

Through Silence

by richardgloucester

Hermione needs a new direction in life; Harry helps her find one; some unusual things happen.

One

Chapter 1 of 3

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Part One

After the war, Harry Potter discovered that he had one outstanding talent. It wasn't in any academic field, though he did well enough in his exams after he and the others went back to Hogwarts to finish their schooling. It wasn't as a duellist, though he was skilled and fearless in combat. It wasn't even in Quidditch, though several top teams approached him with very attractive offers. No, Harry Potter's outstanding talent was in making money.

Without really wasting time analysing trends and markets Harry didn't much care for analysis in any incarnation he seemed to have an unerring instinct for spotting where a small injection of cash could produce a mighty haemorrhage of profit. It started with Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, of course. He hadn't asked for it, but Fred and George had him written into the business's papers as a shareholder, anyway. Profits fell off a bit after Fred's tragic death, but after Harry suggested that Dean and Seamus be taken into the creative team, things picked up again nicely. While he was playing Seeker for the Bloxham Barbarians, an unknown broom maker sent him an example of his work. Harry tried it, sent back a few suggestions, tested out the improvements, and then sank half his year's substantial salary into the man's business. With the financial boost and free advertising through Harry's winning match appearances, Gunnmoore Racing Brooms became the market leader in top-of-the-range, must-have models. And so it went on. Opportunities arrived, and if Harry had a good feeling about them, then he invested and the cash piled up until his vault at Gringotts creaked at the seams.

So when a partnership in Flourish and Blotts came up, he knew it was an opportunity too good to miss.

Leaving Ginny to mind the children (or leave them with the nanny whichever pleased her most), he Apparated to Diagon Alley one evening shortly after closing time to meet with Messrs Flourish and Blotts and a pack of lawyers. The normally-busy street was quiet at the end of the day, with only stragglers and tired shop workers heading for home or a quick pint in the Leaky Cauldron. More than a decade after the end of the war, it was nice to see that most of the premises were occupied, that the only posters were gaudy advertisements, and that a general feeling of renewed prosperity prevailed. Harry wandered unhurriedly past the shop windows, reliving his first, awed visit in Hagrid's company. Poor Hedwig. He'd never had the heart to get himself another owl.

The blinds were down at the bookshop, but light showed behind them. The door opened silently to admit Harry, who followed the sound of voices to the back. In a comfortable office, seated behind two large, leather-inlaid desks, were the two ancient proprietors. Their lawyers flanked them. Harry's legal representative, Padma Patil, greeted him with a smile. The meeting began.

At ten o'clock, Harry Potter emerged as the proud owner of half of the country's most prestigious wizarding bookshop. Mr Blotts had sold out to him with a few gracious words about passing the torch on to a more dynamic generation. Mr Flourish, it seemed, was also selling up prior to retirement. His buyer, however, had chosen to remain

anonymous. This person stipulated that a manager for the business would only be appointed with his approval, but he acknowledged Mr Potter's track record in such matters and would be content to leave the job in Mr Potter's hands as long as a sufficiently market-canny bibliophile for the job was found.

Harry went home to his wife with a good feeling in his gut and a bottle of good champagne in his hand.

Hermione happened to be looking directly at Ron when Gabrielle Delacour came into the living room at the Burrow in the wake of Bill, Fleur and Victoire. She wondered, in a strangely detached way, when he had last looked at her like that. Indeed, she wondered whether he had ever looked at her like that. He recovered quickly, and behaved in a perfectly unexceptional manner towards the stunning French girl, but Hermione knew him too well to be fooled. Gabrielle, gentle, sweet Gabrielle, was even more beautiful than Fleur, and Ron had lost his heart to her. Hermione didn't know how she herself was going to react to that. Reaction would have to wait until the children were in bed.

"Good job it's Saturday tomorrow," said Ron, flopping down on the sofa. "I was beginning to think Mum would never let us go and the kids need their sleep. Hugo's coming down with a cold."

"I know," replied Hermione.

Ron picked up the *Prophet* and turned to the sports pages. Hermione drank some tea and opened her book. She stared at a page for a while without actually reading a word.

"Ron," she said suddenly. "When's the last time we made love?"

"Hmm? What was that, 'Mione?"

"When was the last time we made love?" she repeated in a neutral tone.

Ron came out of the paper warily.

"I don't know it's been a while, I suppose. Why? Do you want..."

"It was just after Hugo's fourth birthday, Ron. He's almost five now."

There was an awkward silence.

"Have you wanted to make love with me since then, Ron? Because if it's my fault, not noticing, or being too tired or whatever..."

"Hermione, don't!"

"Let me make this easier for you, Ron. Don't get angry with me I'm not trying to pick a fight or anything." Hermione took a deep breath and continued, carefully choosing her words. "I don't think either of us has wanted each other like that for a long time now. Even since before the last time. I think it's just gone."

"Hermione..."

"No, listen. I saw what happened when you looked at Gabrielle this evening. Hush, Ron. It's okay. I know you wouldn't do anything, any more than I would. But you don't see me like that at all; it's completely gone from our marriage."

Ron was looking aghast at her.

"Maybe you don't want to hear this. We're comfortable with each other. You're my dearest friend, Ron. But... you're not my lover. Not any more. You looked at Gabrielle this evening, and I just thought how wonderful it would be for either of us to have that kind of excitement and passion in our lives."

"But, 'Mione..."

She took his hand, gently.

"In a strange way, dearest, I even felt glad for you. We're still young, only thirty, but we wear each other like old slippers. We're friends, good friends. But maybe we deserve more." Her eyes filled in spite of her resolution to remain calm.

Ron seemed to collapse in on himself a little.

"I'm so sorry, 'Mione," he whispered.

"It's not your fault."

They continued talking late into the night, discussing all the difficulties that might lie ahead, the impact on the children, what Molly and Arthur would say, where each of them would live, and so on. At times there were angry words, and at times they both cried, but in the end they shared a bottle of wine like the old friends they were, and curled up in bed together to draw comfort from each other's presence, knowing that, the decision made, they would soon enough be sleeping on their own.

Once it was clear to the extended family that there would be no bitter rows, no acrimony, that the children would see as much of one parent as the other, the news that Hermione and Ron were dissolving their marriage was accepted without too much argument or, indeed, surprise. Rose and Hugo did their level best to mend the situation, but Rose at least managed to grasp that mummies and daddies sometimes needed to be more than just friends. Both children were reassured when Ron and Hermione fell into a relationship that harked back to their school days. If anything, they were easier with each other than they had been for a very long time. It was as if a weight that both had been carrying without realising it had been lifted from them. Molly and Arthur were sad, but they knew they would not lose Hermione, and Ron, their soft-hearted youngest son, was beginning to look like a boy again.

Hermione did not feel so carefree. Just one glance, that was all it had taken, and she found herself reassessing every aspect of her life, not just her marriage.

After leaving school, both she and Ron had entered the Auror training programme. Everyone had been surprised at her choice, expecting her to take the academic world by storm, but after seeing the Death Eaters' influence spreading far and wide in her world, Hermione was on a crusade to hunt them down and bring them to justice. She proved as talented an investigator and combatant as she was in all other areas of endeavour. The result was that she was promoted to a desk job, and somehow found herself whiling away her life in a mire of bureaucracy. Her children became her refuge and solace, but much as she adored them, they could not satisfy her voracious intellect. Little by little, she found herself stifling. And now everything was being turned on its head. Hugo was about to start school; Rose was already there they were becoming more independent; Ron was free, now, to do what he wanted with his life. He would undoubtedly continue as an Auror he loved field work and was still possessed of a kind of innocent charm, tempered by maturity, that made him genuinely attractive. Hermione was gloomy about her own prospects, however. She was stuck in a job she didn't like, was tied to two kids, and felt she had never been particularly attractive to the opposite sex. Oh, well. She could look around for more interesting work; she loved her children to bits; and she could always go and have a long moan to Ginny about the other thing.

Ginny assessed her friend's mood with wise eyes and applied retail therapy. First, they went to a beauty parlour, where Ginny paid for Hermione to have the works as an early birthday present, and then they hit the shops. Hermione was not to be moved on the alleged healing powers of fancy underwear, but succumbed to some modest

purchases for herself, and presents for the children to celebrate the rapidly approaching school year. One prolonged session in a wine bar later, the girls returned to Grimmauld Place with a take-away and spread themselves out in front of the living room fire to continue dissecting life.

Harry came back from a training session with the newest model Gunmoore in time to hear Hermione bewailing the tedium of her job at the Ministry. Ginny was beginning to look rather glazed, whether with boredom or wine, it was hard to tell.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry greeted her, joining them on their pile of cushions and helping himself to a forkful of curry.

"Hey, Harry," she mumbled. "You're my bestest friend. You know that, don't you?"

"Things that bad?" he asked Ginny, who rolled her eyes.

"I'm her bestest friend too, apparently," she said.

"I hate my job!" wailed Hermione. "All I do is tick boxes and argue with morons. I never see bloody daylight! I never see anything worth wasting my eyesight on!"

"Change your job, then," said Harry, having a brainwave.

"To what? Who'd have a middle-aged, nearly-divorced pen-pusher working for them?"

"Since when was thirty-one middle-aged?" he asked mildly. "And I would. In fact, you're ideal. You're hired!"

"I am? Oh, Harry, I love you!" she cried, flinging her arms round his neck and knocking his glasses askew.

"Oy, Hermione, I'm taken, remember? And you'll have to wait while I get approval from my business partner, but I don't think anyone could reasonably argue with my choice..."

"Doing what?" she asked, trying for a little sobriety.

"Well, Madam Weasley "

"That'll be Ms Granger," she corrected, sniffing.

"Well, Ms Granger," began Harry again, grandly, "you see before you Mr Blotts, of bookshop fame, or at least his successor."

She goggled.

"Flourish and Blotts, henceforth known to legal and financial teams but not the world at large as Messrs X and Potter, is looking for a general manager. The new proprietors do not wish to take too active a hand in the business, and require someone with a thorough knowledge and even further-reaching enthusiasm to do the day-to-day running. The manager will not find her employers ungenerous."

"Oh, Harry!" said Hermione, and burst into tears.

Dear Mr Potter

My client wishes it to be made known that he does not approve your choice of candidate for the position of General Manager, Flourish & Blotts (bookshop and publisher). While Miss Granger's academic record is satisfactory, she has no experience of either the retail or publishing trades. A taste for reading is insufficient to the task of maintaining and growing the business.

You are requested to find another, more suitable, candidate.

Yours sincerely,

Theodore Nott BDSM

Legal representative

Dear Mr Nott

My client Mr Potter thanks you for your correspondence. However, he feels strongly that Ms Granger is the ideal candidate for General Manager. While it is true that she has no direct experience of either the retail or the publishing sides of the business, she has several years' management experience at the Ministry of Magic (Auror Division), during which time her analytical and planning skills resulted in notable improvements in efficiency and budgetary control. Ms Granger has a thorough, up-to-date knowledge of most branches of magical endeavour as well as many areas of Muggle expertise. She has shown during the course of her career that she has a keen mind and a capacity to adapt to the advantage of whichever circumstances require her considerable abilities.

Mr Potter requests that your client review his request to dismiss Ms Granger's application.

Yours sincerely

Padma Patil SBB CFF FFS

Legal representative

Dear Miss Patil

My client wishes me to point out that the business of Flourish & Blotts has need of expert management, not the attentions of a jack-of-all-trades, such as Miss Granger would seem to be from your account. He also wishes me to express his doubts that there will be a need to arrest any of the books, and that being the case, an Auror is not what is required.

In addition, my client is aware that Miss Granger is a close friend of your client. My client wishes to express his distaste for nepotism in all its forms.

Yrs

Theodore Nott BDSM

Legal representative

Dear Mr Nott

My client would like me to reiterate your client's stated intention of leaving the matter of appointing a General Manager in the hands of my client, trusting to my client's good sense and business instinct.

Mr Potter is certain that Ms Granger is the ideal candidate for the position. However, with the aim of avoiding harmful discord at the inception of a business partnership, he suggests that Ms Granger be appointed for a probationary period of six months, at the end of which time the question may be reviewed.

Yrs

Padma Patil SBB CFF FFS

Legal representative

Dear Ms Patil

My client recognises the necessity of establishing a harmonious working relationship. Miss Granger may have the position pending review after six months.

Yrs

Theodore Nott BDSM

Legal representative

"There you are, Hermione the keys to your new empire!" declared Harry. It was early on Saturday evening, and the Trio, with Ginny and Padma, had gathered at the Potters' house to celebrate. They clinked glasses and sampled the champagne.

"I could acquire a taste for this," murmured Padma to Hermione.

"Mmm," she replied, sipping again while looking at the correspondence regarding her appointment. "This mystery man, he doesn't sound too nice, does he?"

"Oh, I bet that's just Teddy Nott being an arse," declared the delicate, refined-looking lawyer. "He always was a bit of a tit. I wouldn't worry about it, if I were you."

"In fact," said Ron, "you really ought to be looking rather more cheerful in general, 'Mione. You've got pastures new to explore. You've also got 24-hour, seven days a week protection for you and the shop if you want it. The entire Auror section is at your feet after what you did to the boss!"

"Well, I needed to make a quick getaway, not work out three months' notice!" she protested.

"I still say the bit with the pineapple was inspired," Ron chuckled. "You're an artist!"

"You're too kind," she smirked before looking serious again. "I hope you're not misplacing your trust choosing me, Harry. I've never done anything like this before you know that. What if I make a mess of it?"

"You won't. I know you, Hermione you can do anything you set your mind to. Running a bookshop can't be harder than defeating a Dark Lord and overturning his Evil Plans."

"Famous last words...." said Hermione, but with an affectionate smile.

They spent the evening at a fancy restaurant, discussing the future and joking as old friends will. Hermione realised how much she had missed her role as one of the Trio during her time as Ron's wife. The return to the equilibrium of friendship had been swift once they had abandoned the requirements of coupledness, and although the whole group was surprised by the state of affairs, they welcomed it. It was more than a job that they celebrated that evening.

However, when the time came to part, Hermione did not go back to her house. Nor did she return with Ron to the Burrow, where the children were spending the weekend being spoiled by their grandparents. Instead, she Apparated to Diagon Alley and silently let herself into the bookshop, dismantling the existing wards and establishing new ones of her own devising. This was her life now, and she was determined to set her stamp on it from the beginning. She had only half a year to convince one of her employers that she was right for the job, so she might as well start sooner rather than later.

Closing the door behind her, she charmed a few lamps to light and removed her shoes with a sigh of relief. Two inches shorter and considerably more comfortable, she moved forward into the main room of the shop. There were all the shelves and stands, just as she remembered them from her first visit, when she was so thrilled at the discovery that she was a witch that she had practically burst from excitement, wanting to run in every direction at once and read all the books in the whole shop. It was eerie to be there on her own, at night, the echoes of her childhood doubling her vision of the present. She wandered around, occasionally touching the spines of the books with a gentle finger, absently straightening one or two of the displays. The doors to other parts of the shop tempted her, but tonight's was just a visit to greet her new life, to breathe the air of new beginnings and new opportunities, to shape a part of the world that had chosen her into an oasis of her own making. She had six months six months to prove to herself and her employers that Hermione Granger was back.

She let herself out into the cool early-autumn night, unaware of the silent watcher in the shadows.

The next day, Hermione returned to Flourish & Blotts armed with a notepad, several ballpoint pens in different colours, and a large Thermos of tea. She'd agreed to be at the Burrow for lunch and part of the afternoon, but apart from that, the day was hers.

Gone were the make-up, the pretty dress, the stupid high heels. This Hermione was dressed for action in jeans, trainers and a baggy t-shirt, her hair caught in a simple pony-tail, and a sweatshirt tied round her waist. Action she intended, and action she would have but first she had to reconnoitre the territory.

The bookshop was far bigger than most people ever realised. The large front area, which contained the materials for the school curriculum as well as most of the popular literature and spellbooks, gave onto a series of smaller chambers and alcoves, opening off in unexpected directions, sometimes sprouting staircases that led to upper floors and yet more specialist niches and store rooms. Once, long ago, it had been a row of houses fronting a narrow street, but with the passage of time and the vicissitudes of town planning, the street had become a dead-end alley, and had finally been boxed in altogether. Some small, dusty windows showed glimpses of a space beyond the walls, but any doors had long since been bricked up as the bookshop owners acquired successive buildings and knocked through from one to the next. The floor levels rarely matched, some of the ceilings were alarmingly low, and many of the more obscure areas had been colonised by all manner of creepy-crawlies.

Hermione set herself to mapping a rough plan of the premises. She pursed her lips at the state many rooms had been allowed to fall into, but let it slide for the moment. Two hours into the day, she was back in the owners' plush office, the loose pages from her pad spread out on the floor. As she drank a well-earned cup of tea, she pieced them together magically, marvelling at the extent of the building and wondering how long it had been since anyone had bothered to do this if ever. It was a strange and intriguing place. As she had worked, she could have sworn sometimes that there was someone watching her, but whenever she looked, there was nobody there. Once or twice, she thought she caught movement out of the corner of her eye, but again there was nothing. Well, old buildings had a habit of gathering presences. At least she had sensed nothing malign.

She tidied up the scribbled parts of her plan and folded it so as to allow her to use it one piece at a time. A glance at her watch showed that it was eleven o'clock. Time enough to make a good start on stage two: inventory.

Over one of Molly Weasley's famed Sunday lunches, she regaled the family with an account of her morning.

"I don't think anyone's set foot in half the rooms for the last fifty years at least," she enthused. "There are antique books in mint condition, still in their cases, not to mention

loads of obscure publications that were never sold. I dare say most of them won't be worth anything, but it'll be interesting to find out."

"Just as long as you don't end up reading every single one," teased Ron.

"I won't have time. Though I'll allow that it's going to be difficult to resist!"

"Mummy," said Hugo, "can I come and help you?"

"Not just yet, sweetheart," said Hermione, giving him a quick hug. She was pleased that he already showed a taste for reading. "Once I know more about the shop and how to run it, then I promise I'll let you both come and explore. You can help me chase the spiders, if you like!"

Rose wrinkled her nose. "I think I'll wait until it's cleaner, if there are loads of spiders. Daddy doesn't like them and neither do I. Why don't you make other people clear it all out, Mummy?"

"I will have to ask other people to help me, love, but it's important that I learn everything I can about the place first. That way, I'll have a clearer idea of what I want them to do."

"Well, I think it sounds a creepy place," replied Rose. "And you've got cobwebs in your hair and dust on your cheek, Mummy. It doesn't look nice."

Hermione wondered from whom her daughter had inherited a concern for appearance.

"But you look full of life, even if you do need a bath," added Ron. "Leave her alone, Rosie. She likes grubbing around investigating stuff no one else knows about."

By three, Hermione was back in the shop. She still couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched, but again, there was nothing to disturb her Auror-tuned sense for danger, so she let it pass until she had leisure to investigate. At five, she paused for another rest. Many rooms on her plan had notes scrawled upon them, but a good half were still virgin territory. Her eyes grew heavy, and she leaned back in Mr Flourish's chair to rest for a minute. She was startled to see what time it was when she woke up, but her cup of tea was still hot, so she couldn't have been asleep that long. She'd probably just misread the clock before. It was unlike her to do so, but hardly surprising, given the distractions. She packed up for the day. She needed to be fresh for the morning.

Author note:

The lawyers' qualifications: Theodore Nott BDSM (Bachelor in Dissimulation, Sophistry and Manipulation); Padma Patil SBB CFF FFS (Senior Bachelor in Bewitchment, Counsel for the Friends of Flamel, Fellow of the Federation of Sophists). These sets of initials can be found in the non-magical world as well, of course, where they have different meanings.

Two

Chapter 2 of 3

Hermione starts to make the bookshop her own; she encounters an old acquaintance and finds that life takes a turn for the better.

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Messrs Flourish and Blotts had agreed to delay their departure by one week in order to show Ms Granger the day-to-day running of the business. She applied herself enthusiastically to the task, earning encomiums from both the elderly gentlemen. When they finally left, they presented her with a magnificent bunch of flowers, a fine selection of chocolates, and a good bottle of Bordeaux ("to share with your young man"). She closed the shop on the Saturday evening with a sigh of relief, locking the door on their departing forms and installing some new, freshly-redesigned wards. They seemed the types to come back and interfere.

"Thank Hecate for that," she sighed. "Incompetent old farts," she added for good measure, childishly raising two chubbies towards the door.

Indeed, the outgoing proprietors had left the business ailing. Each evening, after seeing the children into bed and one of Ron, Molly or Arthur installed as babysitter, Hermione had returned to the shop to review the accounts. F&B had overbought, undersold, made stupid investments, indulged in a dangerous degree of bad planning, and traded too much on their name rather than on serving the market. In the deeply conservative wizarding world, such a strategy could carry a business a long way, but not an infinite distance. There were one or two rivals appearing, and the old firm was sure to suffer if she didn't do something fairly drastic.

She went back into the office her office now.

"Good evening, ghost," she said whimsically, feeling a slight movement of air where there should have been none. There was no reply, of course.

The office needed to be redecorated. Hermione shrank one of the desks and put it away neatly in a cupboard. She repositioned the other, upholstered the chair in a more pleasing fabric, changed the colour of the walls with a nonchalant flick of her wand, and sat down with her bottle of wine and a glass. From her pocket she took a very small object. "*Engorgio!*" she muttered, and before her was a large sheaf of notes that she had spent the week compiling. She poured herself a glass and began some serious planning.

On Monday morning, she was briefly perplexed to find her pages re-ordered on her desk, but as she'd drunk half the bottle by the time she'd finished, perhaps she wasn't so very sure about the order she'd arranged them in, after all. Looking at them again, she found that one or two of the juxtapositions suggested measures she hadn't thought of before, but which in the light of day looked likely to produce good results.

Time passed. Hermione threw herself into her job. Hugo and Rose went with her once or twice on a Sunday, but it wasn't much of a success. Rose grew bored quickly, and Hugo lost himself, frightening Hermione more than she cared to admit. When she found him, in an upstairs room near the absolute back of the building, he was deep in a lavishly-illustrated book about dragons, laboriously reading the text out loud while admiring the pictures.

"Oh, Hugo! I've been looking everywhere for you!" cried Hermione, hugging him fiercely in a mixture of relief and pride. "I didn't know you could read so well, darling! Where

did you find the lovely book?"

"The ghost left it for me," he answered matter-of-factly.

"Ghost?" she said, paling a little. Mysterious presences were one thing when she was involved, but when they chose to interact with her five-year-old son...

"Yes, Mummy. I've never seen him, but I know he's there. And when I found this book, I knew he must have put it there for me."

Hermione breathed a little more easily. Hugo must simply have found the book and invented a benefactor ghosts couldn't handle material objects, and she knew there were no intruders in the place. Her wards would never let anyone pass undetected.

"Would you like me to buy you the book for Christmas?" she asked, and then had to spend the trip back down to her office explaining why she had to buy books when she was the boss of the bookshop.

Harry dropped in frequently. He was pleased to see the rapid progress Hermione was making. The old shop was becoming brighter and livelier, cleaner and more active without losing its old-world charm. The employees were looking more cheerful than anyone had ever seen them. Hermione had gone out of her way to motivate them by introducing staff meetings during which they were invited to discuss her innovations and suggest improvements and initiatives of their own. She delegated responsibilities and rewarded performance.

Mr X, as she called her other employer, did not show his face. He limited his involvement to requests for books and the arrangement of transfers from Gringotts in payment. He appeared to be a voracious and eclectic reader. That was all Hermione knew of him. He sent neither suggestions nor advice. It seemed that he was going to wait for her probation to end and then give his verdict. Harry said she had nothing to worry about, and Hermione thought he was probably right, but she fretted nonetheless.

She continued to work late, often spending the time on what she regarded as her personal project: the cleaning, cataloguing and valuing of the contents of all the rooms left untended for decades. Strange things happened sometimes. If she fell asleep at her desk, she would wake to find the fire banked up or her cardigan draped round her shoulders so she wouldn't get too cold. A lost notebook would turn up unexpectedly, sometimes with the pages rearranged, as they had been that first night, so as to suggest a train of thought which would prove valuable. She could never trace the perpetrator, but grew convinced, after some initial nervousness, that whatever it was meant her no harm.

A month into her tenure, she called her two deputies into the office to look over the books with her.

"Miss Bannister, Mr Crun, I find that there are some discrepancies in the figures for this month. Can you help me, please?"

They bent their heads over the books, scanning the pages rapidly.

"Oh, that," said Mr Crun.

"What?" said Hermione.

"Well," said Miss Bannister, "there's always been a bit of a problem with pilfering, you see. Mr Flourish and Mr Blotts just set aside an amount in the budget each month to cover it."

"I am not Mr Flourish. Nor am I Mr Blotts," replied Hermione grimly. "I am not simply going to write off this amount of theft. We need to put measures in place."

"Oh, but Ms Granger," protested Miss Bannister. "We'd have to charm every single book for theft detection. It would take up far too much time."

"It wouldn't be very cost-effective, surely?" wheedled elderly Mr Crun, who while being adept at charming the ladies into parting with their Galleons, was also rather fond of his lunch breaks and kept to his hours of employment with admirable precision.

"I'll see what I can do," responded Hermione in a mild manner which set them on immediate alert.

Within two days she had worked out a way of installing a theft-protection charm in whole shelves of books at a time. A simple pass of the wand by the cashier after payment would disable the charm. Any book being removed from the premises without passing over the payment desk would set off a cacophonous alarm.

Two days after installation, the alarm went off. Books fell to the floor all over the shop as people clapped their hands to their ears. Hermione moved swiftly to the doorway, where a tall man had been detained by a magical barrier. She put a firm hand on his arm.

"Excuse me," she began, only to trail off into an astonished silence when she looked up into the irritated black eyes of Severus Snape.

There he stood, large as life and twice as ugly, three books held quite openly in his grasp. No one had seen him for over ten years. No one knew where he had gone after the trial had cleared his name. He had simply vanished off the face of the earth; even his Order of Merlin had had to be awarded *in absentia*. And yet, there he was, glaring in the way she remembered so well.

Hermione was lost for words for a minute, but as the alarm continued to sound and customers began shouting complaints over the top of it, she pulled herself together and cancelled the spell.

"Would you come with me, please?" she said to her former professor, and led the way to her office.

She simply could not believe that he was there. It was even more unlikely that he should be stealing and so openly, at that. She didn't know what to think. She closed the door behind them and turned to look at him.

He had walked to her desk, where he laid the books down before returning her gaze impassively. He had not changed very much. Still gaunt and sallow, still black-clad, but his hair, longer now and tied back at the nape of his neck, was clean and shot with strands of silver. There were a few lines around his eyes to add to those she had always seen carved into his features, but other than that he seemed to have aged well. He arched an eyebrow at her, and she realised with chagrin that she had been staring. She cleared her throat.

"Um, Professor Snape this is something of a surprise," she said. The inanity of her words was met with a slight lift of the eyes. She felt acutely uncomfortable. With a gesture towards the books, she continued, "Would you mind explaining...?"

He didn't reply, and she began to feel annoyed. It wasn't for her to feel awkward in this situation. He had been caught walking out of her shop carrying books for which he had not paid.

"Sir, if you cannot account for this incident in a manner which satisfies me, then I shall be obliged to call for an Auror to take you into custody. Theft is no longer tolerated on these premises."

Still he gave no answer, but he uncrossed his arms and reached for a piece of parchment and a quill that lay on the desk.

I do not speak, he wrote.

Her eyes flew to the knot of scar tissue just visible above his collar. Now she felt even more uncomfortable.

"Oh. I er excuse me. Can you please tell me, nevertheless, why you were taking the books, Professor?"

The books are mine. I am no longer a professor.

His script was swift, crabbed but strong, the down-strokes harsh.

She frowned. "What do you mean 'the books are yours'?"

Gringotts sends my order with payment each month. I have not received my books this month, though the transfer has been made. These books are mine.

Hermione's mind went into overdrive. "Oh, good grief! You mean to say, *you're Mr X?*" she blurted before she could stop herself.

He snorted.

She didn't know for the moment how to continue in the face of the revelations piling up in her face. She settled for the easiest thing first.

"Just a minute, please, Prof... sir." She went to the door and called for Miss Bannister. Without admitting the woman to the room, she enquired about the order.

"Oh, but you had us so busy with the anti-theft charms that there just wasn't time," whined the shop assistant.

"There wasn't time," repeated Hermione scathingly, "to parcel up three books and send them over to Gringotts for *the proprietor of the place where you just happen to work?*"

Miss Bannister blanched.

"I am not very impressed," snapped Hermione. "Nothing of the sort will happen again. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Ms Granger," quavered the other woman, suddenly realising that there was steel in her generally amiable boss. Hermione shut the door in her face.

"I'm so sorry," she said simply to Snape, who had stayed where he was by the desk. "I'll see to your order personally from now on. Just my luck to catch my boss with the new anti-theft charm," she said ruefully.

It is a good idea.

"Thank you," she said, blushing at the first bit of praise she could ever remember receiving from him. "Though I can't claim originality most Muggle shops have something of the sort. Well, as you are here, can I offer you anything?" He shook his head. "Would you like to see the accounts and review the plans I've been drawing up for the business?"

By way of answer, he seated himself behind the desk and waited while she retrieved her papers. Summoning a chair for herself, she sat at his elbow as he rapidly scanned the sheets. As he was silent and concentrating, she was able to examine him closely. Her first impression held up on closer scrutiny: he had aged well indeed, yet there was an air of something indefinable melancholy, perhaps which she could not remember ever having associated with him before. He seemed no less harsh on first view, but sadder. She was brought back from her contemplation by a scribbled question being thrust under her nose. His eyes said, "Pay attention, Miss Granger!" with just as much irritation as his voice ever had in class. She blushed and applied herself to the task.

Two hours passed swiftly in his company. She had to send out for sandwiches as they worked through her lunch hour, and though there was no conversation over the meal, she did not find his presence made her uncomfortable. The questions he scrawled were pertinent; any answers he gave were challenging and provoked fruitful trains of thought. It was invigorating.

When at last he indicated that he was ready to leave, Hermione rose from her chair with regret, though she felt she had acquitted herself reasonably well. He half stood, but then sat down again and reached for a scrap of parchment. There was a moment of hesitation, but then he took a deep breath and wrote, *Is there anything you wish to ask me before I go?*

Hermione floundered momentarily. There were so many things she wanted to know. She had dozens of questions tumbling around in her head, all clamouring to be answered. But she didn't want to push her luck too far, despite the apparently open invitation.

"How have you kept yourself?" she asked at last. "Why did you buy this place?"

Potions. Patents. Royalties. Investments, he wrote tersely. *Books are my solace.*

She wondered if he knew how much of his depth of loneliness he had revealed in that last word. Something in her reached out to him.

"I know what you mean," she ventured.

Perhaps you do, he returned, with a searching look at her.

"Will you come here again to review the business records, or shall I send them to you via Gringotts?" asked Hermione, feeling that more hung on his answer than she was prepared to think about.

He hesitated again before writing, *I will come. There is no need to send me my books. I will collect them.*

"May I tell Harry about you?"

He closed his eyes, and the groove between his eyebrows deepened.

I will tell Potter.

And indeed he did. Harry barged into Hermione's office the next day, unable to contain his astonishment. He went over and over the brief meeting he had had with Snape in Padma's office. He was gobsmacked that Snape was still alive, rich, and his business partner. He couldn't get over the man's silence. Hermione heard him out. Her own astonishment and mixed feelings were still roiling in her head. Snape's silence had affected her more than she would admit aloud. That voice had been so much a part of him so infinitely expressive, even if what it was expressing was usually some degree of disapproval and now it was gone. He had lived without a direct means of communicating the nuances of his thought to a receptive listener for over ten years. How dreadful that would be, she reflected. She herself often felt frustrated at having nobody with whom to discuss her intellectual pursuits, but to know that discussion would only be through the laborious means of writing, even if there were an interlocutor to hand that would be so much harder. The spontaneous give and take of a spirited discussion was such a rich and rewarding thing.

"Oh, but he wants his involvement kept a secret for now at least," said Harry, unnecessarily.

Hermione saw him out with relief.

Her life quickly settled to a new routine. She worked long hours, devoting most of her energies to the business she was quickly growing to love. She watched with pride as her improvements took and restored the old place to prosperity. Some of her schemes were more charitable than business-orientated, but she felt justified in implementing them for the sake of F&B's reputation. One such was when she engaged a book-binder. Sixty per cent of his time was to be spent lovingly restoring customers' antique favourites at great expense; the other two days were for refurbishing up second-hand school books.

Why?

Was the abrupt note scrawled in the margin of the letter she had written to Snape informing him of this step, and which came back to her by return owl.

To ensure that children who cannot afford to buy the whole range of expensive new books may still take pride in their possessions she replied. *I still remember how Ron and Ginny suffered over having such shabby things.*

Go ahead, he answered.

Away from work, she spent as much time with the children as she could. Rose was doing well at school, though she preferred sports and handcrafts to anything else, and Hugo was making spectacular progress, for which he was often cruelly teased, especially by children older and stupider than him. Hermione's heart ached for him. She recollected all too well how she had been ostracised and mocked for her intelligence. She gave him what support she could, thankful that he was at least in a school where his emerging magical abilities were recognised and understood. She tried to make her darling, sweet little boy feel that his mind was a beautiful thing, and not be afraid to use it. But sometimes, alone in the shop after the children's bed time, she wept bitterly for his suffering. When Rose played Quidditch on Sunday mornings, Hermione sometimes took Hugo with her on an expedition to the back rooms of F&B (she thought of it so often under this title that she was beginning to wonder about changing the sign over the door). She no longer worried about Hugo getting lost. He would be sure to turn up somewhere with some fantastic tome or other on his knees. He always claimed that the 'ghost' had found him these books, and it became something of a joke between them.

Apart from the odd evening with Harry and Ginny, or a few hours at the Burrow, Hermione had no social life. Her mind was on her job. She told herself she didn't care.

Mr Snape, as she was learning to think of him, came a month to the hour after his first visit. As before, they spent a couple of hours going through Hermione's accounts and progress reports, then reviewing her plans. Afterwards, they drank tea in a silence that was companionable rather than awkward. They shook hands when Snape left.

He returned three weeks later, on the Friday. It seemed he had a need for some books sooner than he had anticipated. While Hermione alternated between dealing with paperwork at her desk and helping out in the shop, he settled in one of the armchairs she had installed in front of the office fireplace and became absorbed in one of the volumes he had selected. He was still there at closing time.

Hermione looked at him inquiringly when she returned to the office to tidy her desk.

Are you going home now?

"No, I thought I might inventory another room upstairs this evening. The kids are with Ron for the weekend."

You have no plans to go out?

"No." Hermione flushed uncomfortably. "I don't 'go out' as such," she admitted, wondering what devil was prompting her to tell him things that couldn't possibly interest him.

I was thinking of visiting some Muggle bookshops. I understand that some stay open late in the evening. Would you care to accompany me?

His expression was not exactly friendly, but the invitation was as welcome, she found, as it was unexpected.

"Thank you! I would love to," she told him with a frank smile.

She hung her work robe on a peg, grabbed her jacket and handbag, and led the way out of the shop. He nodded approvingly at her wards, then offered his arm in an old-fashioned gesture. *Why not?* she thought, feeling slightly flummoxed by the turn of events. But a Friday evening spent in purest book-lust with a fellow enthusiast at her side sounded like a holiday to her.

The following Friday, they did it again. He was always formal, never warm, but she found that even without his speaking they could communicate reasonably well. In fact, it got easier all the time. He was a master of the speaking look, and twice on that second outing, he made her laugh.

Christmas appeared on the horizon, and F&B became phenomenally busy. Hermione had selected various tactics and gimmicks from the Muggle world to entice customers, and late opening on Fridays and Saturdays during December was one of them. Snape's visits to collect his books were sadly curtailed.

Then came Christmas Day. Hermione went to the Burrow with her children. They had been delighted with the little trinkets concealed inside their stockings, and were alight with anticipation of their 'real' presents, which they would be opening with their grandparents and multitude of uncles, aunts and cousins. As they prepared to Floo to the Burrow, Hermione once more thanked Fate that she had been able to keep a good relationship with her in-laws. They had been her surrogate family for twenty years, and it would have destroyed her to lose them. She knew couples whose marriages had died and who had been incapable of exchanging a polite word afterwards, but she and Ron were still good friends. At the basis of their marriage, there had always been that to rely on. Still, it was a cruel blow when he came into the living room with his arm round Gabrielle Delacour.

Once again, Hermione had to put her thoughts and feelings in a box for the duration. It nearly killed her to do so, but by the end of the day it seemed she had put on a sufficiently good show to fool most people. The kids begged to stay the night, since Teddy and Victoire were both there to share the fun, and she was glad to give permission. Ron saw her out into the garden, his face showing his concern.

"Did nobody tell you?" he asked.

"No, nobody did," she said tightly. "It's probably my fault, Ron. I've been so obsessed with the shop, and with the kids when I'm not there, that I haven't had time to notice much else."

"I'm so sorry, 'Mione...."

"Oh, don't be sorry, Ron. I'm just surprised. I'm happy for you. She's a sweet girl. Don't worry about me. I'm just a bit tired. I'll be perfectly okay tomorrow. Good night."

She gave him a peck on the cheek and Disapparated. But not home. She went to the bookshop, where she let herself in, carefully re-erected the wards, went into her office, hung her coat up, sat down at her desk, and began to cry.

She cried until there were no more tears in her and she fell into an exhausted sleep with her head pillowed on her arms.

Waking some time later, she registered some dull surprise that the room was warm, whereas it had been cold before, and that someone was sitting by the fire. She shook her head to clear it, and regretted her action immediately she had the world's worst headache. With a groan, she tried to focus on the other person, who had risen and was approaching her. It was Snape. He pressed a small phial into her hand. Sniffing the contents cautiously and recognising a powerful analgesic, she downed the lot in one gulp and shuddered. Snape had returned to the hearth, where he appeared to be pouring tea. Hermione rose stiffly from the desk. The phial was taken from her and her fingers were wrapped round a large, hot mug. Firm hands pushed her gently into an armchair.

There was silence. Of course there was silence Snape couldn't speak. But as Hermione revived, she became aware that he was watching her closely.

"I must look awful," she said at last, raising one hand to push at her hair.

He nodded his agreement, though his eyes creased in a hint of a smile.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, attempting to divert his attention from her no doubt ghastly appearance.

He gave her an *I own the place* look. Then he took a pad and pencil out of his pocket and wrote, *The question would be more pertinently asked of you. Why are you not with your family?*

"I... they... it's just that..." Hermione faltered, exasperated with herself that she was tearing up again. She breathed deeply to master her voice. "I had a bit of a shock. I needed to get away for a while. The children are with their cousins, having fun."

Shock? he prompted.

Of a sudden, Hermione found that she was unburdening herself to this most unlikely of confidants. She feared that he would think less of her, but his expression remained neutral, his eyes not sympathetic, but not unkind either. That was good. She thought that sympathy might have undone her completely. She told him everything, finishing with how seeing Ron in love had made her feel so profoundly alone and incompetent at life that she had run for refuge.

You have friends.

"I know. But it's not really enough. I can't share all of what I am with them I never have been able to. And now I'm seeing Hugo already enduring the same treatment I got at school, and it's making everything come back to me tenfold, somehow." She sank her face into her hands, bending until her forehead almost touched her knees, but she looked up when she felt an insistent touch on her shoulder.

You should go out more. Meet people.

She wondered at the strange look in his eyes as he handed her these words.

"I do, from time to time. Ginny and Harry set me up from time to time. But they're all ex-schoolmates, ex-colleagues, or idiots. And the categories are not mutually exclusive," she added sourly, which elicited a snort of agreement.

They sat a while. Hermione remembered that it was Christmas, and felt for the lonely man opposite her. She, at least, had had friends and family around her for the festival.

"I have something for you," she said, rising and going to her desk to retrieve a beautifully-wrapped parcel from the top drawer. She placed it in his hands. "Open it," she urged.

He started slightly and then slowly undid the black satin ribbon, which he rolled up and pocketed, then the green-and-silver Florentine paper. His fingers briefly stroked the polished walnut box before opening it to reveal an elegant fountain pen. He stilled.

"Do you like it?" Hermione asked anxiously.

He moved his head in a gesture she realised would have caused his hair to swing forward and disguise his expression in the days when he still wore it loose. Lacking that refuge, he turned his face away, but not before she had seen that his eyes were moist. She wondered how long it had been since anyone had given him a gift. On a deep, slightly shaky breath, he reached out and squeezed her hand. She returned the pressure before they both let go.

It is perfect, Hermione, he wrote. *Thank you.*

"You're welcome. Happy Christmas... Severus."

Author Note: "raising two chubbies" making a V-sign, a rude gesture invented by the English to infuriate the French during the Hundred Years' War, and still popular.

Three

Chapter 3 of 3

Things are going well, both in the shop and between Hermione and her new friend. But, as ever, fate throws a spanner in the works.

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The business continued to thrive. Hermione made some changes to editorial policy in the publishing side, and also installed a Muggle selection in one of the smaller rooms, using cunningly placed displays and advertisements to entice customers to try something new. She was working on a plan to install a coffee shop, but for the moment did not quite see where they would put one. She became used to seeing Ron with Gabrielle and was delighted that the children liked her. She admitted to herself that she was somewhat jealous of Rose's adulation of the Frenchwoman's beauty, but decided to get over that as well. It wasn't Gabrielle's fault, after all. For herself, there was still no social life as such, but work was rewarding, and the Friday night forays into Muggle London with Severus were becoming a regular event, once every two weeks.

It was on one of these Fridays, when she was finishing up her work in the office and looking forward to Severus' prompt arrival, that the Floo connection activated and Ron stepped through with the children.

"I'm sorry, 'Mione there's an emergency all hands on deck, and Mum and Dad are away. Can't get hold of Harry and Ginny at all. I'll make it up to you!" And with that, he was gone.

Hermione stared at the children, who stared back. They were already in their pyjamas and dressing gowns, their only concession to going out being the hasty addition of shoes to the ensemble. Hugo was clutching his old teddy bear to his chest.

Hermione didn't know what to do. In ten minutes, Severus would be arriving, and she realised suddenly that she had no idea how to get in touch with him to let him know what was happening. She rubbed her forehead.

"Right, then. We'll have to wait here for a little while, darlings, because I have a friend coming we were going to look at some bookshops..."

Rose rolled her eyes and Hermione giggled, seeing the funny side of it.

"Yes, I know, I know! Have you two been bathed? Have you eaten?"

Hugo piped up. "Daddy was going to buy us a pizza and play Gobstones and let us stay up late," he said, sounding profoundly reproachful.

That was the moment when Severus came through the Floo. As he dusted himself off and straightened, the children stared up into his surprised face. He looked an enquiry at Hermione, who sighed.

"Something came up," she said.

"Mummy, who is this?" Rose asked, doing her best impression of her grandmother.

Well, it had to happen one day, thought Hermione. "Children, this is Mr Snape, my friend. Severus, this is Rose, and this is Hugo."

"This is Teddy," said Hugo solemnly.

To Hermione's astonishment, Severus shook hands all round, even with Teddy.

"Are you the Mr Snape who used to be Mummy's teacher?" asked Rose suspiciously, having heard a few tales. He nodded. Rose's auburn brows began to lower.

"Mr Snape can't talk, children," said Hermione, recognising a gathering head of impertinence.

"Then how...?" puzzled Hugo.

Severus drew his pen and note pad from a pocket and wrote, *Like this.*

Hugo read the words out loud, and after a moment's thought said, "That's so cool!"

Hermione couldn't help it. She just burst out laughing and couldn't stop. The idea of any child finding Severus Snape 'cool' was the unlikeliest and funniest thing she had heard for what seemed like years. She recovered enough to start to apologise, but saw that while Rose was looking at her as if she'd lost her mind, Severus and Hugo were regarding one another with interest.

Pizza? Games? wrote Severus, showing that he had heard the original plans for the evening.

Rose was suspicious, very much a haughty young lady, but Hugo jumped up and down on the spot.

"Can he come home with us, Mummy?" he chirped, obviously, and for no apparent reason, very taken with the former Great Bat of the Hogwarts dungeons.

Hermione didn't know how to answer. It would be an enormous step to take, and in any case, she doubted that Severus would want to spend his evening with her children. He eyed her, sensing her confusion, and calmly saved the day or the evening, at least.

We can stay here. I will hunter-gather, he scribbled, *if you will lend me Hugo to be my voice. You and Rose find a game to play. Don't worry,* he added when she looked at him in consternation.

So Hugo, his pyjamas Transfigured into decent clothes, set off hand-in-hand with the Git, chattering fit to burst, while Hermione and her daughter set to work transforming other bits and pieces into a selection of games.

Later, Hermione looked back on one of the best evenings she could recall spending since leaving school. Rose had gradually warmed to Severus, as he had diplomatically abandoned his most forbidding range of expressions for the evening, and Hugo had been his slave since the moment the two of them clapped eyes on each other. From the way they had interacted, though Snape remained a little distant, Hermione suspected that the feeling was mutual. He had even allowed Hugo to read him a bedtime story.

The children were asleep on their feet by the time Hermione called a halt. Partings were perfunctory at best, but Snape pressed a scrap of parchment into her hand at the last minute, while she was buttoning up dressing gowns and grabbing her bag. She read it before she slept. *Your daughter is charming, but Hugo is extraordinary. I would like to see him again.* Hermione pressed it to her breast, her hands trembling. It was a precious gift he had given her.

Yet not so precious as the note she found on her desk the following Monday morning.

Friend.

Naturally, the news that Snape was co-owner of the bookshop and that Hermione was seeing him regularly, took all of about a nanosecond to make the rounds of the Weasley family. She tried to make light of their astonishment and barely-disguised disapproval, but it was hard. There was one particularly raw exchange with Ron and Molly that hurt her deeply.

"How could you?" Ron bellowed. "How could you let the Git associate with our children? You know what he was like at school he's a complete bastard, even if he did work for the Order!"

"Ron! He's not like that I know him. How do you think you would have behaved in his position and with his history? You'd have been far, far worse, and you know it."

"How can you say that?" butted in Molly. "Ron's a good man, Hermione dear you know he only wants to protect the children."

"Meaning that I don't?" Hermione snarled. "Are you saying I would deliberately expose my children *my children* to a person I believed capable of harming them? Are you?"

Molly backed down swiftly. Hermione was losing control, and the air was beginning to crackle with magic.

"How dare you insult me like that!" she almost screamed. "And how dare you doubt him! You know what he did what he sacrificed. You know he always did his utmost to protect the children in his care. Even us!"

"Hell, Hermione," said Ron in disgust, "you sound as though you're in love with the guy."

"He's my friend," she said flatly. "And if he should choose to come into contact with the children again," she prevaricated, "then I will allow it. His trustworthiness has been proved time and time again."

The fact that after this confrontation all she wanted to do was find Severus and seek comfort in his presence made Ron's accusation that she was in love very troubling. That she had found a special friend in him was clear; that she was fiercely loyal to him was also obvious. But in love? It was unlikely, to say the least. And as he was undoubtedly not in love with her, it was best that she quash the thought before it had time to develop.

With only six weeks of her probationary period to go, Hermione was busting a gut at work. She was reasonably sure she had already won the approval of both her bosses, but she had set herself targets which she was determined to meet. Her pattern of late nights persisted. The children accompanied her to the shop on occasional Sundays. She didn't know how Severus managed to detect their presence, but if they were there, sooner or later he would make an appearance. He was gracious enough to show an interest in the handcraft projects Rose usually brought with her, even finding her one or two helpful books, but it was Hugo he had really come to see. Hermione, grubby from turning out another forgotten room, would come upon the pair of them poring over some old volume or other, Hugo reading aloud and asking endless questions. Severus corrected the boy's reading by dint of indicating where there was a mistake and patiently waiting while Hugo worked out the correct pronunciation. He answered questions either by encouraging Hugo to think it through himself, or by writing on his pad of paper, always with the pen she had given him. She noticed that he took the trouble to print his answers so Hugo could read them easily. He never cracked a smile, but everything he did showed that whatever it was that had soured him at Hogwarts, it was not the activity of teaching.

Rose and Hugo delivered such glowing reports of him that even Ron was reassured.

The time she spent alone with Severus was even better. She had never felt so at ease, so accepted for her intelligence and enthusiasms, so able to express her thoughts, plans, and even, on occasion, her feelings.

Hermione was happy. She had her Friday outings, her work was a success, her children were blooming, and she had a friend who was becoming more dear to her than she cared to admit even to herself.

Thus it was that the contents of the letter brought to her at her desk by a fine tawny owl one afternoon came as an almost physical blow.

Dear Miss Granger

I am instructed to inform you that, your probationary period of six months as manager of Flourish & Blotts now being over, your services are no longer required. You are requested to turn over your accounts and keys to your deputy upon closing this Saturday evening.

Yrs

Theodore Nott BDSM

Legal representative

With a few cold words, all of Hermione's hopes and dreams were overturned. She felt utterly betrayed. She barely heard when the rest of the staff left. It was automatic for her to raise the wards after the door closed she did it with a wave of her wand from where she sat. Time passed. She opened a drawer to retrieve the parchment on which Severus had so carefully written "Friend". Her eyes caressed the strong lines of his script and her sense of betrayal deepened. Time passed. Hermione grew cold, sitting still. Time passed.

The fireplace flared green and Severus stepped through. Hermione didn't react until he placed a gentle hand under her chin to make her look at him. *What is wrong?* he wrote quickly, his natural frown deepening as he took in her pale face and shadowed eyes.

"How could you?" she said tonelessly.

He looked perplexed.

"How *could* you?" she accused him, with more vigour. She rose from her seat and rounded the desk to face him. "How could you, how could you, how could you?" she began to sob, impatiently smearing the angry tears from her cheeks.

He spread his hands, helplessly.

"How could you?" she shouted, thrusting the letter with such force against his chest that he staggered backwards. The other scrap of parchment she held clutched tightly against her own shaking body.

He scanned the letter quickly, and his lips thinned ominously. He reached for Hermione, but she swung away from his grasp, fumbling blindly for where she had hung her coat that morning. A paper was thrust in front of her, but she pushed it away, making for the door. Feeling the keys jangle in her pocket, she wrenched them out and threw them on the floor. Snape grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to turn round. The contact broke the last of her self-control, and she went for him with her fists, silent but for the sobbing breaths that escaped her. She still couldn't see through the tears, but she felt his arms close round her, pinning her to him so that she could do little more than struggle vainly, her face crushed against the buttons of his jacket. She fought until there was no energy left in her, and when she finally stilled, Snape released her, once more placing his note before her.

There has been a mistake, she read.

She looked up into his dark eyes, which for once were not cool and distant but filled with an agitated concern.

"The letter seemed clear enough to me," she said bitterly.

Forgive me, Hermione. I instructed Nott to dismiss you before you even began. I neglected to rescind the order. It is my mistake. I would never intentionally hurt you. Forgive me.

She held his words in her trembling hands, looking at them fixedly in order to avoid his intent gaze. He wanted her to forgive him? Severus Snape was begging her forgiveness? He did not wish to hurt her? Hermione simply did not know how to react.

"I wish you could talk," she whispered.

He froze. There was a long moment before he wrote, *I can.*

Hermione's eyes flew to his in consternation.

"But you said..."

I told you that I do not speak. That is true.

"And all this time, you've just... I don't understand. I just don't understand! Don't touch me, Severus," she said as he reached for her. Suddenly, everything had become too much for her. She whirled and ran out of the shop, leaving her keys on the floor and the door open.

An exceedingly respectful ("smarmy", Harry said) letter from Theodore Nott apologising for his error and confirming his client's intention to allow Hermione to continue as manager, nay, his client's earnest request that she should do so, arrived by express owl early the following morning. Snape must have roused Nott in the middle of the night and put the fear of some deity or other into him, thought Hermione dully.

When the children asked her what was wrong, she replied that she was just tired and might be catching a cold.

A second early owl brought her the keys. There was no accompanying note. She suppressed the urge to burst into tears again. After a night spent weeping in her bed, being a watering-pot at the breakfast table seemed like the ultimate sacrifice of dignity, one which she was not ready to make, even if her life seemed as wrong in every aspect as it had been wonderful just twenty-four hours previously. She stared at the keys. Ron arrived to collect the children it was his turn to have them for the weekend.

"Don't be late for work, Mummy," admonished Rose, seeing her mother still immobile at the table.

Hermione dragged herself to work. She accomplished what needed to be done with the minimum of communication with her staff and went home at the end of the day. She lay awake half the night, unable to pin down her thoughts and feelings regarding Severus. He had seemed her friend, but he had deceived her. What game had he been playing with his silence? She felt strongly towards him, but exactly what it was she felt, she feared to face it raged inside her and made her afraid. Her emotions had never been so outside her control.

And so the pattern of her days for the next two weeks was established. She was like an automaton. Her only comfort apart from the children, to whom she could not unburden herself, was the 'ghost', whatever it was, which still showed her the occasional kind attention. She thought she really ought to investigate exactly what it was, but lacked the energy. Everyone who knew her was greatly concerned by her apathy, but she kept them at arm's length, politely turning aside enquiries as to her state.

Harry's and Snape's lawyers organised a meeting to draw up a new contract of employment for Hermione. The terms were more than generous and included an option for equal partnership at the end of a further year as manager. Surprisingly, it was Snape who suggested that, though Harry was more than happy to agree. As the two lawyers sniped at each other over the final wording, their clients drifted off to the other side of the room so as to be out of earshot. Harry jerked his thumb over his shoulder at Padma and Nott.

"You'd think they were still on opposing sides," he said, attempting to break Snape's icy facade, but there was no reaction. "Shall we break the news to Hermione or let the flunkies do it?" he tried again.

It would be better if she were to receive the news through official channels, as it is a professional matter

Harry looked sharply at his former professor. He could not claim to know the man well though he knew him better than most but it was clear that he was suffering. And Hermione was miserable. And she hadn't mentioned Snape at all for the last fortnight. Harry found that, in spite of what Ginny always said, he was capable of intuition, after all.

"Well, I still think we ought to celebrate. I'll set something up and let you know," he said breezily, leaving the room as quickly as he could without actually running. He caught Snape's exasperated huff and grinned to himself. He'd leave Ginny to handle the Hermione end of things.

Hermione needed strong persuasion to agree to an outing with Harry and Ginny, but as they were insistent that her success at Flourish & Blotts should be properly celebrated, she gave in with as good a grace as she could muster. It was her fixed intention to resign as soon as she figured out what else she could do to earn a living, but they didn't need to know that. Yet.

She had been forced to promise Ginny that she would dress up properly, as the venue was to be one of London's most expensive restaurants nothing but the best for their friend. So when she arrived, attired in a simple black sheath dress, her hair piled in an elegant twist, and her make-up subtly highlighting her fine brown eyes and the curve of her full lower lip, she turned heads.

She gave her name and was ushered to a table set for four. The waiter informed her that the rest of her party was sure to arrive soon, and would Madam care for a drink. Madam would. She fortified herself with Burgundy, sinking into a brown study while she waited.

When the feeling that she was no longer alone touched her awareness, she looked up and saw Snape seated across the table from her, regarding her inscrutably. With some difficulty, she managed some sort of neutral greeting. He nodded in reply. The fact that he did not speak, though she now knew he could, hurt her. She looked down into her glass.

A second waiter appeared with menus in the wake of the first, who informed them that their companions were delayed. Hermione took refuge in the elaborate descriptions of food, none of which interested her in the slightest. With a sigh, she laid down the menu. Snape was still looking at her intently.

"I'm not hungry," she sighed.

Nor I.

He was still using the pen she had given him. Her lip trembled.

Shall we leave?

There was till no sign of Harry and Ginny. Hermione knew it would be more polite to wait, but she felt too drained for courtesy. She stood, signalling her agreement. In an unexpected show of gallantry, Snape arranged her stole around her shoulders and tucked her unresisting hand into the crook of his arm. Hermione was assured by the maitre d' that Mr Potter would cover the bill for her wine, and they left. Not giving her a chance to protest, Snape drew her into the first available patch of shadow and Disapparated with her.

Struggling free of his embrace, Hermione found that they were outside the bookshop.

"Why here?" she asked, cursing the thickness in her voice that betrayed her agitation. She prepared to Apparate away, but Snape caught her hand and held it until she finally looked him full in the eyes. He had never attempted Legilimency on her, and she was sure that he was not using it at that moment, but very clearly she understood his unspoken request to enter with him. A faint tendril of hope that she might be able to regain her faith in him began to curl in her heart.

Once in her office, they took their accustomed places by the fire, and were still. Snape's black eyes were fixed, unseeing, on the flames. Hermione studied him. He was no beauty, that was for sure, with his harsh features, sallow skin and imposing nose, but she knew how mobile and expressive his face could be in such rare unguarded moments as he permitted himself. She realised that she had never seen him fully lower his guard in anyone's presence but hers. She remembered how his eyes had lit up the one time he had forgotten himself so far as to grin at her over something they had both found funny. Perhaps she had been too harsh with him, overreacted to his deception. Perhaps there was more to it than deception. She noted the bitter angle of his mouth and suddenly the anger went out of her. In one moment of intense clarity, she knew what she had found in the man opposite her, and she knew that she did not want to let him go.

Hermione rose from her chair and knelt quietly at Severus' feet. She rested her hands on his knees and looked earnestly up at him.

"Tell me why you don't speak," she said.

He retrieved his pen and paper.

Penance.

"Oh, Severus!" she exclaimed softly, her eyes filling and the tears gathering to run down her cheeks. "You have nothing to pay for any more. Any guilt has long since been expiated. Can't you see that you are a good man?"

I have been a monster.

"And yet a small child sees in you a gentle soul and a friend," she reminded him.

What do you see in me, Hermione?

His face was expressionless, shuttered against what she might say to him. Hermione gently took the pen from his fingers and pressed her cheek into his hand. She turned her head and kissed his palm. He twitched, almost drawing his hand away, but she firmed her grip. Looking at him frankly and openly, she said,

"I love you, Severus."

She rose up on her knees to press her lips to his, hoping with all her heart that he would find it in him to respond, for here, at last, she knew she was in the presence of the man to whom she belonged, mind, body and soul and who, if he would only let himself, belonged equally to her.

Severus' arms closed around her. He kissed her hesitantly at first, but with a mounting passion that left her clinging weakly to him. Her fingers wound into his hair, loosening the tie that held it back, drawing his head down to meet her urgent, questing mouth. She wasn't aware of being pulled to her feet, but they were both standing when they broke apart. She reached for him again, but he took her hand and pulled her towards the door.

Quickly, Severus led her through the maze of back rooms and up an obscure staircase to a room she had not yet inventoried. A flick of the wand and a brief non-verbal spell disillusioned a door that she had never known was there. Dim light penetrating a dusty window caught his eyes with a strange glitter. She was feeling fey herself as she followed him through the doorway into a large room. The moon's glow flooded the chamber, revealing clean and simple furnishings a table and chair, bookcases, a sofa, a wardrobe and a bed. Hermione turned to him.

"You live here?" she asked in astonishment.

Some of the time. More of late, he wrote and looked expectant, as if he wanted her to work out more.

"You've been here all along. My wards wouldn't have excluded you because you were within when they were set up, which is why you can come and go as you please." He gestured for her to continue. Her mind was racing. "You... you were never seen because you are adept at concealing yourself. It's you! You're my ghost!" She was overwhelmed to think that he had been watching over her, caring for her from the very beginning. "But why?"

I was there that first evening, when you came to lay claim to the shoppe wrote. I saw your sadness, your intelligence, and your courage. You called to me, though you did not know it. You gave me a chance to touch a life without causing damage. I came to know you. And then, face-to-face, you showed me that you trusted me. You will never realise how it shook me that you would trust me not only with yourself but with your children. You are an extraordinary woman.

Hermione read his hasty scrawl as he wrote, and as he finished she again took the pen and paper from him, tossing them onto the table. With a laugh of pure joy she threw herself into his arms, confident at last in what she felt, and in the knowledge that she was loved in equal measure.

Time passed.

Low murmurs and soft moans stirred the dust motes floating in a moonbeam.

Time passed.

A voice, cracked from disuse, spoke into the night.

"Hermione."

THE END