

What Goes Around....

by melusin

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Drabble series written for the 'Headmistress Hermione' challenge on Grangersnape100.

****Winner: Best Drabble Series, SS/HG awards, Third Round, 2008****

The Interview

Chapter 1 of 17

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Disclaimer: All characters depicted belong to JK Rowling. No money has changed hands.

A/N: Many thanks to Septentrion for the beta

Hermione gazed thoughtfully at the man sat the other side of her desk. His hair, still greasy, was now streaked with grey. His robe had seen better days.

'Are you sure you want to return to teaching, Mr Snape?' she asked kindly, knowing that he had tried and failed to make it as an independent brewer.

'Yes, Headmistress,' Snape replied without any great enthusiasm. 'I'd like to be considered for the Potions position, should it ever become vacant.'

Hermione sighed. 'Unlikely, I'm afraid, in the foreseeable future. But... Would you be interested in teaching DADA?'

Above her, Albus Dumbledore choked.

'Is the present incumbent mad, dead or a werewolf?'

Hermione laughed. 'Rest assured; the curse died with Voldemort—unless you count pregnancy as a curse.'

Severus raised an eyebrow.

'Which is why she feels unable to continue with the practical work,' Hermione added.

'I suppose that is understandable.'

'Professor Croft is willing to continue with the theory until I find a replacement—or stay until the end of term, whichever is the sooner. So, if it's convenient, you'd be doing me a huge favour if you could start next week.'

He nodded curtly. 'That would be most... acceptable.'

'Don't you have any questions?' He hadn't even asked how much the salary was, which worried her.

Severus didn't really, but he thought he should show willing. 'Who's the current Head of Slytherin?'

'His name is Gary Burbage,' Hermione replied. 'And he's also the Potions teacher. I doubt if you know him—his parents were diplomats, and he was educated overseas—like his sister. She used to teach Muggle Studies...'

'Charity...' Severus looked at his hands, his lank hair covering his face. 'Yes, I remember her.' He sighed deeply. 'So, a Muggle-born in charge of Slytherin. How... progressive.'

'Would you like some tea?' Hermione summoned a house-elf before Severus had a chance to refuse. 'Yes. In fact, all the Heads of House are Muggle-born. It was my one stipulation for taking the job.'

'I see.'

The house-elf reappeared with a tea-tray. Hermione thanked him and reached for the teapot. 'Milk and sugar?'

'Just milk, thank you.'

'So, if you were hankering after your old chambers, I'm afraid I shall have to disappoint you.' She handed him his cup. 'Biscuit?'

The corner of his mouth twitched slightly. 'Dungeon living and rheumatism do not sit well together in my experience.'

Sitting back, Hermione sipped her tea. 'Ye-ess... One can only question the wisdom of excavating dormitories under the lake... Anyway, that's by the by.' She put her cup down on the desk. 'So. Wages. Naturally, with your experience, you'll go straight to the top of the pay scale—although, of course, it'll still be less than you were earning as a Housemaster.'

If Severus was surprised, he didn't show it. 'That's not a problem, Professor Granger.' In fact, he had never expected such a generous offer.

'Well, if that's all,' said Hermione, extending her hand. 'Welcome back, Professor Snape.'

Cup in hand, Hermione stood by the window, lost in thought. A raven, swooping down to the small, dusty courtyard below, caught her attention. She smiled. 'Clever bird.' Over the years, Hermione had searched for the stairway leading to that little garden, but without success. Whenever she tried, the castle somehow managed to thwart her efforts—even the house-elves were unable to penetrate its magical wards. It was one secret, it seemed, that the castle was unwilling to give up to its Headmistress. And so it remained, a permanent eyesore, unloved and uncultivated, waiting for a spring that never came.

'That was a good thing you just did, Hermione.'

Hermione turned to the portrait of Minerva McGonagall. 'He looks awful. I wish I'd known...'

'How could you have?' Minerva replied. 'Severus was always reclusive, always too proud to ask for help. I only hope coming here and facing his demons won't do him more harm than good.'

'There is that,' Hermione agreed. 'I hope I've done the right thing.'

'On the other hand, Hogwarts was the only home—' There was a cough to Minerva's right. 'And I don't want to hear a word from you on the subject, Albus.'

'Am I not entitled to an opinion?' said Albus.

'Opinion? After all you did to that boy—'

'I don't know what you mean, Minerva. Snape always was a bad lot, but he served his purpose.'

'Albus!' the two witches chorused.

'That,' said Hermione, 'is a dreadful thing to say. Hasn't the poor man suffered enough? Couldn't you see how depressed he was?'

'If that's so,' Albus huffed, folding his arms, 'what are you doing putting him in charge of children. Hm?'

'If anyone deserves a chance, it's Snape,' Hermione retorted. 'And I'm going to make sure he gets one.'

A Secret Revealed

Chapter 2 of 17

Severus returns to Hogwarts, and the castle gives up a secret.

Disclaimer: See chapter 1.

A/N: Many thanks to Septentrion for the beta.

'I know this isn't what you're used to,' Hermione said, opening the door, 'but they were the most suitable quarters I could find for you at short notice, and I wanted to check —',

'Please do not trouble yourself,' Severus interrupted. 'This is more than adequate.' He appraised the room quickly. Standard, second-floor teachers' apartments: a small, cheerfully decorated living room/study with a bedroom and adjoining bathroom. It was light and airy, for which he was grateful. In the years since his brush with death, Severus had hated dark, confined spaces. No, this was much better than he had expected.

Hermione was relieved. 'Well, you know your way around. I'll leave you to it.' She turned to leave. 'Oh, that's odd... That door wasn't there before.'

Hermione walked over to it and tried to turn the knob, but it wouldn't budge. 'Locked,' she said, drawing her wand and casting *Alohomora*. Nothing happened.

Intrigued, Severus offered his assistance. At the first touch of his wand, the door opened with a soft click, revealing a flight of steps. Warily, he descended—with Hermione following on his heels.

At the bottom, a stone archway led into a small, cloistered, and very neglected, courtyard.

'Oh...' Hermione looked up and around, getting her bearings. 'I've been searching for this place for years.'

'Seems it did not want to be found,' Severus murmured.

'Apparently not.' She smiled. 'Well, anyway, it obviously goes with your rooms, so you may use it as you see fit. I think it may have been a knot garden once, though.' She pointed to her office window. 'If you look down on it when it rains, you can see the layout.'

It certainly had great potential. 'That is most kind. Thank you.'

Up on the roof, a raven was observing them keenly.

They walked in silence back to the archway where Severus spotted another door tucked behind the stairs. Opening it revealed a large, square room with an enormous fireplace at one end. Judging by the cobwebs, no one had set foot in it for years.

'This would make an excellent lab,' Severus muttered to himself.

'Indeed it would.' Hermione agreed. 'Are you doing any research at the moment?'

'Yes, but not very much. I don't really have the resources...' he trailed off.

'Hmm... Well, you have a garden and a lab...' She grinned at his look of astonishment. 'It's a start.'

Severus was feeling overwhelmed. He'd all but given up on his research projects, but now he had a steady income and the means to pursue his interests once more. And... Didn't the woman ever stop talking? What was she on about, now?

'I'd love to hear about it...'

'My research?'

'Yes.'

They'd climbed the stairs again. 'I have regular meetings with all my staff—nothing formal—you can tell me about it then.'

'If you wish.'

Hermione stopped by the door and grinned cheekily. 'See you at dinner. I expect you remember the way to the Great Hall.'

Unpacking didn't take him long as Severus' possessions were few. After the war, despite being officially pardoned, his employment prospects hadn't been good. He'd tried his hand at the brewing business, but with his history and background, no one had trusted his potions—after all, he'd taught a large chunk of his potential customers, and they were not forgiving. In fact, a lot of them were only too happy to take pleasure in his failure. Opening his wardrobe, Severus was surprised to discover it stuffed full of teaching robes. This was too much. He was not a charity case.

Severus sat on the bed and put his head in his hands. He should have died—he knew that. There was no purpose to his existence now. Everything that had driven him up until his confrontation with Voldemort had ceased to be, and the victory had been an empty one. The freedom he'd craved for so long was hollow: Lily was no less dead. What was the point of living? Swallowing his pride and returning to Hogwarts had not been easy—but it was either that or sell his house. And Severus was not willing to do that.

Something was tapping on the window. Severus turned his head to see a raven pecking at the glass, but by the time he had walked over to investigate, the bird had flown off. He opened the latch and leaned out to watch it soaring over the Astronomy Tower before dropping his gaze to the little courtyard below. *A knot garden...* Severus wondered who had tended it last. It would certainly be a challenge to revive it... Yes, that would be his purpose for the present—as well as imparting his wisdom to the latest batch of dunderheads, of course.

Kindness Personified

Chapter 3 of 17

Unexpected allies.

Disclaimer: See chapter 1.

A/N: Many thanks to Septentrion for the beta.

The murmuring voices in the Great Hall fell silent as Hermione stood up. The wizard on her right needed no introduction—though why he was there was the subject of intense speculation.

'It is my great honour to introduce our new Defence teacher, Professor Snape...'

'... Death Eater...'

'... what a conk...'

'... war hero...'

'... who joins us today...'

Reactions ranged from incredulous gasps to a raucous, standing ovation from the Slytherins. All eyes were on Severus as he rose to take a bow. No one noticed the malicious look on the face of Slytherin's Head of House.

'I would like a word, Headmistress.'

Hermione turned on the spiral staircase. 'Of course. Come up.'

In her office, Hermione offered Severus a chair, which he declined.

'I must insist on paying for... this.' He indicated the robe he was wearing. 'And the others.'

'Sorry, you've lost me.'

'The clothing. In my wardrobe?'

'Ah.' Hermione sighed. 'I think I know what's happened. As I'm sure you're aware, Hogwarts' house-elves are free. It was quite a struggle, though, to get them to accept any wages—until they realised what they could do with the money.'

'What?'

'They love buying people presents.'

At Severus' thunderous expression, Hermione quickly explained the situation. The elves were paid for kitchen duties and cleaning the classrooms and public areas. Life skills had been introduced into the curriculum, which meant that each House was responsible for the cleanliness of the dormitories and common rooms. Members of staff were, however, at liberty to come to private arrangements with the elves in regard to their own quarters.

'Then why was a house-elf tidying up my papers this afternoon?'

'There was? Oh, no,' said Hermione. 'And I asked them to hunt around for some unused desks and cauldrons for you...'

The house-elf bowed low. Try as she might, Hermione couldn't break them of the habit.

'How may Purdy serve Headmistress of Hogwarts? Oh-oh...' Squeaking excitedly, Purdy bowed until her nose almost touched the carpet. 'And Headmaster Snape!'

'*Professor* Snape,' he corrected, noticing the large badge on the elf's toga sporting the slogan "Adopt a Wizard Week". He had a bad feeling about this. 'Now, who is responsible for these new robes?'

'Purdy,' Hermione interrupted. 'Professor Snape doesn't need adopting.'

Purdy flapped her ears, but looked defiant. 'Elves is having long memories.'

Hermione sighed in defeat. 'Take us to the lab.'

The transformation was startling. Severus stared around the state of the art potions laboratory in disbelief.

'I cannot accept this,' he said.

'Purdy tells me you prevented Alecko Carrow from using her as target practice.' Hermione's voice was gentle.

Severus pointed to one of the cauldrons. 'Solid gold. Have you any idea how much one of those things costs?'

'If it makes you feel any better,' Hermione replied, 'we'll agree that the equipment belongs to Hogwarts. But as for the robes...'

'I will not accept charity—especially from a house-elf! They must take them back.'

Smiling, Hermione shook her head.

'You've got no chance,' Hermione said. 'You could Incendio them if you wanted—but they'd only replace them. Best to accept their gift with good grace.'

While they had been arguing, Purdy had taken it upon herself to fetch some tea. Silly humans. Headmaster Snape needed new robes. Elves had provided new robes. Headmaster Snape was their hero. Headmaster Snape would get whatever Headmaster Snape wanted. Sighing, she left them to it.

Hermione poured the tea, glancing at the sulking wizard at her side. 'I suppose this is as good a time as any to tell me about your research.'

With curfew approaching, Severus was contemplating taking a stroll around the corridors but was afraid of what he might find on his return. Some scatter cushions and a rug had appeared since dinner, along with a painting of the Scottish Highlands above the fireplace.

Shaking his head, he gazed out the window. The lights were still burning in the Headmistress' office two storeys up. He wondered if she always worked this late, then, remembering his own tenure as Headmaster, realised that she probably did.

'Stuck in her ivory tower with only portraits for company.'

He didn't envy her one bit.

Quiet Authority

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

A/N: With Septentrion fast approaching the birth of her baby, Sempra has kindly offered to step into the breach to beta for me. Thank you Sempra.

Dedicated to Septentrion and Miss Bubbles.

'Like shifting sands, the Dark Arts are forever changing, mutating and indestructible. They prey on your weaknesses, promising unimaginable power, wealth or whatever else your heart may desire. Do not imagine for one moment that you are immune to their siren call. You are not; no one is.'

Hermione watched from the back of the room as Severus addressed the seventh-years. She need not have worried that he'd lost his touch; the class were as enraptured as she was. But there was no sneering condescension in his voice, now, only a quiet authority that commanded attention—not to mention respect.

'Were you really a-a Death Eater, sir?' one girl (a Gryffindor, Hermione noted) had the temerity to ask.

Hermione sucked in a breath, waiting for the explosion. It never came.

'Yes,' Severus replied, calmly rolling up his left sleeve. 'I was not much older than you when I pledged my life to the service of Voldemort.'

Hermione took an involuntary step forward as the others moved in for a closer look.

'The Mark is barely visible now. But when Voldemort was alive, so was this. It chained me to him—called me to him with the most excruciating pain imaginable.'

There was no reason for her to stay, but Hermione remained glued to the spot as Severus recounted his early years as a spy.

'I will say this once so you may benefit from my experience...'

You could have heard a pin drop.

'...I was seduced by promises of wealth and power. I was stupid and naive...' The hairs on the back of Hermione's neck prickled as Severus' low, melodious voice enveloped her. She could listen to it forever—but then she always could. '...constant vigilance...' He looked directly at her and smirked.

Smiling, Hermione crept out of the classroom.

* * *

Hogwarts at night held no terrors for Severus. He was at home in its empty corridors among the whispering portraits and the restless ghosts. In years past, he had often felt as insubstantial as those long dead individuals, a shadow amongst the shades. He walked to the castle's heartbeat, breathing its breath, at one with every creak and moan, knowing when something was out of place. Like now. Someone was following him. And whoever it was had never mastered the art of stealth. The footfalls halted when he stopped. Wand drawn, Severus slipped behind a suit of armour and waited.

'Can I help you, Professor Burbage?'

Burbage eyed the wand pointed at his throat before slowly shaking his head.

Severus did not drop his guard. 'Then why were you following me?'

'I-I was merely patrolling the corridors—like you.'

'I see.' Severus inclined his head. 'Then I'll bid you good evening.' He started to walk away.

'Wait...'

Severus turned to face the younger man, knowing what was coming.

'They never found her body.' Burbage looked at him pleadingly. 'Just answer me this. Was it quick?'

Severus considered lying, but the man deserved the truth, however painful. 'No, it was not.'

Burbage clenched his fists angrily. 'And you just stood by and *watched*!'

Yes, and her screams for help still haunt my dreams 'I was powerless to save her.'

'You can look me in the eye and say that?'

Severus stepped towards Burbage, entering his personal space. Burbage flinched slightly.

'Charity was a courageous witch and a valued colleague,' Severus said evenly. 'But my priority above all else was the defeat of Voldemort *always*.' He looked away. 'Many good people died. You are not the only person to have lost a loved one.'

Burbage snorted. 'What do you know of love?'

Back in his rooms, Severus checked for any recent elf activity. Other than a bottle of elf-made wine on the table next to his chair, there didn't seem to be any. He drew the cork and sniffed. After his encounter with Burbage, this was one gift he had no objection to receiving. Pouring himself a glass of the ruby-red liquid, Severus sat down and contemplated the fruit bowl that had appeared earlier.

'Sodding elves.' Putting his feet up, Severus brought the glass to his lips. Whoever had first enslaved the little buggers had probably done it out of sheer desperation.

From his position, Severus could just about see the Headmistress' office. She was burning the midnight oil again. He didn't quite know what to make of Hermione Granger and her 'reforms'. And why had she felt the need to sit in on his classes, hmm? Did she think he no longer had it in him? Had she only given him the job out of pity?

Grunting, Severus raised his glass towards her window: 'To Hermione Granger. Champion of the underdog.' He knocked it back and poured himself another one, noticing for the first time that the bottle was replenishing itself.

Half an hour later, without the faintest idea of how much he'd drunk, Severus was pleasantly sozzled.

'On the sauce again, are we, Severus?'

Severus squinted at the painting over the fireplace. 'Dunno 'bout you, you old fart, but I am. Cheers.'

Dumbledore smiled benignly. 'It was kind of Hermione to take you on—although, I advised her against it. But then, she always was a soft touch for a sob story.'

Severus hurled the glass at Dumbledore's face. It bounced off the painting and smashed on the grate.

Dumbledore was unperturbed. 'That's more like the Severus Snape I knew.'

'You may have pulled the wool over Hermione's eyes,' Dumbledore continued, 'but you're not fooling me. Once a Dark wizard, always a Dark wizard.'

'Sheesh got more brainsh than you give her credit for.' Severus wished he hadn't drunk quite so much. 'N' sheezz not bad lookin', either. Fac', I wou'n't mind warming h-her bed onn-nocashun.'

'You disgust me.'

Nothing new there then. Sighing, Severus rested his head against the chair and was soon snoring softly. He didn't feel the gentle fingers prying the Reparo'd glass from his hand, nor the Levitation Spell that floated him carefully to his bed.

A Room with a View

Chapter 5 of 17

Severus digs, and the plot thickens.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Many thanks to Sempra for her prompt betaing.

His "patch", Severus discovered, was the only place where he could get any peace. The house-elves couldn't get to it, mercifully—no doubt he would now have a garden to rival that of ancient Babylon had they been able to gain access. Grunting, he plunged the fork into the ground, then stopped momentarily to roll up his shirt-sleeves. The weather was unseasonably warm, and with hardly any wind in the courtyard, Severus was starting to sweat with the physical exertion of digging over the soil in preparation for planting.

High above, two pairs of eyes watched his endeavours with interest.

'Severus seems to be settling in well,' Minerva said.

'Hmm?' Hermione tore her eyes away from the figure toiling in the courtyard below. 'Oh, yes. Yes, he is, but...' Hermione sighed. 'He's nothing like the man I remember—it's like all the fight has been knocked out of him.'

Minerva shrugged. 'Age does that to you, and... Well, have you considered the fact he no longer has anything to fight for?'

'True enough.' Hermione looked out of the window again. 'His teaching hasn't been affected, though, and the Slytherins look up to him like he's some sort of minor deity...'

Despite his initial enthusiasm, the minor deity in question was thinking that this gardening lark was back-breaking work and regretting his decision not to employ magic. But Severus also knew that the best quality potions ingredients were grown naturally and that he would eventually reap the benefits of his labours.

At the sound of fluttering wings, Severus spun around to see a raven settling on a clod of earth. 'You again. I'm not doing this for your benefit, you know.' Picking up an earthworm, he tossed it towards him. 'Catch.' The bird cawed and took off with his free meal.

Minerva moved to the edge of her frame. 'Judging by the way you're chewing your lip, I take it that Severus' new-found divinity is a problem.'

'Slytherin's Head of House seems to think so.'

Minerva sighed. 'Professor Burbage.'

'Yes, Professor Burbage.' Hermione turned as Purdy popped in with her morning cuppa. 'He's complaining because the kids keep going to Severus with their problems and not him. Thank you, Purdy.'

'Severus?'

Hermione blushed. 'And another thing,' she added quickly. 'How come that raven can get into the garden when I can't?'

'That's obvious,' said Dumbledore. 'Founders' magic. It has to be.'

Purdy's ears were flapping as she poured the tea.

'So-oo, how long has it been Severus?' Minerva asked, smirking.

'Oh,' Hermione waved her hand airily, 'since I've been helping him with some Arithmancy calculations—and what do you mean by "Founders' Magic", Albus?'

Dumbledore coughed. 'Hogwarts was the culmination of a long-held dream: four lifetimes worth of ambition, energy—not to mention magic—poured into the creation of a school. That energy still lingers, which is why the castle appears sentient on occasion.'

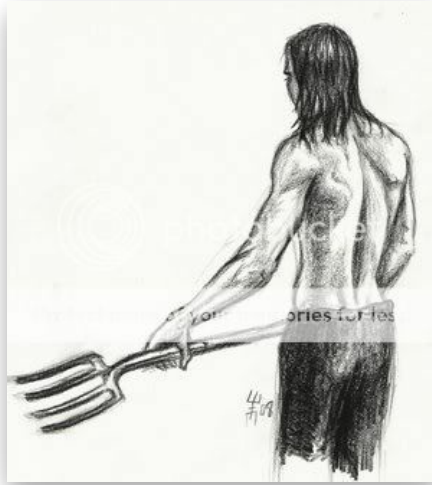
'But that still doesn't explain...' Hermione frowned. 'Why have you never mentioned this before?'

'You never asked.'

Resolving to look into the matter further as soon as she could find a spare moment, Hermione picked her mug up and returned to the window. Purdy followed.

Watching Severus struggling to break up the hard earth, Purdy shook her head, clearly perturbed. 'Headmaster Snape is not letting elves help.'

'I'm sure he finds it therapeutic.' She smiled at the elf, who didn't look in the least bit convinced. 'Sometimes, Purdy, creating something with your hands, without using magic, gives you more of a sense of achieve—' She froze, mug poised at her lips, as Severus began unbuttoning his shirt.



Mouth slightly agape, Hermione stared as Severus pulled his shirt out of his trousers and slipped it off. She was treated to the sight of strong, sinewy muscles and a long, pale back ending at a pair of trousers that looked set to lose its battle with gravity at any minute.

Purdy looked up at the Headmistress, down to Severus and back to Hermione again.

Hermione rubbed the back of her neck as the hairs there started to prickle.

Severus carried on digging.

Hermione took a large gulp of tea.

With a broad grin on her face, Purdy disappeared abruptly.

Licking her lips, Hermione watched mesmerised as Severus paused to wipe his brow, conjure a glass of water and thirstily drink it down.

Someone coughed behind her.

'When you've finished ogling the arse of our illustrious former headmaster, I have something I would like to discuss with you.'

Caught red-handed, Hermione flushed. 'What is it, Phineas?'

'It's about that Mu-uggle-born you've put in charge of my house.'

Hermione sighed. 'We've had this conversation before. I know you don't like it—'

'Not that,' Phineas interrupted impatiently. 'I can't get into the common room. He's removed the portrait of Betty the Bloodthirsty.'

Hermione rubbed her temple, feeling the beginnings of a headache. 'I'm sure Professor Burbage has good reason—'

'According to Betty,' Phineas interrupted again, 'who, incidentally, is now residing in a broom cupboard, it was for "restoration".'

'There you are, then.'

'Since when has a magical portrait needed "restoration"?' he spat. 'He's up to something. I don't like him, and I don't trust him.'

'I know; you've told me countless times.' Hermione sighed. 'But he's doing a good job—'

'Tell you what...' Phineas twiddled with the ring on his finger. 'Ask him about Betty, and I'll tell you about the Raven.'

Purdy returned to the kitchens, an idea forming in her head. She knew it wasn't an elf's place to interfere in a wizard's personal life, but Headmaster Snape was dear to her. They shared a bond, even though he was unaware of it. And he'd made his feelings clear thanks to the Vinoveritas she'd given him... And what Headmaster Snape wanted...

Mind made up, Purdy grabbed a rolling pin and banged it on the nearest table. The usual chattering ceased as the elves looked to her expectantly. 'Purdy has good news.' She beamed happily. 'Headmistress Granger is fancying Headmaster Snape!'

A/N: Big hugs to the lovely, and very talented, Camillo, for the drawing.

Hermione goes looking for answers, and Phineas enlists Severus' help.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

A/N: Many thanks to Sempra for the beta.

Thanks also to Camillo for being inspired to draw Severus doing the gardening. If you haven't seen it, back up a chapter. And lastly, thanks to everyone who's reviewed; I never expected this little series to be so popular.

Slam!

Albus rocked his frame in his mirth. 'You old fraud. The Raven's nothing more than a legend!'

'Like the Chamber of Secrets was, you mean?' Phineas glared angrily at him.

'You've been at the linseed oil again, haven't you?' Albus retorted. 'If you think Salazar's familiar is still guarding his house a thousand years after his departure, I'd say you were due for a new coat of varnish.'

'Gentlemen, please,' Minerva cut in.

'Slytherin's in danger,' Phineas snarled, getting to his feet. 'The Raven's return proves it, and there's only one person I trust to do something about it.'

* * *

There were few occasions these days that warranted a trip to the dungeons. Never Hermione's favourite part of the castle, she nonetheless invariably felt nostalgic for her schooldays whenever she descended the stairs, remembering times past when she and her fellow Gryffindors would huddle together with unease as they entered Slytherin territory.

Nodding briefly at the Bloody Baron, Hermione entered the Potions classroom. Other than some posters on the walls demonstrating various cutting techniques and aide-memoires stressing the lethal consequences of combining certain ingredients, it was virtually unchanged. Hermione smiled in approval at these sensible innovations as she glanced about...

'Headmistress.' Professor Burbage shot to his feet. 'Is something wrong?'

'No. Please,' Hermione said, moving towards his desk. 'There's no need to get up. It's a small matter. Phineas Black asked me to stop by.'

'Phineas...?' Burbage frowned. 'Oh, the *portrait*.' He grinned from under his floppy fringe.

Hermione couldn't help but smile back. Gary Burbage was only a few years older than her; tall and good looking in a puppy-dog sort of way...and he knew it. 'Phineas may be a portrait,' she said, 'but he's given me wise counsel over the years, and I consider him a friend.'

Hermione took a deep breath. 'It's about Betty the Bloodthirsty...'

'Have you ever seen that-that *thing*?'

'No, I haven't.' Betty had always been away whenever she'd visited the Slytherin common room; whether she was deliberately hiding from her, Hermione didn't know. Keeping tabs on the castle's paintings was virtually impossible, anyway; she'd tried cataloguing them once, but their inhabitants wouldn't stay still long enough.

'It's the stuff of nightmares.' Burbage ran his fingers through his hair, sighing. 'I mean, would *you* want a vampire about to plunge a fork into a heart...*astill beating* heart...hanging on *your* wall?'

Remembering the skull candle-holders she'd personally destroyed, Hermione shuddered. 'I understand, and I've every faith in you, Gary. Reforming Slytherin house was one of my main priorities, as you know. But I have to keep the old guard happy.' Smiling, she turned to leave.

'Talking of the "old guard", have you had a word with...*him*?'

Hermione paused, hand on the doorknob. 'If you mean Professor Snape, no, not yet.' She glanced back. 'Was there anything else?'

'That offer of dinner still stands.'

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'And the answer's still no.'

He laughed. 'You can't blame me for trying.'

* * *

Feeling heaps better for a shower, Severus towelled himself dry and padded into his bedroom. As usual, a clean robe and underwear had been laid out ready for him. He dressed hastily, feeling ravenous after his exertions and ready for dinner. Lacing up his boots, he heard someone call out his name. Severus groaned. 'What is it, Phineas?'

'Snape? Where the devil are you?'

Smirking, Severus leant against the door frame and watched Phineas unsuccessfully trying to beat off a swarm of insects. 'Here.'

'Couldn't you have gone for a nice woodland scene?' Phineas grumbled. 'A pox on these midges!'

'The Raven's just a myth.' Severus shook his head in disbelief. 'It simply isn't possible.'

'Well...' Phineas shrugged. 'Granted the story's been embellished somewhat over the years...you know how Gryffindors love legends and that sort of thing...and talking of Gryffindors...'

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Severus sighed. 'What's she done now?'

'What's she *done*?' Phineas spluttered. 'Apart from appointing a-a non-Slytherin as Head of House, destroying the common room's decor and preventing me from keeping

an eye on things, you mean?"

'There's nothing I can do about it, Phineas.'

'Just talk to her, Severus, please...'

* * *

The thing with elves, Severus thought, was that they took things to extremes. He'd casually mentioned that he enjoyed the odd glass of scotch, and within the hour, a drinks cabinet had appeared filled with bottles of some of the finest single malts ever distilled. Pouring himself a large one and sitting down, Severus waited for the inevitable. While he had no wish to get involved in school politics, it seemed he had no choice in the matter. Phineas' concerns weren't unfounded; Severus, too, was uneasy.

The flames in the grate flared green.

'Come through, Hermione. I've been expecting you.'

'I'd read about it in *Hogwarts: a History*, of course.' Hermione sipped her whisky.

'Naturally.'

'But I never gave it any credence.' She turned her gaze to the fire.

Severus watched the flickering light softening her features, fascinated by the flecks of copper and gold in the wild mess surrounding her head.

'Do you think there's any truth in it?'

Startled out of his musings, he nodded. 'Salazar did leave his familiar behind, that's true enough, but it wasn't immortal. Phineas thinks the bird could be a descendent.'

Hermione raised an eyebrow. 'It still all sounds pretty far-fetched to me.'

'You must understand that Phineas comes from another time...'

'You don't need to remind me.' Hermione sighed. 'I know he's not happy with my reforms, but they're necessary.' When Severus remained silent, she continued, 'It's always seemed to me that Slytherin never quite... belonged...it was always them and us. Well, no more. I want a united school, and I want Muggles to be understood and Muggleborns to be welcomed. *Everyone* has a contribution to make.'

'A noble sentiment and, yes, you are right,' Severus conceded. Slytherin has always been... the outcast, but *aroutsider* simply cannot understand our traditions.'

'Ah... traditions.' Feeling awkward, Hermione stared into her glass. 'I'm sorry, but Professor Burbage is afraid you're undermining his authority...'

'Preposterous.' Severus snorted. 'I cannot prevent the little miscreants from approaching me, but I refuse to be inconvenienced by the trivial problems of love-sick adolescents. I always used to let Poppy deal with that sort of thing.'

Hermione giggled.

'And as every Slytherin is sworn to secrecy regarding in-house matters, I cannot for the life of me understand why he's so worried...unless, of course, he has something to hide.'

'An oath? You're not serious.'

'Oh, but I am.'

'Salazar was probably paranoid, but he didn't trust the other founders to respect his beliefs once he'd gone,' Severus explained. 'Which was why he placed the dormitories and common room underground...away from prying eyes. Originally, they were housed in their own tower...just like Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.'

'And Hufflepuff?' Hermione asked intrigued.

'Badgers will be badgers.' The corner of his mouth twitched. 'But, yes... Them and us...' He sighed. 'So, before Salazar left, the Slytherins swore an oath of allegiance, and his familiar remained as his eyes and ears, waiting for his return. But, of course, that never happened...'

* * *

It had been an enjoyable evening, Severus thought, climbing into bed. The Headmistress was surprisingly convivial company; she even shared his love of good whisky. Who would have believed it? He stared at the canopy a while, contemplating their earlier discussion. She was at least aware of his misgivings...whether or not she chose to act remained to be seen. Yawning, he turned over.

In the living room, Purdy appeared and began tidying up. Two glasses? She sniffed. Headmistress Granger's perfume! Tip-toeing towards the bedroom, she stopped at the door, wondering if they'd... but all she could hear was snoring.

Disappointed, Purdy shook her head and sighed at the sleeping wizard. What was wrong with humans? Why couldn't they sort out their own affairs?

Severus stirred and muttered something unintelligible. Well aware of his nightmares, Purdy crooned a lullaby until he was sleeping peaceful again. It wasn't right; Headmaster Snape deserved to have someone to love in his life, but short of locking him in a room with Headmistress Granger... Purdy's eyes widened, wondering if she dared. She would have to consult the others, but it was, at least, a plan. Snapping her fingers, she Apparated back to the kitchens.

Mysteries and Complications

Chapter 7 of 17

Severus ponders, and Purdy acts.

Many thanks to Septentrion and Sempra for the beta.

He'd dreamed he'd died again: *Agony. Green eyes. Lily! Reaching, closer, closer... Almost touching... then... Singing? The humming of bees? Beautiful. Angelic...* 'Come back'... *Turning, turning... The hospital wing. Agony...* Severus groaned in that half-conscious state between sleep and wakefulness, trying to move and finding he couldn't. Like an upended tortoise, he lay stranded on his back, feeling as if he'd been kicked by a Hippogriff.

He strained for his wand to Summon the potion he always kept for these episodes. It took him a full minute to realise his muscle spasms had nothing to do with the Cruciatus Curse.

Gritting his teeth, Severus rolled onto his side and stuck his legs over the edge of the bed. From there, he managed to push himself upright and get to his feet. Wondering how he'd got so unfit that an afternoon's gardening could make him seize up like this, he shuffled towards the bathroom, wincing with every step. Moving eased the pain a bit; experimentally, he flexed his back, catching sight of his reflection in the mirror. A grumpy, middle-aged wizard gazed back at him. Never his best in the morning anyway, his grim expression was not doing him any favours.

Later, after performing his morning ablutions, Severus thought about Hermione again. He had to concede she was agreeable company—and rather attractive in her own way. It was a bugger she was so much younger than him, though—and his boss, to boot. Even in the unlikely event she was attracted to *him*, any sort of relationship, other than a strictly professional one, would be totally unethical. Just his luck, really; unattainable women seemed to be a common thread running through his life. And then there was Burbage... Something definitely off there... Perhaps a chat with Betty was in order...

Rain was lashing against the window. Tucking his wand in his pocket, Severus glanced outside. Where yesterday there had been dry earth, there were now muddy puddles. 'No digging today, then.' Thankfully. He could stay indoors and spend some time sketching out the layout of the knot garden instead. Severus was quite looking forward to the actual planting: Pomona Sprout had volunteered to help during the holidays, and she'd also promised to donate several rare specimens to get him started...

At the sound of a hoarse 'cr-u-uk', Severus turned his head sharply. 'And who or what are you?' he murmured.

* * *

'Corvus... As good a name as any, don't you think?'

The raven bobbed his head, fixing one beady eye on the bacon rind Severus was holding out to him.

'Come on,' he coaxed. 'You know you want it.'

The bird, however, didn't budge. Sighing, Severus placed his offering on the window sill and stepped back. Corvus immediately hopped forward to claim his treat.

It had taken Severus almost a week to get this far. Evidently, Corvus was suspicious of humans—which seemed to rule out the Raven of legend theory. So how could it penetrate the wards surrounding the courtyard...?

'So. That is the mysterious raven.'

Severus froze. 'It has been a long time, Lady Elizabeth.'

A deep, throaty chuckle sent shivers down his spine. 'Always such a polite boy. Turn around. Let me look at you.'

Smirking, Severus walked over to the fireplace and bowed. 'My lady. Lovely as ever, I see.'

'Flatterer.' Betty the Bloodthirsty smiled, showing her fangs. 'And you, my pale and interesting one? Are you married yet?'

'Who would have me?'

Betty cocked her head. 'Phineas tells me the Headmistress is enamoured of you.'

'What? I... That's just malicious gossip. Take no notice of him.'

Betty laughed. 'I think the gentleman doth protest too much.'

'Have you two nothing better to discuss?' Scowling, Severus folded his arms. 'Now. What's going on in Slytherin?'

'I wish I knew,' Betty replied. 'I went out for the evening to visit the Fat Lady—she was hosting a whist drive—and when I returned, I'd been evicted.'

'He must have had a reason...'

The vampire raised an eyebrow. 'Other than isolating Slytherin from the rest of the school, you mean?'

'But why?' He frowned. 'Think, Betty. Did you overhear something untoward?'

'If I remember anything, I'll let you know.'

* * *

Sighing, Severus removed his cloak and hung it behind the door. Patrolling the corridors hadn't helped to clear his head—quite the opposite; the number of Slytherins he'd caught breaking curfew, and the resulting deduction of house points, had only served to darken his mood.

As usual, a decanter of Vinoveritas was waiting for him. The elf-made wine was a gentler alternative to taking Dreamless Sleep, he'd found, but was best drunk alone in any case. In company, Vinoveritas' renowned tongue-loosening properties could prove extremely embarrassing to the unwary.

Feeling quite drained, he poured himself a glass and sat down...

Purdy nervously tip-toed towards the sleeping figure. She hoped Severus hadn't drunk more than a glass or two—her plan depended on him waking up. A less than perfect Levitation Spell and a rough shake as he lifted off the chair had the desired effect.

'What the...? YOU!' Severus yelled, crashing to the floor.

Purdy squeaked in alarm and rushed forward to help.

'I should've known,' he muttered. 'Those times I couldn't recall going to bed... It was you, wasn't it?' Severus reached for his wand. 'Take your pervy little mits off me and

GET OUT!

Purdy took the hint.

Hermione had just put her book on the bed-side table and was about to settle down for the night when she was startled by a very agitated house-elf.

'Headmistress Granger must come quick!'

'Whatever's the matter, Purdy?'

'Headmaster Snape is-is—'

'What Purdy? Is he hurt?' Summoning her dressing gown, Hermione scrambled out of bed and put it on.

'Headmistress must come *now*.' Purdy grabbed Hermione's hand and Disapparated before she had time to object.

Reappearing in Severus' living room, Hermione worriedly took in the scene. Crouching beside him, she touched his forehead.

'Severus? What happened? Talk to me?'

Severus groaned.

'Do you want me to get Poppy?'

'No.' If he gave monosyllabic answers, he reasoned, he'd be all right. Severus peered at her. 'You're wearing your night things.'

'Well spotted.' She pursed her lips, recognising the squinting gaze of a man attempting to focus both eyes in the same direction. 'Have you been drinking?'

He nodded.

'Right, then. Let's get you to bed. Purdy—'

'Not her,' he snarled. 'She's the one who dropped me. But you,' Severus smirked, 'can put me to bed anytime you like.'*Shit*.

'Severus...'

'And you can stay—seeing as you're dressed for it.'*Shit. Shit.*

Severus kept his mouth tightly closed as Hermione, who was trying not to laugh, levitated him to the bedroom.

'Purdy, some Sober-up Potion. Quickly, please.'

'No.' Severus grabbed her hand. 'I'll sleep better like this, but don't go... just yet.'

'Okay.' She sat down on the edge of the bed. 'Just how much did you have to drink?'

'Not nearly enough.' Severus brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. 'O, Hermione, fair... with the cinnamon hair, and orbs of molten chocolate...'

Good God. 'Purdy! What the hell did you put in that wine!'

There was no reply.

'Give us a kiss.'

'You're really pissed, aren't you?'

'Yes, and I'm really ugly, but at least I'll be sober in the morning.' He frowned. That didn't sound right.

'I think you're supposed to say "and *you're* ugly, but at least *I'll* be sober in the morning".'

'No...' That wasn't right, either. 'You're not ugly; you're *beautiful*.'

Now he was hallucinating. 'Purdy! Come back here! Professor Snape is ill.' Extricating her hand, Hermione got up and walked over to the door. It wouldn't open.

'Purdy!'

'It would appear, Headmistress,' said a voice behind her, 'that we have been set up.'

A Taste of Honey.

Chapter 8 of 17

Locked in a room with an inebriated wizard... What's a girl to do?

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

Many thanks to my betas, Septentrion and Semptra, and thanks to everyone who's reviewed. It's much appreciated.

He was standing much too close, breathing down her neck. This had gone far enough. Hermione spun around, the sudden movement causing Severus to sway unsteadily.

He flailed at the door to brace himself.

'Don't just stand there!' she yelled angrily. 'Get your wand out and *do* something!'

He let out a strangled snort that sounded suspiciously like a giggle. 'Oh, Professor Granger. I didn't know you cared!'

'That-that was... *puerile*,' Hermione said, horrified and more than a little concerned. She knew he'd been on the elf-made wine but still. Paying her compliments and now *giggling*? Had he been drugged?

'What on earth did she put in that wine?'

'Don't know.' Severus giggled again. 'But I'm going to kill the little bastard for this.' He placed his other hand on the door, trapping Hermione between them. 'But in the meantime...' He leaned in closer.

'No,' Hermione said, trying to shove him off. 'Not like this.'

'We may as well,' he whispered, pressing against her. 'She's not going to let us out until we do.'

Hermione frowned. So that's what this was all about. 'Purdy! If you think I'm going to sleep with a drunk, you're out of your tiny mind!'

Severus winced. 'Do you have to shout?'

'Pur—!' A phial appeared, hovering just above Severus' shoulder. He ignored it, suddenly fascinated by a lock of Hermione's hair. Pulling the corkscrew curl, he watched it spring back into place before repeating the experiment. Lily's hair had been poker straight but coarse to the touch while this...

'Drink.'

Severus downed the potion absentmindedly. How can something that resembles barbed wire feel this soft?

'What happened to "Hermione fair with the cinnamon hair"?'

Bugger. Had he said that out loud? Sheepishly, he released the curl. 'I... apologise.'

Hermione smirked. 'Sober now?'

'Very.'

'Good.'

She felt so curvy and comfy and smelled heavenly. Reluctant to move away, Severus rattled the doorknob half-heartedly. 'Still locked.'

'So I see.' Hermione put a hand on his shoulder. 'Severus—'

'You said you wouldn't spend the night with a drunk...'

'I did, didn't I?'

'I'm not drunk anymore.'

'No...' She sighed. 'But... this is *totally* unethical.'

'Yes. Probably a very bad idea.' Burying his nose in her hair, he inhaled deeply, committing her scent to memory. It looked like he'd be sleeping on a transfigured couch tonight.

'And it's been a while...'

Then again... 'For me too...'

'But...'

'But...?'

Hermione swallowed. Their noses were almost touching. He looked so... hopeful, but she knew the next move was hers.

'Nothing.'

'Then, if you've no further objections...'

Severus brushed his lips gently over hers; they were remarkably soft. Moaning, Hermione threaded her fingers through his hair, pulling him towards her. Unsurprisingly, he tasted of wine and sober-up potion, but that didn't put her off. On the contrary, she could usually tell from a first kiss how much she was likely to enjoy what was to follow, and judging by the way her knees were trembling, it all boded very well indeed.

He was drowning, or still intoxicated—or both. She was whimpering and kissing him back with a fervour that was driving him to distraction. If she called it off now... Severus tugged at the belt of her dressing-gown, and she moaned into his mouth. Encouraged, he snaked his hand inside, feeling the heat of her body under the cotton nightdress.

Hermione broke the kiss. 'Sorry about... the passion-killing... nightwear,' she panted.

'I forgive you,' he said, lifting her into his arms. 'I'd no idea you had a thing for tartan.'

'Minerva's last Christmas present to me.'

'That explains a lot.'

~~HGSS~~

Lily was smiling, trying to say something. He reached towards her, and for once she didn't pull away. She felt so real. So warm, so inviting...

'Oh, Lily...'

When he awoke, the warm body he'd fallen asleep next to was missing. Confused, he turned over to see a tartan-clad figure perched on the edge of the bed. For a second, he thought it was Minerva.

'Last night was a mistake.'

'What?'

'I'm not Lily Evans.'

'Hermione, I—'

'You don't have to explain.' She sighed. 'Lily will always be nineteen to you. Forever young, beautiful. Perfect. I can't compete with that.'

Severus sat up, intent on pulling her back into bed, but she recoiled. 'Hermione, please—'

'I don't regret what happened,' she interrupted. 'Please don't think that. We're both adults. We're both more than capable of putting this down to experience and moving on. Given time, we can even become friends.' Hermione stood up and walked towards the door. She had to get out before she made a complete fool of herself. Mercifully, it was unlocked. 'I'll see you at breakfast.'

'Wait.'

But she didn't look back.

Severus flopped back on his pillow, covering his eyes with both hands. '*Ohbollocks!*'

Back in her rooms, Hermione showered and dressed hurriedly. Being used as a substitute for a teenage wank fantasy had hurt more than she cared to admit, and no doubt she'd have plenty of time to dwell on it later. Once she'd had something to eat and a strong cup of tea. Then, maybe, she'd owl the boys and arrange a boozy night out. Or, maybe, she'd accept Gary's invitation to dinner. Yes, why not? Severus Snape wasn't the only fish in the sea. But first there was the small matter of...

'Purdy! Get your sorry arse in here,*now!*'

Purdy appeared, shaking like a leaf.

Hermione took a deep breath, reining in her anger. There was no need to frighten the elf. 'What you did was wrong,' Hermione said quietly. 'And I would avoid Professor Snape for some time, if I were you.'

'Purdy is sorry, Headmistress.' She looked close to tears. 'But Headmaster Snape said—'

'It doesn't matter what he said, Purdy. Promise me you won't do anything like that again.'

She hung her head. 'Purdy promises. On elves' honour.'

'Then you may go.'

'But... Vinoveritas is always speaking the truth.'

'What...?' *Hermione fair...*

But Purdy had gone.

A Key Question

Chapter 9 of 17

An elf, a raven and a golden key.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

A/N: Big thanks to Septentrion and Semptra for the beta. And thanks also to everyone who's reading this piece of drabbling madness. Your reviews keep me going.

Well, that had been an unmitigated disaster, even if he had enjoyed himself immensely at the time. Vigorously rubbing his wet head with a towel, Severus padded out of his bathroom, wondering how he could have been so stupid as to think... He'd offended someone he was starting to like—a lot. Would she let him explain? Things could get really awkward, if not; he may even have to resign—shagging the boss was definitely not in the job description. He sighed. Wasn't it bloody typical? Just when things were going really well, he'd managed to balls things up completely.

And it was all that sodding elf's fault!

Severus wasn't expecting Purdy to show her face, so he was completely unprepared for what greeted him in his bedroom. He covered himself quickly with the towel.

The elf nodded. 'Good morning, sir. Will it be the black...?' He held up a robe in his right hand. 'Or, the... er, black?'

'Who are you?' Severus asked, indicating the garment of his choice.

'Eljay, sir,' the elf replied, laying it out carefully. 'Your new valet.'

'Valet?' Severus choked. 'What do you mean "valet"? You're an elf! And why are you talking so peculiarly?'

Eljay drew himself up to his full three feet. 'If elves are ever to be accepted by wizarding society, we must learn to speak properly. Why, only the other day, Deputy Minister Weasley—'

'Percy?'

'Yes—was discussing the importance of improving staff efficiency with the Headmistress and the necessity of implementing sound management structures and instigating time and motion studies. He was very impressed with my suggestion that we all go on a team building exercise in the Cairngorms.'

Severus was losing the will to live. 'Gobbledegook.'

'I think you'll find that's the goblins— Oh, it's that dratted bird again...'

'Car—uuk, car—uuk.'

Eljay scurried over to the window, waving his arms at the raven. 'Shoo. Go away, you noisy creature.'

'No!' Severus cried, racing after him. He stuck his head out of the window. 'Corvus, come back!' Then he turned on Eljay. 'You idiot, I've been trying to tame him for ages.'

At Severus' call, Corvus wheeled in a graceful circle, then settled back on the window ledge, his feathers ruffling in indignation. 'Car—ruuk, carr—~~uuuuk~~.'

Severus sighed. 'I wish I knew what you were trying to tell me...'

'He says he's got something for you.'

'You speak Raven?'

Eljay shrugged.

Corvus stuck his beak under his wing and fished around in his plumage. To Severus' astonishment, he plucked out a golden key and deposited it on the window sill.

'What the...?' Severus picked it up and turned it over in his hand. It looked very old, but not terribly worn. Noticing the initials "S.S." embossed on the top, he let out a low whistle. 'And what am I supposed to do with this?' he muttered to himself.

Corvus bobbed his head twice and flew off.

So... now he had a key. All he had to do was find the lock.

~HGSS~

On entering the Great Hall, Severus was none too pleased to see Hermione deep in conversation with Gary Burbage. She touched his arm to emphasise some point or other, and Severus felt an inexplicable twinge of jealousy. *They look like a couple*, he thought and promptly admonished himself for being so foolish.

Burbage stood up and left the High Table as he approached, and Severus did not hesitate in taking his place. Turning towards him, Hermione smiled.

'Good morning, Severus.'

Not the warmest smile in the world, granted, but it wasn't an unfriendly one, either. He could live with that.

'Good morning, Hermione. May I have a word with you?'

'Of course.'

'I have news of the Raven.' Was it his imagination or did she look a little bit disappointed?

'Oh?'

'Yes. He turned up today with this.' He passed Hermione the key and explained what had happened.

'Good heavens,' she said, examining it. 'S.S... Salazar's?'

'Well, it certainly isn't mine.'

'Any ideas where it might fit?'

'None at all.'

'Hmm. Would you like me to ask Phineas and the others?'

Severus nodded and helped himself to some pumpkin juice. 'I think that's as good a starting place as any.'

~HGSS~

As the portraits chatted excitedly amongst themselves, Hermione rubbed her temples and reminded herself there was only one week to go before the holidays.

'I believe it would be safe to assume,' Phineas offered, 'that if it has anything to do with Salazar, the lock is going to be extremely hard to find.'

'Yes.' Hermione sighed. 'I think we can all agree on that. Anything else?'

'In my experience,' Albus replied, 'the castle gives up its secrets when the time is right or when there is a need—'

'Exactly,' Phineas interrupted. 'And no prizes for guessing where the problem lies.'

Here we go again, Hermione thought. 'Phineas, Professor Burbage assures me that—'

'With the greatest respect, Headmistress,' Phineas said testily, 'the castle itself is trying to tell you something. I suggest you listen to it.' And with that, he got up and left.

The rest of the week passed fairly uneventfully. Without any real idea where to start, looking for the mystery door—or whatever the key opened—was pretty pointless. Hermione had not found the time to really talk to Severus, either—and she did want to clear the air. Alone in her study, she considered her next move.

'I suppose an apology would have been too much to expect,' she muttered.

'That boy has never found it easy to admit his mistakes.'

Startled, Hermione's head snapped up. In a painting of a Norwegian fjord (deliberately chosen to discourage visitors), Hermione was surprised to see the figure of an unknown woman dressed in Elizabethan costume gazing at her intently.

'It is fortunate I do not feel the cold.'

'And you are...?'

Smiling, Betty inclined her head politely. 'Elizabeth Cavendish-Desang.'

'Lady Elizabeth...?'

'Indeed. And now that the formalities are out of the way, let me tell you about Lily Evans...'

Tentative Progress

Chapter 10 of 17

A chat over a cuppa.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

A/N: Many thanks to Septentrion and Semptra for the beta.

The second day of the holidays dawned bright and clear, and Severus was determined to make the most of it. The courtyard's transformation was progressing satisfactorily: using magic, he'd already marked out the intricate pattern of the four individual parterres and created the gravel paths that intersected them. Pomona had, as promised, donated and delivered the trays of young lavender and box-hedge plants that would form the backbone of the design and frame his herbs and potions ingredients. With everything all set, Severus cast a cushioning charm for his knees and began the arduous task of planting out his knot-garden.

An hour later, Severus wiped his brow for the umpteenth time and paused to admire his handiwork. There was an impressive stack of empty pots behind him, but there was still a long way to go. Huffing resignedly, he picked up the next small lavender bush, carefully eased it out of its pot and placed it in the earth he'd so painstakingly prepared the day before. It wasn't as boring a job as he'd expected...repetitive, certainly, but it was also strangely contemplative. Firming the soil around the base of the lavender with his hands, Severus let his mind drift.

In her study, Hermione was catching up on her private correspondence. Ignoring her owl's impatient wing-flapping, she put the parchment to one side and called for some much needed tea. It was proving difficult to concentrate, her mind forever returning to Betty's shocking revelations about Harry's sainted mother. The vampire hadn't pulled any punches: not bothering to conceal her contempt, she'd made a scathing attack on Lily Evans' character, which went way beyond the usual Gryffindor/Slytherin animosity. Severus, however, could do no wrong. *He's like one of my own. But don't tell him I said that. He'll think I've gone soft.*

She'd resisted the temptation of watching him from the window yesterday...well, she'd taken the odd~~peek~~, just to see how he was getting on. It had absolutely nothing to do with the sawn-off jeans, cut just above the knee, and the black T-shirt he was wearing to work in, of course. Picking up her mug, Hermione sighed. This was ridiculous. They'd barely spoken all week, and the tension between them was palpable. She walked slowly over to the window with her tea, making her mind up. *She* was the Headmistress; any bridge-building would have to be instigated by her.

Getting up to rest his knees and stretch his back a bit, Severus cast a gentle rainmaking charm on the bed he'd just planted *One down, three to go*. He glanced up at Hermione's office, then at the window to the side. She was standing there, smiling at him.

'Looking good,' she called out, her voice echoing around the courtyard.

Severus almost quipped, 'Me or the garden?' but stopped himself. He had been waiting for an appropriate moment to speak to Hermione, and it looked like this might be the perfect opportunity. 'Any chance of some tea?' he called back.

'Of course. I'll send some down.'

'Don't bother.' Severus wiped his hands on his jeans. 'I'll come up.'

Seconds later, he was perching on Hermione's window sill. She swallowed. Flying without any means of support was unnatural, whichever way you looked at it...it gave credence to all those old vampire rumours, for one thing. But sitting there, legs dangling, black-kneed, clutching his mug, Severus looked more like some overgrown urchin...boyish, grubby, and rather endearing.

After an embarrassed silence, Severus eventually spoke. 'I feel I owe you an explanation...'

'You don't owe me anything,' Hermione replied, rather too quickly.

He sighed. 'Hermione, I dream about Lily from time to time...but I dream about all the others, too.'

'I see...'

'But...' Severus took a large gulp of tea. 'When I lay dying, it was Lily I saw, and I knew if I could get to her, I would be safe...'

'Oh, Severus.' Hermione reached out to touch his arm but pulled back. 'I had no idea...'

He shrugged, staring into his mug. 'She turned away from me; I woke up in the hospital wing. And when I dream of her now, she still pulls away... but, er... you... didn't.'

Severus finished his tea. 'I can't control my dreams, Hermione, but when I... when we... I-I wasn't thinking of her. I want you to know that.'

Frowning, Hermione worried her bottom lip. She'd needed to hear it, but she wasn't sure it changed anything. *Besotted, he was*, Betty had told her. *Followed her around like a lost lamb.* 'She still had no desire to be compared with a dead woman and found lacking.'

'I had a visit from Betty the Bloodthirsty, yesterday...'

'Don't tell me.' He scowled. 'She never liked Lily.'

'But she does think a great deal of you...'

'In my day, certain 'ladies' kept dwarves as servants to enhance their beauty. I believe having Severus in tow made the Evans girl feel superior'..

'Lily was my friend...,'

Some friend. If anyone had humiliated Harry or Ron in front of the entire school, she'd have hexed their bits off...not used it as a flirting opportunity.

'...and I was responsible, at least in part, for her death.'

'I realise it must have been very hard for you, all these years...'

Severus snorted. 'Guilt, Hermione. Nothing but. I'm not still carrying a torch for her, if that's what you're thinking.'

'I don't want you to feel you have to tell me...'

'I know.' He sighed. 'It was a long time ago. And while I deluded myself for years that she returned my feelings, she loved James Potter...'

... She let him hold her hand in the library, got him to do her homework...but she always had her eye on the rich boys... She went after Sirius Black first...

'... Even after she married him, I hoped she'd come to her senses eventually and leave him...and I'd be there to pick up the pieces... But it wasn't to be.'

Hermione nodded, not really knowing what to say. Arms folded, she took a step closer to the window and looked down into the courtyard. 'Still a long way to go,' she said softly.

'Yes,' Severus replied, staring at her, 'but at least I've made a start...' He followed her gaze down to see Corvus settling onto the handle of his garden fork, cawing loudly.

She smiled brightly. 'Any news on the key?'

'No, not really, I'm afraid. According to my new... valet, Corvus just keeps repeating, 'Not yet time.'

'Is that all?'

'What do you expect? He's only a raven.'

Hermione giggled. 'Betty said you should try the Bloody Baron.'

'Already have. He wasn't terribly forthcoming, either. I think he recognised it, though.'

'Well, I suppose that's progress...' She sighed. 'You know, I think I may have been wrong about Betty.'

He smirked at her admission. 'So, you'll reinstate her?'

'I've found a compromise.' Hermione smirked back. 'Gary objected to the painting, so I'm going to commission a new home for Betty without the bloody heart. She's agreed to being re-housed...'

Severus started laughing.

'What's so funny?'

'She's been after a change of scene for years, didn't she tell you?'

If she didn't know better, Hermione would have thought she'd been the victim of some Slytherin plot.

Severus was still grinning. 'You know... the fork in the heart was an artistic embellishment... she never actually ate it.'

'But even so, she did rip it out of her first kill...while it was still beating.' Hermione grimaced. 'And it was her husband's, for Merlin's sake!'

'Indeed.' There was no denying it. 'Did she tell you he'd been cheating on her for years? She always said, he'd torn her heart out; it seemed only fair for him to suffer the same fate.'

A thought occurred to her. 'Severus... Is Betty still... erm, undead?'

His upper lip twitched slightly. 'You don't expect me to give away all of Slytherin's secrets, now, do you?'

Hermione's eyes widened.

'Well... Thank you for the tea.' Severus shifted his weight on the sill, getting ready to jump. 'I suppose I'd better be getting back to it.'

'What? Wait... I want to know about Betty...'

He paused, appearing to give her demand due consideration. 'All right. Come and help me in the lab tonight, and I'll think about it.'

'Tonight?' Her face fell. 'Sorry. I can't, not tonight.'

~HGSS~

The garden seemed to have lost all appeal, and Severus couldn't drum up any interest in his research, either.

Gary Burbage. She was out with Gary sodding Burbage.

Severus chucked back a large tumbler of whisky and flopped into his chair.

'Am I disturbing you?'

'Yes, but that's never stopped you before.' He pinched the bridge of his nose. 'What do you want, Minerva?'

'She likes you, you know.'

'Who does?'

'Severus...' Minerva expertly swatted a swarm of midges. 'Hermione would rather be with you...she told me.'

'How the Headmistress spends her Sunday evenings is no concern of mine.'

'Idiots...the pair of you. I don't know why I bother.'

'I don't, either.' Severus scowled at the former headmistress. 'So stop interfering.'

'You could do a lot worse,' Minerva continued regardless, 'as could Hermione. I'd really hate to see her devote her whole life to this pile of stones and end up like me.'

'What makes you think I...?' He shook his head. 'No, she's better off with someone her own age.'

'Och, Severus...'

'Enough, Minerva.'

'Pining for something you never had is far safer than taking a risk on a living woman, isn't it?'

'I said that's *enough!*'

A Bit of a Dilemma

Chapter 11 of 17

Hermione questions her judgement.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

Big thanks as ever to my betas Septention and Sempra.

Hermione said a hurried goodnight to Gary in the Entrance Hall. Judging by the look of disappointment on his face, he'd been expecting something more, but Hermione hadn't even looked back. She had been right to suggest drinks in the Three Broomsticks, she thought wearily, stepping onto the spiral staircase. It had been an informal, not-quite-a-date, way of testing the waters to see if she wanted to take things further. And now, after a few hours in Gary's company, Hermione was absolutely sure that she did not. It had felt awkward: the conversation forced, stilted, and mostly about work.

Yawning, Hermione closed the door to her quarters and hung up her cloak. The evening had started off okay, but when they'd veered off the subject of reforming Slytherin house, it had soon become apparent that Gary's favourite topic of conversation was himself. Time had dragged by after that, and she'd found herself wondering what Severus was doing and wishing she was helping him instead. Then, as they were leaving, she'd casually mentioned the commissioning of Betty's new painting and noticed a flash of annoyance cross Gary's face. He'd hidden it well, but not quickly enough. What was that all about?

She kicked off her shoes and lit the fire. Rubbing her arms briskly in the welcoming glow, Hermione frowned in consternation, unable to shake the nagging suspicion she was being manipulated. Why was Gary opposed to reinstating Betty in a less offensive setting? Whatever the reason, Hermione's confidence in the man had suffered a blow. And she was normally such a good judge of character, too, but... had Gary's charm and flattering attention affected her objectivity? Hermione snorted in annoyance. Maybe Phineas...? No, she wasn't going down that road, but... from now on, she would be a lot more wary.

Later in her bedroom as she brushed out her hair, Hermione was still berating herself for being taken in by a pretty face. 'Stupid... stupid...'

'How did it go with Professor Burbage?'

Hermione jumped. 'It's late, Minerva, and I'm tired.'

'Not good, then, I take it.'

'I don't wish to discuss it.'

'Well,' Minerva pressed on regardless, 'if the object was to make Severus jealous, you've succeeded. He hit the whisky again.'

Hermione groaned. 'That's not why...' She walked over to the window and peered out. There didn't seem to be any lights on in Severus' apartments. 'Is he okay?'

'His elf put him to bed.' Minerva sighed. 'Hermione, I would generally advise you against mixing business with pleasure—'

'I know, I know. Spare me the lecture. It won't happen again.'

'I was about to say that Severus is different. He knows what it's like to be in your shoes. He understands, and he does care for you, but if you're expecting him to come crawling, you'll have a long wait.'

Hermione shook her head. 'I don't want him to crawl. I just want him to be sure it's me he wants/want to be sure it's me he wants.'

'For Merlin's sake! What will it take...' Minerva counted to ten. 'Do you know how many headteachers have died in that bed, alone and unloved? And more importantly, do you want to be the next one?'

'No, I...' It wasn't something Hermione wanted to dwell on.

'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, my girl. Hogwarts is your job. Not your life—and get some sleep. You look exhausted.'

Too tired to argue, Hermione was soon snuggled down in the bed where Severus had once slept, dreaming of knot-gardens, rosebuds and a man with the biggest trowel she'd ever seen.

~HGSS~

Approaching the Head Table for breakfast, Severus noted with no small satisfaction that Hermione, who had her nose stuck in the *Prophet*, was largely ignoring Burbage's attempts to draw her into a conversation.

A bowl of steaming porridge appeared as he slid into the seat on Hermione's left. Bile rose in his throat as the smell of food hit his nostrils.

'Morning, Severus,' said Hermione, putting her paper down.

Severus grunted a reply and picked up his spoon.

'You look a bit peaky. Are you not feeling well?'

'I'll survive.' His liver screamed in protest at such a rash pronouncement.

Despite a double dose of hangover potion, Severus was still feeling rather delicate. He tried to force down a spoonful of porridge.

'If you need help in the lab,' Hermione said, a bit too cheerily for his liking, 'I'm free this evening.'

Turning towards her, his prepared caustic remark froze on his tongue when he saw her concerned face.

He swallowed. 'Thank you, no. I need to go to London for supplies, and—'

'I'm having lunch with my parents,' Hermione interrupted. 'I can return via Diagon Alley, no problem.'

'I would... appreciate that.' Severus managed a weak smile. 'Thank you.'

~HGSS~

Later that evening, Hermione was beginning to regret her offer of help as she dissected the wings off yet another Chinese horned dung-beetle. 'This is just like being in detention,' she grumbled.

'You wanted to help.' He scanned his notes once more.

'This was what put me off Potions as a career, you know.' Hermione wrinkled her nose up in disgust as she ground the beetles to a paste in the mortar and pestle. 'At least with Arithmancy, all you get on your hands is ink.'

'Really?' He looked surprised. 'You hid your revulsion well in class, I must say.'

Hermione grinned. 'I saw how you treated the squeamish. I wasn't about to let that happen to me.'

'Are you sure you want to stay?' Severus smirked back. 'No doubt Professor Burbage could find you a more... pleasant task.'

'We-ell...' She pretended to consider it. 'On the whole, I think I'd rather be up to my elbows in beetle goo.'

'That bad, eh?'

Hermione didn't bother answering and carried on pounding. It was strange, really, but there was nothing awkward about the silence, no need to fill it with meaningless small-talk. She looked up to find Severus looming over her.

'Hair,' he murmured, tucking a stray lock behind her ear. 'You should know by now to tie it out of the way.' Severus hesitated a moment before cupping her cheek. 'Hermione...'

Her breath caught at the look of intense longing he gave her, and she wanted nothing more than to lean into his touch, however...

Gently, she peeled his hand away from her face but kept hold of it. 'Severus, if you were to cast your Patronus, what form would it take?'

His expression darkened abruptly, and he pulled away. 'Leave. There is no more to be done here tonight.'

'I disagree.'

Unperturbed, Hermione stepped towards him. 'So you know, I care about you. Very much.' She placed her palm on Severus' chest. 'If you ever find room for me in *here*, talk to me. I'm not going anywhere.' She stood up on tip-toe and kissed his cheek.

The Bloody Baron chose that moment to float through the wall. Glancing at the scene, he moved quickly across the room and disappeared up the chimney.

'Has he mentioned the key?'

'No,' Severus replied, touching his cheek. 'But I expect news of our... liaison will be all around the castle by morning.'

So <i>that's</i> where it goes!

Chapter 12 of 17

Cards, gossip and the Baron shows the way.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

A/N: Much thanks as always to my betas Septentrion and Semptra.

Summer Term. Quidditch. The House Cup. A sense of eager anticipation for the summer holidays, combined with the dread of impending exams, was hanging in the air. Stressed-out fifth and seventh-years, realising that their O.W.Ls and N.E.W.Ts were approaching at an alarming speed, wore worried frowns of concentration while attempting to cram several years-worth of study into a few short weeks. And in the background, the teachers...part of the scenery, a necessary evil, whose only purpose in life was to pile on the pressure until their brains exploded, not people with worries and yearnings of their own.

The boys struggling with raging hormones, hair sprouting in peculiar places and voices they could no longer trust, wrestled with the mystery that was girls and yet had no inkling that the dour professor with the bad hair and the beaky nose was suffering comparable agonies. The girls huddled together in giggling groups on Hogsmeade High Street paid little or no attention to their Headmistress smiling at Professor Snape for holding the door open for her at Scrivenshaft's, or the way he gently steered her inside, or their animated conversation when they emerged from the shop a few moments later.

The same could not be said for the portraits and ghosts of Hogwarts castle, for whom Hermione and Severus' obvious attraction to one another was the hottest topic of conversation. The former heads of Hogwarts, in particular, had plenty to say on the subject...when Hermione was safely out of earshot, of course.

'... conduct unbecoming a headmistress of this school.'

'Fiddlesticks, Armando.' Dilys Derwent's silver ringlets swung violently as she shook her head. 'This could be the making of both of them.'

'Romantic drivel,' Albus muttered. 'If the governors get wind of this...'

'They won't. Unless you tell them.'

'Save your breath, Dilys.' Minerva sighed. 'You may as well talk to the wall. Now, are you ready? It's getting late.'

'Almost. I'll just get my reticule...'

'You don't fool me you, you old goat,' Phineas said once the witches had left. 'You're loving this, aren't you?'

'Can you blame me?' Albus chuckled. 'I haven't had this much fun in years...and Dilys has a point. If Hermione does decide to take Severus on, he won't know what hit him.'

'Severus is no pushover.' Phineas glared at Albus. 'He's more than a match for Hermione.'

'Care to wager on that?'

~HGSS~

Frowning, Minerva rearranged the hand in front of her.

Betty called spades.

'Any news on our two lovebirds?' the Fat Lady asked, leading with a five of hearts.

Minerva snorted, following suit. 'None.'

'She entertains him in her private chambers, you know,' said Dilys. 'Drives Armando potty.'

'I've no idea why that should be...since nothing improper happens,' Minerva was quick to emphasise. 'All they ever do is talk.'

'Sir Nicholas said...'

'Don't believe a word he tells you.' Betty threw a card down and smiled at Minerva. 'And I think it's rather sweet. Like a proper courtship should be.'

Minerva was visibly shocked. 'You approve of a Gryffindor?'

'I like Hermione,' Betty replied. 'And they'll come to their senses, eventually. Have faith. Now, whose turn is it?'

'Um... mine.' Dilys studied her cards. 'Any news on your new home, by the way?'

'Almost ready, I believe.'

'You know you're always welcome to stay with me.' Dilys added the two of spades to the pile.

'You're most generous.' Betty trumped the lot and gathered the cards towards her. 'That broom cupboard reminds me far too much of my coffin.'

The others shuddered, thankful that was one memory they'd been spared.

'I'm just glad Hermione had the sense not to get involved with Professor Burbage,' Minerva said hastily, anxious to change the subject.

The Fat Lady began dealing the cards. 'Ye-ess... way too smooth for my liking...'

'Definitely.' Dilys nodded in agreement. 'I can't put my finger on it exactly, but... something's off there. Definitely.'

Betty looked up sharply. 'What did you say, Dilys?'

'I said there's... Betty, dear. Are you all right?'

'I'm fine, thank you. I've just remembered something...'

The others looked at her expectantly.

'Oh, I don't suppose it's terribly important.' Betty shrugged. 'It can wait until tomorrow.'

~HGSS~

She was doing it again. Slowly winding the quill feather though her fingers while checking her calculations. The way she was nibbling her lip was damned annoying, too. And did she have to lean over the desk like that?

It had been weeks now. Weeks of utter torture. Of course, she wasn't flaunting herself deliberately. It was all quite innocent...he knew that, but it didn't make it any easier or make him want her any less. Two steps. That's all it would take, and he would be behind her, scrunching up her skirts, burying himself up to the hilt...

Turning her head slightly, Hermione gave him a weak smile before returning to her Arithmantic problem. Seeing her so distracted hauled Severus' thoughts out of the gutter.

'Governors giving you a hard time?'

She nodded, not looking up.

'Hermione...'

'Hmm?'

'Come here. Please.'

She frowned. 'Why?'

'I want to hold you. Please.'

Two steps and she was in his arms, head tucked under his chin. 'Do you want to tell me what happened?'

'Oh...' She sighed against his chest. 'They didn't think much of my idea to abolish the Sorting, that's all.'

Severus chuckled softly. 'And you find that surprising?'

'It's not like I suggested doing away with the houses.' She huffed. 'That wouldn't be practical. I just don't see why a child's future should be decided by a hat. It's a nonsense.'

'It's tradition.'

Hermione twisted around to glare up at him. 'It's completely arbitrary! Take me, for instance. My marks were consistently higher than any Ravenclaw in my year; I'm loyal and I'm ambitious. And you. You're the bravest, most intelligent, most loyal man I know. Why not sort the first-years alphabetically? It would make just as much sense.'

'Hermione... You're trying to change too much too soon.'

It would have been too easy to point out it was Hermione's inability to see the shades of grey in any given situation, together with her unswerving conviction that she always knew best, which marked her out as a Gryffindor. But she was in his arms, holding him tight, and he wasn't about to spoil the moment. Nothing he said could ever change her, anyway, which was absolutely fine by him.

'I knew you'd take their side.' She was staring at him accusingly.

Severus shook himself out of his reverie. 'On the contrary, I think your suggestion merits due consideration.'

'Really? I never thought I'd ever hear you say that.' Hermione put her head on his chest again, and Severus' heart speeded up a little.

'Yes, well... I think you'll find that I am... not quite so resistant to change as you might think.'

Hermione inhaled sharply. 'No?'

'No... I....' He swallowed. 'Tradition will always have its place, but one should always be... open to new ideas.'

'Are you trying to tell me something, Severus?' Hermione asked, raising her head once more.

'Subtlety... Thy name is Gryffindor...'

'Oh...'

'A-hem.' A hollow cough overhead made them spring apart.

'It is time.'

'Time for what?' Severus asked somewhat tetchily.

The Bloody Baron ignored him. Floating towards the fireplace, he stopped and hovered, pointing a ghostly finger at something.

Glancing at each other, Hermione and Severus crossed the room to join him.

'There, Snape. Your wand.'

'Very well... If you insist.' Severus touched his wand to the wall under the ghost's watchful eye. 'Now what?'

A second later, scraping and rumbling, the stones rearranged themselves to form an archway. Without looking back, the Baron passed though.

'Well, I wasn't expecting that,' said Hermione.

'Indeed not. Shall we?'

She mock bowed. 'After you.'

'Lumos!'

The passageway, though vaulted, was a bit on the low side, and Severus and Hermione had to stoop as they walked. Narrow shafts of light punctured the darkness at intervals, but they were glad of the wand-light nonetheless...if only to avoid walking into the cobwebs that were strung across their path.

Severus stopped abruptly, causing Hermione to bump into him.

'What is it?' she asked.

'A door...' Severus fished in his pocket and produced the golden key. 'If this leads where I think it does...' It was a perfect fit. The lock clicked; Severus lifted the latch and pushed.

Perplexed, Hermione followed a grinning Severus up the spiral staircase. Reaching a landing, Severus picked the first door on his left, which opened into a lofty, formal hall. As they looked around in wonder, the fire roared to life of its own accord.

'No one's been here in years,' Hermione muttered, noticing the dust-covered tapestries. 'Not even the elves. Where are we?'

'Shall I tell her or will you?'

Hermione spun around and stared, open-mouthed, at the portrait above the fireplace. Even without the locket around his neck, she'd have recognised him anywhere.

'Headmistress.' He bowed. 'Welcome to Slytherin Tower.'

Faded Grandeur

Chapter 13 of 17

Loyalties and responsibilities.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Many thanks as ever to Septentrion and Sempra for the beta.

A thousand questions running through her head, and Hermione could only stare.

'Sir...' Severus broke the silence, gesturing around him. 'Why now?'

Hermione blinked. 'Yes, yes... And... have you been here all this time... alone?'

Stroking his beard thoughtfully, Salazar Slytherin gazed at them. 'To answer your question, Snape, the time is right, and... Headmistress, I believe that I appeared *here* shortly after my... demise. Few know of my existence, but I am not without company.' He turned his head at the sound of beating wings. 'Am I Caradog?' Landing gracefully on Salazar's shoulder, the raven nipped his ear affectionately.

'Is that...?'

Severus nudged Hermione as Salazar looked at her disdainfully. 'Of course not,' he hissed. 'Use your brain.'

'Right. How would a live bird get into a painting...?' Throwing her hands up, Hermione walked over to one of the large mullioned windows, trying to gather her wits. Slytherin Tower... That was confusing enough. She remembered Severus mentioning its existence, but she hadn't paid much attention, thinking it had disappeared...as in been demolished and not hidden from sight...centuries ago. Looking through the leaded glass, Hermione confirmed its aspect: facing due south, to capture the best of the sun.

Severus and Salazar watched Hermione taking in her surroundings. The room was certainly imposing, with its high ceilings, panelled walls and large refectory table, even if it was sadly neglected.

'The elves'll think Christmas has come early,' Hermione murmured, examining the moth-eaten tapestries. 'Impressive. This is some common room, sir.'

'Common room?' Salazar spluttered. 'This is my...that is, my Head of House's...reception hall! The entrance to the dormitories is down the corridor.'

'Really...?' Hermione smiled. 'Your apartments must have rivalled the Headmaster's in their day.'

'Rivalled and excelled,' Salazar replied. 'But then, Godric always had rather... plebeian tastes.'

Hermione's smile froze. 'Perhaps the safety of Muggle-borns was a more pressing concern for him,' she ground out. 'And at least he didn't leave when the going got tough... A Slytherin trait, incidentally, that survives to this day!'

'Hermione! That was uncalled for.'

'No, she's right, Snape.' Salazar smoothed his familiar's plumage and sighed. 'I've witnessed many changes down the years...Caradog, here, keeps a keen watch from the paintings for me...no one takes any notice of a raven sitting in the background, you see...and I, too, have been saddened and embarrassed by Slytherin's... attitude in recent times...'

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. 'That is behind us now...'

'It still needs to be said.' Salazar inclined his head towards Hermione. 'My apologies, Professor Granger. There were fewer Muggle-borns in my day. Not enough to be worried about. But I have observed your numbers increase, and I am enough of a pragmatist to realise it is better to bring them into the fold and train them here than leave them to their own devices and run the risk of our world coming under attack.'

Hermione nodded. 'Apology accepted. So... why have you brought us here? Why now?'

'A good question,' Salazar replied. 'And one I cannot answer. The key was to be delivered to Slytherin's Head of House on my orders or, in the event of my death, when a compelling need arose.' He turned to Severus. 'You know the quarters under the lake were only ever intended as a short-term solution...to stop Godric from sticking his oar in while I was gone, mainly...but the time has evidently come for my house to return to the home originally built for it.'

'But Severus isn't Head of Slytherin.'

Salazar looked down his nose at Hermione. 'Exactly.'

'Now, what does that tell you, Headmistress, hmm?' Salazar asked, tapping his fingers together impatiently. 'What can you deduce from that, eh?'

Hermione's frown deepened as she considered the implications of Salazar's question. 'You're either inferring Professor Burbage wasn't fit to receive the key, or that the Raven did not recognise his status,' she said quietly.

'I am.'

Head bowed, Hermione stared into the fire, finally accepting that something, somewhere, was terribly wrong. But with no solid evidence, she could hardly start flinging accusations around...seeing as Gary hadn't actually *done* anything.

Hermione sighed. 'What do you suggest I do?'

'We have no proof of any wrongdoing,' Severus said, echoing her thoughts. 'I therefore advise caution while further investigations are made.'

'Time may be of the essence, however,' Salazar offered, 'but as guardian of the key, the decision to reveal the Tower's existence is yours, Snape.'

Hermione's head snapped up at that. 'What?'

'Didn't I tell you?' Salazar smirked. 'The tower is still invisible to the outside world. The enchantment will only be broken if you leave via the main exit. Go back the way you came, locking the door behind you, and no one will be any the wiser.'

Severus didn't like the way Hermione was nibbling her bottom lip.

'Um-um. O-okay,' she stammered. 'That would probably be for the best. I'll have to order a structural survey to ensure the tower's safe for habitation first, anyway. And, er, with exams this close, it would be far too much of a disruption in any case... No. Without a good reason, I see no need to rush into this. We'll take our time and aim to have everything ready for the new school year.'

Salazar glanced at Severus, who shook his head imperceptibly. 'That is of course your prerogative, Headmistress.'

'Well,' Hermione said brightly, 'if that's everything... It's getting late, and I have work to do.' She turned to leave. 'Severus...?'

'It was a pleasure meeting you,' Severus said, bowing formally. 'Until we meet again.'

Salazar bowed in turn. 'Indeed. And I suspect it will be sooner rather than later...'

As soon as the door closed behind them, Salazar slumped back in his chair. He could do no more.

'Have they gone?' said a voice to his left.

'Yes, my beloved.' Reaching out his hand, Salazar pulled Betty into his lap. 'And you were right. She is a stubborn one.'

Betty smiled. 'I did warn you...' Sighing, she leaned her head on his shoulder. 'I'll miss having the tower all to ourselves, but I'll be glad when the enchantment's broken...for your sake.'

'It's been a long exile,' Salazar agreed. 'Only made bearable these last four centuries by your presence, Elizabeth. It was a blessed day when Caradog led you here.'

'But soon you'll have your pick of the portrait ladies,' Betty whispered, toying with his locket.

Salazar stilled her hand, covering it with his own. 'I already have.'

'Charmer,' she murmured.

'Hmm... Ouch! Watch your fangs, old girl.'

'Sorry...'

~ HGSS ~

Once the archway had sealed itself, Hermione rounded on Severus. 'Sometimes I wonder if I'm fit for this job,' she snapped.

'Of course...'

'I mean, my judgment is obviously suspect, the castle hides things from me, and Slytherin house is doing its own thing as per usual.'

'Hermione, calm...'

'And back there, I was made to feel like a ten-year-old by a bloody portrait! A portrait which obviously doesn't give two hoots about my position in this school.' She paused to draw breath, glaring at him.

'So what are you yelling at me for?'

'Because... because... Oh, I don't know.'

Arms akimbo, Hermione tapped her foot agitatedly. 'Guardian of the key,' she muttered.

The tapping stopped, and Severus braced himself. 'Please don't take this the wrong way...'

Oh, shit.

'I trust you with my life, but I need to know where your loyalty lies. With Slytherin or with Hogwarts?'

'Good God, woman. Is that what all this is about?'

'Don't be angry. Please,' Hermione said, stepping towards him. 'Just tell me. In a crisis, who would you support. Me or Salazar?'

Severus took her hands in his. 'Above all else, my loyalty is to you. As Headmistress and my... friend.'

Hermione nodded and smiled. 'That's good to hear.'

Severus tried to pull her closer, but she resisted. 'Tomorrow, we'll talk tomorrow. After all that's happened, I need time to think.'

'May I escort you back?' he asked hopefully, releasing her hands.

'No, I'll Floo.' She reached for the pot of Floo powder and scooped out a handful. 'Oh, and shall I ask the elves to see you about cleaning our newest addition to the castle?'

'I think that would be wise.'

'Well, then... Goodnight, Severus.'

'Goodnight...'

Kicking the empty hearth in frustration, Severus cursed his luck. 'Tomorrow... Always. Bloody. *Tomorrow*.'

Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered

Chapter 14 of 17

A curry, a snog and a revelation.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

Many thanks to Alienor for an emergency beta, and to my regulars, Septentrion and Semptra.

The door closed on the last of the fifth-years, and a blessed silence fell on the Defence classroom. Relaxing his stance, Severus wrinkled his nose in disgust at the foetid smell of unwashed, sweaty teenager and wasted no time in opening the windows to let in some much needed fresh air. The place was stinking like Hagrid's hut after Fang had been out in the rain and was drying off in front of the fire.

Dear Merlin! Were they wizards or not? If it was too much trouble to bathe, what was wrong with casting a cleansing charm or two?

'Life skills,' he scoffed, imagining, not for the first time, how the more affluent pure-bloods, accustomed to being waited on hand and foot since birth, had welcomed that little innovation. Smirking to himself, Severus cast Reparo on a hex-damaged desk, remembering one particularly animated discussion he'd had with Hermione on the subject.

Severus turned his head towards the door as it creaked open.

'Excuse me, sir. I dropped something.'

Severus grunted and carried on clearing up. A musty smell assailed his nostrils, and he turned around to face the source of it.

Damp Dog. 'Was there anything else, Mr Vaisey?'

The Slytherin boy shook his head, but remained where he was.

'Mr Vaisey...?' Narrowing his eyes, Severus took a step forward, noticing the stains on his robe for the first time. 'Tell me. Is it too much trouble to place soiled clothing in the laundry baskets provided?'

Vaisey looked him straight in the eye. 'No, sir.'

'Then see that you attend to your attire before dinner this evening.' Severus pointed towards the door. 'Oh, and Vaisey?'

'Sir?'

'Make sure I don't catch you and your friends out after curfew again...it's becoming rather... tiresome.'

The boy's shoulders slumped. 'No, sir.'

Hermione read through the parchment in front of her one last time before signing her name with a flourish. There. Done. With a contented sigh, she rolled the parchment up, attached it to the waiting owl and sent it on its way.

'Skipping dinner again?' Minerva asked.

'Actually, I've invited Severus around for an early supper. We've some things to discuss.' Hermione glanced around the portraits, coming to a decision. 'Something's happened that you should know about.' She took a deep breath as they all looked at her expectantly. 'Severus and I found the door that the golden key unlocks.'

His stomach was rumbling. Loudly. Lunch had been a rather Spartan affair; everyone on the High Table had grumbled about the plain food and lack of second helpings. Severus suspected the kitchen was likely running on a skeleton staff as every elf that could be spared would be desperate to help clean Slytherin Tower. That said, it was still almost two hours before his supper date with Hermione. And he didn't think he could face it on an empty stomach. Concentrating on the unmarked essays in front of him was proving impossible.

'Eljay,' he called. 'Some sandwiches, if you please.'

The elf duly appeared. Severus decided not to comment on the large cobweb hanging from his left ear. Instead, he examined the plate and chose a cheese and pickle sandwich.

'How are renovations progressing?' Severus asked, taking a bite. 'Have you noticed any structural damage?'

'No, sir.' Eljay replied. 'The castle's wards protected the tower despite the Concealment Charm...as you said it would.'

'Hmm... S'good.' Severus swallowed. Hopefully, that would allay Hermione's fears regarding health and safety. 'And did you manage to salvage some of the more... perishable furnishings?'

Eljay smiled happily. 'What couldn't be saved, sir, was replaced.'

Still kicking himself for leaving the renovation of Slytherin Tower to a bunch of unsupervised house-elves, Severus left his rooms (clutching a bottle of chocolate liqueur he'd been keeping for such an occasion) and made his way to Hermione's quarters. *Merlin only knows what they've done to the decor,* he fumed, marching along the empty corridor. *Though knowing their taste in hats, anything's possible.* Nevertheless, it would keep until tomorrow; tonight, Hermione wanted to 'talk'.

Arriving at her door, Severus raised his hand then hesitated, feeling suddenly nervous. 'It's just supper,' he muttered. 'No point in getting your hopes up.'

Hearing Severus' knock, Hermione checked her hair in the mirror and tried to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. 'It's just supper,' she told her smirking reflection. 'Nothing more.'

He knocked again.

'It's open,' she called. 'Come in, Severus.'

Hermione smiled as Severus closed the door behind him and awkwardly thrust something at her.

'For you,' he said gruffly.

Hermione took the proffered bottle and glanced at the label. 'How lovely! We'll have some with our coffee, later.'

Relieved that she liked it, he managed a small smile, then sniffed. 'Mmm... Curry? Indian take-away?'

'More of an Indian banquet, actually.'

There was rather a lot of food, and it looked and smelled delicious.

'You can thank Purdy for this,' Hermione said. 'She went to India to get it for us by way of an apology for...'

Did she just blush? 'Well...' He smirked. 'I think this is a most acceptable peace offering.' Severus walked over to the table and pulled a chair out for her. 'Shall we?'

'Thank you.'

After they were seated, Severus waited for Hermione to serve the rice before helping himself to some Chicken Korma.

'By the way,' Hermione began, 'I've told the portraits about the tower.'

If she'd expected him to be annoyed, he didn't show it. Severus merely raised any eyebrow.

'It wasn't easy for me to acknowledge that something was amiss,' Hermione explained, 'but now that I have, it would be negligent of me not to pursue it.'

Severus nodded. 'Agreed.'

'I need to gather evidence, though, which is why I asked the portraits for help.' She smiled as she reached for the naan bread. 'And it gives them something to do other than gossip about us.'

'And how did they take it?'

'As you'd expect, really,' Hermione replied. 'Phineas hasn't stopped grinning since.'

They talked about various things after that: Severus' research, the garden, the summer holidays...but it seemed strained as neither appeared willing to broach the subject they really needed to discuss. Severus switched off, staring hungrily at Hermione's mouth, wanting to lunge across the table and...

'Coffee?' Hermione asked as a house-elf arrived to clear the table.

'Uh? Please.'

Hermione rose and led Severus over to the sofa where they sat in silence until the coffee arrived. 'Would you like some of that liqueur?' she asked.

'Bugger the liqueur.'

'Severus?'

'No more games, Hermione. Can I kiss you or not?'

Where that came from, he didn't know. Months of longing and lonely nights, probably. He hadn't meant to sound so abrupt, though, and she looked a bit taken aback...

Hermione stared at him, wide-eyed. Then she nodded slowly. Once.

She saw him swallow. Then he leaned forward, the sofa making squeaky noises as he swivelled around to face her. The first brush of his lips sent a delicious shiver down her spine, and she found herself melting into him, tempted to let go, leave him take control, forget her job, her responsibilities, forget about Headmistress Granger and just be... Hermione.

The feather-weight touch on the underside of her breast brought Hermione back to her senses, and she pushed him away, panting.

'I think we should... take it slowly.'

Severus pressed his forehead to hers. 'Slowly?' he gasped. 'It's been months...'

'I'm just not ready...'

'Fine,' he said, flopping back against the sofa. 'Fine.'

'Severus...'

'How long do you intend punishing me, Hermione?'

'I'm not...' Hermione sighed. 'You're not the first man to hurt me, you know,' she said, staring at her hands. 'And each time, I swear I won't let it happen again. I thought this...us...might be... different.'

'Different,' Severus muttered under his breath as he strode along the corridors back to his quarters. 'What the hell does she expect from me?' He was seriously considering tendering his resignation. There was only so much he could take...

He stopped dead. What was that rustling noise? Drawing his wand, Severus cast *Lumos* and noticed a classroom door slightly ajar.

He pushed it open and sighed. 'Mr Vaisey. How... predictable.' Severus glanced at his companions, all Slytherins. 'Ten points apiece from Slytherin for allowing me to catch you out after curfew, yet again. Now, get back to your dormitories, immediately.'

After pouring himself a large glass of whisky, Severus spelled off his boots and sank into his chair with a loud sigh. He was annoyed, upset and frustrated amongst other things. Hermione Granger was one infuriating witch, but he wasn't about to give up on her just yet. She wanted him; he couldn't remember the last time a woman had wanted him, and God knew he wanted her...

'Ah, you're back.'

Severus groaned. 'Yes, Betty, I am.' *Unfortunately.* 'Do you have any news for me?'

'Actually,' Betty replied, 'I've remembered something. It may not be very important...'

'Just tell me.'

'Well...' Betty began, 'I overheard a couple of girls mentioning a recurring problem with mould.'

'Mould?'

'Yes.' Betty nodded. 'Growing on their trunks. Cleansing charms weren't banishing it for long.'

'And?'

'That's it. I told you it wasn't much...'

Taking a gulp of whisky, Severus let his head fall back against the chair and wondered why he was the one trying to make sense of this mess. ~~What~~^{was} Burbage doing?

Or not doing...?

Severus inhaled sharply. 'Oh, my good God, no.'

Putting his glass down, Severus summoned Eljay.

'How may...'

'Eljay, get me inside the Slytherin common room. NOW!'

By the Pricking of my Thumbs...

Chapter 15 of 17

Something rotten in the House of Slytherin...

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

A/N: Thanks as always to my betas, Septentrion and Sempra. Thanks also to everyone who voted for this story in the hg/ss awards. I was very surprised to win.

It all seemed suddenly so very obvious.

Mould, musty clothing... Vaisey and his friends... He should have realised; no self-respecting Slytherin would get caught in the same place twice... Severus glared at the house-elf. 'Now, Eljay.'

Waving his hands, Eljay backed away in horror. 'Elves are f-forbidden from entering the common rooms, s-sir,' he stuttered.

'This is an *emergency*, elf,' Severus roared. But Eljay stood his ground.

'Very well. I cannot force you...' It was pointless arguing. 'Purdy!'

It took a moment longer than usual, but Purdy appeared, dived behind Eljay with a squeak and peeped around his side nervously.

Despite his increasing agitation, Severus extended his hand towards the trembling elf and spoke evenly. 'I'm no longer angry with you, Purdy, but I urgently need a favour. Apparate me into the Slytherin common room, and we'll put the past behind us.'

Purdy's ears drooped. 'Headmistress Granger...'

'As soon as we're in there,' Severus interrupted, 'I want you to fetch her, too.'

She took a step towards him, but Eljay held her back. 'It is against the rules,' he hissed. 'You may be punished...sacked, even.'

'I will take full responsibility.' Severus offered her his hand once more. 'Please, Purdy.'

With bated breath, Severus watched the battle taking place on the elf's face, but his pleading seemed to have decided the matter. Ignoring Eljay's protestations, Purdy grabbed Severus' hand and Disapparated.

The shocked faces that met their sudden appearance in the dungeons quickly dissolved into expressions of relief. He smirked at a group sitting on one of the leather settees. 'You have my attention, Mr Vaisey.' But his smirk soon faded as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. The Slytherin common room was not somewhere you would ever call cheerful: austere, certainly, but never this bare and depressing. Never.

Severus' jaw tightened as he looked around. Betty's portrait had of course gone, as had the stuffed animals, the Nundu rugs, the dragon-head trophies...all that remained were some ghostly marks on the stonework to indicate they'd every been there. He shuddered, trying to shake the claustrophobic feeling clutching at his heart. The place was about as welcoming as a tomb. With the friendly glow from the skull candle-holders also absent, the scant light from the wall sconces was only serving to emphasise the sepulchral atmosphere.

'What has happened here?' Severus asked through gritted teeth.

He was met with silence.

'Mr Vaisey,' Severus began. 'You have been putting yourself in my way, deliberately wearing filthy clothing, and...' He sniffed. '... not bathing regularly.'

The Slytherins exchanged furtive glances but remained silent.

'Furthermore,' Severus continued, folding his arms, 'I would remind you that your oath does not prevent the discussion of house matters with other Slytherins within these walls.'

They looked at him blankly.

He sighed. 'I am a Slytherin.'

'Oh,' said Vaisey. 'Of course. I didn't think... Well, in that case, sir... After he took Betty away, Professor Burbage said the rugs and ornaments weren't appropriate and... removed them, too.'

Shaking their heads, the others muttered amongst themselves. Severus frowned. Evidently, they were thinking the same thing he was: the Nundu was a protected species, their skins valuable... He began to breathe more easily, hoping that this... desecration, though unforgivable, was all that was amiss.

'And then there's the dampness, sir.'

Severus' heartbeat speeded up again. 'Show me.' He turned towards Purdy, who was staring in abject horror about her. 'I think the Headmistress should see this for herself, Purdy. Don't you?'

'Yes, Headmaster Snape,' the elf said angrily. 'Purdy is thinking the same thing.' She bowed curtly and vanished.

Severus let Vaisey lead the way, following him down the gently sloping corridor towards the dormitories. The smell of damp had hit him as soon as they'd left the common room, and his sense of foreboding was growing with each step. Vaisey paused just before the corridor ended, opening the door on their left as Severus expected, and entered the vestibule around which the boys' dorms were located.

'We try to keep it in check, sir,' Vaisey said, pointing at the walls. 'But it's hopeless.'

Severus touched the stonework and nodded. 'I assume Professor Burbage has been informed of this?'

Under the circumstances, Severus couldn't admonish Vaisey for rolling his eyes like that. It was an inane question, but it had confirmed his suspicions. Burbage had been negligent in his duty; whether this was out of ignorance or malice, he had yet to ascertain.

Vaisey turned away. 'My room's one of the worst,' he said, opening the door to the fifth-year dorm.

Inside, three seventh-years...two of them girls...were busily casting drying charms on the ceiling, walls and beds. They stopped when they saw Severus.

'How long will that last?' Severus asked, looking up.

'Until tomorrow, sir,' Vaisey replied.

'These are the strongest spells we know, Professor,' one of the girls said. 'We don't know what else to do.'

Keep calm. Don't frighten them. 'You've done all you can,' Severus told them. 'But, it's not healthy for you to sleep in these conditions.' He ushered the two girls towards the door. 'Get everyone out of the girls' dormitories. Take what you can carry and head for the common room. The Headmistress should be there by now. Tell her to stay put until I arrive.' He glanced over his shoulder. 'The same goes for the boys. Vaisey, you're with me.'

~HGSS~

Hermione had been enjoying a long soak in the bath when Purdy appeared. Despite the elf's frantic pleading that she should come immediately, Hermione had insisted on dressing first and not budging an inch until Purdy had explained what was going on.

She was therefore partly prepared for the sight that greeted her when they Apparated to the dungeons. The Slytherins stared at her coldly as she took in their living conditions, and for once, Hermione was at a loss for words. She was saved from the embarrassing silence, however, as the first evacuees began trickling into the common room.

The first-years, who had been sound asleep in bed, rubbed their eyes and yawned. Some were clutching books to their chest, others teddies.

'What's going on?' Hermione asked one of the prefects.

'Professor Snape said to stay put until he arrives,' the girl replied.

Further questions were stone-walled. 'Very well,' Hermione said exasperatedly. 'I shall await Professor Snape's explanation. But in the meantime, will one of you please fetch Professor Burbage? He has a right to be here.' She turned to Purdy. 'Some comfy chairs, please, Purdy, and something to drink... and, let's do something about the light, shall we?'

~ HGSS ~

Entering the corridor once more, Vaisey automatically turned right.

'No, this way.'

'But, sir. It's a dead end.'

'Appearances can be deceptive, Mr Vaisey.' Severus paused before the blank wall, hoping that the wards still recognised him. Placing his palm on the stone, he muttered an incantation and pushed. His hand passed effortlessly through the wall. 'Hold my arm,' he told Vaisey. 'I shall only keep you a moment.'

On the other side of the barrier, both wizards cast *Lumos* and quickly mounted a short flight of steps.

'Where are we, sir?' Vaisey asked nervously.

'Where do you think, boy?'

Meanwhile, Purdy was busy handing out steaming mugs of cocoa.

'When can I go back to bed, miss?' a first-year asked Hermione, sipping hers.

'Soon, I hope,' she replied, kneeling beside her. 'I'm sure Professor Snape won't be...'

'What is the meaning of this?' All eyes turned towards the Head of House as he stormed into the common room. 'Why aren't you all in bed? And I thought I told you, no

Transfigured furniture.'

'The latter would be my doing, Professor Burbage,' Hermione said icily, getting to her feet.

'H-headmistress,' Burbage stuttered. 'I wasn't told you were here.'

'Evidently not.'

It was hard to ignore the expressions on the young faces around her: loathing, hope, relief combined with a certain gloating pleasure that Professor Burbage had been Found Out. But, much as she was ready to wipe the floor with him, Hermione was not about to do it in the Slytherin common room...or without being in full possession of the facts.

'I'm waiting for Professor Snape's report,' she said.

'Snape? Oh, he's here, is he?'

Hermione didn't like the sly look that came over his features. 'Yes,' she replied. 'Can you think why?'

Burbage shrugged. 'I have no idea...'

~ HGSS ~

With a broad sweep of his hand, Severus illuminated the domed chamber. Vaisey shielded his eyes against the bright light, becoming aware of a silver lattice pattern which shimmered and stretched like a giant web over the low ceiling and reached down to the floor. On closer inspection, he noticed that parts of it were shining less brightly while in other places the strands were black or missing altogether. Here, cracks could be seen in the rock and water seeping through. He gulped.

'We have caught it just in time,' Severus said. 'It is not as bad as I feared.'

'Is-is that all that's keeping the lake out, sir?' Vaisey whispered.

Severus nodded. 'It is.' He reached into his robe pocket and took out the golden key. 'I shall attempt to make repairs. Take this to the Headmistress and explain what I'm doing. She knows what it's for...and make sure everyone stays in the common room. It's part of the castle and therefore protected by its wards. You will be safe there should I fail. Quickly, now.'

He waited until Vaisey had scuttled back down the steps before surveying the damage once more. Breathing deeply, Severus raised his wand.

It was an ancient spell, almost as old as Hogwarts itself. Created by Salazar Slytherin, it had been passed down to every Head of Slytherin since. Had Burbage not been told that the Net had to be regularly maintained? Had the secret died with Horace Slughorn?

Severus' worst fears were confirmed a moment later. Concentrating on stabilising one of the least affected patches, he was horrified to see the dull grey strands turn black... and spread like a fungus over the ceiling. A large chunk of rock crashed to the floor...

A trap?

The Bastard!

Severus turned and legged it.

He only had a few minutes at best. With water already pouring in, Severus charged through the false wall and yelled at the final few stragglers ambling nonchalantly towards the exit, 'Get out! *Run!*'

They froze for a split second, stunned by the sight of their Defence teacher sprinting towards them... then registered the water that was following him.

'MOVE!'

Panicked into action, they ran blindly, knocking over a bewildered little first-year, who had just emerged from the bathroom, in their haste. Severus hardly broke stride. Picking her up, he slung the girl over his shoulder and kept on running...

~ HGSS ~

'Professor Snape said to give you this, miss.' Vaisey offered the key to Hermione. 'He's trying to repair the wards, but...'

He was cut off by a loud shriek. 'Oh, my God!*Look!*'

'What the...?'

Turning in the direction of the sound, Hermione was horrified to see a rush of brackish water flowing towards them. But before anyone had time to think, the torrent hit an invisible barrier and folded back on itself.

'Is anyone else down there besides Professor Snape?' she asked frantically. 'How many are missing?'

'Another four, miss,' one of the Prefects answered. 'Here they come now.'

The water was rising fast as Severus and the others waded the last few feet to safety.

In the confusion and with everyone anxiously watching the entrance, no one noticed Burbage quietly unsheathing his wand while an exhausted Severus finally dragged himself into the common room.

Triumphantly, Burbage struck, casting the curse with lightning speed.

'Rot in hell, you murdering bastard!'

Severus glimpsed the flash, but had no time to defend himself. Instead, he instinctively turned to protect the child in his arms, taking the full blast of the curse. Without uttering a sound, he collapsed to the floor.

'SEVERUS!'

Aftermath

Chapter 16 of 17

In which our protagonists come to an understanding.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

A/N: Many thanks to my betas, septentrion and sempra, for all their hard work and encouragement. This is the last episode, barring a short epilogue. Thanks to all of you who have read, reviewed and voted for the series in the recent hg/ss awards. I never thought when I started this series that it would be so popular.

'Incarcerus!'

'Petrificus Totalus!'

Hermione barely registered the outraged, angry cries or the hexes flying behind her. She was only aware of blood. Lots of blood, Severus' blood, and the fact that he was horribly still. Moving would mean accepting this unwelcome reality, and so she remained where she was.

A high-pitched, keening wail shattered Hermione's inertia. Startled, she watched Purdy bound over to Severus' side and winced, covering her ears as the distraught elf shrieked a second time.

Eljay materialised alongside her, closely followed by another elf, and another, until Severus was completely surrounded. And then they began to sing.

A hush descended over the common room as everyone stopped to watch and listen. None of those present would ever forget the scene (although they would later be hard-pressed to describe the peculiar chanting), for as long as they lived. The event would pass into Slytherin legend, a tale the grandchildren of those who witnessed it would never tire of hearing. Hermione would always liken the elf-song to a hummingbird's beating wings. But lovely though it undoubtedly was, the sound of Severus groaning as he regained consciousness was far more beautiful to her ears than any music would ever be.

'Hermione...?' Severus wheezed.

Finding her feet again, Hermione dashed forward, the elves parting to let her through. She knelt at Severus' side, taking his hand in hers. 'I'm here, Severus. Don't try to speak.' *Oh, thank God, thank God.* 'You're going to be all right.'

He looked so terribly pale. Tenderly, she pushed a long strand of hair off his face and turned to the elves. 'I don't know what you did, Purdy, but thank you for acting so quickly. Now, please take us to the hospital wing.'

Severus' eyes fluttered open. 'Take care... of my house...'

'Severus, I...'

'Stay...'

Hermione reluctantly let go of his hand and sighed. Her mantle of responsibility had never felt so onerous. 'I'll join you as soon as I can.' Sitting back on her heels, she gestured to Purdy. 'Take good care of him.'

'Purdy is always taking care of Headmaster Snape,' the elf replied before gently cradling his body and disappearing.

With Severus gone, Hermione's focus shifted to the others in the room. Some of the older Slytherins were wearing knowing smirks, but the majority, elf and human alike, were waiting expectantly for her orders. Then she noticed the bound and immobilised Burbage.

It had been a long time since Hermione had felt such cold anger. Waving aside the prefects still guarding him at wand-point, she released him from the full Body-Bind but left the ropes intact.

Burbage glared at her. 'You're no better than he is,' he sneered. 'Go on, hex me. You know you want to.'

'I wouldn't give you the satisfaction,' she replied icily. 'How could you do such a thing?'

He laughed. 'Easily. Death Eater scum. He...'

'Save it for the Aurors. Eljay...' Hermione handed the key to the elf. 'Open up the Tower. I'll be there presently.'

~ HGSS ~

'Any news, Minerva?' asked Albus.

'Poppy's filling him with Blood-Replenishing Potion as we speak,' Minerva replied. 'He'll be fine in a day or two.'

Albus looked relieved. 'That was a selfless act on his part.'

'Why can't you admit it, man?' Minerva cried. 'Severus is a hero!'

'Well, he's certainly brave...'

'Say it!'

'Alright, alright. He's a hero. Satisfied?'

'Very.' Minerva glanced around the office. 'Phineas not back yet?'

Albus snorted. 'Still with Salazar. He's going to be insufferable for... oh, the next century or so. You do know that, don't you?'

'Och, let the man have his moment.'

Albus smiled wryly. 'On a more serious note, the governors have called an emergency meeting.'

'Oh, dear.' Minerva sighed. 'It may have been a major lapse of judgement on Hermione's part, but I hope they won't be too hard on her.'

'No, indeed.' Albus stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'Even though some of us had our doubts about Burbage, no one could have known he was a psychopath...Hermione included.'

'True,' Minerva agreed. 'And right now, she's too worried about Severus to care if they ask her to resign or not.'

'Is she still with him?'

'She hasn't left his side.'

'He's lucky to have her,' Albus conceded.

'Albus...?' Wide-eyed, Minerva pointed at his hat. 'There are flashing letters...'

He groaned, remembering his bet with Phineas. 'What does it say?'

'It-it says, "Gryffindors suck Slytherins rule",' Minerva replied, putting her hand over her mouth.

'Could've been worse, I suppose.'

'Depends how you read it... Anyway,' she said hastily, 'must be off. Have to spread the good news...'

Wearily, Albus removed his hat. 'You've no idea how lucky...'

The day Severus' portrait joined their ranks, he would be comforted by the knowledge that his love would soon follow. Albus envied him that.

~ SSHG ~

Book lying forgotten at his side, Severus was enjoying the late afternoon sunshine while keeping a critical eye on the elves toiling in his garden. He'd made a half-hearted protest for appearances sake, but letting them help had seemed the least he could do after everything they'd done for him. That said, weeding the parterres and clipping the box-hedging was as far as his concession went and no further.

Severus' hand instinctively touched the dressing on his neck when Purdy looked his way to ensure he was resting. He scowled. *Such a fuss.* You'd swear he'd never been hexed before.

Huffing, Severus wriggled against the cushions that were wedged behind his back and closed his eyes, inhaling the scent of the honeysuckle that was scrambling up the wall behind him. He felt old. And tired. He hadn't needed a Healer to tell him his body wasn't as resilient as it used to be; it was self-evident, but that didn't excuse all this *mollycoddling*.

Bloody females. They were clucking around him like mother hens. Purdy, Poppy...even the portraits were trying to get in on the act...and... Hermione... Well, he supposed he didn't mind *her* pampering him *quite* so much.

She had been the first thing he'd seen on waking up, brown eyes full of worry and looking like she hadn't slept in a week. Before he'd had a chance to ask, she'd told him the evacuation had gone well and Burbage was in custody. Then she'd squeezed his hand, and he'd known that everything was going to be all right.

Adjusting the blanket that was tucked around his legs, Severus opened his eyes... and there she was, chatting to the elves about something. Corvus, landing on his customary perch, cawed out a greeting and was rewarded with a smile.

Good. He's awake, Hermione thought, walking towards him. Severus was still looking pale, fragile even, in spite of all the potions Poppy had administered. 'Purdy tells me you've been behaving yourself,' she said, sitting beside him on the garden seat.

He snorted. 'As if I have a choice in the matter.'

'Now, you know Poppy only released you on condition you do nothing taxing.' Hermione resisted the temptation to plump up his pillows. 'You need to get your strength back.'

'Interfering old harridan,' he grumbled, but there was little venom in it. 'So. How did it go with the governors?'

'We-ell...' Hermione began. 'I did offer my resignation...and they might've accepted if Draco Malfoy hadn't known something the others didn't.'

'Oh?'

'Yes...' She stared straight ahead. 'Someone in the Aurory told him Burbage never actually intended to harm anyone... until you arrived. Then...' She took a deep breath. 'He dreamt up the plot to lure you to Slytherin House and to-to...'

'Kill me.'

'Yes... And if any children died too, he thought it would be a price worth paying.' She paused. 'Which is why he's in St Mungo's being assessed, not Azkaban...'

'So. He's pleading insanity.'

Hermione nodded.

'The governors accepted I employed him in good faith, and...' Hermione pointed upwards. 'When they saw *that*, they couldn't talk about anything else.'

Severus followed her gaze up to the top of the newly revealed Slytherin Tower and smirked. Exceeded in height only by the Astronomy Tower, it was an imposing sight. 'I can imagine.'

'Hoisting Salazar's flag was a bit over the top, though.' She smirked back. 'Purdy's idea?'

'Eljay's. He didn't see why a perfectly good flagpole should go to waste.'

Folding her arms, Hermione leaned back against the seat. 'It can stay...until the end of term...'

'I wish I'd killed him when I had the chance,' she said after a brief silence.

'Hermione...'

'Now it looks like he might've wriggled his way out of Azkaban...'

'Let it go, Hermione.'

She stared at him. 'I thought you'd be baying for his blood.'

'For wanting vengeance?' Severus let out a long sigh. 'I know only too well how he feels; how grief can... gnaw at your soul. I feel only pity for him.'

Hermione had to bite her lip and turn away. She stared down the garden while she composed herself, focusing on the heady scent behind her.

'I love honeysuckle,' she said, hoping her voice sounded steadier than she felt.

'I know... Minerva told me.'

Cool fingers tentatively caressed the back of her hand. 'It's not exactly a bower, but I hoped you'd appreciate the gesture.'

Feeling tears pricking the corners of her eyes, Hermione squeezed Severus' hand. How easily the simple pleasure of sitting here, like this, could have been snatched away. And the honeysuckle... He'd planted it just for her.

'It's truly beautiful,' Hermione said. 'You've... accomplished much in a short time.'

'I'd like to think so,' he said softly, lacing his fingers with hers.

'It was Salazar's originally, you know,' Severus murmured, suppressing a sigh as her smaller thumb brushed his own. 'The garden, I mean.'

'Really?'

'Yes, Betty told me,' he explained. 'The lady founders loved it too and enjoyed walking here. Godric, however, was banned. Salazar took great pains to make sure he couldn't get in but could only admire it from his window.'

Hermione snorted, remembering her own attempts at searching for the entrance. 'That explains a lot. Tell me, did you ever look for it when you were Headmaster?'

'I had... more important things on my mind at the time.'

'Sorry, of course. Stupid of me.' Hermione tried to withdraw her hand, but he held on firmly.

'The garden wasn't ready to give up its secret. Although... ultimately, only a Head of Slytherin could have gained admittance...'

'I see.' She tried to look stern and failed. 'Oh, don't look so coy. You've always been head of Slytherin as far as the castle's concerned. The job's yours...if you want it.'

He grinned. 'I shall consider it.'

A cool breeze made them both shiver. Purdy left her weeding and approached them.

'It is time for Headmaster Snape to be going in.'

'A moment more, Purdy. I'm enjoying the fresh air.'

Purdy looked at them both disapprovingly but noted their linked hands.

'There,' said Hermione, casting a warming charm. 'Will that do?'

The elf nodded. 'Five minutes.'

Hermione glanced at Severus expecting to see the customary scowl on his face, but instead there was an indulgent smirk.

'You're being remarkable tolerant,' she observed.

'I owe that small creature my life...twice over.'

Puzzled, Hermione frowned.

'It was her, Hermione. Purdy. She followed me to the Shrieking Shack...despite my orders to stay put and her bond to Hogwarts. She saved my life.'

'Oh...' Hermione brought her free hand to her mouth in amazement.

'She brought me to the kitchens,' he continued, 'laid me on the Slytherin table, and then the elves sang me home. It was their voices... Haunting my dreams all these years, and I never knew. They never told me.'

'Oh, Severus.' It was too much for Hermione. Resting her head gently on his shoulder, she snuffled. 'I'm never letting you out of my sight again. Ever. And you're staying with me tonight, too. No buts. If you wake up needing anything in the night, I want to be there.'

'Bossy madam,' Severus grumbled, though his heart did a little somersault. 'Can't wait to get me in your clutches, can you? I shan't be up to much, mind, just so you know.'

Hermione grinned. 'I'll call Purdy, then, shall I?'

'No, wait.' Severus fumbled for his wand. 'I've been thinking. Do you remember, you once asked me about my Patronus?'

'Yes, of course, but you don't have to... No, really,' Hermione protested. 'Please. You have nothing to prove...'

'Maybe not.' He sighed. 'But perhaps this is something I need to do for myself. Call it an experiment, if you will.'

'You shouldn't exert yourself,' Hermione admonished, but there was a determined look on his face.

Severus leaned his head against hers. 'You must realise that in the days when I needed to cast a Patronus on a regular basis, I relied on a handful of trusted happy memories. There were precious few of those to draw on in my early life, and they all involved Lily.' He sighed as Hermione's arm snaked around him possessively. 'But... in these past months, while you have largely infuriated the hell out of me, I do not think I have ever been as... content.'

Hermione laughed. 'Do you really think it might've changed?'

'We won't find out unless I try.'

'Poppy said, "No magic", remember,' she countered.

'I won't say anything if you don't.'

'You're incorrigible.'

'I know.' He chuckled. 'And you love me for it.'

'Ye-es,' Hermione said. 'I suppose I do.'

'Yes, well I... He swallowed hard.

'*Expecto Patronum!*

With an indignant squawk, Corvus took wing as the white flash exploded from Severus' wand. Witch, wizard and elves cast their eyes skyward, gazing spellbound, as two ravens, one black, the other of purest light, circled each other in the early summer sky.

~*~ *Finite* ~*~

Epilogue

Chapter 17 of 17

Happy ever after.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

A/N:The end at last. Big thanks as always to Septentrion and Sempra for the beta and thanks, also, to everyone who's read and reviewed. It's much appreciated.

Hogwarts: five hundred years later.

The Headmaster was not looking forward to this in the slightest. 'Is everyone here?' he asked, glancing quickly around his office. The sooner everything was said and done, the sooner he could go down the pub.

Albus looked pointedly at two empty frames.

Tilting his head back, Headmaster Longbottom sighed heavily. 'What are they up to? This is imp...'

The rest of his sentence was drowned out by a cacophony of coughs, snorts and titters.

'You're new here, Augustus.' Phineas smiled kindly. 'So you should know that those two could never keep their hands off each other in life. I'm afraid death had little success in slowing them down.'

Such information, while interesting, was hardly relevant. 'I-I... Look,' he said. 'Look... I need you all to hear what I have to say.' He held out his hands in a plea for order. 'This is really important.'

'It had better be,' a silky voice said. 'I would resent having my afternoon... nap disturbed for anything trivial, Longbottom.'

Augustus tried not to shudder, but there was something about that voice...the way Severus Snape said his name as if it were something unpleasant stuck to his shoe...that made him feel like an errant first-year. 'And where is...?'

'Here, Augustus. Sorry I'm late.' Hermione entered Severus' frame looking rather flustered. She patted her hair, although it was a futile gesture, and sat in the second chair that had thoughtfully been painted in. Leaning towards her, Severus grinned and whispered something in her ear.

'Show some decorum. Please,' Albus grumbled.

Blushing, Hermione undid the two buttons that had been hurriedly fastened and put them in the correct button holes.

Augustus took a deep breath and tried again. 'Now...'

'Is this going to take all day?'

'PLEASE.' Augustus was fast reaching the end of his tether. 'This isn't easy for me, you know. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but...'

'Leaving us so soon?' Severus goaded, sneering down his long nose at the young man and earning an elbow in the ribs from Hermione. 'That would make you the shortest serving headmaster in Hogwarts' history.'

'No, Severus,' Augustus replied wearily, 'that will make me the *last* headmaster in Hogwarts' history.'

There was a stunned silence. *Finally.* 'I see I now have your undivided attention.'

~HGSS~

The office door closed with a soft click, leaving the portraits to absorb the bombshell Augustus Longbottom had just dropped. By order of the Minister for Magic, Eljay XI, Hogwarts would cease to be a school at the end of the year. But worse was to come.

'No longer viable.' Minerva sighed. 'It seems time has passed us by.'

And indeed, things had moved on, outside, in the real world. With an ever-increasing number of Muggle-borns each year, the existence of the wizarding world could no longer be realistically concealed, and after much deliberation, the Wizengamot had repealed the Statutes of Secrecy. For the past hundred years or so, Hogwarts had been struggling to cope with the rising intake of these Muggle-borns, which had led to new, cross-culture schools able to accommodate Muggle technology being built. The sad fact was that no one wanted to send their kids to a draughty, antiquated castle in Scotland any longer.

'No respect for tradition,' said Phineas.

Hermione had been largely silent. 'It's more than that,' she said eventually. 'Even in my day, Muggle-borns didn't like giving up their music players and computers to come here. Imagine what it must be like now with all that-that *neurotechnology*.'

'I never thought I'd live to see the Statues of Secrecy revoked, though.' Dilys shook her head sadly.

'You didn't, dear.' Minerva turned to Albus. 'Can anything be done, do you think?'

'Such as? Some sort of rebellion?' He shrugged. 'We may just have to face it. Our purpose is to advise the incumbent Headmaster. If Hogwarts is sold, presumably that obligation is transferred to the new owner.'

'Yes, but, Albus, a Muggle?'

'And a Colonist, to boot,' Phineas added.

'There is little point speculating,' Severus said, 'until the sale goes through, and we learn more of this... American's plans for the castle.'

~HGSS~

'So these are the famous talking heads of Hogwarts.' Barnum P. Rand III let out a low whistle as he looked around the Headmaster's office. He tried to count the paintings but gave up after a few minutes. 'Say, Augustus. Whadd'ya think they're worth?'

'Worth, Mr Rand?' Augustus replied, somewhat perplexed.

'Call me Randy. Yes, worth. In Eurodollars.'

'I've no idea.' Frowning, Augustus scratched his head. 'They've never been valued. They just appear, you see, when a Head dies.'

'A-hem.'

'Yes, Minerva?'

'It's really rather impolite, Augustus, to talk in front of someone as if they weren't there.' A murmur of agreement went around the portraits.

'So, they're unique, right?' Rand said, turning his back on her. 'And old. And they come with the school?'

'Well, how *rude*.'

'Yes, of course.' Augustus mouthed a 'sorry' to Minerva while offering a seat to his guest. 'They're there to give me the benefit of their experience...'

The portraits strained to listen as the two men talked rapidly... *full-refurbishment... government grants... tax incentives... international standard golf course..*

'I don't like the sound of this, Severus,' Hermione said, reaching for his hand.

'Neither do I.' Severus cleared his throat loudly. 'Excuse me. Would one of you... gentlemen kindly explain what is going on?'

Surprised at the interruption, Rand turned around. 'And you are? Or should I say, "were".' He chuckled at his own joke.

'Severus Snape. Mr Rand...'

'Call me Randy.'

'I'd rather not.'

'What my husband wishes to know, Mr Rand,' Hermione said hastily, sensing Severus' rising anger, 'as do the rest of us, is... What are your plans for this school?'

'We-ell, little lady, I don't suppose it would harm...' He took out what looked like a small, square piece of metal from his pocket.

To everyone's astonishment, a three-dimensional image appeared in mid-air.

'Muggles can do that?' Albus remarked. 'Without a wand?'

They stared at the plan, recognising the castle but little else.

'What are those little flags on poles for,' Phineas asked, intrigued. 'And where did the Quidditch pitch go?'

'Quidditch?' Rand frowned. 'Oh, that broomstick game.' He pointed to the map. 'That's where the eighteenth hole will be...after we demolish that old stadium, of course, and clear some of that woodland.' He grinned, looking distinctly pleased with himself.

'Golf? You're building a golf course?' Hermione asked incredulously.

'Do Muggles still play that?' Minerva shook her head. 'Well, I never.'

'Please enlighten us, do,' said Albus. 'What on earth is golf?'

'It was such a long time ago...' Minerva sighed. 'I don't know if you remember, but my great-uncle invented a game for his Squib son, which was all the rage for a while.'

'You don't mean Smack the Snitch?'

'Yes, that's the one,' Minerva replied. 'Some Muggle must have seen it being played, and the next thing you know, everyone was at it...only with a ball, naturally...and little sticks. Uncle Archie should have patented it...'

While the merits of golf were being discussed, Severus had been staring at the sailing boats tacking merrily around the lake. 'Have you consulted the Merpeople about that?' he asked. 'Not to mention the Giant Squid?'

'Squid?' Rand spluttered. 'Do you mean to say there's a monster in that lake...and people? Why wasn't I told?'

'We hadn't got that far...'

'And what about the creatures in the Forbidden Forest?' Phineas asked.

'What creatures?'

'They'll be protected.'

'And what about the elves?' Hermione threw in. 'What about the ghosts? What about *us*?'

'Everyone, *please*.' Augustus appealed for order once more as the Heads vociferously expressed their concerns. 'Not all the details have been ironed out yet, but the Elves' place here has been assured by the minister. As for the rest... Perhaps Mr Rand could...?'

'I, too, would be interested to learn what this... Muggle has planned for my school.'

All eyes turned as Salazar Slytherin entered Phineas' frame. In deference, Phineas stood up and offered the founder his seat.

Augustus groaned.

'Why, yes.' Paying no heed to Salazar, Hogwarts' prospective purchaser got to his feet, smiling at Hermione. 'To answer your question, the decor here is pretty depressing for the luxury hotel complex and spa my consortium is planning. Anything valuable will be sold off...although I might keep you.' He winked at her. 'Great hair.'

Minerva gasped. 'Sell us off? You can't be serious.'

'Hmmm...' Salazar steepled his fingers and appeared to give the matter much thought. 'Assuming you could unstick us from the walls,' he said, 'selling the portraits would be fruitless. We are able to come and go at will, you see. If we did not like our new, er, lodgings, we would simply go elsewhere.'

'Is that right?' Rand turned to his host. 'Can't they be contained?'

Augustus shrugged. 'Well... there are charms...'

'There you go.'

Hermione gripped Severus' hand tightly and whispered, 'He means to separate us.' Glancing at Phineas' frame, she noticed a shadowy figure hovering near the door. 'Hmm... I've had an idea. Keep him talking until I get back.'

Severus looked at her questioningly as she left the room but did as he was told. 'What ~~do~~ you have planned for the interior, Mr Rand?'

'A-ha... Get a load of this...'

The 3-D architectural plan opened up to show the swimming pool, saunas, indoor tennis courts and hotel accommodation that were being proposed. The portraits stared in abject horror as Rand gave his presentation. To be fair, Augustus, too, looked a little green around the gills as the plans for the Great Hall were revealed, but was saved from commenting on it by the appearance of a house-elf. The Headmaster bent to listen and nodded.

'It seems rumours have reached the kitchen,' Augustus said. 'Please excuse me. I shouldn't be long.' The elf took his hand and they both vanished.

'Do continue, Mr Rand,' said Albus. 'This is absolutely fascinating.'

'Yes,' said Salazar. 'And perhaps you could also explain how you propose to override the castle's defences.'

'Glad you mentioned that...' Rand continued to wax lyrical for a further fifteen minutes during which time Hermione returned, looking grim but determined.

Severus knew that look. 'What have you done, Hermione?'

'Asked a friend for help,' she replied. 'Just watch.'

A few moments later, there was a soft tap on the door. Rand turned his head and immediately straightened up as the most entrancing woman he had ever laid eyes on entered the room. Porcelain skin, straight black hair and blood-red lips, she seemed to glide towards him.

'Good evening.'

'Er, um... Hi. I'm Randy,'

'So I've heard.' The vision of loveliness extended her hand. 'Elizabeth Cavendish.' She smiled slightly, revealing bone-white teeth. 'Astronomy Professor. Headmaster Longbottom has been delayed, unfortunately, so I'm to escort you from the premises...the castle has a nasty habit of playing tricks on the unwary, particularly after dark.'

Rand glanced at the window. Dusk had already fallen, and he hadn't noticed. 'Fine by me.' He took the proffered hand, which was unbelievably cold, and shivered. 'Elizabeth Cavendish... I don't remember seeing your name on the staff list.'

'Ah, no. I'm-um, filling in for Professor Weasley while she's on maternity leave. Now,' the lady gestured airily towards the door. 'Shall we? It is a beautiful evening for a walk.'

Compressing his blueprint down and slipping it into his pocket, Rand followed without looking back. 'I'm staying in Hogsmeade. Would you care to join me for dinner?'

'That sounds delightful...'

As the door closed behind them, the portraits let out a collective breath.

'Hermione... Was that...?' Severus stared at his wife.

Hermione raised her chin defiantly. 'Yes.'

'You set a *vampire* on a *Muggle*?

'Yes.'

'You set Betty the Bloodthirsty on a *Muggle*?'

'He was going to split us up!' Hermione sighed. 'Oh, don't look at me like that. Betty's been on plasma substitute for years. She'll just give him a bit of a fright, that's all.'

Memories of a bushy-haired young girl setting his robes on fire came flooding back. 'You're terrifying, you know that?'

The shade of Hermione Granger, who in life had sent Dolores Umbridge to the centaurs without so much as a dent to her conscience, merely snorted. Shaking his head, Severus gazed in open admiration at his wife, his best friend and lover, the woman who had stood by his side for the best part of five centuries and who was still prepared to fight for him if she had to.

'How on earth did you find her?'

'That would be my doing, Severus.' Betty entered Phineas' frame and perched on the arm of his chair. 'I always know the whereabouts of my counterpart, and she is most keen to help in any way she can.' She laughed in delight as the former heads of Hogwarts burst into a spontaneous round of applause.

'Well done, my dear,' said Albus. 'Well done, Hermione. Though I fear we haven't heard the last of this.'

'No,' Phineas agreed. 'But Hermione has bought us some time. Forewarned is forearmed. We can make plans, organise an escape route if necessary. They'll have to find us to freeze us.'

'I've spoken to the elves, too,' Hermione added. 'And we have their support.'

'Excellent.' Albus beamed, rubbing his hands together. 'This is just like old times. Now, this is how I suggest we proceed...'

Snaking an arm around Hermione's waist, Severus pulled her closer and nuzzled her neck. 'Now that's sorted...at least for the moment...do you think they'd miss us if we sneaked off?'

Hermione giggled and kissed his cheek. 'Probably, but I think I've done my bit for now.' Taking his hand, she pulled him out of his chair. 'And after all that excitement, I could do with a nice, um, nap.'

'Bossy witch,' Severus growled, following her out of the room. 'Remind me never to get on the wrong side of you.'

'After all this time, I hardly think that's likely...'

~*~END~*~