

* 

The jazz club wasn’t too far from Grimmauld, though they Apparated to the next street over in case the house was still being watched. The food was decent, but that wasn’t the main attraction. No, that was decidedly the music. A woman stood center-stage, her eyes closed as she leaned into the microphone. It was the sound of slow, easy jazz, the auditory equivalent of melted chocolate, making everything fade away. She was like a throwback to the greats, the Ella Fitzgeralds and Doris Days, and it was wonderful.

“We could get her to do the wedding, don’t you think?”

“Too many memory charms for my taste. We’ll think of something, darling.”

Hero leaned against his side as they watched and listened. The next song was instrumental swing, and she pulled her fiancé onto the dance floor. He went willingly, inexpressibly glad to see her with so much energy. He twirled her, and she laughed in pure, exhilarated joy. He pulled her back, and she relaxed against him, resting her head on his chest as they swayed to the beat.

By then, their dinners had arrived, and they returned to their table. They sat on one side of a table, leaning against each other.

After a comfortable silence, Hero spoke.

“Humor me.”
“Hmm?”

“I don’t have a future beyond the next few months, and we both know it. But, just for tonight, let’s pretend I do. Let’s pretend we have a lifetime together. Decades after the war, stretching out so far we can’t see the end of it. What’s it look like?”

He brushed a kiss against her temple. “Let’s see. We’d be married. We’d finally have time for a honeymoon. We could . . . buy a house, or fix up Grimmauld Place like I know you sometimes plan when you let your mind drift. Clean it, strip the wallpaper, paint the walls, buy new furniture. It would look completely different.”

“What about . . . what about children? A family?”

“I . . . suppose I never thought about it. Would you want that?”

“Yes,” she admitted in a whisper. “But . . . only if you wanted the same thing.”

“Mmm. I think I would like that. Little children running around that looked like you. Bright, curious, full of questions.”

“You could teach them potions basics. I could teach them how to cook, how to fly. We could read them bedtime stories. I’d love to hear you read bedtime stories.”

“I’d love to hear you sing lullabies. You would make a wonderful mother.”

“I think you’d make a good father. So serious, but always willing to listen. You hide it, but you can be so kind, and compassionate.”

“I didn’t used to be. You bring it out in me.”

She grinned, the expression in her eyes tender. “Then we’re well-matched, aren’t we?”

“Indubitably. I would love to see you round with my child. I can almost picture our child now. A daughter, with your heart and lovely eyes.”

“A son, with your nose and your brilliant mind.”

“Teaching them to read, and introducing them to the world.”

“Sending them off to Hogwarts. Are you still a professor?”

“Mmm. Perhaps.”

“If you were, headmaster or Potions Master?”

“Headmaster, I think. Let Slughorn handle the explosions and students who don’t understand—”

“The subtle science and exact art of potions making. Yes, I know. It is beautiful, isn’t it? The smell of Amortentia. It smells like you.”

He nuzzled his nose against her neck, edging her jaw. “I know. The first night of term, I snuck down to the Potions classroom to smell the Amortentia Slughorn had brewed for the demonstration to the sixth years. Just to smell you. I wasn’t sure I could risk visiting very often at that point. But I couldn’t last that long without so much as the scent of you.”

Hero’s heart broke. She wondered if the scent of Amortentia would be enough to sustain him over
the many years she would be gone.

“I love you,” she whispered, pain coloring her voice as she kissed him desperately.

“I love you, too, darling. Always and forever.”

There was no more talk of a future they could not have. Instead, they allowed the touch of warm skin to warm skin to remind each other that, though they were very much mortal, they were still very much alive.

Severus cupped her jaw, his thumb caressing her cheek, as he once again dipped his head to capture her lips. Hero moaned into the kiss. What had begun as a tender and gentle meeting of lips became increasingly desperate, and achingly sad despite its intensity. They kissed, fully aware that their last dance was all too near.

Severus broke away reluctantly to pay the bill, leaving Hero behind, starry-eyed, her lips swollen a delectable red. Once that was taken care of, they collected their coats and walked out into the winter’s evening, wrapped in each other’s arms. They tasted of each other’s lips all the way home in the cab as it was the elixir of life. They clutched at each other like teenagers in an alcove after curfew.

When they arrived at Grimmauld, Severus pulled away to pay the cab driver. Hero remained by his side. As the cab pulled away, she slipped an arm around his waist. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of head. They stole into the house, quiet and empty due to the lateness of the hour, and crept up the stairs, laughing softly as floorboards creaked and they bumped into things.

Once in their room, Hero pressed the door closed with a soft click. Severus pressed her up against it, kissing her fiercely. She kissed back for a moment, then pushed him backwards toward the bed. Grinning, he went, watching her hungrily.

She stepped out of her shoes as she walked toward him, reaching behind her to get to the zip on her dress. She let it fall to the floor and stepped out of it. She pushed Severus down to sit on the bed and straddled him. Severus simply gazed at her, taking a moment to appreciate the debauched picture she presented: her, in nothing but underwear and stockings, straddling him while he sat fully-clothed.

She bent her head to kiss him. He unhooked her bra and slid it off her as she began to unbutton his waistcoat. That accomplished, he clutched at her upper arms, relishing the contact of skin to skin. She shied away from the sensation, her laughter muffled against his skin.

“And you call me a tease,” she whispered.

“Oh, I’d never claim we weren’t evenly matched.”

His shirt hanging open, he lay back on the bed and rolled them so their positions were reversed. Hero met his heated gaze, wide-eyed and breathless. He pressed delicate positions to her collar
bones, his thumbs grazing across her nipples. She shivered at the heat that rushed across her skin, her eyes drifting shut.

Severus rolled off her and swiftly shucked his shoes and trousers and shrugged out of his shirt and waistcoat. He bent down to press a kiss to her bellybutton, his fingers playing with the top of her stockings. He smirked, meeting her eyes. Her breath hitched.

“God, I love undressing you,” he admitted, his voice gravely. “It’s like all my Christmases and birthdays come at once.”

Hero huffed a laugh, rolling her eyes. “Then I’d suggest you commence, my dear,” she advised not without a little frustration. Slowly, he rolled her stockings down, finally drawing them off with a flourish. Hero let her head fall back, laughing at his absurdity.

He lay back down beside her and stroked her cheek.

“You’re so beautiful. I love to see you laugh. Do . . . do you want to keep the wig on, or not?”

She drew back slightly, hesitating. “I . . . I never really thought about it. Do . . . do you want me to keep it on?”

His gaze grew intense. “You are beautiful to me no matter what. Not because of your hair, or your clothes. Your smile. Your bright eyes, and the thoughts they express. The roses in your cheeks. Your brilliant mind and your boundless heart. I want whatever makes you feel more comfortable.”

She reached up to her wig and simply touched it for a moment. Slowly, she pulled it off. He took it and set it on the bedside table. He smiled down at her and kissed the top of her head.

“Stunning.”

She started to cry, just a little, even as she smiled. “I love you.”

He buried his face against her neck and whispered, “As I love you.”

He slowly drew her panties down and away before seeing to his own underwear. He grasped her hips, caressing with his thumbs. She shivered, almost writhed, at the sensation.

His left arm encircled her waist, lifting her hips, as his right hand stroked down to play with her curls before slipping inside her folds.

Hero moaned, arching into his embrace. Slowly, with the utmost care, he set to drawing as many sounds of pleasure from her lips as he could. Finally, only after she was incoherent with pleasure, did he slide into her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and gazed up at him. Her eyes were hazy, her pupils blown.

“My dear Severus. You are mine, and I am yours, and I will never stop loving you. Never.”

He kissed her, sweetly and deeply, because the words stuck in his throat. Together, they moved until climax overtook them. As they lay on the coverlet, breathing heavily, Severus took her left hand and kissed her ring, voice finally returned.

“With my body, I thee worship. With my soul, I thee adore. Till the end of time.”
So, this is the second chapter of the evening. If you didn't see chapter 71, you might want to go back and take a look. This chapter doesn't have all that much of Sev and Hero, but it contains a lot of news of the state of affairs of the war and the inhabitants of Hogwarts.

The Civil Service That Couldn’t Be Arsed

By Millicent Morrigan

The current government is in a shambles. They’re more concerned about rounding people up for nonexistent crimes they didn’t commit than actually carrying out the business of government. We’ve seen showers of pink rain, duels in the streets (which the Muggles thankfully assumed was two nerds in a role-playing game), and misuse of Muggle artifacts galore.

Our society has always been in a delicate balance. We obviously reserve the right to live our lives with a certain degree of freedom and independence. On the other hand, reckless actions can reveal us all, and not just in Britain, but across the entire wizarding world. In the current climate, we are neither free nor safe. Our freedoms and independence are threatened along with the secrecy of our world. I for one find this to be completely unacceptable. How long will it be until foreign governments are forced to intervene for their own safety. The new regime is playing with fiend fire, and it seems to me we’re all going to get burned because they neglected to learn the counter-spell.

If you’ve been paying attention the last few years, you’ve probably realized that the last few administrations haven’t really done all they could. After all, we didn’t end up in this sorry state spontaneously. It took real, dedicated effort in ignoring and suppressing the truth, and we need to acknowledge that. On the other hand, they’re looking a bit better considering what we have to put up with these days.

Inferiority Complex?

By Barry Dowling

The results of extensive studies have shown that muggleborns are in no way inferior to those showing evidence of magical parentage. Many influential muggleborns have come and gone in the past century. Dirk Creswell, head of the Goblin Liaison Office, Nobby Leach, Minister for Magic just a few years ago, Johannes Jonker, a renowned American wand-maker, Sir Nicholas, the Ghost of Gryffindor, Donaghan Tremlett, bass player for the Weird Sisters, Kendra Dumbledore, mother of Albus Dumbledore, and Lily Evans, mother of the Girl Who Lived, are all muggleborns. Clearly, the claims that muggleborns are inferior have no basis in reality.

On the other hand, many have noted a clear trend in the quality of magic coming from supposedly superior purebloods. More squibs are being noted in old, pureblood lines, and magical ability in general is declining. Mental capacity is also a noted issue – several of the older bloodlines are
turning out less and less intelligent scions; witness the Crabbe and Goyle families. And let us not forget the madness that clearly shows in others, such as the Blacks and Lestranges.

On the other hand, muggleborns and half-bloods are showing exceptional skill in a variety of areas of magic. Nymphadora Tonks, the result of a union between the pureblood house of Black and Muggleborn Ted Tonks is a metamorphmagus. Hero Potter has proved to be capable of standing against the Dark Lord and first produced a corporeal Patronus at the age of thirteen. Hermione Granger is widely regarded to be the brightest witch of her age. Albus Dumbledore, whatever you may think of him, had fearsome magical talent and a muggleborn mother. The results are in and the data is clear: we have more to gain by embracing diversity than in marrying our own cousins.

A: Hi, guys!

HP: Hey, how are things?

A: Oh, we’re doing fairly well. How are you?

RW: Ah, we’re living the life of Riley, haven’t you noticed?

HG: Ron exaggerates. We’re fairly comfortable. It could be much worse.

HP: I keep telling him, a few coats of paint, some new furniture, it’ll be great.

RW: Yeah, but we have bigger fish to fry.

A: That’s true. What have you been up to?

HP: Well, we’re not at liberty to discuss everything. Secrecy, you understand. But we are making real progress.

HG: Yes, we’re actually moving faster than we had anticipated. A lot of that is due to better communication and coordination between different areas of the war effort.

RW: The occasional spy doesn’t go astray, either.

A: You have spies? Can you give us any details on that?

HP: We have one or two in the lower ranks of the Death Eaters, which I’m sure the Dark Lord has anticipated. I mean, that’s just how the game is played. Besides that, we have countless untraceable spies in his very headquarters. The best part is, he’ll never be able to find them.

A: You seem very sure.

HG: Well, you see, he, like many wizards, has a certain blind spot. He constantly underestimates magical beings and other non-humans. Frankly, I doubt even if he read this article, he could change his perspective enough for it to make a difference. When we win the war, it will be damning evidence that we need to treat these beings better. They, like their human counterparts, will be war heroes, and I for one am determined to make sure they are recognized as such.

RW: She gets very passionate about these things. She’s determined to reform the Department for
the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

A: More power to you, Hermione. It’s high time wizards showed more respect for other inhabitants of the magical world.

HP: Especially when they prove to be our salvation. In terms of intelligence gathering, they’re helping to turn the tide of the war.

A: I wonder if living here isn’t a help as well.

RW: Eh?

A: Well, there are hardly any wrackspurts here. Contrary to popular belief, they tend to be attracted to clean, well-lit environments. Which is bad news for exam rooms and operating theatres. But they don’t seem to like it here. Clutter breeds creativity and keeps them at bay. So, they’re probably helping as well. Ideas do seem to flow more freely here.

RW: Well, desperation might have something to do with it.

A: Desperation isn’t any guarantee of success, though. The universe doesn’t just give you inspiration because you need it.

HP: The universe is rarely so kind.

A: Exactly. There’s something else. Maybe something beyond even the lack of wrackspurts. Something . . . watching over you.

RW: (clears throat) Well, I don’t know about that. Though I will say we have been fairly lucky. Who knows why that might be?

A: Well, we certainly hope your luck continues, wherever it comes from. Tell me, what are your impressions of the war so far?

HP: It’s going better than we had initially expected. I think Potterwatch and the Quibbler are an important part of that – they connect us all, and allow us to come together. They unite us, and that’s invaluable.

HG: Intelligence is another huge aspect. People can report on problems, Death Eaters coming to call. It’s a warning system that’s saving lives. It’s kind of a community forum, and I think it could be useful even after the war, presuming we win, of course. It seems to me that politics and the will of the majority haven’t really gone together for some time now. It’s important that the voices of ordinary citizens are heard.

RW: In a way, we’re stronger than we were before. There’s nothing like the threat of dying to make people put aside their differences. It sort of puts everything in perspective, you know? You look at the big picture, and the threat is so huge, everything else seems very small and inconsequential.

A: And then you see that the little things never really mattered at all. Or at least, that’s the hope.

RW: Yeah. Bit depressing that it takes a war where loads of people die for people to get a bit of perspective.

A: Maybe they’ll hang onto it this time.

RW: I wish I had your optimism.
HP: Don’t let the Death Eaters get you down, Ron. We’ve done great things. What’s one more?

A: And you have the numbers on your side. You’re not alone in this.

HP: No, we’ve had a huge swell of support from the magical community. There are more of us than there are of them, and we’re not going down without a fight. If the Dark Lord does manage to succeed, he won’t have much left to rule.

A: Better dead than Dark?

RW: Yes. There are far worse things than death, and a whole hell of a lot of things worth dying for.

* 

With the revelation of the conspiracy which the more paranoid Ravenclaws had suspected, namely that Snape and Malfoy were on their side, they had finally felt safe enough to share their note-passing method. It was nearly as good as texting. Due to the surge in muggleborns using it, muggle textlish was quickly instituted into everyone’s vocabulary. The Ravenclaws loved it because, to an outsider, even if the spell somehow failed, the notes would be practically indecipherable.

One of the best parts was how adaptable it was. Messages could be sent en masse – “Carrows on warpath, wyb” – or to specific recipients, such as the missive Draco sent Ginny one morning.

The piece of parchment in her pocket flashed with heat for a second. She dug it out of her pocket and read:

**Ginny,**

*Want to see something explode?*

**Draco**

Glancing around surreptitiously, she took out a pencil and scribbled back:

*Draco,*

*What sort of explosion?*

**Ginny**

He sent a drawing of a smiley-face, then,

*Meet me by the statue of the one-eyed witch.*

It was a Saturday, and she knew no one would be watching to see where she went.

*When?*

**A quarter.**

She nodded to herself and finished off her pancakes. Ten minutes later, she slipped out of the Great Hall. Draco followed not long after.

“What’s this about, Malfoy?” she demanded.

He put his finger to his lips. Only once they were in the secret-passageway did he speak.
“It’s two things, actually. First is the mission your brother’s on with Granger and Potter. My uncle in all but name has corrupted Hufflepuff’s cup. The Goblins have been making a copy, which is finally ready.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“Nothing, technically,” he admitted. “I was wondering if you wanted to be the one to destroy the original.”

“Destroy it? Why?”

“The taint can’t be removed any other way, unfortunately. Potter and I have done it, Kreacher’s got one. Weasley and Granger are perfectly content not to. I thought you might like a go.”

“Why me? Neville’s head of the DA while Hero’s gone.”

“Just between you and me, you’re much prettier than he is.”

Ginny stopped, glaring at her companion. Draco stumbled when he realized she wasn’t beside him anymore. He turned, confused, flinching when he saw her expression.

“You’re doing this because I’m pretty?” she snarled.

Draco frowned, genuinely puzzled. “I . . . thought girls liked to be told they’re pretty?”

“Oh my God, you berk! If you only picked me because of how I look, I swear, I’ll Stun you and leave you here.”

Draco huffed in exasperation. “Of course it’s not just because you’re pretty! You’re also highly intelligent, an excellent duelist, athletic . . .” he realized he was getting off-topic. “What I mean is, you deserve this as much as anyone. I was just . . . it was a joke, alright?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “So you don’t think I’m pretty?”

He groaned in pure frustration. “There’s no winning with you!”

She laughed. “I thought I’d try a joke like yours. You’re right, it is funny.”

With that, she swanned past him. He rubbed a hand over his face, muttering in irritation before following her.

Suddenly, she spun to face him. “You said there were two things. What’s the other thing?”

“Xeno Lovegood is getting out of hand. You’re best friends with his daughter, maybe he’ll listen to you.”

“Why would I tell him to stop? The Quibbler’s great.”

“It is. And if he doesn’t tone it down, they may very well kill him.”

“Alright, I’ll give it a shot. Honestly, I’m surprised Dad hasn’t had a word with him about it.”

Draco shook his head. “The whole Order’s being watched. He’s probably being smart and not drawing attention to himself.”

Ginny smiled fondly. “That doesn’t sound much like my dad.”
Draco’s eyes grew shadowed. “War changes us all.”

“True. A year ago, if someone had told me you and I would be friends, I’d have hexed them.”

“Is that what we are? Friends?”

“If you want to be. I didn’t mean to presume—”

“I’d like that.”

“Did you really mean it? When you called me pretty?”

He snorted. “You know you are.”

“Well, yes, I suppose, objectively speaking, my appearance could be considered—”

“Ginny. You are stupefyingly attractive.”

And then he kissed her, partly because there didn’t seem to be any other way of getting her to stop talking, partly because he could no longer help himself. When he drew back, she looked slightly dazed.

“Oh. So you did mean it. Good.”

“Good?”

She blushed furiously, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “Getting to know you . . . I sort of developed a crush on you.”

“Huh. Your brother’s going to kill me.”

“Which one?”

He groaned. “Oh, Merlin. All of them, probably.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about Percy, he still hasn’t come to his senses.”

“Right, Percy. I wouldn’t have been worried about him anyway. More the cursebreaker, the dragon-tamer, the twins, and Ron.”

“Ron doesn’t get a nickname?”

“He’s the knight who’s going to slice me apart and set fire to the pieces. Might even use the Sword of Gryffindor, really add insult to injury.”

Ginny snorted. “My brothers know better than to interfere where they’re neither needed nor wanted. I can look after myself. They might still be a little overprotective after what happened with Dean, but they can stuff it. It’s none of their business.”

“Okay, sensing a couple of unresolved issues there—”

She kissed him to shut him up. He very much did not mind.

“So . . . so . . .”

She laughed and shook her head. “You’re such a numpty.”
“So, does this mean you think I’m pretty?” he asked, fluttering his eyelashes at her and smirking.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re the fairest of them all. So, I take it we’re going to the wedding together? You know my parents are hosting the reception?”

He groaned again. “I have a feeling dating you is going to be more dangerous than Quidditch.”

She laughed again. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. What’s life without a little risk?”

* 

Griphook smirked at him. Two identical cups sat on the desk between them.

“A week, Mr. Malfoy. As promised.”

“Which is which?”

The goblin shook his head. “Sometimes I forget how little wizards these days know about metalworking. The one on your left is real. The other is the replica. The funds to pay for it have been removed from your family’s vault. You have it for one generation, remember.”

Draco nodded and took the horcrux. “Much obliged, Mr. Griphook.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“What? Oh. The Winter Solstice.”

“The longest night of the year,” the goblin commented, a suggestive leer in his voice. Ginny pointedly cleared her throat. Draco flushed. Griphook only grinned wider, his pointed teeth on prominent display.

“Thank you, Mr. Griphook, for your time,” she said firmly, getting to her feet.

“Pass on my regards to William and Fleur when you see them. I miss talking to decent wizards, especially the few I can call friends.”

“I’ll do that. I know they both miss working here, now they’re stuck in the safehouse.”

Griphook shook his head. “Bill Weasley, cooped up? I can’t even imagine it.”

Draco nodded respectfully to the goblin, and they left.

“Aren’t people going to be confused when they see me with you?” it suddenly occurred to her to ask.

“Hopefully, they’ll assume I converted you. You sided with Percy, or something.” He chuckled as she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

They didn’t spend any more time in Diagon than they had to. Within minutes, they were standing on the front stoop of No. 12 Grimmauld Place. They ducked inside, hoping no one had seen them.

The Sword of Gryffindor was in the troll’s foot umbrella stand, a rather odd addition to the collection of umbrellas and walking sticks occupying it. Draco pulled it out and hefted it before handing it to Ginny by the hilt.

He led her down to the kitchen, whose solid oak table and flagstone floor had proved useful before.
He brought out the cup and set it on the table. He glanced at Ginny, who was standing off to the
side, looking uncomfortable to be holding the sword.

“Come on. You’ll do fine. If I can do it, you can.”

She gave him a shaky nod and stepped forward, sword clutched in both hands. Black mist seemed
to rise out of the cup, taking the shape of the young man Tom Riddle had been when he had created
it. It seemed to smile.

“Ah! I see you’ve met my counterpart. I can still smell him on you. Step aside, girl. You know
you’ll never be able to harm me. No, you love me.” The black mist curled around her. She had
gone white and lowered the sword; her whole body trembled.

“You miss it, don’t you? Having someone to confide in, someone who always listens, always cares.
No one in your family took you seriously. They still don’t. You have no real friends – only a girl
who spends time with you because she has no one else. Half-mad. She can’t help you. She doesn’t
listen. Always a separation. What kind of friend is that? No, I was your friend, your best
friend. Even now, after everything I did to you, you love me too much to kill me.

“And I love you. I promise, Ginny. I am the only one who will ever love you, who ever could.”

Draco, startled out of his shock, rushed forwards to grab her shoulders.

“Ginny, you know that’s not true! I love you! I see you as you really are, and I love you!”

Fury consumed her expression and she grasped the sword with both hands again. Alarmed, Draco,
leapt out of reach, landing on his arse. She raised the sword high. He saw it gleam in the dim light
of the lamps, fervently hoping it wouldn’t be the last thing he ever saw.

The sword swung down – and neatly cleaved the cup in two. The black mist figure screamed and
disappeared in a flash of light. Ginny lowered the sword, breathing hard, her eyes wild.

Draco stared up at her in a combination of awe and apprehension. Ginny blinked, and her
expression cleared somewhat. She flung the sword down on the table and reached over to help him
up.

“Are you alright?”

“Er, never better,” he replied, a little breathless. “That was . . . that was impressive.”

“You think?” she asked shyly, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Most definitely. I can’t imagine what it took for you to destroy that thing.”

“You destroyed one,” she argued, blushing.

“Maybe, but I was never possessed by one, let alone for months at a time. I think what you just did
might be the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen.”

“You’re sweet. Come on. We should get to Mr. Lovegood’s.”

She held out her hand, and he took it. They left the kitchen behind them, the sword and the cup
forgotten on the table.
They apparated from the stoop, arriving just outside the wards to the Burrow. Draco looked around cautiously.

“Your, er, parents around?”

Ginny snorted. “The coast is clear. Some knight in shining armor you are.”

“I’m not a brave and daring Gryffindor, and I never claimed to be. I’m a background player, not a charge-of-the-light-brigade type.”

“You’re going to have to meet them eventually,” she pointed out, not unreasonably.

“Yeah, but . . . not now.”

Ginny laughed. “Come on, we have things to do. Things which have nothing to do with my parents, so you can stop twitching.”

“I’m not twitching.”

“Yeah . . . your eye’s going like a hummingbird.”

Frustrated (and eager to leave) he stomped off to the left. Ginny cleared her throat.

“It’s, ah . . . it’s the other way.”

Wordlessly, he turned and stomped the way she was pointing. She suppressed a giggle and fell into step beside him.

It was a twenty-minute walk to the Lovegoods’ house. The southern English countryside was beautiful even in December. They both had their winter cloaks and gloves on, but Ginny kept close by Draco’s side anyway. Hesitantly, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

She smiled up at him. “It’s almost like you haven’t done this before, Malfoy.”

“Parkinson always preferred draping herself in furs and having her swain trail after her with an expression of awe, so I haven’t actually.”

“Ah. Of course. And how do you like it?” she asked in a lightly teasing tone.

“Well, you’re nice and warm, so far be it from me to object.”

She laughed, elbowing him. He groaned.

“I didn’t think fair damsels had such sharp elbows.”

“Lesson number one about dating me, Draco, is that I am, under no circumstances, a damsel in distress. Dean never really did learn that – always trying to help me through the portrait hole into Gryffindor tower, like I’d fall over my own feet without him. Actually, him clinging to me caused it, more often than not. I can look after myself and have done so in pitched battle against Death Eaters. I have faced dark wizards and murderers and seen inside the mind of a madman. I have a bat-bogey hex that’ll knock your socks off. And I must admit, I’ve got a bit of a temper.”

“Duly noted. Also, incredibly hot.”

She smirked at him. “You’re not so bad yourself, blondie. Care to impress a girl with your tales of derring-do?”
He thought for a moment. “I don’t know. Most of it I’m not exactly proud of. If you’d asked me last year, I might have boasted of my grand plans to kill Dumbledore – none of which actually worked. But you wouldn’t have asked me last year. And this year, it’s mostly staying under the radar. Information gathering, stuff like we did today. Hero’s will. Working with the house-elf network. Really, the most exciting thing that’s happened to me in ages was you destroying the cup.”

Ginny stared at him. “Are you mad? All that sounds amazing. I mean, you’re risking everything, every moment. You turned your back on everything you’d ever known.”

“Well, not everything. My mother will stand with me no matter what. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

“Yeah, I’ve been hearing stories about your mum. She sounds amazing.”

That topic of conversation carried them the rest of the way to the Lovegoods’ house. It was set on a knoll, a black tower not unlike a chess rook. Next to the door were a number of hand-painted signs.

_Xenophilius Lovegood, Quibbler Editor-in-Chief_

_Pick your own Mistletoe_

_Keep off the Dirigible Plums!_

Ginny pulled the long bell-chord on the other side of the door. For several minutes, no one came.

“Are you sure he’s in?” Draco asked.

Ginny frowned. “He should be. He usually only goes looking for crumple-horned snorkacks and blibbering humdingers over the holidays, when he can take Luna. I mean, they’ve never found anything, but Sweden’s always lovely anyway. Course, he could have been smart and left the country. But I’m sure he would have told Luna, and he didn’t mention anything like that in his last letter.”

Suddenly, the door was wrenched open, revealing a rather strange-looking man. He was slightly cross-eyed with white hair the texture of candy-floss. In stark contrast to his “sun-colored” attire at Bill and Fleur’s wedding, he was dressed in a faded, patched pair of robes.

“Miss Weasley! Has Hogwarts fallen? Why is Luna not with you?”

Ginny smiled reassuringly. “Both Luna and the school are fine, Mr. Lovegood. But there’s something we wanted to talk to you about. May we come in?”

Looking flustered, he stepped aside. “And who is your companion, Ginevra?”

“He’s a friend from the movement. Mr. Lovegood, this is . . . Daniel.”

Xeno’s eyes narrowed. “Does Daniel have a last name?”

“He’s a spy. Best to remain incognito,” Ginny murmured, tapping her nose. Mr. Lovegood’s stared at Draco for a long moment, eyes still narrowed, before turning to Ginny.

“What was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

Draco spoke. “We’d like you to tone it down.”

“I’m sorry?”
“The coverage. It’s brilliant, of course, but we don’t want you taking unnecessary risks. Perhaps you could go back to your normal coverage for a while? Just to lull them into a false sense of security.”

Xeno frowned. “I must admit, the Death Eaters have come calling. They have been making vague threats. Nothing substantial, but . . .”

Ginny and Draco shared a look. “Yes, we thought they might have,” Ginny said grimly. “So, will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Stop. Just for a little while. No one wants anything to happen to you.”

“I will . . . consider it.”

“Good,” Draco remarked crisply. “That’s all we ask.”

“Promise us you’ll tell us, or at least someone, if the threats get any more specific?” Ginny asked, frowning.

“Oh, of course. Of course. Was that everything?”

“Yes. I’m afraid we don’t have much time. We really must be going,” Draco said, pulling back his sleeve to glance at his watch. He wasn’t about to admit it out loud, but the man gave him the creeps.

“Ah. Pity. Well, do give my regards to your parents, Ginevra. And say hello to my bumblebee for me.”

Ginny smiled. “I will, promise.”

Draco nodded and gave him a tight smile, practically dragging Ginny out the door.

She cast him a sidelong glance as they walked to the edge of the wards. “He can be a bit unsettling the first time you meet him.” Draco didn’t reply, just gave her a look. She shrugged. “You get used to it.”

“I’m not sure I want to. But, anyway, that’s done. I just hope he does it. I may not like him, but I don’t want anything to happen to him, or to Luna.”

“I know.” She hesitated. “Did you mean it?”

“Hmm? Mean what?”

“At Grimmauld. When you said . . . you loved me.”

He looked her in the eye, and she was frozen in the face of the intensity she saw in his eyes.

“Honestly? I’m not entirely sure. I’ve never been in love before. But, I think . . . loving you might be the easiest thing in the world.”

Ginny blushed. “Keep talking like that, and I’ll be head over heels before I know it.”

* 

Within Hogwarts, there was an underground revolution. Contrary to popular belief, not all the
Slytherins had sided with the Dark Lord. Besides Draco, there were those who’d never been allied with the Dark at all. They knew enough to keep their heads down and their mouths shut, especially around other Slytherins. As the revolution swept through the student body, a feeling of liberation accompanied it.

The Carrows took turns taking sick – they were usually out at least once a week each. The students went in shifts to take the skiving snackboxes – the hope was that it would seem like typical illnesses were making their rounds, albeit with more strength and frequency than usual. Madam Pomfrey knew all about it, and even if she’d been inclined to help, there was little she could do without the curative end of the sweets. The Weasley Twins’ formula was airtight.

Of course, that was hardly Wheezes’ only contribution. Shield clothing had vastly improved and was doled out to the younger years – those who weren’t strong enough to cast a Shield Charm yet. They still weren’t enough to hold off the full force of the Cruciatus, but it dampened it considerably.

Decoy detonators and Peruvian instant darkness powder became weapons in the hands of an increasingly creative, increasingly vindictive population of adolescents. All of this occurred with the blessing of the professors, with the implicit agreement that these were emergency wartime measures, not to be tolerated once it was back to business as usual. Peeves turned into a major force to be reckoned with due to the almost tangible air of mischief that hung around the castle.

In a very short period, the Carrows were very much no longer enjoying themselves. Snape was no help at all – he insisted that it was always like this. They’d stared at him as if he were mad. When the other professors echoed his sentiments, giving the Death Eaters odd looks, as if this was common knowledge, the Carrows had begun to break.

Flitwick was surprised when, after he and several of is NEWT Charms students enchanted the ceiling in the Great Hall to actually snow, they didn’t quite fall apart. The younger students had great fun making snow angels and snowmen and snow forts and having snowball fights during meals, so it wasn’t a total loss. The Carrows had begged Snape to step in. He’d told them that a wise leader knew the limits of his authority. Telling children not to play in the snow was several leagues beyond that line. Alecto had looked like she was about to cry when he suggested they join the children in their merriment.

Then McGonagall’s animal subjects for her class “mysteriously” escaped . . . Filch hadn’t been too happy about that one, either, admittedly. Then again, many saw this as a bonus. Flitwick had bought one of the portable swamps the twins had created; it was still his favorite of their creations. He put it outside the Carrows’ offices and told them it was a new formula, which meant that to get rid of it, he’d have to start from scratch. They moved their offices; he moved the swamp. Thanks to the prison break of the animals, it had a healthy population of fish and amphibians. McGonagall may or may not have conjured a swarm of gnats and horseflies to hover over the surface.

Professor Sprout wasn’t to be left out. She started an initiative where vegetables for the kitchens were grown in the greenhouses. In reality, it was an excuse to slip some of the more unpleasant, though not lethal, plants into the Carrows’ food. Pomfrey in turn assured them it was simply an allergy – and restricted their diets to a vanishingly small selection of unpleasant health foods. They were visibly wasting away.

There was less they could do to deter the enemy Slytherin students; after all, a majority of them were little more than children, and their allegiance had more to do with the influence of their parents than any sincerely held beliefs. Most of the younger ones unwittingly helped to perpetuate the mayhem, as eleven to thirteen-year-olds often do. In terms of magical ability, they were mostly harmless anyway. They certainly weren’t a match for their peers in the DA.
The upper-years were somewhat more problematic. They often found their wands replaced with convincing joke-wands courtesy of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, who were swiftly coming to be seen as the rebellion’s quartermasters. The Umbridge-era discounts had been reinstated, in addition to price breaks for buying in bulk.

Ultimately, the enemy Slytherins were mostly confined to their dorms and their section of the dungeons – there simply weren’t enough Slytherins loyal to the Dark to hope to stand against the rest of the school, a population that was increasingly militant. The Light and neutral Slytherins found small ways to make them deeply uncomfortable even there.

The Carrows were finally defeated by means of a handy little charm Hermione had once described as highly advanced magic. For many, it really was a dream come true.

Mary Kellingworth, a fourth-year Hufflepuff, was chosen to put the plan into action. While she was supposed to be doing an in-class writing assignment for Muggle Studies, she started chewing on her quill and staring into space with glazed eyes and a dreamy smile. Alecto recognized the symptoms of a daydream charm. She slapped the girl back to her senses and confiscated the other boxes of the charm she found in Mary’s bag.

There were two of them: one pirate-adventure flavored, the other a tropical island paradise. Alecto gave the tropical island to her brother, knowing they could both use a break from the hideousness of Hogwarts. Neither daydream worked as advertised. Instead, they experienced terrifying nightmares. They remained paralyzed inside the charm until the spell finally abated. Dream-time moving much faster than time in the real world, the half-hour it took felt much longer.

For a week after that, they relived their nightmares every night. Finally, exhausted and defeated, they begged Snape for some Dreamless Sleep. He obliged, or at least appeared to. In reality, he gave them a particularly potent batch of the Draught of Living Death. It gave an appearance remarkably similar to death and could best be described as a state of suspended animation. True to his word, their sleep, such as it was, was dreamless.

It took several days before their absence was remarked upon; given their series of allergies and illnesses, it was hardly unusual. It was a class of sixth-year dark arts students who finally realized there might be something seriously wrong. They arrived at the classroom, as they always did, since you never knew when they might recover. You couldn’t even check to see if they were at breakfast – since they’d gone on their diets, seeing other people indulge just upset them.

Most of the students were quite content to leave them to whatever new unpleasantness had befallen them. Tybalt Flint, Marcus Flint’s younger brother, insisted they alert the headmaster. A house elf found them in their quarters, passed out and barely breathing. Snape, naturally, gave the determination that they’d taken Living Death.

He’d sneered over their bodies. “Probably brewed it wrong, too. Salazar knows when – or if – we’ll be able to wake them. Ah, well. Nothing for it. Their classes will just be suspended. We can set up study groups or something. Merlin knows none of the other Death Eaters are fit to be around children,” he’d finished distastefully.

Minerva, once again Deputy Headmistress, hid a smile behind her hand. There was a party in the staffroom that evening, and much fun was had by all. The next Hogsmead weekend, the chaperones ordered several hampers of Honeydukes’ best as a gift for the Weasley twins. Most of the professors had found that they had a much better opinion of the twins now they didn’t have to put up with their antics in their classrooms.
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