

A Murder of Crows

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One For Sorrow

Chapter 1 of 33

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Chapter 1: One For Sorrow

Although every day at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was magical, the first day of the new school year was by far the most enchanting. Anticipation crackled the air. Throughout the grey stone halls of the old castle, the sounds of fevered activity rang forth as house-elves and staff prepared for the onslaught of students. The long slumber of summer had finally ended, and the building shimmered as if waiting for the living and learning that would soon take place inside its ancient walls.

Without a doubt, today was Hermione Granger's favourite day of the year. She had to stop herself from skipping up the stairs as she made her way into the Great Hall. Along the way she admired the suits of armour lining the walls...just last week they'd been dull and dusty, slouching idly against their swords and shields. But today they stood to attention, gleaming and proud, the sun from the open windows glaring off their shining breastplates and nearly blinding Hermione as she walked past.

Entering the Great Hall at last, she watched in silence as the Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall, flicked her wand at the ceiling in a series of complex motions. When she had finished, the massive enclosure perfectly reflected the sky outside...a brilliantly clear blue without a single cloud in sight. Hermione had always loved the effect of the ceiling, but she had never before witnessed the enchantments being performed. The smile on her face fled when she lifted her gaze and saw an enormous Thestral fly overhead.

One for sorrow, she thought, remembering the old rhyme Muggle children sang to count magpies. She wondered if there existed an equivalent in the wizarding world for counting Thestrals but dismissed the thought at once. Children shouldn't be able to see Thestrals. The exceptions, of course, were all the children present at the Battle of Hogwarts more than fourteen years ago. There were a great many who could see Thestrals after that day. Too many.

"Ah, there you are, Hermione." McGonagall's crisp voice broke her reverie.

"Yes, you wanted to see me?" she asked. For reasons beyond her comprehension, she was always pleased by how little Minerva McGonagall had changed since the first time she'd seen her. As a child, the stern face and uncompromising disposition had nearly terrified her, but the consistency of her demeanour proved quite comforting now.

"Indeed, Professor. I summoned you for a very special reason," replied the headmistress. A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "You have been chosen to bring the firstyears into the Hall for the Sorting tonight," she said, and the rare smile spread to the rest of her face.

Hermione gasped. "But this is only my fourth year of teaching!" It was a privilege to be trusted with such an important task, and the thought of being the first to welcome all those fresh, new faces to the school thrilled her.

"You have proven yourself admirably in the past three years. I consulted the senior staff and Heads of House, and nearly everyone agreed the honour should belong to the Potions professor this year."

"Thank you so much, Headmistress...I look forward to it," she said.

She hoped McGonagall hadn't noticed the way she had started when referred to as the Potions professor...it would hardly be prudent to show how uncomfortable she was with the designation despite the three years she'd worn it. With a new lightness to her step, she made her way to her Potions classroom in the dungeons. There was still a great deal of work to be done prior to the start of term tomorrow, and as she set herself about her tasks, she allowed her mind to recount the circuitous journey that had brought her back to Hogwarts.

In the weeks and months following the Battle of Hogwarts, life had slowly returned to some semblance of normality. The remaining Death Eaters had either fled the country or been sent to a fully restored Azkaban. The long process of grieving had begun, and there had followed a blur of funerals and memorials, of visiting families and offering condolences, of tears and nightmares.

Hermione had retrieved her parents from Australia and reversed the charms on their memories. They'd been shocked to learn what she had done, and the novelty of having a witch for a daughter had lost a considerable amount of its charm. It had taken only two tales of Voldemort's terror to convince them of the wisdom of their relocation, and she had spent the rest of the summer savouring their company, aware of how lucky she was to have them when so many had lost entire families.

McGonagall had been appointed headmistress of Hogwarts, and a directive had been issued for all students to repeat their existing year at the next term. It had been determined that the students' education during Snape's stint as headmaster was not up to Hogwarts' usual standards, with Death Eaters roaming the halls, pummeling students, and hijacking classes with teachings in the Dark Arts. The decision had also helped those forced into hiding during the deplorable Muggle-born Registration Act of Dolores Umbridge and her supporters.

To say the decision had not been popular with the student body would have been a gross understatement. Hermione had been quite alone in her agreement with the edict, eager to finish her education properly.

Ron had spent the entirety of seventh-year grumbling. His constant dissertation on the unfairness of their return to school had soon pushed Hermione beyond her limits of tolerance. Although they had considered themselves a couple throughout seventh-year, they had spent most of it bickering. Without the intensity of their Horcrux search...and the constant fear of death awaiting them around each corner...their relationship had regressed to what it had been before: one of semi-tolerant friendship.

When Ron and Harry had begun Junior Auror Training, Hermione had travelled to Poland to simultaneously attend the Muggle university in Krakow and the magical Jagiellonian University hidden beneath it. As a caveat to her attendance at Hogwarts, she had promised her parents many years earlier that she would attend a Muggle university.

It had been an easy commitment to make when she'd been eleven, but the fulfilment of the promise had proved difficult. Knowing she would be woefully behind all the other non-magical students...a sensation she'd never been comfortable with...she had spent seventh-year cramming her head with Muggle knowledge. She had been glad for the tremendous workload. There had been no room in her mind for grief, and exhaustion had kept the nightmares at bay.

With the help of Professor Flitwick's *Reddo* charm, she had learnt an effective tool to comprehend and speak a foreign language. McGonagall herself had produced enchanted Muggle transcripts for Hermione's entrance into the Krakow University. The headmistress had even made special arrangements to secure the use of the sole Time-Turner owned by Jagiellonian.

"I support the decision to honour the commitment you made to your parents, Miss Granger," McGonagall had told her at the end of seventh-year. "But you cannot allow your magic to languish whilst you pursue your Muggle studies."

That Poland was not far from Bulgaria...the home of Viktor Krum...had not escaped Ron's notice and had contributed to his constant foul mood. And although she had remained uninterested in Viktor, the effort required to soothe Ron's ruffled feathers had soon outgrown her desire to remain committed to him. By the time they had finished school and had prepared to embark on their post-Hogwarts journeys, she had told him, "Perhaps some time apart will do us good."

"Yeah, maybe," he had said. "Let's just see how it goes."

The first several months had passed with the exchange of a few letters, but he hadn't seemed at all heartbroken over their separation. The realisation had provided her more relief than sadness, and the lack of emotion on both their parts had confirmed the death of the relationship, as lost as their childhood. Perhaps it had been yet another casualty of the Battle of Hogwarts.

She had remained friends with Ginny Weasley and had later learnt that Ron had left Junior Auror training after five months. In Ginny's words, "... he realised studying is a bit more work when you're not around to help!" He had moved to London and had helped George at Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. Ginny had said he was much happier there, and Hermione had deemed it a good solution for both brothers.

Harry had also left Junior Auror training early, though for very different reasons. In typical Harry fashion, a chance encounter had somehow led to his meeting the Athletic Director of the Wimbourne Wasps. The Wasps had had a decent Quidditch team that year, but they had been in dire need of a Seeker. One thing had led to another, and soon Harry had been playing Quidditch professionally and had been instrumental in England's subsequent win at the Quidditch World Cup. He had married Ginny on his twenty-first birthday, and the couple had had three children together.

Hermione had continued her magical coursework with a concentration in Charms and Transfiguration, but halfway through her university career she discovered that her studies at the Muggle university were impacting her magical thinking. She had become enamoured with the Muggle chemistry classes and had found herself surprisingly adept at many of her scientific studies. Even as a child, she had loved the preciseness of science, the endless quest for proof, and the free exchange of ideas and thoughts.

She had risen to the top of her science classes at the Muggle university when something strange had happened: the work she had performed in her Potions classes had begun to dramatically improve. No one had been more surprised by this than Hermione. She'd always been competent in Potions, but no one would have accused her of being particularly gifted. All that had changed as she had gained more knowledge about science on a molecular and sub-molecular level; suddenly she had been able to see the ingredients and processes of her potion-making in an entirely new light, and very good things had begun to happen.

The Potions master at Jagiellonian University, a large bear of man named Mikolaj Brukowski, had been famous for the invention of Bru-Bier, the Eastern European equivalent of butterbeer and a good deal stronger than anything served at the Three Broomsticks. Hermione's sudden improvement in his subject had seemed to impress the old wizard, and she'd soon become his personal protégé. By the end of her fourth year at university, Hermione and Brukowski had jointly published two papers in the prestigious *Bibliothèque de Remède Europe & Worldwide (BREW)*: one on their discovery of an additional four uses for dragon's blood, and another on potion-brewing methodology that had rocked the wizarding world and had garnered them a large feature in the Sunday edition of the *Daily Prophet*.

By the end of her sixth and final year at university, the duo had again gained notoriety for the now-famous "Brukowski-Granger Principle": a complex theory combining various elements of magic and science, set to revolutionize the world of potion-making and medicine. Unfortunately, there had existed a great many 'old-school' wizards

who had publically protested against anything that might change the established methods, especially when it had blatantly involved the incorporation of Muggle scientific theorem.

The Brukowski-Granger Principle had created a bit of an uproar for awhile, but the furore had eventually died down when most wizards and witches had been either unwilling or unable to devote themselves to learning the science required to put the Principal into practice. Still, Hermione had been quite proud of her work and everything she'd accomplished while at university. She even believed the controversy had been a good thing. Encouraging the wizarding world to enter into a debate on such things had been a step in the right direction.

Her success at Jagiellonian University had earned her several lucrative offers for employment after graduation, and finding herself in such demand had been a heady experience. It had been Mikolaj Brukowski who had ultimately helped her choose the direction in which to take her career. When she'd initially approached him for advice, he had encouraged her to give serious consideration to the position offered by the Ministry of Magic. ("You cannot deny the appeal of government benefits," he had told her.) But one week later he had pulled her aside to rescind his earlier direction.

"I hope you are not taking my advice to work for the Ministry of Magic seriously, Hermione," he had told her quietly. "You must realize I was playing a joke on you."

Hermione had been shocked: in the six years she'd known Mikolaj Brukowski she had never witnessed anything even slightly humorous about his countenance. He had never once teased her, and the thought that he'd choose her career path to start his foray into the land of practical jokes had been less than amusing.

"You ... what?" she had asked.

His dark face had flushed with embarrassment...another first. "Yes, it was just a joke. You must of course pursue the offer from Arglist Industries."

She had searched her memory and had recalled that Arglist was a private research facility in Eastern Europe with significant financial backing.

Brukowski had confirmed this by telling her, "They are well-established in Germany and Austria, and they have a large facility in England, which would suit you, no?"

She had nodded absently and had told him, "Okay, I'll think about it." But as she had turned to leave, Brukowski had grabbed her arm. She had been shocked: other than shaking her hand, he had never before touched her.

"No, Hermione! Do not just 'think about it'," he had whispered harshly, and his eyes had darted around the room. "I strongly advise you to accept their offer."

She had thought he had sounded desperate, and his fingers biting into her arm had not escaped her notice. She had nodded solemnly and had assured him she would take his advice seriously.

Then he had released her arm, distractedly patting her on the head while saying, "Good girl."

She had dismissed the encounter and had attributed her professor's odd behaviour to his ill attempt at humour.

If only I'd known, she thought now. Tension caused her shoulders to stiffen.

If only she hadn't dismissed Brukowski's strange behaviour so readily. Perhaps then she wouldn't have accepted the position at Arglist. Perhaps she wouldn't have been so blinded by the amazing facility, by the intoxicating enticement of running that cutting-edge lab all by herself. Perhaps then she wouldn't have ...

CRACK!

She jumped when the glass phial in her hand exploded into dozens of jagged pieces. Blood ran through her fingers and dripped onto the table. She shivered at the unexpected but appropriate correlation. *Blood on her hands...*

"Hermione!"

For the second time in the space of just a few seconds, she jumped when her name was shouted from the door. Neville Longbottom stared at her with a worried expression.

"Are you alright?" he asked, coming into the room and nodding at her bleeding hand. "Do you need some Dittany?"

"I've got some, Neville. Thanks." She pointed her wand at the storeroom while silently casting an *Accio* charm, and a small green bottle floated towards her. She checked the label, satisfied when she read, 'Tincture of Dittany MILD' written in her own precise handwriting. Another wave of her wand removed the remnants of broken phial and excess blood from her hand and bench. She was relieved to see the cut wasn't bad, and just one drop of the Dittany tincture instantly sealed the wound with the tiniest puff of green smoke wafting up from her palm.

Neville still watched her, his face still creased with worry.

"Just being careless, Neville," she told him. "I must be overly-excited about start-of-term tonight," she finished with what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

His round cheeks broke into a smile. "That's why I came to see you," he told her. "I just heard that you're in charge of firstyears tonight. Congratulations, Hermione! Well done!"

"Thanks, Neville!" She beamed a genuine smile at him now, the pride she'd felt from McGonagall's earlier announcement returning. "I was delighted...it's such an honour."

"Ah, you deserve it. You've done brilliantly here," he told her. "I mean, I've been here ten years, and I'm still not as comfortable as you are," he added with a laugh.

She tried to assure him that she was just as scared of meeting all the new students as he was.

He looked a tad doubtful, so she added, "As soon as you get into your greenhouses, you are completely in your element. You're a wonderful Herbology professor. I would have been thrilled to have you for a teacher, and you know how picky I am."

He blushed at her praise, but she hadn't said it simply to be kind. Neville truly was gifted in Herbology, and she'd observed his ever-present doubt and clumsiness melt away the moment he entered the massive greenhouses of Hogwarts.

She hadn't been at all surprised to find Neville at Hogwarts. After leaving school, he had spent a few years touring the Magical Gardens of Europe before returning to Hogwarts to start an apprenticeship with Pomona Sprout. When Pomona had finally decided to retire, Neville had become a full-fledged Professor of Herbology. His appointment had coincided with Hermione's acceptance of the Potions master post, so that they were both officially introduced as new professors just three years ago.

Three years, she marvelled. Had it really been three years since she'd left the horrors of Arglist? At times it seemed as if a lifetime had passed since she'd fled her beautiful lab in the middle of the night, running blindly with no destination, no plan, nothing but an overwhelming need to flee. But whether she had been escaping from Arglist...or herself...was a question that still haunted her.

With a shake of her head, she realised how glad she was to be here, poised to begin her fourth year as Potions professor. She'd even begun to allow herself to feel happy again, daring to hope she'd escaped from her period at Arglist with no lasting detriment.

"I hope I'll be back in time for the Sorting," Neville said. "I'm trying for a quick trip to St Mungo's before the Feast."

She frowned. "I thought you always went on Sundays."

"I do," he confirmed. "But I didn't get a chance to go yesterday with all the preparations for start-of-term." He looked decidedly uncomfortable for a moment and then added, "Not that they'd notice if I wasn't there."

She gazed at him and nodded, uncertain of whether or not he'd welcome her sympathy. He rarely mentioned his parents, and she knew it was unwise to push. She suspected he had taken it very hard when Molly Weasley had deprived him of the chance to avenge his parents by eliminating Bellatrix Lestrange.

"How are your parents, Neville?" she asked him quietly. "And how is ..."

"Snape?"

"Yes." She swallowed. "How is Professor Snape?"

He shrugged. "The same as always." As if wanting to reassure her, he hurriedly added, "The Healers at St. Mungo's treat him really well."

"It's very good of you to visit them every week."

He blushed again when she patted his arm. He really was a very good sort of man. It was amazing he was still single.

"I hope you make it back in time for the Sorting," she said, "but don't despair if you're late. Perhaps Minerva will let us play with the Pensieve, and you can watch from my memory."

The thought seemed to cheer him. He chatted a bit longer before departing for Hogsmeade, where he could Apparate to London and St Mungo's. And eventually, to Severus Snape.

Hermione's stomach clenched as it always did when she thought of Snape. It was perhaps appropriate she'd just seen Neville, because it had been Neville, fourteen years ago, who had spoken about Snape with the words that had first turned her insides to ice.

It had been several hours after the Final Battle, after the defeat of Voldemort, and after Harry's decision to return the Elder Wand to its rightful place. Witches and wizards had been coming and going all night, but Hermione had found an opportunity to separate herself. She'd felt strangely compelled to retrieve the memories that Snape had given to Harry. She had just removed the last filament of thought from the Pensieve where Harry had left them when McGonagall and Filius Flitwick had entered, trailed by Ron, Neville, and Harry.

"What are you doing in here alone, Miss Granger?" McGonagall had snapped at her, but before she could answer, there had arrived several officials from what remained of the Ministry along with dozens of portrait occupants, and everyone had spoken at once.

Information had been at a premium in those first hours, and it had taken some time to sort the facts from the rumours. And all the while, flocks of owls had been swooping in and out, carrying urgent missives while issuing plaintive hoots.

Hermione had glanced at Neville, who had been sitting in a corner scratching his head while he had stared at the walls of the office. "Where's Snape's portrait?" he had asked her. And although he had spoken the question quite softly, everyone in the room had somehow heard, and everything had gone quiet.

She had searched the walls, frantic to find the familiar sneer. A cold fear had spread through her body when she had wondered if they'd made a terrible mistake. He had been dead when they had left him in the Shrieking Shack. Hadn't he?

Her eyes had met the piercing blue gaze of Albus Dumbledore's portrait, and a moment of understanding had passed between them.

"Headmaster?" she'd whispered, desperate for the old wizard to offer any other explanation for the missing portrait.

"It should have been here by now," he'd informed them all gravely. It could only mean one thing.

Severus Snape was still alive.

There had been a great rush to the Shrieking Shack where they'd left him so very many hours earlier. She'd had only a brief glimpse before Flitwick had Apparated him to St. Mungo's, but the image of his lifeless form lying prostrate on the floor would be burned in her mind for eternity. There had been vivid red fang-marks on his neck, covered in drying blood that had seemed to also cover the floor and his hands where he had earlier tried to stop the bleeding. The dark crimson had provided the only colour to be found on his ghostly white body.

At that moment she had been sure they'd all been wrong: there could be no possibility for life in that corpse on the floor. There simply had to be some other reason his portrait hadn't appeared in the headmaster's office. His short tenure, perhaps, or the fact that he had been installed by Voldemort, rather than through a legal vetting process.

But a faint pulse had indeed been found when Snape had arrived at St Mungo's. After three weeks and several rounds of treatment with pure Essence of Dittany, his wounds had begun to heal.

He had survived the snakebite, but no one had been able to hazard a guess as to his prognosis. Since Nagini had been harbouring a piece of Voldemort's soul when she'd attacked, very Dark Magic had been at work within him.

As the months had faded into years, he had remained unconscious, existing in what had reminded Hermione of a Muggle coma. The Healers at St. Mungo's had never seen anything like it. They had coined the term 'semi-Petrification' solely to describe his condition: a bizarre sort of unconscious immobility. He appeared to have been frozen in time. His body had not aged, his muscles had not weakened. But unlike standard Petrification, the lack of sustenance had not resulted in his death. Yet. Even the most skilled Healers had been baffled, completely unable to predict whether he might someday awaken, succumb to death, or remain in a state of stasis forever.

The revelations about his true loyalties and the amazing role he had played in the downfall of Voldemort had soon become public knowledge. Within a year of Voldemort's defeat, he had been exonerated for Dumbledore's death and pardoned for all previous crimes. His name had become legendary, and he was still celebrated throughout the wizarding world as a hero.

Initially, visitors had flocked to the hospital. Fourteen years without any sign of hope had eventually disheartened even the most zealous of supporters, leaving Neville as his only faithful visitor. Neville had made a habit of visiting his parents at St Mungo's each Sunday, so adding a stop at Snape's bedside wasn't an altogether huge inconvenience for him. Others had found the task of chatting to a non-responsive body rather daunting, but Neville had solved this by using the time to peruse the Sunday edition of the *Daily Prophet*, reading certain bits aloud.

Hermione had visited a few times but had never been able to speak to Snape. The guilt over having left him in the Shrieking Shack for so long had mingled with shame for never noticing his portrait had been missing. And then there were the memories she had removed from the Pensieve. She had kept them safe for many years, but the temptation to view them had been a factor she had not been fully prepared to deal with. She couldn't predict what he would do if he ever learnt she had possession of such intimate recollections.

The visits are best left to Neville, she assured herself.

From the storeroom, she retrieved a bag of obsidian chips and began to sort them by size. The black stones glittered in her hands like a turbulent, midnight ocean. She

stared at the pieces, but in her mind she saw only the dark, accusing eyes of her former professor. The thought of never again seeing that familiar flash of anger in those eyes filled her with a sadness that was as surprising as it was intense.

"Why are you still lurking about in the dungeons, woman?"

She gazed across the room to where Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway. After three years of working together, she was surprised and pleased to count him among her friends. The years had been kind to him, and although he still resembled his father, his frequent smiles made him appear more attractive than haughty.

"Have you descended from your tower to fetch me?" she asked with a smile.

She had been shocked when she had first learnt Draco had become a professor at Hogwarts. The knowledge that he had chosen to teach Divination, of all things, had completely struck her dumb.

"Perhaps," he answered and sauntered to her desk. "Will you promise to be nice?"

"Oh, I'm certain you can divine the answer to that," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "And me without my crystal ball. Be a love and brew me some prediction potion, will you?"

She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Nice," he chided. "Very adult."

She encouraged his banter, finding it balanced the drastic leap in maturity he had experienced since his stint with the Death Eaters. She suspected the events leading to Voldemort's defeat had had more of a life-changing impact on Draco than on anyone else.

After the war, a short trial had sent both his parents to Azkaban: his mother was released after two months, but his father had spent more than two years in the wizarding prison. Draco had escaped prosecution and had returned to Hogwarts for his final year a much quieter and subdued young man.

He'd become a keen observer of others and approached Divination with the premise that the answers one seeks already lie within, and one need only learn the proper tools with which to divine them. Hermione was actually quite impressed by this, although she'd never admit it, as she still viewed Divination as a very imprecise branch of magic.

Stowing the obsidian with a flick of her wand, she said, "I'm ready. Let's get this over with."

"Nice try, Granger."

"What?" she asked.

"Don't pretend you're not practically jumping out of your skin with excitement over bringing the firstyears to the Sorting!"

"Oh, that!" she laughed. "Yes, well... it is rather exciting, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is!" he agreed. "A grand occasion."

Their footsteps echoed through the dungeon hallways. "How are Luna and the little imps?" she asked.

His face broke into a smile. "They are wonderful, as always. Luna owled to say Niobe has found a nest of armour-headed pinticklers," he said, referring to one of his twin five-year-old daughters.

"What's an armour-headed pin..."

"Don't ask," he begged. "I haven't yet had the heart to tell her they're just Flobberworms."

She chuckled. Perhaps even more surprising than his career choice had been his decision to marry Luna Lovegood twelve years earlier. Luna had seen something in Draco that everyone else had missed, and they seemed to have a happy marriage. Their twin daughters, Niobe and Nemma, reminded Hermione of paintings she'd seen of angels; their long, platinum hair and serene smiles seemed almost otherworldly.

"Nemna set fire to the curtains again last week," Draco said. "The ones in the drawing room this time."

"Oh, dear." So much for the angelic perception.

They had almost reached the Great Hall. Hermione smiled a greeting to the other professors who had gathered in small groups to chat before the castle opened its doors for the new term.

"What about you?" Draco asked quietly, studying her. "Any summer romances that set the house on fire, so to speak?"

"I spent the summer with my parents, as you well know. Other than a torrid love affair with my father's herb garden, there was nary a romance to be had." She kept her tone light, unwilling to confess the way her current stretch of celibacy had begun to niggle at her. A relationship had been the last thing on her mind since escaping Arglist. But perhaps the very fact it had begun to bother her was a sign it was time to start dating again.

"You should start dating again," Draco said.

She hated when he did that. Pouting her lips, she said, "There was only one Slytherin for me, and he's already taken."

"Sadly, I am but one man," he agreed with a sigh. "But we can't have you pining away the rest of your life. You should get out more. You know, you're not unattractive."

She held her hand to her forehead and pretended to swoon.

"Stop that," he said. "I realise I was quite rude to you when we were younger, teasing you about your awful hair and your giant teeth."

"Wow. You sure know how to compliment a woman. Or are you trying to apologise?"

He frowned. "Both, I suppose."

"I think you should stop before you hurt yourself."

"Do you want me to tell you you're pretty or not?"

"I doubt I should risk it."

"That's probably wise," he said. "Besides, you have a mirror...you don't need me to state the obvious. Loads of men would fancy you. Would you like me to introduce you to some of my single friends?"

"Are they Slytherins?"

"Perhaps. Is that a problem?"

"Do they possess your obvious talent for flattery?"

He smiled. "They haven't been married for the past dozen years: no doubt they are far more skilled than I."

She patted his arm and said, "Thanks, I'll think about it."

He watched her for a moment, as if considering whether to pursue the matter further. Finally, he asked, "However *did* you manage to tame your hair, by the way?"

"Ah, I wish I could claim credit for it, but I had to pay a small fortune to a witch in Paris for this," she said. "I never could figure out how to replicate the Charm." Not that she hadn't tried for a full year, stopping only when she had run out of volunteers and had nothing but a bald Kneazle to show for her efforts.

"Surely you're not having troubles with a Charm?" asked a high-pitched voice behind her. She turned and smiled down at Filius Flitwick.

"Yes, the one that permanently smoothes hair and..." she began, but Flitwick cut her off with a wave.

"Ah, yes, cosmetology Charms can be some of the trickiest," he agreed. "No time for that now, though. It is time for you to greet the firstyears!"

She heard the returning students before she saw them, hundreds of voices combined in a unique symphony of shouts and conversations, cat-call whistles and sing-song melodies. The older students entered the Great Hall first and meandered toward their appropriate House tables. Hermione was touched when several students smiled and waved at her. She hadn't known whether or not she would enjoy teaching, but she had found the past three years unexpectedly rewarding.

In a side corridor, she stopped at the top of a sweeping staircase and awaited the firstyears. She heard the shuffling of feet below, the noise rising as they made their way higher, past the first landing, and then finally stopping before her, eyes wide as they tried to drink it all in at once.

We were never that young, she thought instantly. How easily she could remember her first glimpse of Professor McGonagall at this very spot, all sharp features and austere manners. Hermione knew she could never make a similar first impression, so she tried for scholarly instead. The little faces before her swivelled left and right, one minute staring at the portrait occupants waving down at them, the next watching with mouths agape as a House ghost floated by on its way to the Feast.

After a moment, all whispered conversations ceased, and their attention rested solely on Hermione. For the benefit of those unaccustomed to seeing a real, live witch, she had taken great care in dressing and wore long, black robes with a rich burgundy lining. She had chosen one of her more ridiculous hats, adorned with tiny shooting stars that winked and sparkled from the base all the way to the tall, pointy tip.

"Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!" she said and abandoned her serious expression for a smile.

Several of the children smiled in return.

"As you will spend the next seven years in this castle," she said, "I recommend you carefully study the book *Hogwarts: A History*, so you may fully appreciate your new surroundings."

A gangly girl near the front of the queue removed a book from her robes and showed it excitedly to the boy standing beside her. He did not seem impressed.

"In a moment," Hermione said, "we will enter the Great Hall, and you will be Sorted into your Houses. While you are at Hogwarts, your Houses will be like your family: you will dine with them, room with them, and take classes with them." Some of the students exchanged fearful glances, and she wondered what sorts of friendships and rivalries had already been formed aboard the Hogwarts Express.

"Your House will be awarded points throughout the year for your achievements," she continued, "and points will be deducted from your House for any rule-breaking. At the end of the year, the House with the most points wins the highly coveted House Cup."

There appeared a calculating gleam in the eyes of some children, and she didn't have to guess which House they would end up in. Which reminded her ...

"The names of the four Houses are Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Slytherin..."

Her speech was interrupted by the sound of someone running through the corridor behind her, their heavy footsteps echoing loudly with each slap of boot against stone. Several firstyears tried to peer around her to see who was causing the commotion, and Hermione issued a huff of disapproval.

She turned on her spot, eyes widening when she spotted Neville racing towards her, his arms flying out from his sides as if a thousand Dementors pursued him.

"Her ... Her ... Hermione!" he shouted and panted as he ran.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Peeves the Poltergeist hovering in a doorway and quickly shouted, "Neville, slow down! You're going to..."

But it was too late. With perfect timing, Peeves flung a piece of chalk into the corridor just as Neville's shoe met the ground. He was airborne at once, arms flailing and hands clutching wildly for something to grab onto, which, unfortunately, turned out to be an enormous suit of armour. The resulting crash had the first-years covering their ears as it reverberated off the stone walls. After what felt like an eternity, the noise faded along with the delighted cackling of Peeves.

The Great Hall emptied. Headmistress McGonagall rushed forward with a look that would have intimidated even the bravest of knights.

"It's alright, Neville," Hermione said as she helped him to his feet. "The Sorting hasn't begun yet."

He shook his head and seemed to struggle for each breath, making her wonder if he had run the entire distance from Hogsmeade. She removed a small phial of Calming Draught from her robes and urged him to drink.

The effect was immediate. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough Calming Draught in the castle to counteract the effects of his next words.

"He's awake," he said.

The ground shifted beneath her feet. She didn't require the clarification, but he seemed compelled to offer it, looking first at McGonagall and then back at Hermione. "Severus Snape is awake."

A/N: My deepest thanks to ladyinthecloak and little_beloved for beta reading and to lettybird for Brit-picking. b>

Two for Joy

Chapter 2 of 33

Hermione is desperate for details.

Chapter 2: Two for Joy

An excited murmur began in the crowd gathered around Neville, quickly gaining momentum as word of Snape's awakening spread throughout the Entrance Hall. Hermione was assaulted by too many feelings to examine at once and could only stand by, dumb-struck. She watched the shock on McGonagall's face as Neville casually told her, "He's asked to see you, Headmistress."

Hermione had to give credit to Minerva McGonagall. Other than uttering an obviously unplanned and startled cry which sounded something like, "Glrrb!" she had recovered her composure quite quickly, although she did keep her hand pressed over her heart as she started barking orders at those milling around. Hermione could feel her own heart pounding so hard and fast it was a wonder it didn't echo in the corridor. She sincerely hoped that McGonagall's heart wasn't doing the same: she speculated that the Headmistress had to be in her eighties, at least.

"Students will return to their House tables immediately!" McGonagall shouted with authority. "Staff will return to the Great Hall at once!"

There was an instant commotion of movement as everyone made their way back to the Great Hall and resumed their places, carrying the sound of excited whispering with them.

Later, both the staff and students would marvel at the brevity of the speech the Headmistress had given. Several people exclaimed that it must have been the shortest start-of-term speech in history, although Hermione nervously pointed out that if they'd read *Hogwarts: A History*, they'd surely remember that the speech given by Dilys Derwent in 1759 was much shorter, consisting of only two words: 'Welcome' and 'Eat'.

McGonagall departed for St. Mungo's immediately after her speech, relinquishing responsibilities to Flitwick, as Deputy Headmaster. Hermione presided over the Sorting, though everyone was quite distracted, and in the end, there appeared to be an inordinately large number of first-years Sorted into Slytherin.

After the Sorting, they all took their places for the Feast, and the conversation in the Great Hall was loud and boisterous. Snape was, after all, a hero to most of these children, and the news of his awakening was cause for much excitement.

Half of the students in the Great Hall hadn't even been born when the Battle of Hogwarts was fought, and Hermione strongly doubted that the rest could possibly remember it. She found it peculiar to realize that to this roomful of excited faces, Snape was nothing more than a name in a history book, or, perhaps, someone their parents mentioned at odd times, like on the anniversary of the Battle.

Snape had always been flesh and blood to Hermione. There had been those occasions when he'd treated her with outright cruelty, and she'd grown up loathing him for his hostility towards Harry. By the time she learned more about his motivations and was old enough to examine his actions in a less biased manner, he was gone.

Only, *he isn't*, she reminded herself anxiously. He was in London right now, being visited by the Headmistress. The thought of facing him again after all these years was causing a ball of nerves, fear and dread to form in the pit of her stomach. Hermione realized that it had been much easier to handle the idea of Snape when he had been in a hospital bed, miles away.

Hermione was well aware that as the Feast dragged on, her anxiety was intensifying. She couldn't seem to stop herself from spouting inane facts about the history of the start-of-term Feast to anyone who would listen, and she was quite miffed when very few would. She felt edgy and highly-strung by the time she finally had the chance to interrogate Neville in the corridor outside of the Great Hall.

"What happened? What did he say? Can he move? Does he remember anything?" She fired questions at Neville in rapid succession, tapping her foot impatiently.

Neville was still enjoying the effects of Hermione's excellent Calming Draught and appeared unfazed by her storm of queries. He told her simply, "Well, if you'll give me a chance to answer, I'll tell you."

"I'm sorry, Neville," she apologized instantly. "It's just so... you know... so..." Hermione held her palms up as she searched for the right word, but for once, her vocabulary failed her.

"I know," Neville agreed with an understanding nod.

"Okay, so tell me what happened," Hermione pleaded. "I want to hear everything."

"Well, it started out like any other visit. I went in with my newspaper and sat down. I told him I was sorry about not coming around yesterday and explained that today was start-of-term and I couldn't stay long because I didn't want to miss the Sorting. Oh...and then I told him how you'd been chosen to bring the first-years in!" Neville paused, seeming to concentrate on what happened next.

"Yes?" Hermione prompted breathlessly, her attention riveted.

"I opened up the paper and read a couple of stories... nothing really special... new security measures at Gringott's... Harry and the Wasps winning their match yesterday... you know, the usual stuff."

"Then what?" Hermione asked, desperate for him to get on with it. She was dangerously close to grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him, and she made a mental note to never again give a Calming Draught to Neville.

"I had just turned the page and was about to fold over the paper, when I looked over at him, and his eyes were open." Neville shuddered visibly at the recollection. His features glazed over and he spoke very slowly: he seemed to be reliving the incident in his mind. "I don't know how long they'd been open... He was just lying in bed, staring at me," he mused aloud.

Shaking himself, Neville continued, "I couldn't look away. And then he made a kind of croaking sound, and I realized he was trying to speak." Neville's brows grew together in a small frown, and he looked away unseeingly.

"What was he trying to say?" Hermione asked him in amazement, her tone hushed.

Neville returned his attention to Hermione and stared into her eyes intently. Fear and wonder warred for supremacy in his wild expression.

"He said, 'That's quite enough, Longbottom!'" replied Neville, delivering the phrase with the same eerie cadence so unique to his former tormentor.

Hermione gasped. It was such a *Snape* thing to say!

"Hermione, I swear I almost fell out of the chair!" Neville recalled.

"So, he knew who you were?" Hermione gaped, open-mouthed.

Neville nodded.

Years ago, when everyone had still held hope that he'd regain consciousness, there had been much speculation regarding the status of Snape's mental state. Many had suspected that his mind would be lost forever, an effect of the venom poisoning his system for such an extended time. Others had proposed that he would wake up with no memories of who he was or what had transpired. The Healers had eventually stopped theorizing when so many years had passed and the possibility of him waking up at all had become hopeless.

But Hermione thought this sounded more promising than anyone had dared to hypothesize.

"Then he told me to get McGonagall," Neville said. "I left right away...seeing him awake was a bit scary after all this time. I just sent the Healers in and then ran back here. You know the rest," he finished with a trace of embarrassment.

Hermione recalled the image of Neville crashing into the suit of armour and hoped for his sake that he hadn't had a similar incident at St. Mungo's. She could well imagine that Neville couldn't have extricated himself from Snape's presence fast enough.

"I wonder what he'll do now?" Neville pondered aloud.

"Mmm," Hermione muttered. The future of Snape's career was actually the last thing on her mind.

"I guess we'll learn soon enough," Neville concluded. He seemed to be looking at Hermione rather speculatively. Now that she thought about it, several members of the staff seemed to be casting curious glances her way.

Hermione bade a hasty goodnight to Neville and then hurried to catch up with Draco, who was speaking to a large group of Slytherin students. Hermione listened as Draco personally welcomed the students, noting the many faces watching him in admiration. Draco had been named Head of House for Slytherin when Horace Slughorn had retired, and Hermione had to admit that he did an excellent job of keeping his House in line.

"A proud night for Slytherin," she commented wryly as he finished speaking to the students and turned to her.

"Amazing, isn't it?" he asked with a delighted smile. "Largest group of first-years in history, AND our esteemed leader returns from oblivion!"

"Yes, well... I rather think the second part had quite a lot to do with the first," Hermione pointed out imperiously.

"Oh, come now...there were several little swots sorted into Gryffindor for you. No need to be jealous."

Hermione tried to hide her smile. "I'll stop being jealous if you'll stop being smug."

Draco grinned at that. "I wouldn't hold your breath, pet."

Laughing, the pair made their way down the corridor and paused by one of the rather hideous gargoyles guarding the entrance to the staffroom.

"So, why do you suppose Severus asked to see McGonagall first?" Draco asked.

Hermione considered for a moment, wondering how much Draco knew about Snape's actions the night Nagini had nearly killed him. "I don't know. Maybe he realizes that she's the most senior remaining member from the Order of the Phoenix," Hermione offered. "It would be logical to speak to her first."

Hermione knew that Snape possessed one of the most logical minds of any wizard: she'd had firsthand experience with this at an early age when she had solved his puzzle guarding the Philosopher's Stone for Harry. And she had no doubt that only the coolest logic could have prevailed during the many years when Snape had acted as a spy for the Order. His powers of reason were truly astounding, and Hermione found herself hoping they had not dulled during his time at St. Mungo's.

Hermione turned to see Professor Vector approaching them; she was staring intently at Hermione and seemed about to speak. But at the last moment, she veered away from them, mumbling the words, "Docere, Cognoscere," to the gargoyles before disappearing into the staffroom.

"That was odd," remarked Hermione.

Draco regarded Hermione with a raised eyebrow. "I believe everyone is wondering what our former Potions professor will have to say about our current Potions professor."

Hermione was surprised. "Surely they don't think Snape asked to see McGonagall for *that!*" she objected.

"Dunno," Draco said with a shrug. "You weren't exactly one of Severus' favourite students. I imagine he'll be very... outspoken... about your role here."

"Perhaps," Hermione granted. "But it's hardly appropriate for the staff to gossip and speculate about such things."

"Yes, Professor," Draco intoned diligently.

Hermione just pursed her lips in disapproval, and when Draco suggested they join the others in the staffroom for a much-needed nightcap, Hermione declined. She was certain there would be rabid discussion about Snape, and she desperately wanted some time alone to digest Neville's story.

Deep in thought, she headed down the long staircase to the dungeons, her footsteps echoing softly off the damp walls. The temperature dropped rapidly as she descended into the bowels of the castle; all traces of the warm autumn day they'd enjoyed had vanished.

Torches along the walls sprang to life as Hermione made her way across the length of the Potions classroom. The Potions office was located at the side of the classroom, and a blazing fire magically appeared in the small fireplace the moment Hermione entered the room. She removed the new timetables and student lists from a pocket in her robes and stacked them neatly on her desk, organized by day of the week. She needed to sit down and highlight the timetables based on Year and House, but decided her current mental state probably wouldn't afford her the concentration required for that important task.

Leaving her paperwork behind, she crossed the office and pointed her wand at the heavy, wooden door which led to her living quarters. She silently cast the *Alohamora* charm and walked through the doorway, the door having completely vanished at her incantation. Without turning her head, she flicked her wand over her shoulder and cast *Colloportus*, and the door instantly reappeared, sturdy and solid. Only select members of the staff were granted the ability to work the door: the castle instantly bestowed the honour to Potions professors and the Headmaster or Headmistress. They, in turn, could grant it to others.

There was a great whoosh as torches and fires throughout the quarters came to life at her presence. Hermione removed her robes as she strode through the cosy sitting area, tossing them rather haphazardly onto the brocade sofa. After toeing off her boots, she plopped herself into an overstuffed armchair in front of the massive marble fireplace. She could instantly feel herself relaxing and was grateful for Horace Slughorn and his hedonistic ways.

When Minerva McGonagall had first shown Hermione the living quarters in the dungeons, she'd been amazed. Horace Slughorn had made enormous changes to the

chambers during his time at Hogwarts. He had magically enhanced the size of the quarters using the same powerful spells that wizard tent-crafters used. What should have been two small rooms off the Potions office had been transformed into an entire suite, complete with sitting rooms, a small kitchen and dining area, a library (Hermione's favourite room), three bedrooms, and two bathrooms with tubs the size of small swimming pools.

Minerva had surveyed the rooms sternly and announced, "This is a good deal larger than the Headmistress' quarters."

Hermione had happily offered the rooms to McGonagall, but the Headmistress hadn't seemed keen on the idea of spending so much time in the dungeons, which were quite damp and draughty outside of the living quarters. Hermione had been secretly pleased that her offer had been declined.

The rooms were filled with lovely carpets, and the walls all sported heavy tapestries that greatly helped remove the chill from all that grey dungeon stone. The furniture Slughorn had chosen was a bit too ornate for Hermione's taste, however. Happily, she had amused herself for many evenings during her first year by Transfiguring the various pieces into simpler furnishings more suited to her style, and she still changed them frequently when she tired of the look. Doing so kept her Transfiguration skills sharp, which Hermione deemed an added bonus.

Hermione sighed contentedly and snuggled further into the cushions, drawing her legs up beside her. She rested her elbow on the arm of the chair and cupped her chin in her palm where her fingers automatically began a rhythmic drumming against her cheek. She stared intently into the fire for a few moments and felt her eyelids growing heavy despite the frenetic day.

Reminiscing about her first sight of these rooms had brought back a flood of other, less pleasant, memories. It was impossible to think of coming back to Hogwarts without remembering the circumstances that had caused her to flee so recklessly from her life at Arglist Industries.

It had been a rainy night in the middle of summer more than three years ago when Hermione had deliberately destroyed her beloved laboratory. Her movements had been methodical as she'd carefully poured several litres of Dragon Bile into the files containing her notes and findings from a lifetime of research. She had listened with satisfaction to the parchments sizzling in protest as the acidic bile disintegrated them.

Into the middle of the lab she had conjured an enormous cauldron; the solid black iron had looked distinctly out of place against the gleaming rows of stainless steel tables. With a mighty motion from her wand, Hermione had summoned the thousands of specimen-filled vials in the lab and had directed them into the massive cauldron. The vials had shattered, and there had arisen a great hissing and smoking as ingredients that had never been intended to mix had suddenly reacted with each other, causing the iron pot to shake threateningly.

Hermione had approached with caution. She had held her wand aloft and had directed an entire gallon of Acromantula Venom to be dumped into the mix. For once, she had not stopped to consider the prohibitive cost of the venom: Arglist Industries could certainly afford it. Like the Dragon Bile, the Venom had been the only substance powerful enough to destroy the specimens on both a physical and magical level.

When the cauldron had stopped shaking and smoking, she had Vanished it, along with the gooey remains of her parchments and notes. She'd felt satisfied that the contents of the lab would prove very difficult to trace, and even if someone could have located them, the Bile and Venom should have been sufficient to ensure that everything had been rendered useless.

With a wild prayer that there were no other samples hidden somewhere at Arglist, she had made her way to the Director's office where a streak of blue light had emitted from her wand, sparking a short-lived but powerful fire that had effectively burned any papers within ten meters. The shrieks from the portraits had told her she wouldn't remain alone for long, so she'd Disapparated quickly with no destination in mind, and had found herself running like mad through the warm summer rain outside of the Arglist facility.

Her feet had somehow carried her to Minerva McGonagall's doorstep where she had arrived the next morning in a wild state of disarray. She'd had no sleep for the previous two days and nights, during which time she had been carefully planning and executing her vandalism. That the compulsive rule-follower could have carried out such devastation with such blatant abandon was a mark of how very dreadful the alternative had been to Hermione.

When the door to McGonagall's cottage had opened, Hermione's whole body had begun to shake violently. Even in her frenzied state, she knew she must have appeared bedraggled, paranoid, and not at all like the star pupil McGonagall had once known.

McGonagall had ushered her to a chair, then had forced her to drink some strong tea spiked with a generous amount of Firewhisky. Hermione had revealed small bits of what had been going on at Arglist, though luckily she had still possessed the wherewithal to stop herself before she'd told her old Headmistress *too* much.

McGonagall had been as perceptive as ever and had cagily mentioned the fact (almost in passing) that Professor Slughorn had tendered his resignation to her that very week. The unspoken invitation had hung before her, beckoning. Hermione hadn't supposed she'd have any trouble finding employment elsewhere: her name had always been well-respected in her field. But something about the idea had appealed to her.

Clutching her tea like a lifeline, Hermione had closed her eyes briefly, allowing the image of Hogwarts Castle to flood her senses. She had expected to feel the sharp pain of loss that she'd always associated with the Final Battle, but it never came. Instead, she'd been overwhelmed by the same exhilarating sensation she'd had upon catching her first glimpse of the magnificent castle across the shimmering black lake. That emotion had been like an instant balm to her ragged soul, and she had unhesitatingly volunteered for the job. McGonagall had smiled tightly and had hired her on the spot.

Returning to Hogwarts had been like coming home, and it had not taken Hermione long to realize that she'd made the right decision. She'd settled in so quickly that at times she could almost convince herself she'd never even left.

Even now, as she leaned her head back against the soft chair and stared at the fire dancing before her, Hermione realized she felt more comfortable here than anywhere else she'd ever been: even her own parents' house. Hogwarts was her home. She simply *belonged* here.

She must have fallen asleep because she was suddenly being jolted awake by the sound of someone noisily clearing their throat. Hermione turned her stiff neck to survey the room, nearly jumping out of her chair when the face of Minerva McGonagall materialised in the flames of her fireplace. After the war, the Floo network within Hogwarts had been disabled; the fireplaces were now used as a type of intercom system only. And even then, such use was fairly rare.

"Oh, good... you're awake," said the face from the embers without the slightest trace of irony.

Hermione glanced at the clock on the wall and noted with surprise that it was quite late: nearly two o'clock in the morning. "Did you just get back?" she asked the Headmistress sleepily.

"Yes," she answered briskly. "I'd like to speak with you if it's not too late."

It was hard to tell with the sound of the logs crackling in the fireplace, but Hermione thought McGonagall sounded either very old or very tired. Or perhaps both.

"Of course! I'll come to your office straightaway."

Despite the warmth of the fireplace, Hermione felt a sudden chill and set off for the Headmistress' Office with a rising sense of trepidation. What could have transpired between McGonagall and Snape at St. Mungo's that was so important it couldn't wait until morning? And perhaps most disturbing of all, how did it involve *her*?

A/N: Enormous thanks to the amazing ladyofthecloak and the stunning little_beloved, the best betas a girl could ask for (and unbelievably patient with my

comma-challenged grammar!). The fabulous lettybird did the Brit-picking and taught me the term 'swot'... love it! BTW, 'docere, cognoscere' is Latin for 'to teach, to learn'.

Three for a Girl

Chapter 3 of 33

McGonagall delivers a surprise. Hermione is upset by a book.

Chapter 3: Three for a Girl

Hermione stood outside the towering stone gargoye leading to the headmistress' office.

"Quidditch Cup," she said, dismayed when her voice came out with a distinct squeak. She quickly tried to compose herself as the revolving spiral staircase carried her higher. Tapping softly on the outer door, she was admitted entrance and tried to appear calm as she stood before McGonagall's massive desk.

"Hermione, thank you for coming so quickly," the headmistress intoned rather formally. "Have a seat while I finish, please." McGonagall had been pacing behind her desk and resumed as soon as Hermione sat down.

Hermione noted there was a great deal of activity going on in the office for two o'clock in the morning. Two lengths of parchment lay on the desk with elaborate quills busily racing across them as McGonagall dictated simultaneous letters from her thoughts. She paused in her pacing every now and then to quietly consult with a portrait, and the quills stopped with her, suspended in mid-air and trembling with impatience.

As if sensing the letters were almost complete, two large grey owls swooped into the room from an open window high in the tower. A small barn owl was attempting to leave at the same time, and they narrowly avoided a disastrous mid-air collision. Meanwhile, several of the portraits had decided to forego the pretence of sleep: they murmured softly to each other, pausing occasionally to stare at Hermione.

Hermione looked up at the wall and couldn't help squirming in her chair as the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black glared down at her balefully. The former headmaster had never forgiven her for removing his portrait from number twelve, Grimmauld Place...hauling him around so unceremoniously during the search for Horcruxes. Hermione had attempted to apologise to Phineas on several occasions, but he would disappear in a huff before she could utter more than three words.

With a faint "tsk," Phineas dramatically turned his back on Hermione and stalked out of his frame. Hermione sighed ruefully and turned her attention to Dumbledore's portrait instead. His bright blue eyes met hers instantly, and she was surprised to note that he was positively beaming down at her. She smiled in return and watched in wonder as he gleefully bounced inside his frame, his pointed wizard's hat squashing against the top of the portrait with each motion.

Finishing the letters at last, McGonagall entrusted them to the owls and sat down tiredly in the elaborate chair behind her desk. "What a night!" she exclaimed.

Hermione was pleased to observe that her tone was much less formal now.

McGonagall peered at Hermione and said, "I apologise for the late hour; the Ministry insisted on meeting with Severus before I was allowed entrance. I had to wait outside for quite some time before Severus was able to clear them."

Hermione forced her lips to remain still as McGonagall mumbled some choice curses about bungling bureaucracy. She thought the headmistress looked equally irritated and exhausted and didn't dare risk a smirk. "I brewed some fresh Invigoration Draught on Thursday," Hermione offered. "Shall I summon some for you?"

McGonagall waved her hand dismissively. "No, but thank you. It causes me to hiccup." Instead, she flicked her wand over her desk, and two steaming cups of tea appeared. One delicate china cup floated through the air and stopped before Hermione, hovering over her lap.

Hermione accepted the tea and waited anxiously to hear what news McGonagall had brought from St Mungo's. But the headmistress was frustratingly silent as she pondered her own cup of tea; she appeared to be carefully collecting her thoughts. Hermione tried to mask her impatience by taking a sip from her cup. The hot drink scalded her tongue, and she quickly set it aside before she could do any more damage.

"Severus has indeed returned to us," began the headmistress without preamble.

The portraits in the office became still...all except Dumbledore's...as each occupant seemed to be straining forward to catch McGonagall's words. Dumbledore merely raised his hands in front of his face and clapped them together excitedly in quiet applause.

"What does he remember?" Hermione asked.

"Everything."

"The Battle? His attack?"

"Yes."

Hermione swallowed hard. "The time he spent in the Shrieking Shack?" she asked quietly. She noticed that Dumbledore's mood had suddenly grown serious.

"Yes."

Waves of guilt washed over Hermione as she said gravely, "I see."

"I certainly hope," began the reassuring voice of Dumbledore from the wall, "that you are not blaming yourself for the time Severus spent in the Shrieking Shack." He pierced Hermione with a stern gaze, and she found herself unable to meet his eyes after a moment.

"You are no more to blame than anyone else present that day, my dear," he told her gently. "We all believed Severus to be gone."

Hermione nodded but couldn't bring herself to speak, knowing she was more culpable than the headmaster believed. After all, she had been in the tunnel beneath the Shrieking Shack when Voldemort had ordered his horrible snake to kill Snape. And she had been the one standing behind Harry, witnessing Snape's last words before he'd fallen back upon the floor, apparently lifeless.

If everyone else had believed Snape was dead, it was only because she had told them as much. The guilt from her mistaken assumption could not be easily forgotten, and she doubted anyone else could ever fully comprehend that.

Hermione turned back to the headmistress and asked, "What do the Healers have to say about his outlook for the future?"

"His prognosis is excellent. He was already sitting up in bed by the time I'd left."

"Wow." It sounded ridiculous, but it was the only thing Hermione could think to say.

"Indeed," agreed McGonagall. "The Healers are all terrified of him, of course. He demanded a Strengthening Draught and then ordered them away."

Hermione's lips quirked as she pondered his actions, deciding they were precisely what she imagined typical Snape behaviour to be. "So, then, he is very much... himself?" she asked, trying not to sound as if that was an unpleasant thing to be.

McGonagall allowed a quick smile to grace her stern features. "Yes, it would appear that Severus is still very much... himself."

"Furthermore," continued the headmistress, "it seems that he's spent the last fourteen years with some level of awareness. He actually had quite a lot to say about young Longbottom visiting him each week."

Hermione could well imagine. *Poor Neville*, she thought. "I see. No doubt he was grateful for the company," she said. The obvious sarcasm in her voice earned her a chuckle from Dumbledore's portrait.

"Yes, well..." McGonagall trailed off. "At least he has some idea of what's been going on in the world for the past fourteen years, although I daresay the *Daily Prophet* is hardly the best source for reliable information."

McGonagall fixed Hermione with an intent gaze and then added, "Naturally, it will take some time for Severus to appreciate how much the *people* he knew have changed."

Hermione was beginning to grow uncomfortable under the headmistress' scrutiny and started to get up from her chair. "Well, thank you for letting me know..." she began.

"He wants to come back to Hogwarts," McGonagall said suddenly.

Hermione sat back down with a thud and a softly uttered, "Oh."

Resting her elbows on the top of her desk, McGonagall leaned forward in her chair and watched Hermione speculatively.

"Why?" asked Hermione.

"Hogwarts is his home," Dumbledore said simply.

Hermione experienced a sense of déjà vu at his words: she had been thinking the exact same thing about herself just hours earlier. She had always been a bit of an outcast and had never truly fit in anywhere, other than Hogwarts. Perhaps Snape felt the same way.

McGonagall added to Dumbledore's explanation. "Severus informed me he has no desire to live in the spotlight. He'd prefer to return to Hogwarts and teach."

"Defence Against the Dark Arts?" Hermione asked hopefully. "Everyone always said Snape badly wanted to teach that..." she offered, but then grew quiet, realising that it was not Bertram Aubrey, Junior, the current Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, sitting in the headmistress' office: it was she.

"Professor Granger, you know better than to believe the idle gossip from your schooldays," Dumbledore chided her quietly. "Severus' heart has always belonged to the subtle art of Potions, just as yours has."

Hermione turned away from Dumbledore's portrait feeling confused. The notion that she and Severus Snape shared a similar passion for *anything* was disturbing. But not nearly as confounding as McGonagall's announcement that Snape wanted to return to Hogwarts and resume his position as Potions professor. And where did that leave her...was she meant to just pack up and leave? She stared down blindly at her hands lying clutched in her lap and felt the unmistakable prickle of tears stinging her eyes.

Everything had been going so well during her brief time at Hogwarts. She supposed she should have known it was all too good to be true. Bitterness shot into her, but was quickly replaced by overwhelming remorse as her mind battled with her heart. She desperately wanted to stay at Hogwarts, but how could she possibly suggest that she was more deserving of this job than Snape?

He'd spent so many years faithful to Dumbledore and the Order, enduring their loathing and distrust even while he was secretly helping Harry and feeding misinformation to Voldemort. His reward had been fourteen years of lying in a hospital bed, apparently awake, but unable to move or speak. And no matter what Dumbledore said, Hermione couldn't help but wonder if she might have been able to prevent that.

With a heavy heart, Hermione raised her chin and met McGonagall's hawk-like eyes. Willing her voice not to tremble, she said, "I understand what's required, Minerva. I will of course step aside so Snape may resume his role as Potions professor here."

Hermione watched as McGonagall and Dumbledore exchanged a meaningful glance, Dumbledore smiling, and McGonagall frowning.

"There's no need to be so hasty, Hermione," McGonagall told her sternly. "I did not send for you to solicit your resignation!"

"But, Minerva," Hermione argued, "you cannot possibly keep me in this post if Snape desires it. We owe him so much; surely you can't refuse him!"

"I do not need to be told what I can and cannot do as regards the staff at this school, Professor Granger!" McGonagall rose from her chair indignantly and cast a reproachful glance at Dumbledore's portrait, whose smile had turned into silent giggles.

"But..."

"And I am quite aware of the debt we owe to Severus."

"But you can't..." Hermione tried to protest again, somewhat surprised to hear herself fighting on Snape's behalf.

"Enough!" barked the older woman, obviously weary of arguing. "I swear, Hermione, if you don't stop trying to resign, I'm going to have you dismissed!"

The sheer absurdity of the statement was enough to force Hermione to shut her mouth and turn helplessly to Dumbledore's portrait, silently willing him to assist her. Surely Dumbledore knew more about Snape's true role in the downfall of Voldemort than anyone else. Hermione couldn't understand why he wasn't insisting that McGonagall do whatever was required to fulfil Snape's wishes. But Dumbledore just looked down at Hermione with a mirthful expression, and she had a feeling there was a lot more going on in those bright blue eyes than he was willing to speak about.

McGonagall returned to her chair and drew a steadying breath. "While I appreciate your Gryffindor sensibilities and applaud you for your noble offer to step aside, I'm afraid I have no intention of losing one of my brightest teachers." She had finished the end of her statement in a loud, clipped tone, evidently attempting to drown out any further protest Hermione might offer.

Hermione grew pink at her mentor's praise and mumbled a quiet, "Thank you."

"I am quite certain we can find some type of arrangement that will accommodate both you and Severus," McGonagall informed her. Hermione couldn't really picture Snape acquiescing to this but refrained from mentioning it now.

"That's very generous of you," Hermione told her.

"Not at all. It's the best decision for the school," McGonagall pointed out. "And try to keep in mind that nothing has been cast in stone. I have informed Severus that he will be welcome here whenever he feels up to it. That may be months, or years... or he may change his mind entirely."

"I see," Hermione said, starting to feel a little better about the whole situation.

"The only reason I summoned you tonight was to spare you from hearing this second-hand tomorrow." McGonagall peered over the tops of her square glasses and cast a rather admonishing look at one of the portraits on the wall.

Hermione followed her gaze and recognised the witch in the picture as none other than Dilys Derwent, the very same former headmistress whom Hermione had spoken of during the start-of-term Feast. She seemed to recall a similar portrait of the silver-haired woman at St Mungo's: undoubtedly she could travel back and forth between the two pictures. Judging from the look on McGonagall's face (and Dilys Derwent's sudden departure from her portrait), Hermione surmised that details about McGonagall's meeting with Snape would be common knowledge throughout the castle by tomorrow morning.

"I appreciate that very much," Hermione informed McGonagall. She sensed her presence was no longer required and made a hasty retreat to her living quarters.

Despite the late hour, sleep eluded her for some time, and when she finally did fall asleep, her mind was assaulted by disturbing dreams. In one, she was lying immobile on the floor of the Shrieking Shack while an enormous snake slithered along her side and bit her neck repeatedly. Then the dream changed, in that strange way that dreams do, and instead of the snake, it was Snape. And he was doing a great deal more than just biting her neck, and she was certainly not protesting.

Hermione had been determined to join the staff and students in the Great Hall the next morning, certain that rumours would be flying and bent on squashing as many as possible. Her best intentions quickly diminished, however, when she began repeatedly casting the *Quiesco* charm at the small porcelain statue of a robin she'd enchanted to wake her up. The poor bird could barely get the first few notes of his song out before Hermione would sleepily point her wand at him and sink back into her pillow. In this way, she granted herself an extra hour of sleep, albeit in ten-minute increments.

When she finally dashed out of bed in a hazy rush, she had scarcely enough time to dress and bolt down a piece of carelessly burnt toast before leaving her quarters. She could already hear the sound of voices coming from the Potions classroom as she hurriedly scooped her books and papers off the desk in her office. Shuffling her load as she moved, she walked smack into the side of her heavy desk, cracking her knee into it with a sickening thud. The loud curse that escaped her lips was hardly the first impression she'd planned to make on her new students.

Twenty little faces turned their terrified eyes upon her as she hobbled up to the front of the Potions classroom and flung her timetables and books upon a table. She was reminded suddenly of her own first lesson in Potions. Snape had come charging into the classroom, his robes billowing out behind him in great black waves and scaring them all senseless.

With the desire to fix a much different memory in the minds of these young students, Hermione smiled at them all and said, "Welcome to firstyear Potions... um..." she gave her timetable a quick glance and finished, "...Gryffindor and Slytherin!"

They seemed to relax a little at her smile, and she continued, "Today's class is a double lesson, so we should have enough time to jump right in and concoct something a bit fun! Please divide into groups of four while I call your names from the register."

Hermione had planned a simple Handwriting Potion, which, when made correctly, would grant whoever drank it perfect handwriting for one day. Though the ingredient list was long, the method was simple and required only an hour's brewing time. With a little skill and luck, the students could actually be sampling it by the end of class.

Walking amongst the five small groups of students busy at work, Hermione felt herself relaxing for the first time. She stopped to offer advice to one table and then turned to the class and asked, "Who can tell me the difference between black beetle eyes and desiccated beetle eyes?"

A hand flew straight up into the air so fast that a student's eye was nearly poked out, and Hermione was hit with a flashback of her first day at Hogwarts when she'd wanted so desperately to prove herself. She turned to survey the owner of the outstretched hand, unsurprised to find it belonged to the gangly-looking girl who'd been clutching her *Hogwarts: A History* book the previous night. The young girl had thin, straight hair the colour of straw, which had been cut into a rather too-short fringe along her forehead. Her greyish-blue eyes regarded Hermione eagerly.

"Yes?" Hermione asked the girl. While the correct answer was perfectly recited to her, Hermione peered down at the register and noted a glow around the name "Emilia Woodhouse...Gryffindor", indicating the name and House of the student she was speaking to.

"Very good, Miss Woodhouse," she said when the girl had finished speaking. Hermione smiled at her warmly; the awkward child reminded her painfully of herself at that age. "A point to Gryffindor," she added, and the girl's entire face and neck turned red.

Hermione stood by their table awhile and watched them work. Turning to leave, she accidentally kicked her toe into a heavy bag on the floor, spilling out dozens of books. Emilia Woodhouse looked mortified and dived for the books as two boys at her table sniggered. It appeared as if she'd tried to stuff the entire library into her bag.

Hermione gave the boys a waspish look, and they instantly fell silent. Bending down to help collect the items, she recognised the familiar copies of first-year spell books and magical history tomes. Her hand hovered in mid-air over the last book: it was slim and bound in emerald green leather with the words "Brukowski-Granger Principle" stamped in gold across its cover. Hermione's hand shook slightly as she picked it up and turned it over, seeing a familiar seal and the words "Jagiellonian University" in the bottom corner.

Emilia Woodhouse was watching Hermione expectantly, her hand held out for her book.

"Where did you get this?" Hermione asked her.

"I toured the magical universities of Europe with my parents this summer, after I got my letter from Hogwarts," the young girl explained. Then she added rather sheepishly, "I knew you were a professor here, and I wanted to read everything you'd written."

"That's very... studious of you," Hermione told her as she finally relinquished the book to its owner. She cleared her throat and hoped the students hadn't noticed the fact that she'd been visibly shaken by the sight of a book which she herself had written. Moving quickly to another table, she announced how much time was left on their potions and instructed them to hasten their work.

By the end of the class, only two of the five tables had managed to produce an acceptable Handwriting Potion. Those students who were brave enough were encouraged to take a small sip. Their resulting facial expressions quickly told Hermione whether or not this was their first taste of a potion containing black beetle eyes. The last five minutes of the lesson were taken up by an impressive display of flawless handwriting ability.

The remainder of the day passed in much the same way for Hermione. She taught students from four separate years and was pleased when each class managed to produce at least one properly brewed potion that could be sampled and experienced by the end of the lesson. The students had grumbled a little when she assigned

homework on their first day of school, but most had seemed to find their lessons quite enjoyable (especially the fifth years, who had concocted a surprisingly effective Potion of Joy).

The feeling of accomplishment Hermione usually felt from such a satisfying day escaped her, however. Her mind kept returning to the book the Woodhouse girl had been carrying, and she couldn't help feeling like the sanctuary she had created for herself had somehow been invaded. A strong sense of foreboding settled upon her and refused to relinquish its hold for the next several weeks.

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Four for a Boy

Chapter 4 of 33

Hermione hates Halloween. Snape appears. Trick... or treat?

Chapter 4: Four for a Boy

A familiar routine had settled upon Hogwarts Castle as October drew to a close. Halloween dawned with a bitterly cold mist that dared to wend its way inside the castle, and even the numerous fires and torches couldn't chase it away altogether. The morning was frosty; Hermione's quick breaths came out in ghostly white puffs as she navigated the rime-covered paths outside. She carefully made her way back to the castle from the gamekeeper's hut, long since vacated by Rubeus Hagrid when he had married Madame Maxime in France.

All around her hung the scent of earth and decay. The grounds were covered in composting leaves that had long since fallen from the trees, their crispness stolen by the mist that buried them and left them to rot. Hermione tightly clutched a jar of fresh lacewing flies to her chest and tried to shake the feeling of gloom that seemed to pervade her thoughts.

Hermione hated Halloween.

Her intense dislike was caused in no small part by having been locked in the bathroom with a lumbering mountain troll on her very first Halloween at Hogwarts. Then there had been the dreadful Deathday Party for Nearly Headless Nick in her second year which had culminated with the opening of the Chamber of Secrets. Her subsequent Halloweens had likewise proven to be embarrassing, regrettable, and even downright disastrous.

Despite her rather unfortunate history, Hermione had fostered high hopes for improving her experience upon returning to Hogwarts as an adult. But two separate cases of goblin pox and one hapless Dungbomb incident later, the outlook was dismal. Nevertheless, Hermione was determined to change her pattern of dreadful Halloweens, and she found herself looking forward to the Feast tonight.

She had even purchased a new set of robes for the occasion when she'd last visited Madam Malkin's shop in Diagon Alley. The outer robes were a gorgeous deep topaz colour in shimmering satin, and they topped a sheath dress in bronze that suited the colour of her eyes and hair quite nicely.

By the time Hermione slipped into the dress later that evening, her spirits were much improved. Surveying herself critically in the mirror, she was surprised to realise the dress was actually quite racy. It clung rather seductively to her curves and sported a shockingly high slit, revealing more thigh than she was comfortable with. She was mightily glad the outer robes were far more sedate and could easily cover the dress beneath.

Hermione swept her long hair into an informal French Twist and offered silent thanks to the Parisian witch who'd permanently charmed the frizz away. It had been a rare act of vanity for her, not to mention ridiculously expensive, but worth every silver Sickle. She had gladly tossed her tubs of Sleakeazy's Hair Potion without a moment of regret.

Hermione decided to forego the traditional witch's hat and instead artfully tucked several small leaves in various shades of yellow, orange, and red into her hair. She'd collected the leaves from the grounds at the beginning of autumn and had preserved them with a dab of Mummy Potion. A light dusting of gold powder had been applied to complete the opulent look. The gilded leaves sparkled in the flickering light from the candles on her vanity, and Hermione thought the overall effect was actually quite nice and most appropriate for the season.

Hermione left her living quarters and headed up to the Halloween Feast where she chatted briefly with Draco and Neville. She chuckled when Draco told her she looked like an enchanting wood nymph and smiled when Neville blushed furiously at her. The headmistress rushed into the Great Hall at last, looking decidedly flustered for some reason, and Hermione took her seat at the far end of the staff table.

Some of the older students had formed a choir at Hogwarts, and Professor Sinistra led them into song to commence the Feast.

Eye of newt, and toe of frog,

Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,

Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,

Lizard's leg, and owl's wing.

Double, double, toil and trouble,

Fire burn, and caldron bubble,

Double, double, toil and trouble,

Something wicked this way comes!

Hermione clapped as the students finished and was about to turn to comment on the performance to Neville, who was seated to her left. But a slight movement to the right caught her eye, and she turned casually to see what had caused it.

Being on the very end of the table, the only thing located on Hermione's right side was a small alcove where a faded tapestry was hung, hiding a seldom-used passage to the headmistress' office. Hermione noted with a start that the tapestry was being held aside by a dark figure. Her hands froze in mid-air when her eyes met the face half-hidden by shadows. Severus Snape was standing in the alcove, staring at her intently.

Hermione was not sure how long she sat there, staring back at Snape unblinkingly, but it felt like an eternity. He looked almost exactly the same as she remembered him from her schooldays: black robes, black coat, and those frighteningly intense black eyes that watched her along with a familiar scowl. His black hair was cut shorter than she recalled but still held not a single touch of gray despite the many years that had passed. Remarkably, he appeared as if he hadn't aged a single day.

Hermione's heart was pounding in her throat at the shock of seeing him so fully recovered. She was only dimly aware that somewhere behind her, McGonagall had begun speaking to the students in the Hall, and their plates and cups had been magically filled with food and drink. She found herself unable to look away from Snape's penetrating eyes, and it was not until he stepped back into the passageway, letting the tapestry fall back with a forceful snap, that she was once again able to move.

Hermione turned her gaze to the other teachers at the staff table, but no one else appeared to have seen him. After a few moments she wondered if she had imagined it, but then Neville handed her a small piece of paper, and she knew it hadn't been a hallucination. Written on the parchment in McGonagall's precise handwriting were the words, "Come to my office after dinner. Severus will be joining us."

Hermione toyed with her food during the Feast and barely contributed to the conversation Neville was attempting to have with her. The various drying methods for Alifhoty leaves appeared to fascinate her friend, but Hermione could think of nothing but Snape. She finally left the Great Hall after her untouched dessert was cleared and headed to the headmistress' office with a mixture of anxiety and dread. Snape hadn't exactly appeared happy to see her earlier, and she mentally steeled herself against his unpleasant manner that she remembered so well from her youth.

She entered McGonagall's office and saw the headmistress seated behind her large desk while Snape occupied the chair across from her: the same one Hermione had sat in the night they'd learned he was awake.

"Ah, Hermione," McGonagall said and motioned her forward.

She approached the desk and was rather surprised when Snape vacated his seat at her presence and turned to her.

"Miss Granger," he said with a slow grimace, nodding his head curtly.

The slight inflection he placed on the term "Miss" did not escape her notice. Judging from his pursed lips, she doubted Snape was going to address her as "Professor" anytime soon.

Hermione watched as his dark eyes quickly swept down her form, taking in her appearance. A subtle frown drew his brows together, and Hermione believed her earlier assessment had been accurate: he certainly did not appear pleased to see her.

"Good evening," she replied, equally formal. "It's nice to see you looking so... um... alive," she said, hating how her speech had faltered. She didn't miss the way his scowl deepened at her choice of words.

If she was expecting some sort of exchange of pleasantries, she was to be sorely disappointed.

The awkward silence in the room extended until finally Snape turned to McGonagall and said, "I believe we're done with the courtesies now, Minerva. Might we continue with the business at hand?"

McGonagall looked uncomfortable but replied, "Of course. Please, sit down."

Snape returned to his chair, and McGonagall absent-mindedly conjured a seat for Hermione directly beside him. Hermione thought the headmistress looked distracted, and her suspicion was confirmed when she sat in her newly conjured chair and found herself sinking deeply. The legs of the chair were ridiculously short, and it sat a good deal lower than the one Snape occupied.

She tried to arrange herself professionally, but the task proved difficult, given that her knees had now risen to the same level as her chest. She briefly considered Transfiguring the chair into something more appropriate but feared it might embarrass the headmistress, who was already looking unusually ruffled. Hermione shifted her head to the side and regretted it immediately when she saw the amused expression on Snape's face as he looked down at her. He was evidently enjoying her discomfort.

It's like being eleven again, Hermione thought and felt her face grow hot.

McGonagall cleared her throat and brought their attention back to her. "Hogwarts is indeed very fortunate to have you both on staff. Now, let's work out some of the details, shall we?"

Hermione bowed her head in acknowledgement while noting that Snape remained still and silent.

"You could start out teaching the classes together for..." began McGonagall.

"I do not require an apprentice," Snape interrupted quietly.

Apprentice? Hermione felt her irritation rise at his easy dismissal. "Nor do I!" she countered, trying not to blanch when Snape glared down at her.

McGonagall looked pained with them both. Hermione thought she heard the distinct sound of Dumbledore chuckling from his portrait, although the old wizard appeared to be snoozing.

"Neither of you will be relegated to the role of apprentice," McGonagall informed them impatiently. "You could share the responsibilities..."

"I doubt our teaching methods would be suitable for a joint endeavour," said Snape flatly.

Hermione actually agreed with this statement but refrained from saying so.

McGonagall made several more suggestions, each involving some form of combined control of the Potions classes, and each promptly rejected by Snape. It didn't appear as if he would entertain any scenario from the headmistress unless he was taking sole responsibility for teaching Potions.

Hermione watched McGonagall expectantly.

"I appreciate your position, Severus, but there needs to be some compromise," said McGonagall.

"Naturally. Have her work with Flitwick or Harbro," he said, naming the Charms and Transfiguration professors. "She certainly doesn't belong in Potions."

This was finally too much for Hermione to abide. "Excuse me! 'She' is sitting right here," Hermione pointed out, aggravated by the way he was discussing her as if she were in another room. "And 'she' happens to be quite accomplished in Potions!"

Snape turned to Hermione with a look of boredom and said, "I instructed you for five years, Miss Granger. 'Accomplished' is hardly the word to describe your abilities."

With growing indignation, Hermione jumped from her seat, which was no small feat considering the chair's proximity to the floor. "Actually, I was being modest!" she fumed, fisting her hands on her hips. "It may surprise you to learn that a great deal can change in fourteen years!"

"Obviously," he said in a slow, deliberate tone. His eyes flicked up from her face and briefly rested on her hair, then slowly travelled down the length of her body, lingering on the deep slit in her dress. Her soft, brown leather boots laced up well above her knees, but a copious amount of flesh could still be seen.

Mortified, Hermione realised that her robes must have come open in her haste to extricate herself from the chair, fully exposing the dress beneath. She gathered the fabric around her and felt her heart beating erratically at the predatory gleam on Snape's face. Then he resumed speaking, and she was convinced that she'd imagined the look in his eyes and misinterpreted his reference.

"I don't consider tinkering with Muggle toys an adequate qualification for a Potions mistress," he said with disdain.

Muggle toys indeed! thought Hermione. Furious that he had reduced her many years of hard work to this, she spat angrily, "How fortunate we are that *you* no longer hold a position at Hogwarts where you need concern yourself with a professor's qualifications!"

At the reference to his brief time as headmaster, Snape rose to his feet with surprising speed and approached her menacingly.

Hermione drew herself up to her full height, which was considerably less impressive than Snape's towering form. Refusing to back away, she held her position proudly as he advanced on her. When he paused before her, she ridiculously wondered if he could hear her heart slamming frantically against her rib cage. He was standing so close that his breath fanned her face, and she could feel strands of hair that had escaped her clips tickling her cheeks.

In a low whisper he told her, "I did not solicit the role of headmaster, nor did I enjoy it." His eyes roamed her face with derision, and he continued, "But I would hardly expect a foolish girl to appreciate the concept of duty and obligation."

Hermione held her tongue, remembering that it was only two months ago when she'd stood in this very spot and argued with the headmistress over all the reasons Snape should stay and she should be the one to leave. His mention of duty and obligation had forcibly reminded her of the sacrifices he'd made on behalf of the Order, and she felt ashamed now for having attacked him. Hermione ordered herself to stop arguing with the man, however difficult it might prove.

McGonagall, who had been quietly watching the exchange from behind her desk, now also stood. "Let's all just calm down and discuss this like adults."

"A noble concept," Snape said mockingly, never taking his gaze from Hermione's face.

She frowned as his eyes narrowed and pierced into hers, surprised when she thought she saw a look of puzzlement on his pale face. She dismissed the thought instantly when he continued speaking.

"Perhaps *Miss Granger* should go play with her little science kit while I teach the complex magic of Potions." He provided a distinct sneer to accompany the word "science."

Completely ignoring the resolution she'd made just moments before, Hermione couldn't stop rising to his bait. "Perhaps *Snape* would like to educate himself on advancements in his field of expertise while I teach the modern approach to Potions," she retorted through clenched teeth, deliberately mimicking his insulting tone when she spoke the word "expertise."

"Excellent...it's settled then!" McGonagall slapped her palm on her desk, causing the sparring pair to break apart with a jolt and face her incredulously. The headmistress had obviously had enough of their bickering.

McGonagall explained, "Starting tomorrow, Severus will take over Potions classes for all students in years one to three."

Hermione started to sputter in protest, but McGonagall raised a hand and demanded silence. "Hermione, you will continue teaching years four to seven."

Hermione did some fast calculations in her head; although technically she'd be teaching an extra year, there were fewer classes in years six and seven when Potions became an optional subject. McGonagall had effectively split the classes evenly between them.

"I will expect you both to utilise your new spare time in a productive manner," said McGonagall sharply.

Turning to address Snape, the headmistress said, "Severus, I'm certain you will want to find out what you've missed in the study of Potions over the last fourteen years."

A frown crossed Snape's face and his jaw muscle twitched. "Naturally," he agreed curtly.

Hermione allowed herself to feel just a little smug at the headmistress' order to Snape, but she quickly schooled her features when McGonagall turned to her. "Hermione, you will be able to continue your research; I'm sure you're anxious to have more time for laboratory work."

Hermione heard Snape utter a disdainful grunt but refused to look at him. She didn't necessarily agree with McGonagall's proposal of increased research and lab time, but she wasn't about to debate her reasons for such in Snape's presence.

"Thank you," she demurred instead. As Snape offered no further argument, she assumed that the direction McGonagall had set forth was to his agreement as well, and Hermione prepared to leave.

"It's settled then," McGonagall reiterated, sounding relieved. "Now we just need to discuss the matter of your living quarters, Severus."

Hermione hadn't considered this aspect of having an additional instructor join the staff and turned back to the headmistress with a frown. To her knowledge, there weren't exactly spare bedrooms in the castle, and Hermione felt a growing sense of unease as McGonagall's eyes rested on her with a look of sympathy.

"Since you'll both be teaching in the dungeons, the most efficient solution would be to share the living quarters," insisted McGonagall. At Snape's surprised expression, the headmistress explained the vast enhancements Slughorn had made to the rooms during his extended time as Potions master.

"Fine," he said with a disinterested flick of his wrist.

"Wait a minute," Hermione interjected. The thought of having to work closely with Snape was daunting enough, but the idea of actually *living* with him was simply too much to contemplate.

Hermione began suggesting they alter another area of the castle, similar to the way Slughorn had changed the dungeons. But McGonagall reminded her that such changes required a unique magical skill which few possessed and the process would take several months to complete before the rooms would be habitable.

Hermione continued to search for alternatives, growing increasingly frantic. Her last possibility involved a complex plan to move five different professors into four different quarters, so that the professor remaining to share her quarters would be female and Snape could have his own chambers elsewhere in the castle. It had all made perfect sense to Hermione.

At McGonagall's exasperated expression Hermione said, "I'm sure they wouldn't mind moving! I can talk to them all and explain..."

Evidently growing weary of the discussion, Snape walked to where Hermione stood and spoke to her with a look of loathing. "I assure you, Miss Granger, your... virtue... is quite safe with me."

He had given her dress a rather disparaging glance at the mention of virtue, and Hermione felt herself blushing madly. Then he bid goodbye to the headmistress and turned abruptly on his heel before marching out of the office.

Hermione spent the next half hour arguing with McGonagall and insisting there was some other solution until the headmistress completely lost her temper and snapped at her.

"For the love of Merlin, there's a ten-room suite down there! I suggest you stop being so prudish and learn to live with a housemate, Hermione. Severus has spent the last fourteen years living in the space occupied by a single bed; I don't imagine he'll inconvenience you too much!"

Hermione finally set off for the dungeons in a foul mood, feeling McGonagall's remarks were a bit unfair. For one thing, the living quarters contained nine rooms, not ten. She also felt the "prudish" crack was a bit harsh. She noticed McGonagall hadn't volunteered to share *her* chambers with Snape...

Hermione's ire grew as she descended the staircase into the dungeons. Her high-heeled boots rang out loudly tonight, reverberating off the stone walls as she stomped along angrily with her robes billowing behind her. She remembered the look of disgust Snape had given her when he spoke of her virtue, and she snorted in disbelief.

How dare he imply that *she* was the one lacking in appeal? He was surely no prize, with his greasy hair and pale skin. Although to be fair, his hair hadn't looked greasy at all tonight, just shiny and silky, and the new, shorter cut actually suited the sharp lines of his face. If she was going to be honest with herself, she'd admit that he actually looked... well... if not outright handsome, then certainly striking. And almost indecently intense, which she supposed some women found attractive.

Hermione shook her head in irritation, wondering what the hell she was doing with thoughts like that circling in her mind. She paused momentarily to enter her living quarters, frowning at the door once inside. The problem with a Vanishing door was that it was impossible to slam it shut, and Hermione longed for the satisfaction of hearing the door bang closed. She took a deep breath and saw the lamps were lit in the larger of the two spare bedrooms; the door was shut tightly but a crack of light at the base told Hermione that Snape was in the room. There was no escaping her defeat tonight.

Resigned, Hermione walked to her bedroom and removed her robes, turning to stare at herself in the full-length mirror. Okay, so the dress definitely screamed out the fact that her virtue was most likely long gone. But the overall package was not unattractive, to quote Draco. She removed the leaves and pins from her long brown hair and shook it out, admiring the soft waves that had formed as a result of wearing her hair up. Hermione was often her own harshest critic, but even to her judgmental eye, she couldn't find anything in her reflection that Snape could consider so repulsive. Not that she wanted him to think of her in that way, of course.

A voice in her head reminded Hermione that it was just Snape being Snape. He had always taken delight in tormenting her. From insulting her teeth to calling her an insufferable know-it-all, he had a talent for knowing how to get beneath her skin. And now that she was older, he seemed to have found another way to eat away at her confidence. With a roll of her eyes, Hermione realised how pleased Snape would be if he knew his comments had sent her on this path of self-doubt. Tossing her head, she left the mirror and allowed herself to accept the idea that she had, in fact, looked damn sexy in this dress.

Hermione crossed back to her bedroom door and was about to close it when she heard a soft knock on the outer door of the living quarters. She grabbed her wand from the dressing table and headed quickly to the door, her hopes rising. Surely McGonagall had come up with a solution to the living situation after all.

A quick wave of her wand Vanished the door, and Hermione found herself facing Snape for the third time that evening.

The disappointment of not seeing McGonagall must have been evident on her face, for he surveyed her coolly and asked, "You were expecting someone else?"

Hermione wondered where he had been; she hadn't noticed him in the classroom outside, but then again she had stormed through without really looking. A bit embarrassed by the idea that he might have witnessed her temper, she stepped aside to allow him entrance. She deliberately ignored his question as she swept her arm toward the spare bedroom and said, "The lights were on; I presumed you were inside already."

He followed her gaze but soon returned to her face, his expression unreadable. "I did not deem it... appropriate... to enter the chambers before you tonight."

"Oh," she said, surprised. "Thank you." She hadn't expected him to respect her boundaries like that and felt a little more generous towards him. With a curt nod, he entered the sitting room and examined his surroundings. Hermione felt suddenly awkward without her robes and wished she'd spent the past few minutes getting changed rather than gawking at herself in the mirror. *Stop it*, she silently chided herself.

Snape had returned his eyes to her and stood with his arms crossed, watching her expectantly. "Well?" he drawled.

"Um..." Hermione looked at him helplessly and felt ridiculous, unable to guess what he was prompting her for. She hated to feel stupid, and she felt certain he was aware of this fact.

Snape breathed a heavy sigh. "Are you going to offer me the tour?"

"Oh!" Hermione squeaked. "Of course."

She walked through the rooms and pointed out the various changes Slughorn had made to the living quarters. Snape followed her silently, his hands clasped behind his back. As it often did when she was anxious, Hermione's brain kept generating pointless facts which her mouth dutifully voiced before her better judgment could step in. Her constant commentary didn't cease until they'd paused in the library, and she realised her voice was growing hoarse.

Snape turned to her. "Tell me, Miss Granger," he began conversationally. "Is it often your habit to prattle on endlessly like this?"

Hermione flushed, wishing he didn't make her so nervous. She wondered idly what it must be like to conduct oneself with such control, as Snape did. She had to admit that her 'prattle' had started to grate on her own nerves, as well.

With a ghost of a smile she replied, "No; it's a special treat for your first night here."

She was surprised when his lips quirked. Then he stepped out of the library and asked, "My room?"

Hermione thought he sounded tired and wondered what effects he suffered from the snakebite and his fourteen years of bed-rest, if any. There was so much she was yearning to ask him but stilled her tongue with a mighty effort.

Instead, she raised her arm to indicate his bedroom and headed towards it, feeling his presence behind her. She opened the door and walked fully into the room, noting three large black trunks on the floor. Looking around, she saw that several dozen books had been added to the shelves of the bookcase and all the lamps had been lit. The house-elves had evidently been busy.

Hermione turned back to face Snape, watching as he removed his robes and threw them carelessly over the desk in the corner. She had been on the point of asking him if the room was suitable, but judging by the way he was instantly making himself at home, the question was moot.

"Is there anything else I can get you?" she asked.

His dark eyes narrowed at her question, and he arched one slim eyebrow.

Hermione flushed again when she realised she'd posed her question while standing so close to his bed that her knee touched the deep blue coverlet. Hermione swallowed past a sudden lump that had formed in her throat at the intensity of his gaze.

Leisurely, Snape raised his hands to the neck of his black tunic and began unfastening the buttons.

"I'll let you know if I think of anything," he told her silkily. Then his eyes moved to a spot behind her, and she watched as a look of disgust crossed his face.

Hermione swung around to see what had caught his attention and immediately guessed where he was looking. On the middle of the headboard, she had placed a framed photograph of herself, Harry, and Ron, taken in their second year at Hogwarts. The three young faces laughed and hugged one another, occasionally waving out from the picture.

"I'll just... get this out of your way," she mumbled feebly. Stretching across the bed, she leaned precariously on one hand and reached out to grab the photograph with the other. She was quite focused on her balancing act and therefore completely missed the fact that her movements had hiked her dress up considerably, causing Snape's eyes to darken and his hands to still at their task.

Hermione looked down at the photograph, remembering with a pang that it had been taken by Colin Creevey, who had perished in the Final Battle. She cradled the photograph against her chest, returning her gaze to Snape.

He had turned away from her now, and she watched transfixed as his hands continued to unfasten the many buttons on his coat. They were elegant hands, she noted with surprise, and they made her think of music: the graceful fingers looked well-suited to playing a piano or some other fine instrument. She wondered why she'd never noticed how lovely his hands were before. Hermione watched as Snape finished with the buttons and removed the coat, revealing a snowy white shirt. He carefully set the coat aside, and still Hermione continued to watch his hypnotically efficient motions, unable to tear her eyes away.

She was unaware of just how long she'd been standing there beside his bed until he turned back to her, and the force of his dark eyes hitting her made her look down guiltily. She risked one last look at him, watching as his long fingers began work on the buttons of his shirt, before he once again cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Do you intend to join me?" he asked wryly, moving one hand from his shirt and gesturing towards the bed.

"I... oh!" Hermione stammered and awkwardly sidled away from the bed, shaking her head vehemently while her eyes grew larger. "I... NO!" she exclaimed, painfully bumping her hip into the dresser before finally managing to back out of the door as Snape advanced on her slowly.

He stopped neatly at the threshold and inclined his head with a faint smile. "Then I bid you goodnight, Miss Granger," he said and shut the door in her face.

Hermione stood rooted to the spot, breathing hard and crushing the photograph against her ribs.

"Oi!" came the distant, muffled voice of the twelve-year-old Ron preserved in the photograph. Hermione distractedly pulled the frame away, then fled to her room and flung herself on her bed, mortified by her behaviour.

Oh, how she hated Halloween!

A/N: Thanks to everyone who has stayed with this story long enough to witness Snape's arrival. And as always, thanks so much for leaving a review...it's the ultimate inspiration to continue writing!!

I'm sending embarrassingly effusive, glompy, messy gratitude to ladyinthecloak, little_beloved, and lettybird for their amazing beta and Brit-picking skills. Thanks so much, ladies!!!

Five for Silver

Chapter 5 of 33

Hermione can't seem to resist getting drawn into Snape's challenges. Will she be able to prove herself to him?

Chapter 5: Five for Silver

Hermione awoke early the next morning, showered and dressed quickly, and then headed into the small kitchen to make toast and tea. She was surprised to find Snape already seated at the breakfast table, reading a newspaper and carefully sipping from a steaming white mug. After living alone for so many years, it was more than a little unnerving to suddenly find a man in the kitchen, and Hermione's step faltered as she approached. Despite the impressive size of the quarters, Hermione suspected their living arrangements would prove quite awkward for some time.

"Good morning," she said stiffly.

Snape grunted an acknowledgement without looking up.

Hermione prepared her breakfast and hesitatingly placed it on the table across from him. Then, remembering that she was handing over half of her classes today, she hurried to the office and grabbed her timetables and lesson plans for the students he'd be teaching. Hermione felt a pang of sadness over the loss; it had only been two months, but she had grown fond of many of the students in the early years and fiercely hoped that Snape would try to be kind to them.

She returned to the kitchen and took the seat across from him, asking, "Would you like to review the classes you'll be teaching now?"

Snape continued to read his paper and answered her without a glance. "That won't be necessary. As you may recall, I have done this before."

Hermione gritted her teeth and searched for patience. "Yes, of course. But we've already covered quite a bit, and I can show you where we are in each class. I've recorded the details of all the assignments and results in these notebooks; I can brief you on each students' progress."

"You need not bother."

"But why waste your time teaching them something they've already learnt?" she asked irritably, annoyed that he wouldn't even look at her when she spoke.

Finally, he raised his eyes from the newspaper and gazed at her coolly, causing Hermione to rethink her desire for eye contact. "To ensure they learn it correctly."

Hermione recoiled at his words, her face flushing with the insinuation of her incompetence.

"You really are an arrogant bast," she began, but was promptly interrupted by a loud knock on the door to the living quarters.

Rising from the table, she left the kitchen and marched through the sitting room, angrily waving her wand at the door to Vanish it.

Draco Malfoy and Neville Longbottom stood before her with identical looks of concern on their faces.

"Hermione!" Neville spoke first, sounding out of breath. "It's all over the castle! Everyone's saying that Snape is here...and he's teaching Potions!"

"Yes, Neville; he arrived last night. He's having breakfast if you'd like to speak with him," Hermione told him, pointing toward her kitchen and watching as the colour drained from Neville's round face.

Draco eyed her speculatively. "I thought that might happen," he said quietly.

Hermione looked at him with only mild surprise. She knew Draco had travelled to St Mungo's to see Snape a few times since his miraculous awakening, but he hadn't given her any details about the visits. She'd presumed Draco had much to reconcile with his former Potions professor and hadn't wanted to pry into their discussions.

For her part, Hermione hadn't told either of her friends about her late-night visit to the headmistress' office on the first night of school. There had been no point in belabouring the idea if it might never come to fruition. But Draco didn't seem at all surprised about Snape's sudden appearance, and Hermione suspected he had sources of information which she could only guess at.

"He'll be living here?" Draco asked her now. "Are you all right with that?" He would of course remember the animosity between Hermione and Snape.

"I'll survive," she said with a smile. She'd certainly been through much worse than having Snape for a housemate. Even though she didn't relish the current situation, it was still better than leaving Hogwarts. This was her home.

"Well, you just let us know if he... if he..." Neville began in a protective tone but then trailed away, looking over Hermione's shoulder. "Good morning, Professor Snape," he mumbled.

Hermione turned around to find Snape silently watching their exchange. He was calmly leaning against the door to the sitting area with his robes drawn tightly around him, shrouding his arms where they lay folded across his chest. Upon his face, there appeared an all-too-familiar look of contempt.

"Ah, another trio," he said, his tone dripping with false enthusiasm. "How quaint."

Although she was still stinging from his earlier barbs about her teaching skills, Hermione forced herself to swallow the retort that sprang to her tongue, determined to avoid another scene like the one they'd shared in McGonagall's office last night. She could feel Draco and Neville standing behind her, and the way they shifted just slightly closer bolstered her courage.

With a look of disgust, Snape told her, "I see you are still incapable of residing in this castle without becoming part of an entourage."

"That's right," she bit back angrily, feeling herself neatly plummeting from her moral high ground, but unable to stop the fall. "They're called 'friends', Professor Snape. But I wouldn't expect that term to mean anything to you."

He paused only slightly before replying, "I've never felt compelled to surround myself with admirers to validate my sense of worth."

The phrase 'unlike you' was unspoken, but the implication was not lost on Hermione.

"How fortunate for the rest of us!" she fumed, placing her hands on her hips imperiously, annoyingly aware that her voice was becoming shrill. "If your sense of worth were any higher we'd all be crushed by your massive conceit!"

Snape merely looked amused at her insult and shifted from the doorway. "As charming as this has been, I'm afraid you will have to pardon me. Some of us have work to do," he added as he sauntered past them, through the office, and into the Potions classroom.

Hermione could tell by the faint sound of shuffling feet that the students had begun to fill the classroom and hoped they hadn't overheard her; it was hardly professional to be arguing with another teacher. Her arms fell back to her sides, and she clenched her fists in mounting frustration over the way Snape always managed to get under her skin.

"We've got to get going too, Hermione," Draco apologised. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Hermione shook her head, but answered in the affirmative. "I'm fine, really. Thank you both." More than anything, she was angry at herself for once again getting drawn into such an exchange with Snape. He really was the most irritating man she'd ever met.

"What are you going to do today?" Neville asked curiously.

"I don't know," Hermione replied, considering. It was Friday, which was already a short day for her, consisting only of classes with first-years, third-years, and fourth-years. She realised with a jolt that Snape would be teaching all but the last class, leaving her with a great deal more free time than she was accustomed to.

Thinking of McGonagall's dictate from the previous evening, she tried to stifle a sense of dread as she said, "I suppose I'll get to work setting up a research lab." Then she smiled a little mischievously and added, "Perhaps I can invent a 'Personality Potion' for my new housemate."

The other teachers chuckled and seemed reassured by her disposition. They departed, and Hermione reinstated the Vanishing door behind them. Even through the door, she could hear Snape's captivating voice emanating from the classroom and had to suppress the desire to stand there and eavesdrop. Instead, she returned to the kitchen and focused on her breakfast, which had now grown quite cold.

Hermione had just popped the last bite of toast into her mouth when she realised with a start that all the lesson plans, notebooks, and timetables she had brought in earlier were gone. She searched the kitchen and other rooms with growing confusion. Hermione knew they couldn't have just Vanished; she had long ago learnt to protect her books with an anti-Vanishing charm after a rather unfortunate incident with a cheeky sixth-year student.

Gazing at Snape's empty chair in puzzlement, Hermione realised this could only mean one thing: despite his obvious reluctance, Snape had taken the books with him after all.

Hermione spent her day heeding McGonagall's advice and creating an area which would eventually function as a laboratory. With the caretaker's help, she found an abandoned classroom on the ground floor and worked hard to make it suitable. It would take some time to bring in the equipment and supplies she'd need, but McGonagall had stopped by at midday and had promptly authorised the procurement of everything she'd asked for.

"There's no reason why advancements and breakthroughs can only happen at institutions of higher learning," she'd informed Hermione. "I believe it's time you put your excellent mind to work and start earning Hogwarts some of those accolades you brought to Jagiellonian University."

Hermione assured her that she'd try her best, secretly hoping the headmistress' expectations weren't too high. She had been so shaken by her time at Arglist Industries that just going through the motions of setting up a lab was causing her to break out in a nervous sweat.

By the time Hermione returned to the dungeons to teach the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff fourthyears, she was actually pleased with the progress she'd made. Passing by the office on her way to the head of the classroom, Hermione saw that Snape was inside the small room, sitting at her desk. *Our desk*, she corrected herself mentally, feeling her mood sour.

When all the students had arrived, she instructed them to break into groups so they could resume work on the Creativity Potion they'd started the previous day. It was a complicated draught which required the preparation of the many ingredients during one lesson while the brewing commenced separately. There was a great deal of noise as students got their cauldrons out and banged them onto their desks.

Hermione began a brief lecture on the history and uses of Creativity Potion but faltered when Snape came out of the office and slowly stalked amongst the tables at the back of the class. She quickly resumed her lecture, glancing his way occasionally and wondering what he was up to. Snape appeared entirely unconcerned by her discomfort; he casually leant his hip against an empty desk and watched her speak, his arms folded elegantly beneath the folds of his robes.

When Hermione finished her speech and could no longer stand his silent presence, she asked, "Professor Snape, is there something you need?"

The students turned to watch with avid interest, and Hermione had a feeling her argument with Snape this morning had not gone unnoticed. From the looks on the students' faces, the story had grown in the retelling and had undoubtedly been a topic of great interest around the school today.

"Not at all...this is quite fascinating. By all means, please continue, Professor Granger," he said with a tone of civility she knew better than to trust.

Hermione quickly realised she was trapped. Snape obviously intended to stay and watch her teach the entire class, which, she remembered miserably, happened to be a double lesson. She saw no way out of the situation...she certainly couldn't stand here and argue with him in front of the students, nor could she demand he remove himself. She doubted McGonagall would support that; after all, the headmistress had directed Snape to investigate whatever he'd missed in the past fourteen years. Hermione could just imagine him telling Minerva how he merely wanted to familiarise himself with the new teaching methods.

No, there was simply no way out of it. With great conviction, Hermione reminded herself that she'd never backed down from a challenge in her life, and she wasn't about to start now.

She forced a friendly smile onto her face and told him sweetly, "Excellent! Feel free to ask any questions you may have." His lips pursed at her statement, mollifying her slightly.

The students returned to their work with disappointment; they were evidently hoping for something much more dramatic. Hermione began to lead them into the process of brewing their potions. She walked around their tables, watching them work and stopping every so often to offer bits of advice to the class or answer questions from an individual.

Creativity Potion was actually one of her favourites to make, and she soon felt quite comfortable. She was inordinately proud of her students, who were all progressing very well; soon each table had a promising-looking brew cooking in their cauldron.

"Once your potion has started to smoke, watch it carefully for bubbles," Hermione advised them, stopping by a table of Hufflepuffs. "After you've seen the fourth bubble, you may begin to slowly add the nun moth larvae."

"Don't you mean gypsy moth larvae?" purred a voice from behind her. Hermione spun around to find Snape towering over her, his hands clasped behind his back. She hadn't realised he had left his spot from the back of the class and was alarmed by how silently he could move.

"No, it's the nun moth larvae," she affirmed.

"The recipe requires gypsy moths. Nun moths are much smaller than gypsy moths," he pointed out imperiously.

"Yes, that's why we're using twice as many," she said through gritted teeth.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw that several of the students were watching their exchange, completely ignoring their cauldrons. "Four bubbles, students!" she shouted, turning away from Snape. "If you miss this window, the results will not be pretty!"

Hermione noted with satisfaction that the faces quickly returned to the potions, and she soon heard the requisite hissing as the larvae were added. Snape had moved to another table, and Hermione watched him intently observing the mixture boiling in the Gryffindors' cauldron. When it rapidly turned from a pale puce to the required dark grey, he returned his gaze to Hermione, arched one dark eyebrow, and slowly bowed his head in acknowledgement.

Feeling deliriously happy at the small gesture, Hermione smiled at him genuinely before turning back to the class.

"As Professor Snape pointed out, many recipes for Creativity Potion call for the larvae of gypsy moths, *oLymantria dispar*. The nun moth, *Lymantria monacha*, is a close relative with a slightly different diet, consisting mainly of fruit trees. This means that nun moth larvae contain higher concentrations of sugar," Hermione told them.

Several students nodded in understanding, so she ploughed on, pointing to the swirling contents of the cauldron beside her. "As you can see, the sugar enzymes serve as activators for the other bio-molecules, thus providing the catalyst for rapid chemical reaction."

Twenty-odd blank faces stared back at her, completely gobsmacked.

With a slight huff she said, "It turns grey faster."

Now she could see comprehension on their faces, and she even thought she heard a soft chuckle from Snape, although his back was turned to her so she couldn't be certain.

"This particular potion used to require six hours to brew," she informed her class as she walked to the storeroom and returned with a small tank which looked surprisingly heavy.

"Today, I'm going to show you a way to cut that down to less than two hours," she announced, delighted to note the students...and even Snape...watching her with interest.

Hermione set the tank on her desk and removed the vacuum flask inside, opening a pressure relief valve with a loud hiss. Then she filled an insulated container with the bubbling liquid from the flask. Huge waves of thick vapour emitted from the vessel, roiling and whirling before sinking to the ground from their heavy weight.

"This is a critical point in the brewing process of the Creativity Potion," Hermione said as she joined the students at one of the desks. "Gather 'round, please."

The students clustered around the desk, and Hermione was pleased to see that even Snape was standing behind them, his curiosity evidently outweighing his disdain.

Hermione continued, "Normally, at this juncture the potion would be removed from the flame and the mixture would need to be cooled as quickly as possible. In the past, this involved rapidly stirring it or, for someone skilled in Charms, casting the difficult *Frigus* charm. Both methods worked, but were quite labour-intensive."

Lifting the smoking thermos, she said, "Now this... is simple!"

Hermione instructed one student to extinguish the flame beneath the cauldron and carefully stir the contents while she slowly added a few drops of liquid from the container. There was a great hissing noise as massive clouds of white smoke rose over the sides of the cauldron, spilling onto the desk and swirling hypnotically around them.

Hermione gently leant across the table and angled her chin over the cauldron. Then ever-so-softly and ever-so-slowly, she blew on the vapour and watched it float away, revealing the perfect silver potion churning in the bottom of the cauldron. Her face alight with triumph, she looked up and met Snape's gaze. With amazement, she noted that for once he wasn't frowning at her. There was a look of blatant interest in his dark eyes that sent her pulse speeding and skipping through her veins like a hummingbird searching for nectar.

If she could have seen herself, Hermione would have been surprised by what a lovely picture she made, leaning over the cauldron with her face flushing prettily amidst the billowing vapours. It was an image that did not go unnoticed by others in the room that day.

Hermione told herself it was just the success of having passed Snape's little unspoken test that had her stomach fluttering nervously when he regarded her. It had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that his ebony eyes seemed to caress her face or with the way his gaze held hers far longer than propriety would dictate.

Thanks so much to karelia for amazing support and unparalleled beta skills (little_beloved is on holiday and hopefully having a fabulous time!). The lovely lettybird does the Brit-picking and is ever so kind to me!

Six for Gold

Chapter 6 of 33

An evening at the Three Broomsticks leads to a poor decision and a tongue-tied teacher.

Chapter 6: Six for Gold

Within two weeks, Snape's amazing return to Hogwarts had already become old news. All attention had shifted to the third Saturday of November when the older students would finally be given the opportunity to descend upon Hogsmeade. The first Hogsmeade weekend was always eagerly anticipated, and the castle had been abuzz with excitement for days. Hermione smiled widely as she and Neville stood in the courtyard checking permission slips, having volunteered to act as chaperones. The excitement truly was contagious. The weather seemed keen to cooperate as well: the day had dawned clear and bright, and abundant sunshine streamed down upon the many heads huddled around the teachers. A steadfast wind whipped the fallen leaves into swirling eddies of colour around their feet while high above, the naked branches clicked and clacked their skeletal fingers in a hollow, staccato rhythm. Even the air held the distinct feel of autumn: dry and sharp and almost brittle, making Hermione grateful for her warm robes and thick Gryffindor scarf.

As they were about to depart, Hermione heard quick footsteps echoing on the cobblestones behind her and turned to see Professor Flitwick running towards them.

"Hermione! Neville! Wait!" he called to them breathlessly.

"Good morning," said Hermione. She had always liked her former Charms instructor and enjoyed the way he marvelled over the fact that she hadn't been Sorted into his House of Ravenclaw.

"I'm glad I caught you before you left. We're arranging a small get-together in Hogsmeade tonight: a sort of welcome-back party for Severus," he told them.

The images of Snape and a party didn't exactly mesh for Hermione, but she supposed the idea of it was appropriate.

"Please join us after dinner, and we'll walk to the Three Broomsticks together," Flitwick continued.

"Oh, I... um... I have to attend to some Shrivelfig tonight," Neville muttered lamely, and Hermione elbowed him in the ribs.

"Oh, yes, of course," squeaked Flitwick. "I'll inform the house-elves you'll be on hand then, Neville; they've agreed to keep an eye on the students and naturally some staff will be staying behind." Turning to look up at Hermione, he said, "But, Hermione, dear, surely you'll join us...we can't have everyone thinking our Potions professors don't get on with one another."

"Uh... yes, okay," Hermione told him feebly.

As she set out for Hogsmeade beside Neville, Hermione felt her earlier excitement quickly slipping away. She searched her mind for an excuse to avoid attending tonight's festivities, but came up blank. With a feeling of dread, she realised she'd have to go but was certainly not looking forward to it. For one thing, she didn't often drink; she was not fond of the way alcohol made her feel so out of control. And for another, she didn't relish the thought of spending an entire evening trying to avoid a public argument with Snape.

Despite his moment of apparent goodwill towards her during that first class, he had quickly returned to the sarcastic, brooding man she remembered from her youth. Hermione had been continually frustrated by the way he could draw her into a heated argument so easily. They had spent their first several evenings together in awkward silence as each adjusted to living with a relative stranger. Next came several ridiculous rows over sharing some aspect of the living quarters with one another. Fortunately, Snape had decided to ignore her the past few nights, burying his large nose in back issues of *Draughting Digest*.

Hermione divided her time in Hogsmeade between chastising errant students and formulating wild ideas to avoid attending the gathering later that evening. With a sigh, she supposed it would look dreadful if she didn't at least make a brief appearance. By the time she and Neville returned to the castle with the students, she was feeling decidedly grumpy. Perhaps it was a bit ridiculous, but she knew she'd have felt better if Draco or Neville were going to the Three Broomsticks as well. But Draco had Apparated home for the weekend (having arranged a mini-break to surprise Luna with a Crumple-Horned Snorkack expedition), and despite her cajoling, Neville seemed to be a lost cause as well, flat-out refusing to return to Hogsmeade with her later.

Making her way to the dungeons, Hermione glanced around and noted that Snape didn't appear to be in their living quarters. She idly wondered where he went at times like this when he seemed to simply disappear altogether. No doubt lurking in shadows, anxious to frighten first-years, she thought unkindly. Then she chided herself and

resolved to put aside their differences for one night; perhaps it wouldn't be as bad as she feared, and she might actually enjoy herself.

Hermione slipped on a pair of faded jeans and rifled through her dresser for a top. She finally decided on a soft chenille jumper in a deep shade of red that reminded her of Imperial Russian rubies. The fabric gently caressed her curves while the colour flattered her skin tone. She kept her makeup light, opting for just a bit of mascara and some shiny, clear lip gloss before heading out alone.

Leaving the castle, she saw a large group of teachers clustered around the front gates and could easily make out the forms of McGonagall, Flitwick, and Snape. After joining the others, she was touched to realise they had been waiting for her, and she hastily threw her heavy cloak over her clothes. She noted Snape staring at her jumper with an annoyed expression on his face. Hermione assumed he didn't approve of her attire, which looked blatantly Muggle.

Bertram Aubrey, the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, beamed at Hermione and said, "You look lovely tonight, Hermione."

She smiled brightly at him and said, "Thank you... You're very kind," while resisting the urge to throw a look at Snape that said *so there!*

Bertram offered his arm to Hermione rather jauntily, and she took it, laughing. As the group began the short journey to the Three Broomsticks, Bertram chatted merrily at Hermione's side and provided a nice distraction from Snape's tall form skulking in front of her. She felt herself scowl each time he glanced back at them; there was an obvious look of disapproval on his angular face, but Hermione had no clue as to what had drawn his displeasure this time. She wondered idly if Snape disliked Bertram but dismissed the thought immediately; Snape had only met Bertram two weeks ago, after all.

Hermione had liked Bertram the instant she'd met him three years earlier; he was a few years older than she and excessively kind. His soft hazel eyes suited his unassuming personality, and he almost always had a smile on his face. Hermione thought he seemed like the kind of man who took everything in his stride. She had never once seen him angry, even when his class of sixth-years had accidentally Summoned a Banshee from County Clare whose shrieks had blown out all the windows on the third floor.

Bertram had once told Hermione that his father had attended Hogwarts with James Potter and the other Marauders, although his tales of James and Sirius in particular were not exactly flattering. Bertram often peppered her with questions about Harry; he was full of questions, in fact. A year ago, he had confided to Hermione that he'd begun work on a book about the rise and fall of Voldemort. He was adorably shy about the endeavour and begged her not to tell anyone else, to which she'd reluctantly agreed. Since that time, he had sought Hermione's help on several occasions for information about incidents she'd been privy to. Hermione didn't relish these sessions, but Bertram was exceedingly kind about stopping as soon as he sensed her becoming uncomfortable.

"How is your work progressing?" she asked him now, referring to the book.

"Good... excellent!" he replied enthusiastically. After a small hesitation he added, "I do have some pieces I'd love to get your help on, though. I wonder if you might have some time... Could I possibly impose upon you?"

Hermione gazed before her, noting that Snape's head seemed to shift towards them slightly as if he were listening. Thinking she could use an excuse to escape his presence, she told Bertram, "Absolutely! When would you like to get together?"

By the time they had settled on meeting over the next four Saturdays, their group had arrived at the Three Broomsticks where a large table had been reserved for them at the back of the establishment. Bertram excused himself from Hermione and left to speak to Madam Rosmerta, the innkeeper. As everyone took their seats, Hermione quickly struck up a conversation with Rolanda Hooch, the flying teacher while simultaneously sticking close to Flitwick in a childish ploy to avoid sitting next to Snape. She needn't have bothered, as he seemed to have no interest in sitting next to her. Instead, he waited until she sat and then took the chair directly opposite from her.

Slick, she derided herself. Now she'd be stuck with his enigmatic eyes casting disapproving looks at her all night. She stole a brief glance at him: he appeared to be watching her lips, and she subconsciously wet them, nervous under his scrutiny. He raised his eyes to hers at the motion, and she looked away quickly, surprised to find her pulse racing.

Hermione listened to her colleagues telling wildly entertaining stories of their activities over the past fourteen years. Everyone seemed to be in relatively high spirits, helped in no small part by the ample quantities of Madam Rosmerta's excellent oak-matured mead. The teachers enjoyed relating their tales to Snape, and he actually behaved quite graciously as they enlightened him on the rather large gaps he had missed.

Hermione opted for Gillywater instead of mead, but she was enjoying the evening just as much as the others. Except for those occasions when she'd look across the table, and she'd find Snape studying her with his dark, intense eyes. Then she couldn't seem to stop an inexplicable heat from rising to her cheeks, and she was forced to look away quickly each time.

Rolanda Hooch had just finished relating a very funny anecdote about a harpy named Heldegarde when she slapped a hand on Hermione's back and said, "But enough about me... Hermione here is the one who's made a name for herself in the past fourteen years!"

Hermione choked on the Gillywater she'd been drinking and said, "No, no... my life is boring!" She chanced a quick look at Snape and found his gaze piercing her again.

"Don't be shy," said Flitwick, patting her arm reassuringly. "Tell Severus what you've been doing for the past fourteen years." He leaned towards her conspiratorially and added, "Besides growing into an enchantingly beautiful woman, of course."

Hermione felt the heat returning to her face as she looked at Snape.

"Yes, Miss Granger," he said, his voice soft and caressing. "Do tell."

Hermione directed herself to breathe normally as her heart pounded in her throat. She squirmed in her seat, determined to get this over with quickly. "There's nothing much to tell, I'm afraid. I returned to Hogwarts for seventh-year, then off to university."

"Head Girl!" Minerva added, sounding proud. "A doctorate from Jagiellonian University *and* a master's degree from that Muggle university in Krakow. Top honours in both if I'm not mistaken."

"Hear, hear," said Bertram from the end of the table, raising his glass towards Hermione.

Hermione's face was on fire now, and she thought it must surely match the colour of her jumper. She couldn't bring herself to meet Snape's eyes and simply said, "Yes, well, I've always enjoyed my studies."

"Don't be so modest," chided McGonagall with a tiny hiccup. "What about the papers you've published and the awards you've received?"

Hermione desperately wished they'd stop trying to help her.

"Yes, indeed!" said Flitwick as he beamed up at her. "You worked for that impressive research firm too, I recall. What was it called? IA? AI?"

"Arglist Industries?" Snape asked quietly, and Hermione's eyes snapped up to meet his. She saw a flicker of recognition in those inky depths and thought, *Oh, Lord, he knows.*

"In Austria?" he asked with narrowed eyes. "What were you doing there?"

Hermione tamped down her rising paranoia, realising with relief that he apparently didn't know about Arglist's relatively new lab in England.

Trying not to draw attention to her sudden fear, she attempted a teasing tone and replied, "Oh, it's quite confidential, I'm afraid. I could tell you, but then I'd have to Oblivate you."

Snape continued to fix her with his penetrating gaze, but McGonagall cleared her throat and quickly steered the conversation in a different direction.

As the hour grew later, McGonagall ordered shots of Firewhisky for everyone to drink together in Snape's honour. "I'll just use my Gillywater," Hermione said.

"You can't toast with Gillywater," McGonagall informed her with an alarming giggle, and Hermione suspected she'd just made up that rule.

"Miss Granger does not drink, Minerva," Snape informed the headmistress dismissively. "No doubt she cannot abide being out of control for even a second."

Hermione glared at him, hating that he was trying to goad her, and hating that he was right.

"Not at all," she lied. "I just thought someone should stay sober enough to get us all back safely to the castle."

"And what dangers do you imagine you'll encounter tonight?" he asked in a tone that was somehow both mocking and suggestive. His gaze fell to her lips again, and one side of his mouth seemed to lift slightly in a secretive half-smile.

Hermione fought the urge to chew on her bottom lip and swallowed hard instead. "Constant vigilance," she said with a shrug, quoting her favourite phrase from Mad-Eye Moody.

McGonagall attempted to overrule Hermione's protests, but Snape cut her off by saying, "She's obviously scared to join us, Minerva; just let her use her Gillywater." His voice was heavy with disdain.

"I'm not scared!" Hermione threw the words at Snape.

"Oh, Hermione, lighten up," scoffed McGonagall as she handed out dozens of small glasses filled with amber liquid.

Snape flicked his wrist towards Hermione with an air of boredom and continued speaking to McGonagall. "Don't force her, Minerva. Young witches are rarely able to handle their alcohol."

This proved too much for Hermione to ignore. She slapped her palm on the table with enough force to make the many glasses rattle. "I can drink you under the table any day, old man," she told him angrily as she pierced him with a glare of her own.

Snape smiled at her cynically and said, "Very well. I accept your challenge."

There was a chorus of good-natured whistling from the other staff members seated around the table. Before Hermione could bemoan the stupidity of what she'd just said, four shots of Firewhisky had been set before each of them. The deep gold liquid sparkled in the firelight, and Hermione watched transfixed as Snape raised one of the glasses to her in mock salute. He brought the glass to his lips, tossing the drink into his mouth in one fluid motion before swallowing. Everyone at the table cheered, save one.

Hermione raised a glass to her mouth and gingerly drank the libation, her throat burning in protest with each swallow. Eyes watering, she set the empty glass down with a determined 'clink' and raised an eyebrow at Snape in defiance.

He smiled again and easily repeated his original routine without the slightest of pauses. Hermione knew she was in trouble. She took a deep breath and grabbed another glass, encouraged by the merry cheers from the others at the table.

It was many, many hours later when the last of the other instructors left with resignation. Only Snape and Hermione remained, still sitting across from one another with identical scowls on their faces, although Hermione's gaze was admittedly unfocused. McGonagall had departed with Flitwick several hours earlier, and both had begged Hermione to concede defeat, but she had obstinately refused to budge. She had lost track of the number of shots she'd consumed, and had long ago stopped trying to count the empty glasses when her double vision rendered the task impossible.

"I'm going to bed," announced Madam Rosmerta with a roll of her eyes. She set a full bottle of Firewhisky on the table, and Hermione felt her stomach give an unwelcome flip. "Severus, please lock the door when you leave," Rosmerta said to Snape. Then, with a frown at Hermione, she added, "*IF* you leave."

They watched her stomp up the stairs and out of sight.

Hermione had been sitting in front of her full shot glass for some time trying to muster the courage to drink it. She had repeatedly pointed out that no time limit had been set for their little challenge: technically, she hadn't yet lost...she was just one drink behind. Experimentally, she attempted to wriggle her nose, which, along with her cheeks, had gone numb several hours earlier.

Snape leaned back in his chair and stretched his long legs out before him. Lacing his fingers together behind his head, he watched her wearily and offered up a heavy sigh.

Hermione surveyed the two Snapes swimming before her eyes and mentally ordered them to hold still. She marvelled over the fact that neither of the Snapes scowling at her seemed in the least affected by the alcohol.

"Drink it," he ordered her. "Or give up."

"I *am* drinking it," she slurred belligerently. Then she picked up the glass and took a small, horrible sip to prove her point. The violent shudder that wracked her body did not go unnoticed.

"This is infantile," Snape pointed out.

Hermione lifted her hand and pointed her finger at him unsteadily. "*You* are!" she exclaimed, unaware that her comment had merely underscored his assertion.

"Admit you cannot drink as much as I!"

"Never!"

With a disgusted look he told her, "You are a bull-headed woman, Hermione Granger."

"And you are an impossible man, Severus Snape," she retorted. The many "s"s in her statement proved very difficult for her tongue, and it took far longer to say than it should have.

Snape snorted at her mangled attempts to pronounce his name. He shook his head at her, but there appeared to be a smile on his face.

"Tell me something, Hermione," he said, suddenly serious and leaning in across the table towards her.

"Anything," she replied, leaning forward to join him and opening her eyes wide. He had called her Hermione twice now, and she was thinking she rather liked the sound of her name when he said it. He really did have a beautiful voice.

With a soft whisper he asked, "What did you add to the Creativity Potion to cool it so quickly?"

Hermione blinked slowly. She wasn't sure what she had expected him to ask her, but it certainly hadn't been this. She hadn't told anyone in the class that she had merely used liquid nitrogen: their homework assignment had been to figure it out.

"It's called niquid litrogen," she told him carefully.

"Niquid litrogen?" he repeated verbatim.

"No, no... you're saying it wrong," she chastised him. "You said niquid litrogen, but it's called niquid litrogen," she explained patiently.

"Niquid litrogen?" he asked again.

"Yes," she confirmed with a nod. *Wait, was that right?* she pondered, looking away with a small frown creasing her brow. It sounded kind of funny to her now. "Niquid... niquid... niquid litrogen," she repeated over and over, very slowly. "Yes, just what I said."

She felt herself sway a bit as she attempted to return her gaze to his face. For some reason, her eyes seemed to be taking an inordinately long time to catch up with the rest of her face when she turned her head.

"You're drunk," he stated matter-of-factly.

"No, *you're* drunk!"

"You should refrain from arguing when you're drunk, Hermione," he informed her.

Her head wobbled slightly as she told him, "No... /should refrain from arguing when I'm drunk."

"That's what I said."

"No, you said, 'you shouldn't argue with you'... I mean 'me'... I shouldn't argue with me," she began again, then stopped, completely befuddled. "What *did* you say?"

"I said, 'Finish your drink.'"

"Liar," she said with a smirk. Then she bucked up her strength and lifted the glass to her lips, draining it with one gulp. She felt the back of her mouth start to water and knew she was moments away from losing the contents of her stomach.

Apparently satisfied, Snape grabbed the full bottle of Firewhisky and refilled his glass as well as Hermione's. With amazing speed, he drained his shot in one quick gulp before nodding his head towards her refilled glass.

Hermione glared down at the glass. It sat before her mockingly, but she knew the taunting gold liquid wasn't nearly as innocent as it tried to appear. She contemplated the drink and felt her whole body shake. "I'm gonna be sick," she stated with unemotional detachment. Then she pushed back her chair and careened to the bathroom to make good on her statement.

When she had finally finished retching, she washed her face in the sink and tried to rinse her mouth out. The taste of the water had her stomach churning again, and she heaved into the basin long after her stomach had emptied. Looking at her wild reflection in the mirror over the sink, she sternly admonished the face staring back at her.

"What were you thinking?" she asked the mirror aloud, slightly relieved when it didn't answer.

Stumbling back into the tavern, she discovered that Snape was no longer at the table, although he had obviously taken the time to tidy up their glasses before leaving. She walked outside, fumbling for her wand in order to lock the door.

"Finished?" asked a voice behind her.

Hermione spun around to find Snape pointing his wand at the tavern door; he had apparently been waiting for her.

Unfortunately, she didn't consider the effects of trying to spin around so quickly, and she was soon falling sideways while desperately attempting to remain upright. Snape caught her neatly with one arm and steadied her. She had grabbed onto his black robes and cloak when she'd begun tumbling and now looked up at him, still clutching his clothing tightly.

She'd never been this close to him before. Her head was spinning, and she was suddenly aware of the fact that she was leaning against his chest, and his arm was around her waist, and his face was so close to hers that she ridiculously felt as if she could drown in the depths of his dark eyes. She smiled at him slowly, taking in his smooth features and thinking he was actually quite attractive when he wasn't frowning. She took a steadying breath and inhaled his scent: he was forest and cloves and fire and books and the smell made her think of Christmas for some reason.

"You smell nice," she told him.

He winced. "You don't," he informed her.

Hermione chuckled and broke away from him, surprised at how cold the loss of contact made her feel. "Yes, well, there's nothing like vomit-breath to ruin a mood," she said dryly. With a small frown, she realised every part of her body that had touched him was still tingling.

He said nothing, but offered his arm to her stiffly. Hermione took it gratefully, and they started off for the castle along the rocky path. They walked in silence for most of the way, and the cold night air soon helped to clear Hermione's head.

As they passed through the castle gates, Snape paused in the shadows just short of the torches at the entry. He removed her hand from his arm, and Hermione assumed he didn't want to be seen walking into Hogwarts with her in such a companionable fashion. She moved away, intending to continue alone, but he reached for her arm and gently pulled her back into the shadows with him.

Hermione looked up at his face in surprise, but his eyes were unreadable in the darkness.

He seemed to be searching her face, and after a moment he said, "Tell me something..."

"Liquid nitrogen," she offered immediately, smiling with the knowledge that she'd finally managed to pronounce it correctly.

"No," he said, sounding serious. "What were you doing, working at Arglist Industries?"

Again, it was not the question she'd been expecting. Hermione frowned and wished she could see his face more clearly. "I can't tell you," she replied honestly.

"Why not?"

"It's... complicated. And it was a long time ago... Please, just forget about it."

He stepped closer to her, and she found she could make out his eyes a little better now. The dark orbs were devastatingly intense, but still unreadable.

"I could use Legilimency and find out," he whispered, watching her face intently.

Hermione swallowed hard. "Yes... but you won't because that would be evil."

He moved closer to her still; she could feel his cloak brushing against hers. "You don't think I can be evil?" he asked her smoothly, his deep voice like velvet against her ears.

Hermione considered. She *knew* he could be evil, and she knew he had done many, many evil things in his life. But somehow she couldn't stop thinking about all the good things he'd done, and the sacrifices he'd made to help both Harry and the Order of the Phoenix.

Acting out of pure impulse, she raised a trembling hand to his face and placed it gently upon his cheek. "I think you have untold depths of goodness."

He seemed taken aback; it obviously wasn't the answer he was expecting. His eyes grew stony, and he stepped away sharply, letting her hand fall back helplessly to her side. "You're a foolish girl," he told her disdainfully. Without another word, he strode past her and disappeared into the castle.

Hermione turned and watched him walk away. "You're right," she whispered before slowly following him inside.

When Hermione awoke the next morning, she held her pounding head in her hands and cursed her stupidity again. It took her several minutes of serious contemplation before she was ready to leave the relative safety of her bed and risk standing upright. Closing her eyes against the fresh wave of nausea that hit her, she tried to swallow and idly wondered if something had crawled inside her mouth and died while she'd been asleep. She was very glad it was Sunday, as she had no classes or other responsibilities to worry about. She bathed and dressed very carefully, her every movement sending knife-blades through her eyes and head.

Looking in her mirror, she surveyed the damage. Her face was puffy, her eyes were red-rimmed with dark circles beneath them, and her skin was pale. She pulled her damp hair into a ponytail, but the weight on her head hurt too much, so she promptly removed it.

Venturing from her bedchamber, she noted with relief that Snape wasn't in the living quarters. She suddenly remembered the way he had rebuffed her last night when she'd told him he had untold depths of goodness. Her already-shaky stomach tightened in a knot. Hermione determinedly blamed the Firewhisky for her ridiculous behaviour and wondered what she could have been thinking to speak to him that way. She knew he had always despised her, and he had certainly never been her favourite professor. Their mutual dislike was somehow safe and familiar; why had she thought she could change that? Why had she wanted to?

The thought of food was revolting, so Hermione left the kitchen and wandered through the quarters aimlessly. Finally, she decided a visit to Madame Pomfrey was in order; surely she wasn't the only one in need of a headache tonic today. She left the chambers and walked carefully through the darkened Potions office.

Upon stepping into the Potions classroom, Hermione was assaulted by two things at once. First: the shutters on the high dungeon windows had been flung open, and blinding sunlight streamed down on her exuberantly. Next: there was a hideous smell coming from the front of the classroom; it reminded Hermione strongly of rotting eggs. The sun and the smell caused Hermione to simultaneously clamp one hand over her eyes and another against her stomach while she uttered a noisy, pain-filled moan.

A deep chuckle met her ears, and she knew without looking that Snape was in the classroom. With another moan, Hermione realised he must be the madman responsible for that horrendous smell. Hermione slowly lowered her hand from her face, allowing her eyes time to adjust to the brilliant sunshine. When she could see, she turned her attention to Snape, who stood over a very small cauldron at the front of the class. He actually had the temerity to smile at her, she noted with disgust. She glowered back at him.

"Sit," he ordered, indicating a chair across from him. Hermione cautiously walked to the seat and did as she was told.

The smell was far worse up close, and Hermione gingerly pinched her nose as she watched him. "Is this to punish me?" she asked, looking up at him pitifully.

A muscle twitched in his jaw, and he seemed to be trying to hold back a smile. He offered no reply, so Hermione rested her elbows on the table and watched him work in silence. His movements were precise and ordered with an economy of motion that was hypnotic to witness. Hermione admired his elegant fingers as he deftly wielded his knife to slice through an odd assortment of ingredients. There was something very soothing about watching a master at work. He crushed and chopped and eventually stirred everything into the tiny cauldron.

When he finally appeared satisfied with his concoction, he carefully poured the contents of the cauldron into a clear glass cup. Hermione noted with revulsion that the colour matched the smell: rotting eggs indeed. He set the cup aside while he cleaned his station; phials and bottles floated through the air on their way back to the storeroom, and the cauldron went into a basin at the back of class where it was promptly scoured.

Snape returned to the table and surveyed Hermione silently. He picked up the cup containing the mysterious liquid he'd just made and drank half of it in one gulp.

She watched him close his eyes, mesmerised by his long black eyelashes sweeping down to contrast with his pale skin. There was a look of disgust on his face, and his Adam's apple bobbed convulsively as he swallowed. Hermione couldn't imagine what would possess someone to drink something which smelled so hideous.

Then he held out the cup to her and said, "Drink."

Hermione felt her eyes grow wide and tried to shake her head, but it was too painful, so she just asked, "Are you insane?"

He ignored her question and continued to proffer the cup.

Hermione finally took it from him and peered at the contents hesitantly. She felt her lips curl and her stomach protest, and she had to hold her breath at the smell. With a silent prayer, she pinched her nose again, closed her eyes, and drank.

Hermione expected her stomach to heave, but instead, it instantly felt better. Opening her eyes in surprise, she was amazed to find the sunlight was no longer akin to sharp daggers piercing her eyes and head. It was incredible.

"Wow," she said, still gripping the cup tightly. She looked down and suddenly found herself thinking about the intimacy of sharing his cup. Unthinkingly, she had placed her lips to the exact spot where his had been just moments before, and she imagined she could feel them pulsing with warmth now.

"Miraculous, isn't it?" he asked dryly.

Hermione nodded enthusiastically, amazed when she could attempt the motion without immense pain. As the discomfort in her head ebbed, her brows drew together in a frown, and she began to wonder why Snape had drunk the potion first. She squinted hard at him and noticed for the first time that his eyes were red-rimmed and his face appeared paler than usual.

"Aha!" she cried out loudly, pointing at him.

He arched one eyebrow at her and pierced her with a look of intense displeasure.

"You needed that, too!" she accused.

"Do not make me regret sharing it with you," he warned her.

"Sorry," she said humbly. "And thank you."

"You're welcome."

"It's just nice to know, though," she said, unable to drop the matter. "If it had been anything other than Firewhisky, I would have been fine."

Snape snorted and Vanished the glass from her hand with a small wave of his wand. He walked around the table to stand beside her, folding his arms across his chest as he peered down at her. "You should learn to lose graciously, Hermione," he said with a smile. "You will find that every time you challenge me, I will win."

Hermione had a feeling he wasn't just referring to the alcohol. She stood up from her chair and met his eyes steadily, her pulse racing at his proximity. "And you should learn that I never back down from a challenge, Severus."

He inclined his head in acknowledgement, and Hermione realised the taunting smile had not left his face, even when she'd called him by his given name. He was standing very close to her, and Hermione found she suddenly lacked the ability to breathe normally. There was something about those dark eyes that forced her breath to come in shallow, rapid bursts.

"Well then," he said at last, tilting his head, "that should make our evenings together... interesting."

Hermione swallowed hard as he turned away. She felt confused by the tension his words seemed to create in her. There had been something distinctly sensual about the smile on his face and his tone as he had spoken to her. She was certain she'd imagined it, though; no doubt her brain wasn't functioning clearly yet, and her system was simply frazzled by an overconsumption of alcohol last night.

She waited for him to depart, but he turned back to her and said, "One more thing, Hermione..."

Looking at him questioningly, she watched in amazement as he slowly leaned in close to her. She stood frozen in place...as motionless as a statue...and still he continued to shift closer. For one crazy second, she thought he was going to kiss her, and she felt her mouth go dry.

Instead, he reached a hand up to push aside the curtain of her damp hair, grazing his fingernails across her jaw-line in the process. Hermione felt herself tremble as his face dipped lower and lower until his lips were so close to her ear she could feel the caress of his whispered words.

"If you ever again refer to me as 'old man', there will be consequences," he purred against her skin. "You might force me to teach you just how... arousing... experience and maturity can be."

He fled the room before her newly-addled brain could process the full implication of his words, leaving Hermione to wonder whether he'd just delivered a threat or a promise. Or perhaps both. With shaking knees, she sank back into the chair and closed her eyes, feeling suddenly dazed and weak. Her stomach had begun to behave strangely again, and this time, she doubted it had anything to do with the hangover.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta's, Karelia and little_beloved (I solemnly swear to learn compound predicates. Soon...). The hypnotic lettybird offered wonderful Brit-picking advice, and saved Hermione from a most dreadful make-up blunder.

Seven for a Secret

Chapter 7 of 33

Snape mocks the men in Hermione's life. Secrets from the past begin to surface.

Chapter 7: Seven for a Secret

The days passed quickly for Hermione. Snape had made no further mention of his whispered promise, and Hermione might have thought she'd imagined it, if not for the fact that she could recall the incident with such perfect clarity. There seemed to be a sort of uneasy truce between them now, though. There were still arguments, but they'd managed to find a way to live together for several weeks without killing each other, and Hermione thought that was surely progress.

Hermione had always spent her evenings with a book in front of the fire, and Snape soon began to join her in this. It appeared as if he was determined to work his way through fourteen years' worth of periodicals as quickly as was humanly possible. But it actually made for pleasant evenings filled with companionable silence and even a few brief discussions on something he'd read. Hermione sat in her large chair while Snape occupied the sofa, his papers and books spread out before him on the coffee table.

As the nights grew longer, Hermione noted with some irritation that her attention to the book she was reading would begin to wane, and inevitably, her gaze would be drawn to Snape. She'd watch his eyes devouring the words before him, and she'd study his hands as they made rapid notes on the pieces of parchment. After a bit of time had passed in this manner, Hermione would grow angry with herself for being so easily distracted and depart with a hasty goodnight to him. Then she'd lie in bed with sleep eluding her and feel inexplicably annoyed with Snape. He wasn't doing anything wrong, but she'd begun to feel edgy and unsettled around him, and she couldn't put her finger on what was causing it.

On Sunday evening, Hermione was sitting in front of the fireplace with a large pile of essays to mark in her lap. She'd assigned the topic of crocodile heart without fully appreciating how extremely boring it would be to read twenty-odd parchments about the ingredient. She had scanned over the same paragraph four times without really reading it when she found her eyes drifting over to watch Snape.

He had removed his robes and overcoat, and he was lounging on the sofa wearing a crisp white shirt and reading a small book, his long legs crossed casually before him. Hermione stared in silence as he reached forward and picked up a small crystal glass that contained some amber liquid which looked like whisky. She allowed herself to admire the way the material of the shirt stretched against his broad chest as he raised the glass to his lips and drank. Her eyes lifted to his throat as he swallowed, and she could see the shiny scars on his neck from where Nagini had nearly killed him so many years earlier.

"Problem?" he asked without looking up.

Hermione jumped guiltily and looked at his face. "No..." she stammered.

Snape set his glass back on the table and turned his gaze upon her. "I am not a specimen to be examined each evening."

"No... of course not," she agreed, horrified that he'd been aware of her silent appraisal each night. "I was... I was just..." she stuttered, not knowing how to explain.

Snape drew in a great breath and exhaled deeply through his nose as he set his book aside. He folded his arms across his chest and said, "I suppose I should feel fortunate that you've managed to wait this long before assaulting me with your inane questions."

Hermione just shook her head.

"Go on then," he told her with a droll look. "Let's hear them."

Hermione did actually have quite a lot she wanted to ask him, although that hadn't necessarily been the reason she'd been watching him so intently. Nevertheless, she wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity, however begrudgingly it had been granted.

"Does it hurt?" she asked with a glance at his neck.

"Not anymore."

"Did it hurt? All that time... when you were in the Shrieking Shack?"

"Only until the antivenin began to work."

"Antivenin?" Hermione hadn't heard anyone mention this.

"Yes. I began taking regular doses of the antivenin I developed after Arthur Weasley was attacked at the Ministry. A preventative measure that proved invaluable ... eventually," he explained.

Hermione wondered briefly at how awful it had to have been...a lifetime of spying on Voldemort while constantly trying to remain one step ahead. It made her shudder to even imagine it.

"What was it like at St Mungo's... those fourteen years?"

"Tedious."

Hermione waited, but he obviously wasn't going to elaborate. It was not the exchange she'd been hoping for, and she struggled to form a question for him that couldn't be answered monosyllabically. A soft knock on their door interrupted her thoughts, and Hermione left her chair with a frown, Vanishing the door as she strode towards it.

"Oh. Hi, Neville," she said when she saw who had knocked.

"Speaking of tedious," Snape mumbled behind her.

Hermione ignored him and hoped Neville hadn't heard the remark. "Come in," she said to her friend.

Neville took one step into the room but stopped abruptly when his eyes fell on Snape. "Oh, good evening, Professor Snape," Neville told him.

"Is it?" asked Snape unkindly.

Hermione noticed the uncomfortable look on Neville's face and tried to set him at ease. "Would you care for some tea?" she asked him. She followed Neville's gaze and noted the glower on Snape's face. "Or perhaps something stronger? Have a glass of wine with me, Neville," she added impulsively.

"No, thanks... I can't stay," Neville told her, and a flush began to appear on his pale face. "I just came to... to give you these," he mumbled quietly, holding out four perfect flowers.

Hermione took them with a delighted smile and exclaimed, "Ooh... Your night poppies opened! They're beautiful, Neville!!"

She buried her nose in the blooms and breathed in their heavy perfume. Hermione adored night poppies; they were exceedingly rare, blooming only in November and then only at night. Each flower was the size of a dinner plate, sporting five hand-sized petals that slowly changed colours from white to lilac to dark purple before repeating the pattern.

"I've never grown the purple ones before," Neville informed her. "They turned out nice."

"They're more than just nice, Neville. They're absolutely gorgeous," she gushed. "Thank you so much!"

Neville cast an uncertain glance towards Snape, who had been watching the entire exchange from the sitting room with his arms crossed stoically. Flushing again, Neville mumbled, "You're welcome," and then walked to the door.

Hermione followed him and asked, "Are you sure you can't stay for a drink?" Bringing her the night poppies had been incredibly sweet, and she resented the fact that Snape appeared to make Neville so uncomfortable.

Neville turned back and said quietly, "No, thanks... I really just wanted to bring you those while they were open. I thought you'd like the colour," he finished, looking down.

Hermione placed her hand on his arm and said genuinely, "I love them, Neville. Thank you." She watched Neville's retreating back as he slumped through the Potions office. Hermione reinstated the door behind him and turned around to see Snape watching her with an amused smile. Not caring to learn what he found so funny, she strode into the kitchen and rummaged around for a jug in which to put the night poppies.

Snape followed her into the kitchen, and Hermione set her jaw, annoyed by the fact that he obviously wasn't going to ignore this opportunity to mock her.

"Ah, l'amour," he intoned, confirming her assessment.

"Not that it's any of your business," she began haughtily, "but Neville and I are merely friends."

"Perhaps one of you is," he supplied.

"Don't be ridiculous," she told him, rolling her eyes. The timbre of her voice had risen with her indignation, and the words sounded shrill, even to her own ears.

Snape shook his head at her and said with a knowing smile, "Tsk, ts... And they said you were the brightest witch of your age."

"Neville and I have known each other for more than twenty years," she reminded him, finally finding a jug and turning to the basin to fill it with water. "We're friends, and that's all."

With her back turned, Hermione considered Snape's insinuation for a moment and dismissed it quickly. It was true that Neville had often done nice things for her, like bringing her flowers or picking up books for her in London. But they shared friendship and a common history; she was certain that was the extent of their relationship. And

surely Neville felt the same way. She had a sudden image of his face surfacing in her mind and realised that he had been spending an awful lot of time blushing around her lately. Hermione shook her head determinedly and snapped off the water tap. Snape had to be imagining things.

Feeling resentful for making her question Neville's motivations, Hermione turned her anger on Snape.

"And you could *try* to be a little nicer to him!" she said imperiously. "He did come to visit you every week."

"Well, pardon me if I appear a little less than grateful for having no choice but to listen to Longbottom droning on for fourteen long years," he said bitingly.

Hermione set the jug of flowers on the kitchen table with a dull thud and came to stand before him, her eyes flashing. "I happen to think it was nice. Especially considering how much you always tormented him."

Snape searched her face carefully before asking, "Is that why you never came?"

Hermione flushed and looked away. "I... I came a few times," she stuttered.

"I never heard you," he told her.

"I never spoke," she said quietly.

"How very unlike you," he said sarcastically. "What on earth could cause you to miss such an opportunity?"

Hermione swallowed hard but couldn't raise her eyes. "I didn't..." she began and nervously bit her lip, afraid to tell him the truth. "I didn't know how to apologise."

Snape was completely still but said, "And what, pray tell, did you need to apologise for?"

Hermione felt her stomach tighten as the old guilt came sweeping back. "For leaving you in the Shrieking Shack, for telling everyone you were dead," she began quietly, "and for not being the one to notice that your portrait was missing from the headmaster's office."

And for looking at the memories you gave to Harry she thought, but didn't dare say.

When he said nothing for a very long time, Hermione raised her eyes to his face and tried to read his expression. It was impossible: his eyes were guarded, and the only part of his face that moved was a muscle in his temple. "I *am* sorry... Very sorry. 'Brightest witch of her age,' indeed," she finished miserably, speaking the words very quietly before looking back down.

Finally, he spoke, and Hermione was surprised that he sounded almost bored again. "As much as it pains me to do this, I fear I must exonerate you."

She looked up at him in surprise, and he continued, "Although I might enjoy having this to berate you with, it would be exceedingly unfair. Everyone thought I was dead; surely someone would have figured it out before I was buried."

Hermione looked down again and said, "But perhaps if I'd been faster..."

"It would not have mattered. The effects of the venom were instantaneous: eight minutes or eight hours made no difference." When Hermione still wouldn't look up, he reached out his hand and placed the side of his index finger beneath her chin, lifting her face and forcing her gaze to meet his bottomless black eyes.

"I happen to know something about regret, Hermione," he told her quietly. "Do not waste your remorse on me."

Then his eyes travelled down to where his fingers still cradled her chin. His thumb had been sticking up at an angle to the rest of his hand, and she was amazed when he touched it to her cheek and gently brushed it along the skin there. He was staring intently at the spot, seemingly mesmerised by the sight of his thumb caressing her face. His gaze seemed to darken when his finger slid closer to her mouth, pausing at the corner of her lips. Then he gave an almost imperceptible start, as if he suddenly realised what he'd been doing. His eyes snapped up to meet Hermione's, which were wide with shock, and he jerked his hand away quickly. He looked down at her with an angry expression.

"You had pollen on your cheek," he told her curtly.

Then he spun around and left the room, leaving Hermione to gape after him in shock over the small moment of tenderness, and the inexplicable anger.

The chilly days of November were rapidly dwindling, and life inside Hogwarts Castle had arranged itself into a familiar routine. Within the cold, grey dungeons, the Potions professors had fallen into a reliable (albeit uncomfortable) rhythm of avoiding and ignoring each other, interrupted only by the frequent moments of each pretending they weren't secretly watching and studying the other.

Hermione found herself increasingly troubled by nightmares and began relying heavily on a Dreamless-Sleep potion that Snape had made for her. At first, she'd been touched by the kindness of his gesture when he had thrust the small bottle at her one morning.

"Use this," he had told her curtly.

"That's very kind of you," she had told him, trying not to blanch when he had snarled at her. "But I find it gives me a headache."

"Then take a headache tonic with it," he had ground out. "I have no desire to be continually woken by the nocturnal ramblings coming from your room."

"Right," Hermione had told him with a frown, hoping she had hidden her embarrassment. "I should have known."

The potion kept the nightmares at bay, but her sleep was still troubled. Hermione suspected that her Saturday sessions with Bertram Aubrey were a major contributing factor to this. It had been easy to relate the early stories of Voldemort since most of them had come second-hand from Harry. But as Bertram's book progressed, he was eager to learn about the activities that had taken place during their year of searching for Horcruxes, leading up to the final battle. Hermione found these sessions far more difficult and often left with a pounding headache.

It didn't help matters that Bertram still wouldn't permit her to inform anyone of what they were actually discussing. It was often very late after their meetings when she would finally return to her living quarters, only to find Snape scowling at her in disapproval.

"Did you have a nice time with Bertie and his little 'project' tonight?" Snape would often ask her in a tone that clearly indicated he thought "project" was a euphemism for something else. Which, she supposed, it was. And although the truth was that she had been having quite a terrible time, she often found herself smiling sweetly and saying something like, "Oh, it's actually quite a *large* project," or, "Yes, his project is simply *amazing*!" just to irritate him.

The time she spent alone with Snape was becoming more and more stressful, and she was unable to find a satisfactory method of soothing her restless, jittery nerves. To combat this, she began spending more time at work setting up the new research department, although she had a feeling this was also contributing to her sleepless nights.

Hermione had just finished a final round of tests on an electron microscope and stood up with an aching back. As it was Saturday, she'd been able to devote her attentions to the lab all day, and her back and neck were protesting. She surveyed the laboratory with a sense of pride...it had taken weeks of endless spells and charms in order to make the complex scientific equipment operate within the strong magical boundaries of the castle. But as she stretched her arms above her head and rolled her aching

neck around, Hermione realised she was ready to give it her blessing at last. She had finally managed to set up a functioning laboratory inside Hogwarts Castle.

Taking a seat behind a long table, Hermione pushed aside a stack of Petri dishes and opened a scroll of parchment. Now that she had a lab, she needed to decide what exactly she was going to research. Her hand shook slightly while she pondered it, unable to take this step without remembering the mistakes she'd made at Arglist Industries and what it had almost cost.

With determination, she told herself that she was smarter now, and she knew how to be more careful. This time, she would start out with simple projects, and she'd make sure she questioned everything. She had learnt the hard way that it wasn't enough to prove that something *could* be done...it was far more important to know whether or not it *should* be done.

With that thought in her head, Hermione abandoned the parchment and instead walked to a solitary chalkboard in the back of the room. She wrote two words in large letters: "could" and "should." Then she drew an "x" through the word "could" and underlined the word "should" twice. She stepped back to admire her handiwork and nodded at the results, certain this would help remind her each day to avoid the mistakes she'd made at Arglist.

"Well, well... If it isn't Dr. Frankenstein," came Snape's mocking tone from the door to the lab.

Hermione spun to face him, stunned. The comparison was eerie, given the direction her thoughts had taken her. She knew that the monster in Mary Shelley's story was as much the creator as the creation. And how often had she thought of herself as a monster after leaving Arglist?

Hermione watched Snape carefully, not trusting how much he might know and remembering all too well his curiosity about Arglist. He had entered the room and was walking up and down the long rows of tables, eyeing the equipment suspiciously.

Turning back to her, he asked, "So this is where magic meets science?"

Hermione frowned at him as he approached her. The phrase "where magic meets science" was very familiar to her: she had written it herself in several papers at Jagiellonian University. Noting a spot of colour against Snape's black robes, Hermione approached him and was startled to see a green book tucked behind his crossed arms. She could make out enough of the gold lettering to know it said "Brukowski-Granger Principle" on the cover.

"Where did you get that?" she asked him.

"I took it from a firstyear yesterday; I hardly consider it appropriate reading."

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, and the image of adoring grey-blue eyes staring up at her from the face of the gangly little Gryffindor girl sprang into her mind.

"Emilia Woodhouse," she said aloud, opening her eyes.

"Yes, that's the one," Snape told her. "Rather obnoxious... Complete know-it-all... Actually, she reminds me of someone," he said to her dryly, his lips lifting upwards slightly at the corners of his mouth.

"Hmm. I can't imagine who," Hermione told him with a small laugh. She held out her hand for the book, saying, "I'll take it. I can keep it here in the lab where it's more 'appropriate,' as you say."

He watched her carefully, and Hermione knew at once that she'd appeared too eager.

"That's quite all right; I'll hold onto it," he told her, surveying her face with a slight frown. "No doubt it will be a perfect fairy tale for late-night reading."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and then turned away at the sound of soft tapping coming from the window. A majestic eagle owl was hovering outside with a scroll of parchment. Hermione opened the glass and allowed the bird entrance, shivering in the blast of cold air that accompanied the intimidating creature. She untied the large scroll and noted the letters "H.G." penned to the outside. Unrolling it casually, she saw with puzzlement that the entire, large piece of parchment was completely devoid of wordsit contained nothing more than an enormous question mark. A soft piece of paper fluttered out, and she bent to pick it up with mounting curiosity. It appeared to be a very small clipping from a newspaper.

Jagiellonian University announced today the appointment of Alexsi Dipikov as Dean of the Potions Department, replacing the recently departed Mikolaj Brukowski. Brukowski, famed for the invention of BruBier and the controversial Brukowski-Granger Principle, departed Jagiellonian University last month after twenty-two years of service. He is currently installed as the Head of Research and Development for Arglist Industries in Germany.

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face as she finished reading the miniscule print. Her mind raced back to her lab at Arglist Industries: surely she had destroyed everything. Brukowski was one of the few people who might be able to come close to duplicating the methods Hermione had used for her work at Arglist, but surely methods weren't enough. They'd need samples, and specimens, and notes, and...

Hermione stopped her frantic thoughts and realised that Snape was still standing before her, staring at her with open curiosity now.

"Bad news?" he asked sardonically.

Hermione crumpled the small newspaper clipping and stuffed it into her pocket, shaking her head. "No, not at all," she lied.

"You're a dreadful liar, Hermione," he informed her matter-of-factly.

"Yes, I know," she said, forcing a smile onto her face.

Grabbing a quill off the desk, she drew a large "x" through the giant question mark on the parchment. She rolled it back up and tied it onto the owl's leg, rummaging in her pocket for an owl treat. She was painfully aware that Snape continued to watch her the entire time, and she hoped he wasn't going to start asking her questions. Somehow, she just knew that she'd be unable to lie to him for very long.

"Hey, you two!" came a friendly voice from the doorway. The owl flew away as Hermione closed the window before turning to smile at Bertram Aubrey.

"Hello, Bertram," she said, grateful for the distraction. Snape did not bother to offer a greeting.

"Ready to go?" Bertram asked Hermione.

"Oh... um... okay," she told him. Actually, she was longing for a hot bath and a chance to think about the disturbing news she'd just received. The thought of spending several hours discussing Voldemort and his reign of terror filled her with dread. She thought about cancelling, but she hated to go back on her word. Bertram had shown her nothing but kindness since she'd come to Hogwarts.

"I thought perhaps we'd go into Hogsmeade tonight. How does dinner at the tavern sound?" he asked her.

Hermione realised with a pang that she hadn't eaten since breakfast; she'd been so wrapped up in her work at the laboratory.

"That sounds great," she told him with feeling, making up her mind. She looked over at Snape, who stood with his arms folded over her book and his back turned to the door. There was a surly expression on his face as he regarded her silently. Hermione suddenly felt immensely irritated with him, resenting his disapproval. She was a single woman, Bertram was a single man, and if they wanted to go have dinner together it was none of his damn business. On top of that, he should have given her the

sodding book when she'd asked him for it.

With one final glance at the green volume in his arms, she said flippantly, "Good night, Severus. Don't wait up for me." Then she strode past him with an air of satisfaction.

In retrospect, her statement would have been an excellent parting shot, if not for the fact that Severus Snape was amazingly quick and somehow managed to snake an arm out to stop her as she passed. Holding on tightly to her elbow, he dipped his head towards the side of her face and leant so close she could feel his warm breath against her hair. In a whisper only she could hear, he said, "Watch out for the Firewhisky, Hermione. I wouldn't want you to lose control... again."

Quickly releasing her, he looked down into her eyes pointedly and with such intensity that Hermione's heart seemed too intrigued to remember how to beat normally. Then his searing gaze dipped to her lips, lingering there for a moment before returning to her eyes with an expression that made her very glad Bertram had remained in the doorway.

A/N: As always, I give thanks to Karelia and little_beloved for being extraordinarily wonderful beta's, and to lettybird who Brit-picks with pride.

Never to be Told

Chapter 8 of 33

Hermione challenges Snape during a lesson. Snape exacts a unique type of revenge.

Chapter 8: Never to be Told

Hermione walked into her laboratory and stopped abruptly at the sight outside the massive windows. It was early December, and although they had experienced many frigidly cold, wet days, the first snow had just begun to fall. Huge, wet flakes slapped against the mullioned windows, clinging hopefully to the glass before sliding down heavily to collect against the pane. Hermione had always loved the way Hogwarts looked in the snow: it was as if a fluffy white blanket had been artfully arranged to cosset the castle in its comforting embrace.

With a delighted smile, Hermione walked to the window and allowed herself several moments of simply gazing outside. Impulsively, she decided she'd haul out her warmest boots and take a walk in the snow after lunch. She started on her current project with a smile and a sense of determination, but within three hours, all thoughts of snow, walks, and delight were gone. It was going to be a long day, and she was glad she had no classes to interfere with her concentration.

All she was trying to do was find a way to increase the potency of Wit-Sharpener Potion, which should have been a simple enough process. She had been successful with modifying similar potions in the past, and although it had taken some tinkering, she'd eventually ended up with stronger and longer-lasting potions. And even though she was applying the same methods she'd used with those other potions, she now stood at her table, mopping up armadillo bile from her robes and table for the third time that morning. No matter what she did, she couldn't get the bile to stop exploding when she added it, and she gritted her teeth as a black mood overcame her.

With an oath of frustration, she Vanished the mess she'd just created. She'd used the last of the armadillo bile and was down to one lone scarab beetle, so she set off for the dungeons to raid the storeroom.

Distracted by the wasted time and ingredients, she didn't pause outside the classroom, shoving the door open forcefully and letting it slam hard against the wall before stomping into the room where Snape was teaching the Gryffindor and Slytherin firstyears. She mumbled an inaudible apology when he frowned down his hooked nose at her.

Hermione marched into the storeroom and started loudly rummaging on the shelves for the bile and the beetles. She could hear Snape in the outer room, chastising the class for not paying attention. It gave her an odd sense of satisfaction to learn that he was in a bad mood as well, although she couldn't explain why his displeasure suited her.

They had both spent the past few weeks in increasingly bad tempers, and the tension in their living quarters at night seemed to grow in proportion to their determination to ignore it. Everything about him seemed to set her on edge lately: each dark gaze, each lingering trace of his scent, the way his deep voice penetrated into her thoughts. Every moment spent in his presence caused a knot of frustration and something else...something she recognised but refused to name...to form deep within her. Hermione knew it couldn't continue like this for much longer; she just hoped she wasn't the one to break first.

"Miss Woodhouse, do not leave your cauldron unattended!" came Snape's angry voice from the other room. "Five points from Gryffindor!"

Hermione could hear young Emilia Woodhouse answer with a quavering voice. "But, Professor Snape, Edward's jar of horned slugs spilled... I was just helping him to pick them up!"

"I did not ask you for a speech, Miss Woodhouse!" Snape replied in a nasty tone. "Another five points from Gryffindor!"

Hermione clutched the bottle of scarab beetles tightly in her hands, feeling her anger build. She thought back to the many times Snape had penalised her and her fellow Gryffindors unfairly for similarly ridiculous infractions. Suddenly, she didn't care why he was in a bad mood; she was just overcome with rage over him taking it out on her precious Gryffindors, and most particularly on the girl she had thought of as her own little protégé.

A boy's voice sounded from the classroom, and Hermione guessed it must belong to the clumsy Edward. "It's my fault, sir: I spilled the jar."

"Ten points from Gryffindor for carelessness," was Snape's reply.

Hermione clenched her jaw as the anger rose up inside her, feeding on the frustration and irritation she'd already been harbouring. She finally found the bottle of armadillo bile and snatched it off the shelf. Then she grabbed a random bit of parchment that was lying on a desk and headed out of the storeroom. Snape's eyes were on her immediately, as if daring her to say something, and she looked back at him with defiance. She walked directly to the table where Emilia and Edward were bent over their cauldrons along with two other students.

Keeping her gaze on Snape's face, she deliberately held out the piece of parchment at arm's length and dropped it quite obviously on the ground at their feet. Snape's eyes narrowed at her, but he said nothing. One of the boys bent to pick it up for her, and Hermione noted with anger that both Emilia and Edward hadn't dared to even look at her, lest they lose more points for their House.

Hermione turned to the boy who was holding the piece of parchment she'd dropped and gushed, "Thank you so much for retrieving that for me! Excellent work! Twenty-five

points to Gryffindor!"

Then she looked back at Snape with fire in her eyes before turning on her heel and marching away. Her heart was thudding painfully against her ribs, but the sense of satisfaction she felt had been worth it. She was halfway to the door when she heard Snape rushing to table where she'd just been standing, swooping down upon the students.

"Distractions are dangerous in potion-making, Mister Elliot," he said pointedly, and Hermione could tell from the way his voice carried that he was speaking to her retreating back rather than the maligned Mister Elliot. "Five. Points. From. Gryffindor."

Hermione stopped in her tracks and closed her eyes, knowing she should walk away, but unable to move her feet. In her mind, she knew he'd only taken away the five extra points she'd tried to slip in for Gryffindor, but her heart was remembering all the times she'd been powerless against him. She glanced down at the table she had stopped next to, noting by the House scarves the children wore that it was full of Slytherin students.

She would never know what made her do it. In truth, Hermione rarely docked points, but she heard herself say, "Your flame is burning the table. Ten points from Slytherin," before she could stop herself.

She thought the sound of her heart pounding against her chest could surely be heard in the silence following her statement.

"OUT!" bellowed Snape's voice from behind her. He was upon her in seconds, grabbing her arm roughly and pulling her into the corridor outside. The door to the classroom slammed shut behind him with a tremendous crash, and he finally stopped and spun her around to face him, fury in his eyes.

"How dare you undermine my authority in front of my students!" he raged at her. "Five points from Gryffindor."

"How dare you abuse students because you're in a bad mood!" she stormed back. "Five points from Slytherin."

"I'll teach my students with whatever means is appropriate! Ten points from Gryffindor!"

"Right, then! I'll respond in whatever manner I think is appropriate! Ten points from Slytherin."

High above them in the Great Hall, people stopped to stare with wonder at the massive hourglasses that represented the four Houses. Sparkling rubies and dazzling emeralds were flying back and forth so rapidly that the glasses shook violently.

They were oblivious to this in the dungeons, however, their voices echoing loudly in the stone hallway. Between shouts, the sound of the door to the classroom creaking open could be heard, and Snape pointed his wand at it without once looking away from Hermione. The door closed with a loud crack, followed by the sound of a bolt being dragged across the lock.

Obviously desiring more privacy, he grabbed Hermione by the arm again and marched her further along the corridor, shoving her into an alcove by a statue of a boar with large tusks.

"Let go of me," Hermione said testily, wresting her arm free.

"If you have issues with the way I teach my class, I suggest you take it up with me in private," he told her angrily.

"This is private enough," she said looking around the alcove. "And I do happen to take issue with the way you teach...it's overbearing, archaic, and biased." Hermione poked her finger hard into his chest with each adjective to underscore her point.

His eyes flashed dangerously as he stepped closer to her and grabbed her hand by the wrist, pulling it away from his chest. In a deadly quiet voice he said, "Tread carefully."

Breathing hard, Hermione refused to back down. "No. I won't stand by while you terrorise children."

"You're a meddlesome little fool."

"And you're a bullying prick."

"Watch your tongue, young lady."

"You don't scare me, old man."

The phrase left her lips automatically, angrily, before she could even consider what she'd said. She felt his fingers tighten around her wrist, and she was suddenly reminded of his whispered threat, weeks ago, when he'd promised retaliation if she ever called him 'old man' again. She could almost hear his voice in her head as the memory of his words flooded her: *You might force me to teach you just how... arousing... experience and maturity can be.*

Her eyes widened in shock as his gaze travelled down to her lips, and she knew he was remembering it, too.

Everything seemed to change in a matter of seconds. The air felt as if it was charged with electricity, and Hermione suddenly found it difficult to breathe. She couldn't look away from his face and watched in fascination as his eyes raked over her features, his nostrils flaring in his own effort to breathe while a muscle in his temple twitched rapidly. He seemed to be debating something, and she wondered frantically what his next move would be.

"I warned you there would be consequences," he whispered silkily, slowly stepping towards her and effectively closing the small distance that had separated them.

"Oh," she heard herself whisper ridiculously, lost in the darkness of his eyes as they held her captive.

Hermione swallowed reflexively and felt her heart racing and an answering pull from her core at his proximity. All the tension that had been building between them in the weeks since his return seemed to culminate inside her now, and she found her breath was coming out in fast, shallow bursts. Her body shivered as his eyes darkened, and she was forced to admit how much she yearned for his touch. She was past wondering why; she just knew nothing would stop her body from trembling except his lips on hers. Now.

The air around them crackled as they came together at last. Hermione closed her eyes as his lips crushed against hers, and all she could think was, *Finally!* His hand wound around the back of her neck, drawing her face closer. Long fingers caressed the sensitive skin and tangled in the hair at the base of her skull. His mouth was impatient, forceful, hungrily ravaging hers, but rather than pull away, she revelled in the pressure, in the feel of his lips bruising hers. His tongue pressed against her teeth, demanding entrance. She yielded instantly, allowing him to dive and plunder until she captured his tongue with her own, trapping it against the roof of her mouth before stroking it fiercely. His entire body tensed at her actions, spurring her onward. She drew him into her mouth and sucked greedily.

Hearing his deep, guttural groan, Hermione felt her already frantic pulse quicken. He pushed her further into the alcove. Soon her back hit the hard stone wall, and she was pinned against his body. The knowledge that he wanted her was evident as his erection ground against her pelvis. His lips never left hers as he lifted her body, clamping strong hands on her thighs to pull her legs up and behind him. She wrapped her legs tightly around his waist and pulled him closer with a reckless abandon she'd never felt before.

His mouth moved to her neck now, feasting on the creamy expanse of skin she'd exposed to him as her head rolled back against the wall. He trailed rough kisses along her throat. There was nothing but the feel of his mouth on her delicate skin, devouring every inch with wild, insatiable hunger interspersed with soft nips. She felt his teeth

gently scraping her flesh, and she moaned in pleasure, grabbing his robes in her fists and clinging to him. Her whole body hummed in anticipation while a heavy, steady ache was building from deep inside her, threatening to consume her.

One of his hands left the underside of her thigh, travelling up her waist to slip beneath her jumper and cradle her breast. Hermione gasped as his fingers slid inside the fabric of her bra, his fingertips grazing her taut nipple. He pulled the cup down to fully expose her breast, filling his hand with it as his fingers gently stroked. The rough pad of his palm rubbed back and forth against her nipple, turning it into a hardened pebble. His mouth moved to a spot on the side of her neck, behind her earlobe. He traced distinct circles there with his tongue while at the same time his fingers perfectly mimicked the motion on the point of her breast, using only the tip of his thumb.

Hermione moaned and squeezed her legs tighter around his waist, subconsciously rocking against him in a steady rhythm. His hand moved back to her legs, and he tugged at the fabric of her robes and skirt that had caught between their bodies. Exposing the skin of her thighs, his hands roamed freely. He stroked her soft flesh, back and forth, ever higher, soft caresses turning rougher as his fingertips grazed the elastic at the bottom of her knickers. Her flesh burned with his every touch, and desire and need combined to block out all rational thoughts. His hands moved to rub and squeeze her buttocks, the cadence of his massage in exact rhythm with his hips grinding into her.

Despite being crushed between the wall and his body, she suddenly felt as if she couldn't get close enough to him, and she squirmed against him frantically. She needed to feel his skin against hers, and she pulled desperately at the layers of clothing keeping her away.

"Do you want me?" he asked against her neck.

"Yes!" Her entire body was shaking with how much she wanted him.

"Tell me," he demanded.

A strangled oath erupted from her throat as she tried to form thoughts into words. She had never been one to vocalise her desires and felt completely inept when trying to talk dirty or say something sexy. But none of that mattered to her now; she was so overcome by need she would have said anything to have him. "I want you... inside me... now," she panted the words between ragged breaths.

Her mind went gloriously blank as he lazily skimmed one hand up and around her thigh, sliding his fingers beneath the soft fabric of her knickers. A harsh, startled gasp shot from her mouth, and her body bucked violently as he stroked his finger along her swollen flesh with perfect, precise motions. There were no thoughts...only sensations...as he made good on his promise, proving how adept he was by stimulating and retreating, over and over again, all the while watching her face intently. He brought her to the very edge of pleasure and held her there, trembling and desperate for release.

"Say it," he demanded again.

Hermione moaned in frustration. She was so close, and her body was so frantic for him...all of him...she could almost feel herself turning into some sort of primitive being, driven only by basic, animalistic needs that demanded fulfilment to guarantee survival.

Shaking and frantic, she let the words tumble from her mind; there wasn't anything she wouldn't have said to him if he asked for it right now. "I want you," she growled, digging her fingernails into his shoulder. "I can't stand this... I want to feel you deep inside me, hard and fast... Please, Severus!"

Her begging seemed to work: he moved his fingers just slightly...rubbing, flicking, teasing...and expertly pushed her over the edge. He clamped his mouth back over hers in time to swallow her strangled scream of liberation as spasms of sweet pleasure shot through her, seeming to spread into every muscle and nerve-ending in her body.

His mouth finally released hers, and her head lolled forward, collapsing on his shoulder. She felt an answering weight as his forehead lowered to her own shoulder, resting there as he also seemed to struggle to catch his breath. The ringing in her ears faded slowly, and she listened to the sound of their ragged breathing echoing in the alcove. Her whole body seemed to be melting, and she was grateful for his strength, certain that his strong arms were the only thing keeping her from sliding down to the floor in a puddle.

As their panting faded, he trailed his hands along her legs, carefully unwinding them from his waist before slowly lowering them to the ground. Hermione felt a different, more powerful yearning growing inside her at his tender, almost reverent touch and shivered in expectation. She didn't think she could bear the mounting tension or the time it would take to remove enough clothing so she could feel him inside of her, filling her completely.

She raised her head slightly and turned her lips to his neck, hungrily kissing the coarse, masculine skin before moving to the strong jawbone, tasting and exploring along the way. It took Hermione a few moments to realise that Snape had remained completely immobile, his body offering no response to her attentions. She froze at his next words.

"Perhaps another time," he said coldly, taking a large step back from her.

Hermione looked up at him in confusion, realising too late that he had completely withdrawn from her. All contact between their bodies had been broken, except for her hands, fisted stupidly in the folds of his robe where she had clung to him.

Releasing his robes as if they were aflame, Hermione wrapped her arms around herself and stared at him in dawning comprehension and horror.

She was pleased to note his voice shook slightly when he spoke, but it was small consolation, given his words. "Don't ever embarrass me in front of the students again, Hermione. I will not tolerate such behaviour without responding in kind, and your self-control is obviously not up to the challenge."

Then he turned his back on her and departed amidst a swirl of black robes, leaving her alone in the alcove. She heard the door to the Potions classroom open, and then it closed with a finality that echoed in her head long after the noise had died in the hallway.

A/N: Extra special thanks to my wonderful betas (Karelia and little_loved) and my awesome Brit-picker (lettybird) for incredibly fast turnaround. I know their plates are full to the point of overflowing, yet they never skimp on encouragement and kindness. I'm very honoured by their involvement with this endeavour.

Eight for a Wish

Chapter 9 of 33

Aftermath of the encounter in the alcove.

Chapter 9: Eight for a Wish

Hermione was unaware of leaning back against the wall of the dark alcove, unaware of her knees folding as she sunk to the cold stone ground of the dungeon. Her body shook as she drew her legs to her chest, encircling them with her arms. Hot tears stung the backs of her eyes, but she refused to cry and buried her face in her skirt instead. After a moment, she realised she could smell the evidence of her arousal, and her stomach knotted. Raising her head, her eyes rested on the statue of the boar, the only witness to her recent encounter with Snape. Although she was rarely prone to flights of fancy, she would almost swear the stone eyes were laughing at her, and the lips of the beast were curled into a mocking sneer beneath the razor-sharp tusks.

She got up unsteadily, stumbling out of the alcove and suddenly desperate for a scalding hot shower, eager to wash away the humiliation of having Snape reject her so cruelly. She walked halfway down the hallway and then paused. The only way to get to her living quarters was through the Potions office, and thus, through the Potions classroom. Her hands shook as she neared the door. Even through the heavy wood, she could hear Snape's strong voice barking at the class.

Cursing her own weakness, she turned away and departed the dungeons without any notion of a destination. The thought of slinking past a roomful of curious students was less appealing right now than wrestling a Blast-Ended Skrewt. Her clarity of mind extended only as far as her certainty that she was not ready to face him yet, not without getting some things straightened out in her own mind first.

How could I have been so stupid? she thought, shaking her head in frustration. Hermione ascended the long staircases from the dungeons and marched past the Great Hall, the force of her stride matching her tumultuous feelings. Her thoughts were jumbled, knocking around inside her brain as random emotions slammed into her. There was plenty of anger, for her foolish naïveté and for Snape's decidedly unorthodox method of retaliation. There was the pain of rejection as well, but Hermione determinedly pushed that thought from her mind. Her ego could wait.

She focused instead on the surprise she felt over her body's volatile response to his touch. There was no longer any point in refusing to admit her attraction to him. In retrospect, it seemed perfectly clear that much of the mounting tension in recent weeks had been caused by her denial. Clear, but still shocking. She shook her head again as she pondered their recent encounter. She'd just thrown herself at him, convinced she wanted him more than anything else, and what had he done?

Her face flushed when she recalled exactly what he'd just done, and how eagerly she had responded. She had never behaved so promiscuously before, and her embarrassment intensified with each step as she roamed the halls of the castle. The sound of her own voice, proclaiming her desires and begging him for more, repeated through her brain.

A part of her knew and accepted the fact that she'd never behaved this way because she'd never before desired a man so intensely. Never in her life had she felt such an overwhelming lust for someone; never had she been driven to act so unabashedly, without any thought to time, or place, or circumstance. A fresh wave of mortification swept over her when she thought about what could have happened if they'd been seen.

Good lord! she thought, stopping dead in her tracks in the middle of the snowy courtyard. There had been a classroom full of children no more than a hundred metres away, yet that hadn't even slightly deterred her from trying to rip his clothes off. True, they'd been in a dark alcove at the end of the hallway, but still...it had been a damn good thing Snape had stopped when he did. She certainly wouldn't have been able to.

A sharp stab of remorse entered her mind as she remembered how easily he had pulled away from her, how she had stood there clutching him long after he had made his point. She knew his body had responded to hers: she had felt the physical evidence of his arousal. But his desire had stopped at his body...he'd easily separated it from his mind. She blinked fast to keep her tears from falling.

After what felt like hours of wandering the castle, she looked up and was only mildly surprised to find herself at the base of the North Tower, standing beneath the trapdoor to the Divination classroom. She listened for a moment to see if Draco was teaching a lesson, knocking softly when silence greeted her.

"Enter," came a voice from within.

She climbed the ladder and stood at the entrance to the room, relieved, as always, by the many changes Draco had made since they'd been students. Gone were the elaborate scarves and heavy incense, as well as the oppressively stifling fire and atmosphere. There was an open, welcoming feel to the round classroom now. The walls were decorated with complex astrology charts and elaborate graphs, and she suspected the stunning oil paintings had come directly from the Malfoy art collection.

"Hello!" Draco smiled from behind his desk on the far side of the room. "I haven't seen much of you lately." The snow had stopped falling outside, and blinding late-afternoon sunlight streamed in through the windows behind him, illuminating his pale hair. She frowned at the ethereal glow haloing his features: the man was certainly no angel. Appearances could be deceptive.

"Am I interrupting you?" she asked.

"Not at all," he assured her. "You know, I've been meaning to talk to Severus ... It's not very sporting of him to keep you to himself."

"Oh," she replied faintly. Perhaps it had been a bad idea to come here. Snape and Draco were friends, after all...even if the dark-robed, black-hearted man she'd left in the caverns of the castle's underbelly did seem the antithesis of the one before her. And although she'd become close to Draco over the past three years, they had never discussed anything truly intimate. She thought about talking to Neville, instead, but the idea of explaining her growing attraction was one she felt certain Neville would never understand.

"So, Granger ... What brings you from the depths of the dungeons to the lofty heights of Divination today?" he asked with a smile, leaving his sun-dappled chair and coming around his desk to approach her.

She still hovered on the threshold, unsure whether she should leave or stay. Draco always gave such excellent advice, but the idea of revealing the tortuous thoughts in her head was rather daunting.

She had to decide quickly...he had almost reached her. "I should go," she mumbled and turned away.

"Don't go," he said, suddenly serious and obviously sensing her distress. He placed a hand on her shoulder to turn her back around while saying, "What's wrong? Are you and Severus fighting over the ..."

Whatever crack he was about to make died on his lips when he saw her face up close. Judging from his expression, she must look pretty bad. Concern was etched all over his pale features, and her eyes stung once more. He held open his arms and in a very fatherly voice said, "Come here."

She wasn't sure what surprised her more: her complete lack of hesitation in grabbing onto him or the uncontrollable sobs that soon spilled forth. Embarrassment over Snape's words mingled with the familiar frustration of every failed relationship she'd ever had with a man. Feeling like a child, she listened to his calm voice as he gently patted her back and offered soft, encouraging words of comfort. She stayed in the safe cocoon of his arms for quite some time, the flood eventually settling down into fast tears. After a few more minutes, the tears had turned into sniffles, and then finally those had stopped, too. Certain that her body could no longer manufacture tears even if she tried, she broke away and wiped her face with shaking hands.

She peered at Draco and with a watery laugh said, "I'll wager you weren't expecting that!"

He merely looked relieved. He smiled at her kindly and said, "Times change, Hermione."

She nodded, then looked at the puddle on his shoulder with despair. "I ruined your robes...I'm so sorry!"

"There are more important things than clean robes," he said, sounding very unlike the preening youth she'd known and confirming his statement about how much can

change with the passage of time. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Not really," she told him. "But I think I need to."

"Come and sit," he suggested, leading her into the room. "I'm guessing you and Severus had a fight?" he asked, prompting her to begin.

"Yes."

"What about?"

"Nothing, really," she said with a sigh. "Teaching ... House points."

"Aha! So that's what happened to the House hourglasses today," he said.

Their sparring must have resulted in quite a show down in the Great Hall. "Yes, that might have been us."

"Tell me what happened," he said and stopped by a group of chairs near his desk.

She couldn't bring herself to sit. "I'm not sure. One minute we were fighting, and then everything seemed to change. And he ... um ... well ... then we, I mean ... um ..."

She looked down at her feet and didn't know how to continue. Her head was pounding, she was knackered from crying so hard, and now her face was growing hot as memories came flying back to her.

"You ... kissed?" he asked. She wished it had been as innocent as that sounded.

Her face flushed deeper, and she said, "Yes, that's right ... We kissed." It would be easier to pretend, for the sake of discussion, they were just talking about a kiss. "You don't sound surprised."

"Lucky guess," he said with a shrug. When she continued to frown at him, he added, "I watch people, Hermione. Observation is the key to Divination, and I happen to be very good at it."

She smiled at the familiar arrogance, rather relieved to find some things hadn't changed, after all.

"So tell me about this kiss," he said.

She looked down, wondering how she had managed thirty-three years of living her life without developing the ability to feel comfortable discussing such topics.

"Okay. We kissed, and I thought everything was going well ... I mean, it was incredible! It was the best ... kiss ... I've ever had," she finished with a quick peek at his face. She seriously doubted that the ever-perceptive Draco was so naïve as to buy into the notion they were really discussing a kiss, but his expression remained impassive.

"What part of that upset you?" he asked.

"Well, I think I was the only one enjoying it," she said honestly, holding her palms up and then dropping her hands to her sides while her mind returned to the alcove. "I obviously wanted to ... um ... kiss ... more than Severus did."

He frowned. "That's hard to believe."

"You don't have to flatter me, Draco," she said with a slight chuckle. "I'll get over it."

"No, it isn't that," he said, shaking his head before turning clear blue eyes on her. "I've known Severus a long time, and I've never seen him act the way he has these past few months. Even when I visited him at St Mungo's, long before his return to Hogwarts, he asked so many questions about you...he seemed rather obsessed, actually. And it's only grown since he arrived here. I would have wagered a thousand Galleons he was interested in you."

"I'm glad you didn't: you would have lost."

He pursed his lips and then said slowly, "I'm not sure. I can only imagine how unsettling it must be to open your eyes one day and everyone's lives have advanced fourteen years while yours has held still. In most respects, he's adjusting fairly well...exceptionally well, even. You, my dear, seem to be the only thing that presents him with a problem."

"It's not intentional."

"No, of course not," he said. "But to Severus, you've gone from an annoying little chit to a desirable woman...whose talent for Potions matches his own...in the blink of an eye."

She considered his words and tried to put herself in Snape's position.

Draco continued, "Severus may simply need time to stop thinking of you as a student. Perhaps that's why he found it difficult to continue your kiss."

"Actually, I know exactly why he didn't continue the kiss," she said quietly. She wasn't sure why she'd refrained from relaying the entire story behind Snape's motivations earlier; somehow, the knowledge of her own culpability in causing the situation was harder to confess than the details.

"Okay ... Why?"

She chewed on her lower lip. "I did something which embarrassed him in front of his class," she admitted, looking back down. "And later, just as we were about to really ... kiss... he broke it off, and ... indicated he was merely trying to prove a point to me."

Her gaze flew to his face. "And it worked ... I'm so embarrassed," she whispered.

"Don't be. You didn't do anything to be ashamed of!" Anger darkened his smooth features.

She studied her feet again. Perhaps his statement would be accurate if they were truly just talking about a kiss. She wondered if he'd say the same if he knew what had really transpired, how she'd thrown herself at Snape so recklessly.

"Hermione, look at me," he said, bringing her gaze back to his. "I know you. I know there is nothing you could possibly have done to cause you any shame."

She looked away from him again, but he continued, "You always act with your heart first, and then with your mind. Why do you suppose you ended up in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw?"

Perhaps he was right. "You're going to bring House into it now?" She smiled a little sadly.

"No," he laughed. "We'll discuss the fact that this happened with a Slytherin later."

She offered an unladylike snarl.

He put his hand on her shoulder and grew serious again. "Those founding witches and wizards knew what they were about. They sort the students by what's in their hearts, and then what's in their heads. And living your life that way should never give you cause for embarrassment or shame."

His words rang true. The heavy knot in her stomach loosened, and she gazed at her friend with new respect. "You're a very wise man, Draco Malfoy. And a surprisingly kind one, as well."

He winked and offered a crooked smile. "Yeah, well ... I will fervently deny the kindness bit if it ever gets out."

"Your secret is safe with me," she answered. "So long as I can impose upon you for one more favour ..."

"Yes?"

"May I use your quarters to freshen up a bit?"

"Of course," he told her and led her to the door to his living quarters. With a sheepish grin, he explained, "It's an awful mess ... I don't often sleep here; I've been Apparating home to be with Luna and the girls."

"I'm sure I can handle it," she told him.

She entered the quarters and shut the door behind her. He hadn't been exaggerating about the state of the room. She was greeted by precariously balanced towers of books, scrolls of parchment in every size and length, and a bizarre assortment of Divination tools strewn about with little order. The bed was piled high with stacks of homework, and she couldn't help but smile as she walked through the room and entered the bathroom. It looked like the bachelor pad of a fortune teller and made her want to laugh for the first time in hours.

She stood under the hot jets of the shower for a very long time, Draco's words replaying through her mind. She'd have to return to the dungeons soon, and although she still dreaded it, she no longer felt overwhelmed by the desire to flee. The memory of telling Snape that she never backed down from a challenge kept floating back to her, mocking and taunting. She'd have to face him sooner or later, and it was probably best to just get it over and done with now.

He was a proud man, and it had been dangerous to challenge him in front of his class. And although he had proven himself to be an inherently good man, she'd been foolish to forget the countless times in the past when he'd shown how much of a bastard he could be. If only she hadn't made the 'old man' crack, perhaps it wouldn't have been taken to that other level. But once it was out, he had seemed more than willing to remind her of his previous warning, and she had been more than eager to be shown precisely how true his words about experience and arousal had been.

She stepped out of the shower and told herself she'd learnt a valuable lesson today. She towelled dry while her mind planned how best to proceed. More than anything, she was determined not to let him see how much his actions had shaken her today. Surely that would be the best way to rattle him, even if it wasn't entirely truthful. She briefly wished they weren't forced to share living space, but she shrugged the thought aside. Such cowardice didn't suit her...let *him* find another place to live. She was not going to be forced out of the dungeons, however uncomfortable it might be. Naturally, some distance would be required...for self-preservation more than pride. No more reading together by the fire at night; that was far too intimate. Their shared meals at the cosy breakfast table would likely need to cease as well. But the time apart would give her sufficient opportunity to plot a suitable revenge ...

Satisfied with her plan, she shoved some of the schoolwork to one side of the unused bed and stretched out, staring up at the ceiling. She marvelled at how much better she felt after her talk with Draco, and the shower, and, of course, a careful plan set in her mind. Telling herself she'd just close her eyes for a second, she turned on her side and let exhaustion carry her into blissfully dreamless sleep.

Hermione awoke many hours later, feeling stiff and completely disorientated. Memories came rushing back at alarming speed, and she realised she must have slept for a very long time in Draco's room. She sat up and stared at the fire crackling in the fireplace: it had lain empty after her shower but now warmed the room nicely. Looking down, she noticed a blanket had been placed over her, and she smiled at Draco's obvious kindness. She heard his voice in her head saying, "People change, Hermione," and knew that was certainly true of him. Whether the same could be said for Snape, though, was another matter entirely.

Throwing her legs over the side of the bed, she rubbed her eyes and glanced at the window, noting with surprise that it was completely dark outside. She assumed that Draco would have Apparated home for the night by now, and she briefly considered staying where she was, just for tonight. But she stood with a small sigh. Delaying the inevitable would only heighten her dread. She laced her fingers together and stretched her arms high above her head, then rolled her neck and shoulders to work out some of the stiffness.

The hum of voices in the outer room halted her motions. She listened to the muffled conversation growing louder and moved towards the Divination classroom. Noiselessly, she opened the door a crack and peered through.

Draco hadn't left after all. He stood by his desk, red splotches of anger darkening his cheeks.

"If it's nothing more than a mind-game to you, perhaps you should find someone else to play with," he said to someone in the room. His voice could have cut stone.

She opened the door a tad wider and heard the voice before she saw the face.

"This does not concern you, Draco," Snape said.

Her hands shook at the sound of his voice, the sight of his face. They stilled when he spoke again and anger surged within her.

"What is she to you, anyway?" Snape asked. "I thought you were happily married."

"I'm going to ignore your implication, Severus. I realise you've spent fourteen years without human interaction. Undoubtedly, you're out of practice."

"Spare me the lecture, *Professor*," said Snape. "I didn't come here for a lesson in making friends."

"Obviously," said Draco. "Shall we review the events which did, in fact, bring you here?"

Even through the crack in the door, she could see Snape snarl in response. He paced back and forth, turning tight circles like a tiger trapped in a cage.

"I only wish to find her," he said at last. "I know she's been here ... I can smell her soap." The look he shot at Draco was heavy with accusation.

"Yes, she was here," Draco said.

"When?" he asked at once. "How long ago did she leave? Where did she go?"

"Severus, listen to me," Draco said. "I know it must be difficult to reconcile your memories of her against the woman she's grown into."

Snape waved away his comments with a dismissive flick of his hand. "Just tell me where she went, Draco."

"Hear me out, first," Draco said. "I know she's brilliant and tough, but she's also more vulnerable than you might think. She rarely lets it show, and I know it's hard to fathom

that someone can be so strong and yet so fragile at the same time. But you must try to remember that."

Snape appeared to consider Draco for a moment. Then his expression turned ominous, and his tone was heavy with innuendo as he said, "I never realised you knew her so intimately."

Draco's hands fisted at his sides. "She happens to be my friend, Severus. And as such, I won't stand by and watch you hurt her!"

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know pain when I see it," Draco spat. "I just never thought someone I admired so much could be the cause of it."

Muttering an oath, Snape raised his hand to his head and raked his fingers through his hair, sweeping it off his forehead. His expression seemed to vacillate between repentance and anger, neither staying on his face long enough to reveal his thoughts.

"Have I ever asked you for anything, Draco?"

"No," he replied quietly.

"And yet you'll deny me this one simple request? Your memory has obviously dulled with time."

All traces of colour drained from Draco's face, leaving his features stark and pallid. "I will never forget everything you've done for me, Severus," he said, his voice fierce. "But I owe you *my* soul, not hers."

Snape stared at him in silence for a long time, his face a mask. Then he brought his hands to his face, swiping them over his eyes before slowly trailing them down his cheeks. "No, you don't owe me anything," he said finally, and his voice sounded rough. "Just tell me where she is. Please."

Draco watched Snape in silence. Regret seemed to cross his face before he shook his head and said, "I can't."

"Damn it!" Snape's voice roared like thunder. He drew his wand and stormed at Draco.

To his credit, Draco had his wand out within two seconds, but Hermione was faster still, having already opened the door at Draco's refusal to answer. She charged into the room. "What the hell is going on here?"

Both men spun to face her. Their wands were instantly lowered, and they had the good sense to look abashed as she stood before them, hands on her hips.

"Well?" she demanded again.

"Severus was looking for you," Draco offered.

She narrowed her eyes at Snape. "Oh, really?" she asked. "Well, you found me."

He stared back at her, shifting his gaze to take in her ruffled appearance. She knew she must look a mess, having gone to sleep with wet hair and fully clothed.

When he remained reticent, she dropped her hands and turned to Draco. "Thank you for your kindness and hospitality," she told him.

He nodded and cast speculative glances between her and Snape.

"I'm sure you're anxious to get home to Luna and the twins. Please don't feel compelled to stay on my behalf," she said.

"Are you certain?" he asked with a small frown.

"Yes, quite," she assured him. Then, with a mocking smile, she turned to Snape and said, "I promise that Professor Snape and I will be prodigiously civil to one another."

He looked unconvinced, so she added, "Give my regards to Luna, please."

Draco walked towards the exit but stopped briefly in front of Snape. He spoke quietly, making it impossible for Hermione to overhear his words. Snape inclined his head in acknowledgment but pursed his lips into a thin line of disapproval.

Then he departed, leaving her alone to face Snape in the awkward silence.

A million thoughts raced through her head, but she couldn't settle on which one to voice first. She perched on the edge of a large, overstuffed chair and folded her arms across her chest, regarding him in the same way he often watched her. His face, as always, was unreadable, except for the angry expression still on his lips.

Finally, he spoke. "Have you been here all day?" he asked.

"Pretty much," she answered. "Draco was very kind..." she began, but he cut her off quickly.

"How dare you reveal the details of our..." he started angrily, but it was her turn to cut him off.

"Stop!" she commanded, closing her eyes while raising her hands up as if to stall his words. Amazingly, it worked.

"I have no wish to fight with you." She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. "And I think we both know how arguments beginning with the phrase 'how dare you' can end in trouble."

His mouth tightened, and he resumed his jerky pacing, hands clenching and unclenching.

She waited for him to speak, but he remained frustratingly silent. "I told Draco we kissed," she said, responding to his earlier accusation. "Nothing more."

He stopped his pacing and peered across the room, into the living quarters. His eyes darkened at the site of the messy bed. "I didn't realise you and Draco were such ... close ... friends," he said pointedly.

"There's a lot you don't realise about me," she told him softly, and his gaze instantly moved to her face, his dark eyes searching. Trying to speak calmly, she pushed the anger aside and said, "And I resent your implication. Draco is like a brother to me."

"You resent my implication?" he asked with obvious scorn. "You disappeared over eight hours ago, you've been here the entire time, and you've obviously been sleeping in his bed!" He jerked his head towards the living chambers. "What was I supposed to infer from such behaviour?"

"So you just assume that I came up here and ... and ... what, exactly? Slept with a married man?" She jumped to her feet. "Just what kind of woman do you think I am?"

Before he could draw a breath to answer, she held up her hands and closed her eyes. "Please don't answer that," she said with a sigh and returned to her seat. She vividly recalled her behaviour in the alcove, and she didn't need him to point out what kind of woman would act in such a way.

"For the record," she began, opening her eyes and forcing herself to look at him, "Draco offered me nothing more than a sympathetic ear and the use of his shower." His jaw clenched at her words, but he said nothing.

"As regards my behaviour with you this morning ..." she started and then paused to find the right words as her face grew hot, "... it is certainly not my habit to ... act so wantonly, despite my actions to the contrary."

"Nor is it mine!" he said with a surprising amount of force, but she held her palms aloft once more.

"Please, just let me finish. I shouldn't have challenged you in front of your class. That was highly unprofessional ..." she began, inclining her head towards him, "... as was your choice of retaliation."

She met his eyes, determined her gaze would not falter. "I hope you enjoyed the sound of me begging, Severus, because I can promise it's something you'll never hear again."

He opened his mouth to speak, but she quickly continued, "Actually, I should thank you for stopping when you did ... for exhibiting restraint and good judgment when mine had obviously failed."

"Hermione, please don't," he said quietly, his shoulders falling.

"Don't what?" she asked. "I'm only trying to accept defeat, as you had suggested the last time I challenged you."

He looked wounded somehow, but she needed to finish. "I've never just abandoned reason and behaved in such a way. Honestly. So ... well done, you."

"Stop," he told her.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm done." Despite the nap, her bed beckoned. She stood and crossed the room.

"Wait," he said.

She turned. "What?"

"I ... I apologise," he said as he approached her. He stared down into her face, as if searching. After some time, he said formally, "I apologise for my actions today. I regret if my methods caused you any ... doubt."

It wasn't often he apologised to anyone...for anything. "Thank you," she began, "but it was entirely my own fault. I was foolish to have expected anything ... better." She shrugged again, and as she turned away, she thought she saw him wince as surely as if she'd slapped him.

Although exhausted, she was relieved the conversation was over and they could return to their respective lives. He followed her down the ladder and through the North Tower, always a few paces behind but impossible to ignore.

She congratulated herself for handling the situation in a mature manner and tried not to wonder why it had left her feeling so hollow. She resolved to ignore the sudden emptiness that pervaded, but it seemed to echo with their footfalls as they made the long journey back to the dungeons together in silence.

As always, I offer heartfelt thanks to Karelia and little_beloved for their beta skills, friendship, and priceless advice.

Nine for a Kiss

Chapter 10 of 33

Hermione makes two shocking discoveries.

Chapter 10: Nine for a Kiss

Other than the addition of new books, very little had changed in the Hogwarts library with the passage of time. The same scarred tables were arranged in the same places they'd stood when Hermione had been a student. She sat in what might well have been the same squeaky chair she'd occupied twenty years earlier and waited for Bertram Aubrey to join her. On this particular Saturday, he had suggested they meet in the library and had asked her to show him what books she'd consulted before attempting to defeat one of the most feared wizards of all time. She had arrived early and picked several volumes off the shelf, stacking them on the table before her.

Although she enjoyed Bertram's pleasant manner, she wasn't looking forward to meeting him today. Still, she supposed it was better than spending time around Snape. The memory of their encounter in the alcove several days ago still weighed heavily on her mind, and although they treated each other with solicitous distance, their relationship was definitely strained.

She had quickly decided to forego her plan of limiting the time she spent in Snape's company. After one night, she missed her comfortable, overstuffed chair by the fireplace and returned to her former routine of reading or marking papers there in the evening. Changing her pattern had felt cowardly, and she was determined to carry on with her chin held high. Their time together wasn't as companionable or comfortable as it had once been, but she was certain that with time and reason things would improve.

For his part, Snape had not altered his behaviour other than to spend more time studying her. He often seemed to be examining her as if she were a puzzle whose solution eluded him. At times he appeared wary, no doubt waiting for her to unleash whatever retribution she had concocted. And she had, in fact, amused herself by formulating several scenarios of revenge. But such plans were unnecessary: behaving with dignified insouciance seemed to disconcert him more than any attack might have. Over the past few days in particular, she had caught him watching her intently, although she had no idea as to what he hoped to ascertain from his silent analysis.

"Hermione, sorry I'm late!" Bertram said as he approached her table. "I had an owl from my folks and wanted to get a reply off quickly."

"Of course," she told him with a smile. Though the Aubreys had moved to America when Bertram was ten years old, he had told her he'd always wanted to return to Britain. The offer from Hogwarts had obviously delighted him, and his exuberance for all things British bordered on embarrassing. He might have been a Briton by birth, but he acted...and sounded...like an American. Some found this charming, others annoying. His insistence on slipping British colloquialisms into his speech was his only habit that alarmed Hermione, simply because it was rather jarring to hear the familiar phrases spoken in his heavy, Boston accent.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long," he said.

She had been so lost in her thoughts she hadn't even realised he was late. "Not at all," she told him. "I love this library...I think I could live in this room. In fact, several of my House-mates accused me of doing just that when I was a student!"

Bertram chuckled in his easy, good-natured way and glanced around the room. "Pretty empty today," he pointed out.

"Indeed," she agreed. "But there are only a few weeks left until Christmas. I expect the students are getting ready for their holiday, and I know several of the staff were headed to Hogsmeade for shopping."

His smile fled. "Oh, dear... I hope I'm not keeping *you* from anything."

"No, of course not." She patted his arm to allay his fears. "My parents are abroad for the holidays, and Harry and Ginny are taking the Weasleys to Australia. I volunteered to stay here in the castle, so I have very little shopping to do."

He seemed relieved. "As long as you're sure," he said, and she nodded. "Shall we begin, then?"

They spent the next hour poring over an assortment of texts and discussing the ways the trio had prepared to leave school before embarking on the Horcrux search. Bertram spread out a complicated timeline he had created, and the next two hours passed categorising various dates and events until finally Hermione found herself relating some of the details from their capture by the Snatchers and the horrific time spent at Malfoy Manor.

To call it unpleasant would have been a gross understatement, but still, she was surprised to find tears rolling down her cheeks as she spoke about Dobby and how the little house-elf had given his life in the process of saving theirs. So many emotions and feelings had ebbed with the passing years, but the sacrifice of the brave little creature was difficult to communicate without sentiment.

Bertram removed a soft white handkerchief from his pocket and abandoned his seat for the one beside Hermione. She wiped her face, uncomfortable with her reaction. The faint smell of oranges and liquorice on Bertram's handkerchief made her queasy.

"Hermione, I'm so sorry." He took her free hand in both of his and rubbed the back of it. "We should have stopped sooner."

"It's quite all right...please don't apologise." She seemed to be crying far too much lately. "I just haven't been able to sleep well for some time, and I think it's beginning to take a toll on me."

He continued to stroke her hand, his worried countenance an odd sight, as his features were almost always creased with a grin.

She took a deep breath and smiled.

"That's better," he told her. Without warning, he leant forward and pressed his lips to hers.

Shock immobilised her. Had it been a quick, friendly peck on the lips, she might have been able to dismiss the bold move. But he continued to move his lips against hers long after she tried to retreat, until she was forced to place her hand against his chest and gently push him back. She shifted away and thought she saw movement in the corner of the library, although she'd been certain they were alone. Either she was imagining things, or they had just given some unsuspecting student a bit of a surprise.

She glanced at Bertram and slowly raised one eyebrow.

"I shouldn't have done that," he apologised quietly.

"No, you shouldn't have," she agreed.

"I just ... I had to know."

"Had to know what, precisely?"

"If you felt anything for me. If you'd kiss me back."

"There are better ways to find out," she told him, stung that he would take advantage of a situation when she'd felt so vulnerable. "You shouldn't just launch yourself at someone. Especially at such a moment."

"I should have asked first," he said with a nod.

"Yes, that would have been nice. Or perhaps some indication that you..."

"But you must have guessed I was attracted to you," he interrupted. "We've been getting along so well on these little dates. And I thought ... here in the library ... you might be more receptive?"

"These haven't been dates!" She stood so quickly the papers strewn across the desk fluttered. "I've been helping you research your book."

Her stomach sank at his guilty expression. "Please tell me there *is* a book, Bertram."

"Well ... there could be." He waved his hand over the stacks of notes and piles of books. "I mean, I have an awful lot of information, and I could probably put something together ..."

"No, no, no." She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. Her head still throbbed from the long, emotional session she'd just endured, and each growing wave of anger brought a fresh batch of pain. She opened her eyes and said, "You cannot be serious!"

"I thought this was a good way for us to get to know each other better," he said and reached for her hand.

She jerked her fingers away and thought of all the horrible memories he'd dredged up, all the sleepless nights she'd had. And all because he wanted to go out with her? He had set up this whole scene...in the library, her favourite place...apparently thinking she'd feel more amorous here. She couldn't follow whatever logic had led him to such a plan, or what he had intended to happen next. Was he really just waiting for her to break down crying, so he could rush in with his stupid handkerchief and save the day?

The sick little bastard...

She glared at him. "This was twisted and offensive and wrong. You should consider yourself *very* lucky I haven't already hexed you into next month."

He watched her with wide eyes. "You're so beautiful when you're angry."

Having had her fill of ridiculous men, she threw his handkerchief in his face, spun on her heel, and stormed from the library.

The corridor echoed with Hermione's footsteps as she made her way back to the dungeons in a fit of temper. As upset as she was with Bertram for pulling such a stunt, she was more unsettled over how completely she had misjudged him. She had truly believed him to be so kind and caring, so courteous of her feelings. Yet the whole time

he'd been using her.

The memory of his mushy lips turned her stomach. She swiped her hand over her mouth and rubbed hard, as if she could remove the encounter from her mind along with the traces of him from her lips.

Bright torches cast shadows upon the walls, and the candles had already been lighted when she entered the Potions classroom. The sight that greeted her made her stop cold. The entire classroom was in disarray: desks were overturned; the blackboard lay shattered in pieces on the floor; cauldrons were flung haphazardly about the room, and a layer of parchment blanketed everything. It looked as if a cyclone had torn through the room, and she stared in disbelief, shocked by the idea that someone would do this to school property.

Perhaps Snape had antagonised one student too many. The complete chaos seemed like such a violent act, though. Surely the young children Snape taught weren't capable of such demolition. Hurrying to the side of the class, she checked the office and storeroom, relieved to find them untouched.

She vanished the door to the living quarters and searched for Snape. If he'd been present when the incident had occurred, he would have heard the destruction outside their door. She found him in the kitchen, leaning heavily on the breakfast table with both palms down. Although his back was towards her, she could see him labour for each breath of air.

Her limbs turned to lead when he drew a ragged breath and hung his head, as if in pain. She imagined him surprising the vandal, and the thought of him injured by the resulting duel spurred her forward. But before she could cross the soft carpet to reach him, he straightened and swiped a bottle of what appeared to be Firewhisky from the table. Although an empty glass stood before him, he brought the bottle to his lips and took several long swallows.

Relief for the fact he wasn't injured was short-lived.

"Someone trashed our classroom," she told him. He spun around so fast his robes wrapped around his hips in a tight spiral before falling into place. His eyes looked wild, unfocused, and he seemed to struggle for breath even more than when she'd first found him. He offered no reply but stared at her with narrowed eyes.

"Did you hear me?" she asked. "Someone vandalised the Potions classroom. The office and storeroom are fine, luckily. Did you hear anything or see anyone?"

"I ... I was looking for something." His tone sounded unnaturally cautious.

She watched him, puzzled by his reply. When his gaze flicked to where the classroom lay wrecked on the other side of the wall, she gaped at him in dawning comprehension.

"You did that?" she asked.

"I was looking for something," he repeated through clenched teeth.

She glanced down at his hands. "Was it a bottle of whisky?"

He ignored her question.

"I was about to repair the damage when you interrupted me." He slammed the bottle down onto the table and strode past her.

She followed him to the classroom, still reeling. "Is this a hobby of yours? Trash the classroom and then clean it up while I'm away?"

Once again, he ignored her questions. He raised his wand and swept it around the perimeter of the room, casting his spells in silence. There was a great cacophony of noise when all at once the room seemed to right itself. Pieces of blackboard flew together and sealed themselves onto the wall; desks and chairs were turned upright; pieces of parchment danced around the room like white bats, and cauldrons clanked and thudded as they returned to their proper shelves.

Hermione watched in awe, too impressed by the level of magical strength required for such powerful, simultaneous spells to remember he had created the destruction in the first place. Then he marched past her and returned to the kitchen, and she trailed after him once more, determined to finish their conversation.

"Satisfied?" he asked before picking up the bottle for another long drink.

"Hardly."

"Why have you returned so soon, anyway?"

"What do you mean, 'so soon'? I've been gone hours."

"Yes. And no doubt you've been very busy." He stared at her lips, still swollen and puffy from the frantic scrubbing she'd given them earlier.

"We can't all pass the time by amusing ourselves with temper tantrums."

"Tell me, Miss Granger," he purred suddenly, standing so close she could smell the whisky on his breath, "are you simply working your way through the castle?"

She bristled at his use of her schoolgirl title. He had consumed at least half the bottle of whisky, so it was little wonder he had ceased to make sense. "What are you on about now?"

"Let's review, shall we?" he asked. "I had you in the dungeons, then Draco in the Tower, and now Bertram in the Library. You only need someone to fuck you on the third floor, but that shouldn't prove too difficult. Perhaps dear Neville could..."

His speech ceased the instant her hand slapped hard across his face. She watched his shocked expression and thought it must be mirrored in her own eyes. She had responded automatically...she hadn't even been aware of hitting him until she stood facing him with her palm stinging, her whole body shaking. A perfect red handprint bloomed across the pale skin of his cheek while she searched for words to capture how utterly ugly his accusations had been.

The minutes seemed to stretch into hours. When she could no longer stand the sight of him, she turned to walk away.

"Wait," he pleaded. He reached his hand towards her arm and frowned when she recoiled from his touch. "Please wait."

In the coming months, she would often think back to this moment, to how much might have changed if he hadn't asked her to wait, or if she had simply ignored him and walked away.

She turned back with her hands upon her hips. "What?"

He seemed to struggle with his reply, his lips pursed so tight they were barely visible. "I'm sorry," he said at last. Although he spoke softly, there was more feeling in his voice than if he'd shouted.

She closed her eyes and drew a long, slow breath. "It's just not enough."

"You're right." He shook his head. "But it was never my intention to hurt you."

She looked away, surprised when her thoughts turned to the evening he'd walked her back from the Three Broomsticks. He had seemed so offended when she'd told him she believed in his capacity for goodness, and indeed, he seemed to be doing everything in his power to prove her wrong. But why? Had he been so hurt by Lily's rejection that he was somehow compelled to test her, to push her away, to hurt her until she, too, rejected him as Lily had?

"I'm sorry," he repeated when she offered no reply. "That was an unconscionable thing to say. I know that you and Draco ... that your relationship is one of friendship and respect. And it's hardly any of my business what you and Aubrey are doing..."

"I'm not doing anything with Bertram!" she said, stunned by how shrill her voice sounded.

"I saw you kiss him in the library!" His jaw clenched as he stepped nearer, and he seemed torn as to whether he should accuse or apologise.

She remembered the movement she'd seen after Bertram had kissed her.

"So, you witnessed a kiss and instantly assume I'm sleeping with him?" she asked. "That's hardly a logical conclusion."

His brows drew together. "My logic seems to fail me where you're concerned," he admitted with obvious reluctance.

His statement couldn't have surprised her more. Surely very few things had ever caused Snape to question his logic.

"I'm sorry ... I didn't quite catch that." She folded her arms across her chest and raised her brows.

With teeth bared, he said, "You appear to elicit responses wherein my reason abandons me and I act without regard to consequence."

"I see," she said. She watched his hand tighten around the whisky bottle.

He had obviously seen Bertram's clumsy attempt to kiss her, but he had returned to the dungeons too soon. He must have just finished wrecking the classroom when she'd found him panting at the table.

She shivered at the sheer fury he'd unleashed on the room outside. Had she really caused such a powerful outburst in the same man who had proved just days before what exquisite control he had over his reactions? The thought of so much raw passion was alarming, yet somehow it was a bit exciting, as well.

"Do you find this amusing?" he asked.

She hadn't realised she had smiled. "No, but I do find it curious," she replied and tilted her head. "Were you upset because it was Bertram ... or because it wasn't you?"

"Both!" he said instantly, then quickly amended, "No ... neither." He closed his eyes and dropped his shoulders. His sigh echoed through the kitchen. "I merely find him untrustworthy."

"You couldn't have mentioned that sooner?"

"Would you have listened?"

Probably not. "So I'm to assume you're merely looking out for my best interests, then? Making sure I don't go around kissing untrustworthy men?" She smirked. "How very noble of you."

He grimaced. "I suppose you will not be satisfied until I say it?" he asked. "Very well. I admit I found the sight of you kissing him a bit ... disturbing."

She pictured the havoc he'd wrought upon the classroom and thought 'disturbing' seemed rather tame, given the outcome. "What you saw was Bertram *attempting* to kiss me," she told him. "If you had bothered to stick around, you would have also seen me pushing him away and telling him to stuff it."

Surprise crossed his face, then doubt. Both were replaced by something else, but she didn't quite trust herself to speculate on it. She strolled nearer, emboldened by a power she hadn't known she possessed until tonight, and pulled the bottle from his fingers.

"It seems Mr Aubrey is a rather classic example of a wolf in sheep's clothing," she told him. "Of course, those of us in the scientific field prefer the term 'worthless, lying prick,' but there you have it." She lifted the bottle to her lips and drank until her body shuddered.

After returning the bottle to his hands, she stood on her toes and brushed her lips over the red mark on his cheek where she'd slapped him.

"Goodnight, Severus," she said and walked away.

Although subtle, she felt certain a shift had just taken place in their relationship. She could sense its presence as surely as she felt his gaze on her back while she walked to her bedroom. She couldn't quite define how it had happened, but as she slowly closed her door, the thought of exploring it further filled her with anticipation.

She changed into thick flannel pyjamas and snuggled beneath a heavy, down-filled duvet, rubbing her feet together for warmth. The flames leaping inside the fireplace went unnoticed while her thoughts journeyed abroad, bravely scouting this new, undiscovered territory, tromping through fields of possibilities previously off-limits to her imagination. Sleep proved elusive for many hours. She stared into the fire until all that remained of the sturdy logs were piles of glowing embers, crusting into ashes. Her brow creased as she recalled the strange events of the evening. She pondered the future until sleep finally carried her into a world where nothing made sense, yet everything was perfectly clear.

My betas and Brit-picker are lovely women ... Thanks so much Karelia, little_beloved, and lettybird!! Thanks to everyone who takes the time to leave a review...! love receiving feedback, and the diversity of opinions has been truly enlightening!

Ten for a Time...

Chapter 11 of 33

A moment of tenderness leads to confusion, contemplation, and concord.

Chapter 11: Ten for a Time...

Hermione spent the next several weeks in a state of cautious bemusement. Shortly after her revelation of Bertram's true intentions, she had heard wild rumours of an altercation between Snape and Bertram, in which Snape had rather unsurprisingly emerged as the victor. She'd been unable to ascertain the details (and undoubtedly the tale had been greatly exaggerated), but she had noticed Bertram giving them both a shockingly wide berth ever since.

Initially, Hermione had been a bit annoyed by Snape's actions: she was quite accustomed to fighting her own battles and didn't need him charging off like some self-appointed champion. If she hadn't been so very angry with Bertram for deceiving her and making her relive such horrific memories, she might have confronted Snape about his bold behaviour. But Hermione had to admit it felt inexplicably comforting to have someone defend her honour after so many years of independence, making it surprisingly simple to overlook the presumptuous act of possession. She decided to worry about Snape staking his claim on her later: for now, she was far too busy chuckling each time Bertram tripped over his feet in an almost comical effort to extricate himself from her presence.

Outside the castle, the barren landscape was a stark contrast to the fragile buds of hope that had begun to blossom deep within Hermione, tremulous yet persistent. The days had grown gloomy and brief while the darkness of night seemed to linger interminably, a sure sign the winter solstice was rapidly approaching. Hermione impatiently watched December trudging along in its relentless stream of miserably cold days. A damp chill seeped into the corridors, clinging stubbornly to the stone walls where it condensed, the drops of moisture glistening in the flames of countless torches. The ancient castle creaked and rattled, groaning against the onslaught of frigid winds, reminding Hermione of an old man whose body had suffered the vagaries of time and would never again know the youthful promise of spring or the wild abandon of long summer days.

Hermione tried to convince herself that the relative warmth of the living quarters was her primary motivation for returning so quickly at the end of each day. But in truth, she had begun to look forward to her evenings together with Snape, stunned when he demonstrated a quietly intense courtesy towards her that she hadn't expected and hadn't imagined him capable of. The bitter cold did little to dispel the heat Snape could generate from one softly uttered remark or tentative, slow smile.

It would have been foolhardy to expect a complete stop to their disagreements, but both seemed to realise and accept that such strong personalities could not co-exist without some clashes. Hermione was amazed when even their arguments seemed to change. There was a far lighter tone to their sparring now: gone were the muttered curses and cutting remarks. Snape had merely acted exasperated during Hermione's weekly occurrence of turning toast into charcoal (although, to be fair, if she hadn't been so distracted thinking about *him*, they might have been spared the episode). Hermione had clucked her tongue and rolled her eyes at Snape's overly dramatic coughing fit when he'd encountered the thick clouds of smoke in the kitchen. Her actions hadn't escaped his notice, and he'd responded with a series of queries on why the combination of bread and fire had proved so vexing to an otherwise talented witch. Hermione had simply reminded him that few were blessed with his extraordinary powers of perfection before she'd informed him he was dangerously close to becoming an insufferable know-it-all. The incongruity of the role reversal had had them both laughing out loud until Snape had suggested she leave the sarcasm to him in exchange for the uncontested title of bossy malapert. They had both agreed, and Hermione had smiled when he'd jokingly offered his hand. She had taken it readily, shaking on the mock deal, but Snape had seemed reluctant to release her hand and the light-hearted, teasing moment had quickly turned serious, seeming to take the air from the room as it metamorphosed. The brief, physical contact...however innocent...had stirred something in Hermione that she had steadfastly resolved to avoid. Although unfair, Snape had been correct in his long-ago assessment of her self-control: no matter how hard she tried, she found it impossible to remain unaffected by his touch.

Whether by chance or contrivance, they seemed to be spending a great deal of time in each other's company. Hermione was surprised when Snape began to pay her fairly frequent visits while she worked; he often appeared to specifically seek her out in between his lessons. So it was little wonder that as she stood in her lab on the first day of the Christmas break, her thoughts were soon drifting away from the ingredients spread across the table before her. Draco was attempting to have a conversation with her, but she was only half-listening to him. She couldn't seem to stop herself from thinking of Snape and wondering when he would appear.

"You seem distracted," Draco said, making her realise she had no idea as to what he'd been speaking about.

"Sorry," she apologised with a rueful look.

He surveyed her curiously and asked, "Is Severus still behaving himself?"

"Yes," she said, unable to stop the smile from spreading across her face. Draco had checked on her frequently since her emotional visit to the Divination Tower, and although she had not confided the details of the night Snape had wrecked the Potions classroom, she had assured him everything was fine and he needn't worry about her.

He nodded his acceptance but made no attempt to pry further; instead, he looked down at the items laid out neatly before her. "That's disgusting," he said, gesturing to a hard, sinewy rope of dried flesh.

Hermione chuckled. "It's Erumpent tail," she told him as she grabbed a piece and began trying to chop it, which proved quite difficult.

With a disgusted curl of his lips, Draco returned his attention to Hermione. "As I was saying... You've turned me down the last three years... You simply cannot say 'no' this time."

Hermione frowned and vengefully pressed her knife into the Erumpent tail. Draco was trying to cajole her into attending the annual Christmas Eve ball his parents gave, as he had tried to do each Christmas since she'd returned to Hogwarts.

Steering the conversation in a different direction, she said, "I bet the twins can't wait for Christmas." Draco had, in fact, been on his way out of the castle to Apparate home for the holidays, but he apparently couldn't pass up the opportunity to pester her about coming to the ball.

"They're ecstatic. Don't change the subject."

"I'm not!" she said, pretending to be insulted. "I happen to have genuine interest in the antics of your little angels."

Draco snorted, although she couldn't tell whether it was her feigned offence or the idea of his hellions being called 'angels' that drew his humour.

"Nice try, Granger. Come on," he beseeched her. "Luna's dying to see you it's been months."

She pondered that, feeling like it had been far too long since she'd seen Luna as well. Not since the summer holidays, when Hermione had passed a pleasant week with the young Malfoy family. She had loved the constant havoc caused by the twins and had marvelled over Luna's calmly accepting reaction to it all. But that had been at Draco and Luna's home in Sussex; the thought of returning to Malfoy Manor had always turned her stomach.

"I don't know... I just don't think I can go back there," she said quietly, trying to explain.

"I understand," he said, earning himself a grateful smile. But then he continued, "It's been over fourteen years though, Hermione. Maybe going back now would actually be a positive step... Exorcise the demons, so to speak. People change," he reminded her, and Hermione quickly looked back down at the table.

She whacked her knife into the Erumpent tail as she considered his words. While it was true that Draco had changed enormously in the past fourteen years, she doubted the same could be said for his father. There were indications that Lucius Malfoy was still as conceited and bigoted as ever, and Hermione had her own very private reasons for never wanting to see him again. Reasons she could not possibly share with his son. She had no desire to spend Christmas Eve...or any other day of the year...dredging up memories from her past, although there was no conceivable way to convey the secret of her rationale to Draco.

She knew that relations had been strained between Draco and his parents after their incarceration for supporting Voldemort. When Draco had married Luna before Lucius's release from Azkaban, there had been a full-out estrangement between father and son. That had changed when the twins had been born, and a shaky reconciliation had ensued. Still, unlike their days at school, Draco rarely mentioned his father, and Hermione suspected they spent little time in each other's company.

Draco seemed to think her silence indicated she was wavering because he continued, "Please say you'll come."

Hermione remained silent.

"Severus will be there," he said enticingly, and Hermione could feel an odd fluttering in her stomach at the mention of Snape's name and the unbidden image of him in formal attire. "Isn't that right, Severus?" Draco asked, causing Hermione to snap her head up.

Snape was in the doorway, casually leaning his shoulder against the frame. His gaze focused on Hermione, and although he answered Draco, he never shifted his eyes from hers. "I will indeed attend," he confirmed and then stipulated, "if Professor Granger will grant me the honour of a dance."

Hermione felt a warm glow in her body and heard herself answering, "Oh... um... okay," before she could recall all her previous reasons for not attending.

"Great; see you both there!" Draco said cheerfully, quickly departing before Hermione could change her mind.

Hermione scowled at Draco's rapidly retreating back. Glancing at Snape, a shy smile replaced her frown, and she said, "I never really pictured you as the Christmas ball type."

Snape pushed off from the doorway and slowly entered the room, winding among the tables as he approached her. "No, I suppose I often find them a rather tedious waste of time." Then he turned his dark eyes to her face and added, "But perhaps I've just never been properly diverted before."

Hermione's smile bloomed from shy to daring. "Well, then. I certainly hope you can find something...or someone...to keep you amused," she said.

"I intend to," he replied softly, holding her gaze until she blushed and returned her attention to her work.

Head down, Hermione grinned as she listened to Snape slowly sweeping around the laboratory, examining ingredients and notes as he moved, pausing periodically to inspect a piece of equipment. He had taken a surprising interest in her research, and contrary to his earlier assertion, he wasn't reading "The Brukowski-Granger Principle" simply to fall asleep at night.

She had expected him to mock her when he'd first inquired into the different methodologies she employed, but her answers had actually led to several stimulating conversations. Hermione had been pleasantly reminded of her time spent at university where she had often engaged in debates over various ideas and approaches. She hadn't realised how much she had missed being challenged on an intellectual level and found herself eagerly anticipating their discussions. She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised that Snape was interested: his thirst for knowledge and his innate hunger to examine every facet of whatever held his interest rivalled her own. Still, she relished the discovery of yet another layer to the puzzle that was Severus Snape.

Hermione had been lost in her thoughts, but her mind snapped to attention at his next words.

"What is it about visiting Malfoy Manor that upsets you?" he asked.

Hermione's hand stilled on her knife. She looked at the blade, overcome with sudden memories of Bellatrix Lestrange holding a similar weapon to her throat. She felt certain that Snape knew about the incidents at Malfoy Manor; he was firmly ensconced with the Death Eaters when they had occurred. With a frown, she wondered why he would ask her such a question. *Unless...*

Hermione shook her head to clear it; there was no way Snape could suspect her true reasons for wanting to stay far away from Malfoy Manor.

"Bad memories," she mumbled at last, returning to the Erumpent tail with sudden ferocity.

"Anything else?"

"Isn't that enough?" she shot back with unmasked fury, angrily attacking the stubborn flesh of the tail before her. "Bellatrix and her love of torture. Voldemort coming for Harry. That monster, Fenrir Greyback." Hermione shuddered visibly, remembering the vicious werewolf.

"Yes, of course," Snape said quickly, contritely. "I had just thought... perhaps you and Lucius..."

The knife in Hermione's hand slipped dangerously at his words, sliding off the sinewy tail muscle and sinking deeply into the soft flesh between her thumb and forefinger. She let out a startled cry as blood pumped out with alarming force, covering her robes and the table before her.

Snape was beside her in an instant, grabbing her hand carefully and sliding his fingers through the gushing blood to inspect the cut beneath. Hermione had had enough accidents in the lab to know the cut was very deep. She suspected the knife had sliced open an artery, and she wouldn't be surprised to learn a tendon had been severed as well. She felt incredibly embarrassed at her clumsiness and tried to pull her hand away.

"Hold still," Snape hissed at her impatiently, holding his wand over the wound with one hand while still massaging the cut with the other. Then he began an intricate series of motions, and Hermione could actually feel faint movement deep within her hand as tendons were repaired and layers of skin moved together. She stood still as a statue now, watching in wonder and listening as his deep voice seemed to be humming or chanting something incomprehensible. The words were indecipherable, the language unrecognisable, and yet there was something about the strange, low song that was comfortingly familiar. She was hypnotised by the resonance of his voice and felt goose bumps spring to her arms. Her heart was filled with a strange feeling: an incredible swelling that made her want to weep with joy, for surely her chest would burst if she couldn't release it. It was as if a chorus were singing inside her head. The sound of a thousand voices joined together in perfect harmony flowed through her body, filling her completely.

Then the strange song stopped, and the feeling slowly faded. Snape used his wand to quickly remove the blood, even swishing it over her robes until it was impossible to see that a terrible accident had just occurred. Hermione watched him contentedly, observing his precise and efficient ministrations as if in a dream. Finally, he held her hand up, inches away from his nose, and carefully inspected his work.

"How does it feel now?" he asked, turning her hand back and forth in detailed examination.

"Wonderful," she replied breathlessly, still mesmerised by his movements, his power, and the feel of his fingers on her hand.

His eyes locked onto hers quickly, widening for a fraction of a second before narrowing slightly. Almost imperceptibly, the lines of his face changed, smoothing themselves from the quiet concern and rearranging into what could only be described as desire.

Hermione felt an odd wave of dizziness and knew it had nothing to do with the recent blood-loss. In her mind, she was falling; the floor beneath her feet was no longer stable, and she felt herself tumbling over some imaginary precipice, into the dark depths of his eyes. They stood staring at each other for several moments, neither willing to break the spell. Hermione decided she would be content to stay like that forever.

Snape's eyes left hers, focusing on her hand which he was still holding in the air between their faces. His thumb began slowly stroking the area where the knife had sliced her skin, then roamed farther along her wrist. Hermione watched in fascination as he continued to gently caress her skin, moving to the inside of her hand. His touch was soft and tender, but she felt her breath hitch at the feel of his long fingers massaging the sensitive flesh of her palm. Hermione marvelled at how strangely erotic the sensation was considering the innocence of his actions.

With an almost painfully slow deliberation, Snape lowered his head towards her hand and placed his warm lips against the base of her thumb. Their eyes met at the exact moment his lips made contact: intense black seeking the surprised brown. He held her gaze intently as he began to move his lips along the length of her thumb, rubbing them back and forth against her skin slowly, reverently. Hermione became entranced by his exquisite movements, amazed to find herself thoroughly aroused by nothing

more than the strength of his gaze and a simple kiss on her hand.

Of course, nothing about this man was ever simple. He shifted his mouth to her other fingers, opening her hand to place his lips against her palm before closing his eyes and breathing deeply. Hermione watched transfixed as his long black eyelashes swept down to touch his face. His eyes remained closed as he slowly kissed the palm of her hand. The skin felt incredibly sensitive, and the intimate touch of his lips to her flesh sent shockwaves through her body. Her lips parted involuntarily to emit a soft sigh of pleasure, and his eyes flew open at the sound.

He raised his head, and Hermione felt a sudden wave of sadness as he slowly lowered her hand and gazed into her eyes once more. She regarded him cautiously, a part of her still feeling fragile and uncertain, not entirely ready to trust him again.

Instead of releasing her hand, though, he stepped closer to her and placed it upon his chest, holding her palm flat against his heart so that even through the layers of clothing, she could feel it beating fast and hard.

He gazed at her, almost desperately now, and his expression looked somehow tortured. When he spoke, his voice was uneven and shaky.

"How do you do this to me?" he implored her.

Hermione searched his face, unable to speak, barely daring to breathe.

He didn't seem to require an answer, as next he moved his hand to her face. His fingertips brushed her cheek before trailing down the side of her throat and winding behind her neck, urging her closer. His eyes focused on her lips before he slowly lowered his head, and they both forgot to breathe.

Hermione could feel his mouth almost upon hers when he paused and barely drew back, searching her eyes as if seeking her consent to continue. She was powerless to refuse, weary from denying herself that which her entire being seemed to yearn for. She angled her chin up, closing the tiny space between them by pressing her lips to his as she closed her eyes in acceptance and surrender.

His mouth was patient this time, unhurried in its careful exploration of her lips. He seemed to taste and savour and relish each delicious tremble, each softly uttered sigh. When he urged her lips open at last, his tongue touched hers gently, tentatively stroking and experimenting in slow torment.

Her body shook with the memory of the frantic need she'd felt in the alcove, and the familiar pull of desire quickly flamed to life. She could feel Snape shudder against her, and she knew he was just as consumed by longing as she. Hermione thrilled at the way he seemed to strain against it, though, as if he was determined to enjoy the pleasure of discovery before passion overwhelmed.

His hand had just released her neck, sliding slowly down her throat and brushing over the swell of her breast when a deafening cackle filled the air.

"*SNAPE AND GRANGER, KISSY KISSY!*"

Hermione and Snape broke apart guiltily as Peeves, the Poltergeist, zoomed around the room, singing with obvious delight.

"*OLD HOOK NOSE AND PRISSY MISSY!*"

"Peeves!" roared Snape, whipping his wand from the folds of his robes and pointing it at the intruder. A jet of red light shot out from the end, barely missing Peeves. Instead, it ricocheted off the far wall, rebounding dangerously around the lab before finally blowing up an empty bookcase standing in the corner.

Peeves was smart enough to make a hasty exit, but his cackling laughter and ridiculous song could be heard echoing down the corridor for some time.

"I cannot fathom why Minerva doesn't banish him from the castle," Snape said irritably.

Hermione shrugged. "He's an institution."

She had turned her back to Snape and stood at the table shuffling bottles of insects, not wanting him to see how visibly shaken she was by his recent touch. She kept telling herself it was just a kiss, but the knot in her stomach belied that theory. This had been very different from the desperate fire that had consumed her in the alcove, seemingly light-years ago. That encounter had been all about tension and lust and raw hunger. And even though it had ended badly, it still seemed somehow safer than the tenderness of the kiss they'd just shared. She didn't want to admit it to herself, but she was suddenly terrified that at some point, in that brief expanse of time when their lips had just met, she had opened her heart to him. The realisation sent her mind reeling and made her knees shake.

"He's a menace," grumbled Snape, apparently still fixated on Peeves as he muttered something about foolish sentimentality. Hermione could almost feel his eyes on her back and bent her head down to hide her face.

"No one will believe him, anyway," she said, trying to keep her tone light. "Everyone thinks we hate each other."

She could feel the very faint brush of his robes as he stepped close behind her.

"They're wrong," he said roughly.

Then his hand was on her hair, pulling it back to expose her ear. She could feel his warmth as his lips drew nearer, and her mind went to war with her heart. *Retreat!* screamed her mind. *Enjoy!* yelled her heart.

Shifting ever so slightly forward, Hermione said, "It's probably a good thing he showed up when he did." She could sense Snape's body stiffen behind her, feel his hand freeze on her hair.

"And why is that?" he asked with a derisive sigh, dropping his hand and stepping back.

"Well, obviously... we shouldn't be doing this..." Hermione faltered, not quite knowing what to say. She bit her lip, surprised by her reluctance to look at him.

"Is this a game to you?" he asked quietly. "Or have you chosen this opportunity to punish me for my earlier behaviour?"

Hermione spun around quickly, stunned. "No!" she exclaimed, appalled. "I would never..."

"I could hardly blame you, of course. I daresay I deserve it for the things I said." He was watching her intently, searching her eyes. Hermione tried to gauge his thoughts but found she could no longer read his expression. A door had been shut, and she was left out in the cold.

"It's not that, I promise. I just... I..." she tried to find a way to explain all the reasons why they shouldn't be sharing intimate kisses like this. A thousand random thoughts shot around inside her head, seeming to zoom away the second she tried to latch onto one and making it impossible to offer him an explanation.

Hermione cursed her inability to find the right words when Snape was around. If she could just think of a logical way to explain this to him, then surely he would agree with her. But logic meant truth, and she wasn't sure she was ready to examine the truth yet, much less relate it to him.

Her hand fluttered up nervously, and she said, "I can't do this." It sounded clichéd, even to her own ears, but all she could think to add was, "I'm sorry," before looking away.

Snape regarded her for a moment and then sighed again. He folded his arms across his chest, his expression still aloof.

"What is it you think you need from me, Hermione?" he asked, bringing her eyes back to his face. "Declarations of love? A marriage proposal?" he asked with a laugh so hollow it practically echoed.

Hermione shook her head in the negative. The idea of marriage was preposterous. Love, on the other hand, was something everyone wanted, wasn't it? A misty image of Lily Evans surfaced in the back of her mind. She knew Snape could never offer her love: his heart was far beyond her reach and belonged to the memory of another woman. To expect such a man to care deeply about her was surely a recipe for disaster.

"I just don't want to get hurt," she replied at last. Without meaning to, she had already allowed her heart to be touched by him. She had to do something to stop herself from falling any further: it could only end in heartache. Hermione knew instinctively that this man could, intentionally or not, cause her a tremendous amount of pain.

"Life hurts, Hermione," he told her matter-of-factly. "And if you think differently, then you're fooling yourself. Or perhaps you just need to grow up." There was no malice in his tone, just disappointment. Somehow, it was harder to take.

He stared at her for a few moments more, then unfolded his arms and walked to the door. "Good day to you," he said formally before departing.

Hermione stood at her table feeling confused and miserable. She knew she had blundered her explanation and completely botched the conversation, and she couldn't help but wonder why her best intentions kept leading her in the wrong direction. She had a strong notion that by trying to spare herself any pain, she had unintentionally hurt Snape. Rejecting him had never been her goal; she had simply been scared by how rapidly her feelings had changed and had felt suddenly desperate to protect herself. How could the rationalisation seem so sensible in her mind and yet sound so ridiculous when spoken aloud? And how was she supposed to concentrate on anything when her mind was still spinning from the memory of his lips on hers?

Hermione packed up her lab materials and put it away as a bad job. She made her way back to the dungeons, trying to think of a way to offer Snape some explanation without digging herself further into a hole. Their living quarters were depressingly empty, a fitting reflection of the void that seemed to be expanding inside her. Hermione dropped her shoulders, wondering where Snape had gone after leaving the lab.

Stepping into the kitchen, she grabbed a glass and poured herself a generous amount of the elf-made wine Minerva had bestowed on the teachers staying at Hogwarts for the Christmas holidays. Although she still balked at the servitude of house-elves, Hermione had to admit that the deep burgundy liquid was beyond anything she'd ever tasted before. She took the glass to her favourite chair in front of the fire, staring into the dancing flames while sipping her wine. After draining the glass, she set it aside and pulled her legs up on the chair, curling herself into a ball. Then she rested her temple against the arm of the chair and allowed her thoughts to drift back to the amazing kiss she'd just shared with Snape.

She wondered what they'd be doing right now if she hadn't stopped him and found herself wishing she had been fearless enough to find out. She'd only been trying to safeguard her emotions, she reasoned; she just wanted to spare herself the inevitable pain. That plan had backfired, though, because what she was feeling now was certainly not painless. And the thought of living with Snape over the coming months, in a constant cycle of desire and denial, was worse than the pain she'd been trying to avoid.

Hermione wondered if she was in love with Severus Snape. The idea of it was shocking, to be sure. She had spent so many years disliking him and then many more years feeling remorse because of it. She respected him, certainly. But love? An image of him sitting across from her on the sofa, smiling at her over his book while he sipped a glass of wine suddenly rose to her mind. Then she pictured his eyes, dark with desire, and the feel of his hands on her body. Companionship, desire, admiration... All these things seemed to be leaning in one direction. She seriously doubted she was in love with Snape, and she was certain it was far too soon to be contemplating such things. Nevertheless, she was bright enough to realise that if she continued on this path, she would need to take very careful steps to guard her heart, lest she place herself in the dangerous position of falling in love with him.

Hermione closed her eyes, feeling like she needed a new plan but suddenly too tired to focus on it. She pictured Snape's face as he had looked kissing her hand and quickly fell asleep with a small smile on her lips.

She was having a lovely dream about Snape: they were back in the lab, and he was caressing her cheek softly, whispering her name. There was such tenderness in his touch and his voice that she sighed deeply and moved her face to nuzzle against his strong fingers. Then the fingers were gone, and a shadow passed before her vision. Hermione opened her eyes and realised he was standing in front of the fireplace, and she hadn't been dreaming.

"You're back," she said needlessly.

Snape turned away from his silent study of the jumping flames and watched her, his face a total mask in the shadows. Hermione sat up tiredly and rubbed her eyes. The elf-made wine must have been stronger than she'd thought: a glance at the clock told her several hours had passed.

Whether it was the fire, or the dream, or the residual wine, Hermione felt surprisingly relaxed. She thought of all the logical things she had planned to say to Snape, but dismissed them with conviction, telling her brain to be quiet for once.

Instead, she looked up at him with a comfortable smile and asked, "We just can't seem to get it right, can we?"

His shoulders seemed to relax, and he dropped them slightly. Hermione could see that he'd been holding himself quite rigidly, as if bracing himself against whatever nonsense was going to come out of her mouth next. He walked to her chair and knelt down beside it, so their faces were on the same level, and he could gaze into her eyes without looking down.

"Nothing worth having ever comes easily," he told her.

With an uncertain laugh, she said, "I guess this must *really* worthwhile, then."

He smiled, then grew serious. "I'm sorry I accused you of being immature."

"You seem to be apologising a lot lately," she pointed out with a smile.

"Yes," he agreed, looking grim. "And might I just mention how much I detest it?"

"Really? I never would have guessed."

"How gracious of you."

"Actually, you could have spared yourself this one. I happen to agree with you. At least with the first part," she amended.

"Oh?"

"I realise everything's a risk," she said. "And to try to live a life without any pain probably wouldn't be much of a life."

"No one wants to be hurt, Hermione. Sometimes it's unavoidable."

"I can accept that, I suppose. And I should have been honest with you earlier," she began, noting the way he shifted back from her slightly. She wondered if honesty in a relationship was as frightening to him as it was to her.

"The truth is... I've begun to care for you," she told him.

Snape sat back on his heels now, and his eyes appeared guarded. He was obviously uncomfortable with talking about emotions, as she suspected he would be. But she'd gone too far to stop now. Her heart was pounding, but she had to finish.

"I know you didn't ask for it," she said with a small shrug. "I doubt either of us expected to find ourselves in this situation. But whatever this is, it doesn't appear to be going away, despite both of our best efforts. And I'm tired of fighting the fact that I'm attracted to you; I can't keep pretending my feelings are nothing more than deferential regard for a colleague."

She paused for a moment, simultaneously eager and fearful for his reaction. He appeared to be deep in thought, but he remained silent, so she continued, "You asked me earlier what I thought I needed from you. I don't expect promises or declarations, Severus...I'm not a child. All I require is for you to understand that this scares me a little."

Hermione clasped her hands in her lap and gave him a sheepish grin. "In case you hadn't noticed, I generally like to be in control of a situation," she said. "I'm not comfortable with feeling vulnerable...I've spent a good portion of my life avoiding this sensation. To willingly relinquish something that could so easily be used against me is unnatural and frightening and hardly the act of a supposedly bright witch." Shaking her head, she finished, "I must be mad to be telling you any of this."

Hermione took a deep breath and folded her arms across her chest, surprised to realise she actually felt better for having shared her thoughts. It was almost liberating to know the decision to proceed or retreat rested with Snape.

Snape stood up and walked to the fireplace, his brow furrowed in concentration. After several moments, he turned back to her and seemed about to speak, but then looked away and began pacing. He kept at this for several minutes: pacing, looking at her, hesitating, pacing some more. Hermione was amazed at how calm she felt despite his apparent agitation. She had spoken her mind and merely sat watching him with a bemused expression.

Finally, he spoke, and Hermione could tell he had chosen his words carefully.

"I appreciate your candour," he began. "I will attempt to respond with the same."

Hermione nodded.

"I am not a romantic man, Hermione. I would prefer you refrain from attaching any romantic notions to me. I am not going to write you poetry or sing you love songs."

"All right," she said, wondering if he seriously thought she was expecting such things.

"I will not pretend to be in love with you."

Hermione let his statement hang in the air for a moment. She knew this, of course. But hearing the words spoken with such finality made her pause. He was being brutally honest, and on some level she supposed she was grateful; at least she would be spared the burden of wondering if he would ever love her. He was making sure they both went into this with their eyes wide open. Now, the only question remaining was whether she wanted to be with a man whose heart was forever closed to her.

It surprised Hermione to find that she did. "I understand," she said finally.

Snape searched her face and seemed satisfied by what he found, giving her a curt nod.

"That being said, I have experienced certain feelings for you: chief among these are admiration and desire," he stated rather formally.

"I see," she said with a small smile. He certainly hadn't been exaggerating about not being romantic.

Snape frowned and appeared to be unsatisfied with his statement. He elaborated by saying, "I admire your intellect and wit, as well as your strength and determination."

"You're going to make me blush," she teased. "I believe you mentioned something about desire, too?"

"Of course I desire you," he said, sounding more than a little impatient. He considered her for a moment, still frowning, and then said, "You possess a unique intelligence as well as an uncommon beauty, of which I'm sure you're aware. And I happen to find intelligence and beauty a rather irresistible mix."

Whoa, she thought to herself, letting his sensual voice carry the words to her brain, making her tingle all over. For an unromantic man, he could say some fairly amazing things when he chose.

"Thank you," she whispered.

She received another curt nod in return. His brows were still drawn together, and he pursed his lips as he looked at her askance, serious contemplation evident in his countenance.

"You said you did not require declarations and promises," he said, drawing a deep breath. "And I cannot offer them to you in the traditional sense."

He came back to her chair and resumed his original position, kneeling before her and looking into her eyes thoughtfully. Hermione sat forward and found her heart was beating loudly as she watched him.

"I will, however, *declare* to you that I understand your fears. And I will *promise* to try my best to ensure those fears are never realised."

Hermione regarded the sincerity in his eyes and swallowed hard, unable to speak. She hadn't been able to articulate it earlier, but he had somehow managed to provide the precise measure of reassurance she'd been searching for.

"This is all I can offer," he said with an air of finality.

Hermione smiled slowly, suspecting that his impatience masked his trepidation over having revealed so much. "I'll take it," she said with a nod.

He looked relieved, then stood up and offered his hand to her. Hermione thought he wanted to shake on it and almost laughed out loud. She took his hand, but instead of a handshake, she found herself being pulled up out of her chair and standing before him. She craned her neck to meet his eyes and smiled as his gaze searched her face, perhaps looking for doubt or regret.

Satisfied at last, he said, "Let's see if we can get it right *this* time," before turning to lead her towards his bedroom, her hand still held within his.

A/N: Karelia and little_beloved are kind enough to beta this story, and lettybird Brit-picks for me. I am eternally grateful to all three of these lovely ladies!

Just wanted to say, "Well done!" to all the clever readers who suspected Bertram of being evil (almost from the first instance he was mentioned)!! I was a tad pouty that you all figured it out so quickly. :-)

... of Joyful Bliss

Chapter 12 of 33

Snape and Hermione try to get it right this time. And the next, and the next...

Chapter 12: ... Of Joyful Bliss

Hermione's heart raced as she followed Snape into his bedroom. She felt suddenly shy and awkward, like an inexperienced naïf. She moved to stand by the bed as he began to remove his robes and coat, just as he had the last time she'd been in this room, on Halloween.

"Do you remember your first night here?" she asked.

His eyes travelled the length of her body, and a provocative smile curled his lips. "Of course. I haven't been able to look at this bed without picturing you stretched across it in that damn dress."

Her eyes widened, but his confession calmed her nerves. He had finished removing his jacket and had started on the buttons of his bright, white shirt when she admitted, "I couldn't stop watching you undress." She focused on his fingers, as she had that other night, and said, "You have amazing hands."

His fingers stilled at her words, and she brought her eyes back to his.

"I'm glad you approve," he said, and his voice made her imagine those hands on her body, at last on her bare skin.

Feeling suddenly warm, she unfastened the clasp on her robes and shrugged out of the heavy material, throwing the bundle onto a chair in the corner.

His lips quirked at the quickness of her actions, and he crossed the room slowly to stand before her. The smile was smooth as he looked down into her face. "You're not nervous, are you?" he asked.

"A little," she replied honestly. "It's been a very long time..."

He emitted one single, deep chuckle. "I believe I win that particular contest."

He placed his hands on her shoulders and began absentmindedly stroking her arms, shoulder to elbow, and back again. He was watching her mouth the entire time with a slight frown.

"In fact," he began with a quick glance at her eyes before returning to her mouth, "you should bear in mind that I spent fourteen years without the ability to move. And the last two months being tempted daily by a certain witch..."

"Minerva?" she asked innocently and was rewarded with another chuckle. Hermione was astounded to realise that he actually looked nervous, which had to be a first.

"Hermione, let's consider this first time as something of a trial run. I might not be able to... sustain... for the time required to properly... That is, for the necessary duration in which to..."

"Tell me, Professor Snape," she interrupted him, remembering the words he had spoken to her on Halloween. "Is it often your habit to prattle on endlessly like this?"

The wry smile seemed to reflect the humour sparkling in his eyes. "No: it's a special treat for our first night together," he answered dryly.

She returned his smile, touched that he recalled the reference and remembered her answer. She placed her palms on his chest and delighted in the freedom to touch him and the feel of his crisp, cool shirt against her hands. "Well, then. I will grant your proposition for a trial run. You have piqued my scientific curiosity."

He slid his hands down to her hips, and when he slid them back up, his fingers drifted beneath her jumper, skimming her sides before encircling her bare back and pulling her against him. "We have all night to review our findings," he said in a silken voice before capturing her mouth against his.

She closed her eyes, letting go of all the fears and doubts that had plagued her and allowing herself to *just feel*. His lips were warm, and she could almost taste the restraint in his kiss, hinting at the hunger simmering beneath. She fumbled with the remaining buttons on his shirt as he continued to explore her back, his fingers impossibly skilled when he unhooked her bra in one smooth motion. Finally reaching the bottom of his shirt, she slid the fabric down his arms where it hung on his elbows. Free to roam, she glided her hands over his bare chest, the kiss deepening with her touch. He released her mouth long enough to pull her jumper up over her head, taking the unhooked bra with it. His eyes stayed on her bare breasts as he stepped back and unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt, allowing it to fall to the floor.

Hermione felt herself blushing hotly under his stare.

"Don't," he ordered quietly when she began to cross her arms in front of her chest self-consciously. "I've imagined the way you would look... standing here, just like this. Let me enjoy the sight of you."

Hermione lowered her arms. "It was a better sight when I was in my twenties."

"According to you. From my perspective, you have only improved with age," he informed her.

The words caused a warmth to spread throughout her body, making her suddenly braver. Hands trembling ever so slightly, she reached behind and lowered the zip on her long wool skirt. She let go, and the skirt fell to the floor, pooling at her feet.

His hands clenched reflexively at his sides as his gaze travelled down her body. She imagined she made quite a sight, standing there in nothing more than a pair of lacy black knickers and her knee-high black boots.

The boots presented her with a sudden conundrum, and she realised she should have taken them off before stripping her clothes. She didn't care for the idea of sitting half-naked on the bed and struggling to remove them; it was not the image she wished to make on their first truly intimate encounter. There was really no graceful way to shed them at this point, and after a moment's consideration, she chuckled nervously. "This isn't quite the order I normally do this in."

"Perhaps it should be," he told her appreciatively. Then he gestured pointedly at the remaining articles she wore and said roughly, "Continue."

Hermione thought for a moment about the best way to get her blasted boots off without looking completely ungainly and ridiculous. She turned and walked to the chair where she'd thrown her robes. With her back to Snape, she raised one leg, placing her foot on the seat of the chair. Then she bent forward to unfasten the zip which ran from her knee down to her ankle. She repeated the process with the other boot before turning back to face him.

A part of her knew she had just unintentionally delivered an interesting little show. And she was surprised to discover that another part was secretly pleased at her own daring. She looked at Snape's face to see his reaction and was a little dismayed to find his eyes closed. His hands were still clenched into tight fists at his side, his breaths shallow.

"If you'd like this to last more than five minutes, I'd suggest you save the theatrics for the next round." He opened his eyes and pierced her with a look of unbridled lust.

Emboldened by his words, and rather in awe of the notion that she could be having any impact on making this powerful man's control slip, she chuckled softly and shrugged one shoulder. "You're the one who wanted them off." She hooked her thumbs in the sides of her knickers and lowered them slowly, gracefully stepping away when they fell to the floor.

"My, my," he said in a very low voice. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

She noticed he was staring at the area between her legs, which was completely devoid of hair. She gave another small shrug and explained, "University trip to Brazil; there are some amazing magical salons there. I tried it as a dare, but I kept it...I like the way it feels."

His eyes darkened as he slowly approached her. "I believe I will, as well."

She frowned slightly. "Um... it's not exactly new territory for you. You didn't notice that in the alcove?"

His nostrils flared with the memory. "I was distracted." He lowered his head towards her and whispered, "An oversight I fully intend to remedy now."

She shivered as his lips touched hers. Their arms remained at their sides, bodies slightly apart; it would have seemed quite chaste if not for the fact that she was standing there naked and completely aroused. The kiss deepened, his tongue exploring her mouth, and still he did not touch her. Hermione began to tremble as his tongue stroked hers in perfect thrusts that made her mind race. Delicious thoughts of him repeating the same motions on a very different part of her body made her moan quietly.

Finally unable to resist the need to touch him, she reached her arms around his neck and pressed her bare chest against his. The reward for her boldness was instantaneous: his arms wrapped around her roughly, dragging her against him. He seemed to have only been waiting for her prompt. His hands were everywhere now, fisting in her hair and then caressing every area they could reach her back, her thighs, her bottom, her sides all the while feasting on her mouth as if he could somehow devour her entirely and fill himself up.

Desperation took hold, and Hermione fumbled with the catch on his trousers, frantic with the need to touch all of him, see all of him. The button opened at last, but her fingers soon met with another. As she struggled madly, she heard the fabric tear, yet she still couldn't open the blasted pants. Breaking the kiss, she hissed, "Damn it!" and bent her head down to look at the offending closure. Her eyes were frustratingly unfocused.

"I'll do it," he said in a ragged voice, his breath coming in rapid gasps before his mouth was on hers again, and she lost all thought. She kissed him hungrily, wanting to memorise his taste. She abandoned his mouth and let her lips explore, kissing the line of his jaw, the powerful muscles in his neck, the four perfect shiny scars from the snakebite, and the hard plane of his shoulder. Then she returned to centre, kissing his throat, the resonance of his groan vibrating against her mouth. She licked at the small hollow spot in the middle of his collarbone, thrilled when he shuddered against her.

"This is ridiculous." His voice was breathy, strained.

She had no clue what he was talking about and had ceased to care. The backs of her knees touched something, and she was stunned to find herself being lowered onto the bed. She hadn't even been aware they had crossed the room. She welcomed the feel of his weight as his body covered hers. Then he was gone. She tried to focus her vision and raised herself on her elbow, watching him remove the trousers that had stymied her. His hands shook. Hard.

He flung the clothes away and started back to her.

"Wait," she said, holding up a hand.

His eyes narrowed on her dangerously, possessively. "It's too late for that."

"I just want to look at you," she told him. Obediently, he straightened himself to his full height.

She drank in every inch of his body, admiring the dramatic contrast between broad shoulders and narrow hips. Then she lowered her gaze to his powerful thighs and stared at his erection, noting that the size exceeded her expectations. She swallowed. Hard.

"I take it you approve?" he asked with a knowing smirk.

She returned her eyes to his, and although she couldn't hide her smile, she also couldn't resist shrugging her shoulders and saying, "I suppose it'll have to do."

He chuckled deeply. "You'll pay for that." He lowered himself to the bed and placed one knee between her legs to spread them apart, pushing her shoulder back so she lay flat before him.

"I sincerely hope..." she began, pausing to let out a surprised gasp when his mouth clamped down hard on her breast, "...so," she finished breathlessly. He drew the nipple into his mouth and sucked hard before scraping his teeth against her flesh, then circled his tongue around and around until she cried out in divine torment.

He released her breast and trailed his face across her chest to the other one, being as gentle with this one as he'd been rough with the other. Hermione moaned and wound her fingers into his hair, then stroked her hands over his strong shoulders, raking her fingernails against his skin. He moved his face along her chest and up to the base of her throat, and she trembled at the roughness of his cheeks and chin scratching against her delicate skin.

She craned her head back, writhing in delight over the things his mouth was doing to her throat and neck. His hands explored her body, and she moved against him in desire so overwhelming it was almost unbearable. He seemed to be touching her everywhere at once until she felt her body would explode from the pure pleasure of it all.

He rose above her. "Look at me."

She blinked rapidly, finding his face at last and registering the passion in his eyes. The smile froze on her face as his hands moved to her legs, stroking the soft flesh inside her thighs. He held her gaze as he trailed one hand along her thigh and then up to the point where her legs met. She tried to keep her eyes on his, but they slid out of focus when he parted her skin and slid one long finger inside. His thumb circled her clitoris once, twice, then lightly flicked over it repeatedly until her body clenched around his finger. She arched her back, vaguely aware of his breath hissing as her chest rose towards him. A curse erupted from his throat, but she was oblivious to everything but the suddenness of the orgasm and the surprising force with which it shook her. She called out his name roughly, over and over.

Pulses of pleasure swept through her body, but she was given no opportunity to savour them. The lingering shudders had not yet stopped when his finger was hastily removed, and he roared, "Now!" His voice sounded unfamiliar and urgent as his body covered hers. Before she could even open her eyes, he was plunging deep inside her, thrusting with a force that made her scream out again.

"Damn it!" he ground out.

She heard his strangled curse but was too lost in the sensation to do anything more than cling to his shoulders, gasping and moaning. As his thrusting continued, the pace became faster, the force harder. The sound of their flesh slapping rhythmically mingled with their frantic breathing, but neither heard. Lost in a thick haze of ecstasy like nothing she'd ever experienced, she found herself trying to match his intensity, thrusting back ferociously. However hard they came together, it wasn't hard enough, and soon, incredibly, she felt another orgasm bursting through her body. She cried out in shock, throwing her head back. Seconds later, his movements changed and his body

shuddered violently; he buried himself within her and joined in the final release.

Several minutes passed before their bodies stopped trembling and their breathing returned to normal. They lay on the bed intertwined, a tangle of legs and arms. She knew she had a silly smile on her face but lacked the energy to force it away. He had collapsed on top of her, his face nestled in her hair, his chin on her shoulder. She breathed deeply and inhaled his familiar scent, and her smile widened.

As her chest rose with the effort of breathing, he stirred and very gently removed himself from her, shifting his weight and rolling over to the side.

Hermione winced and uttered a tiny groan, her body protesting the loss of his.

Snape raised himself up on one elbow and looked down at her carefully, his eyes hooded. "Are you all right?" he asked with concern. "Did I hurt you?"

"I can't feel my legs," she said with a laugh.

He seemed relieved by her laughter...if not her words. "It was not my intention to be so rough," he apologised.

"I don't believe I was complaining."

He smiled. "Nevertheless... I had planned on using a bit more finesse."

Hermione grinned at him. "As did I. But after I tore apart your trousers, I gave up."

Chuckling appreciatively, he placed his palm on her stomach and slowly slid it to the side of her waist, then up her ribcage and back over her breast, smiling when she shuddered.

"Your body trembles at my slightest touch," he said, almost to himself. He seemed entranced by the sight of his hand on her midriff.

"I noticed," she agreed, already beginning to feel that now-familiar ache for him.

"Do you have any idea how erotic it is to watch you respond to me?" he asked as his fingers lazily skimmed over her breast, causing her to gasp. He circled her nipple with one finger and looked into her eyes.

She was having a difficult time thinking straight, but managed to focus on his face, which she suddenly found quite exquisite.

"Tell me I'm uncommonly beautiful again," she whispered.

He smiled and rolled his eyes slightly. Then he gazed at her seriously and said, "Let me show you, instead." He kissed her with such tenderness, such deliberation; she felt certain she could hear the sound of her heart beginning to crack.

They moved together again. The rushing and urgency had subsided: this time they savoured, teased, discovered. There was time now for beauty and compliments and celebration as they worshiped each other, each intent on watching the other experience pleasure.

She had few chances for coherent thought, but when they occurred, she told herself to hold on to these moments, to memorise each sigh and touch and nuance of their bodies, to tuck it away in a safe place so that she could hold some small piece of him inside her forever.

When the need eventually became unbearable, they clung to one another, marvelling at the beauty and wonder of this incredible thing they had found. Then they separated slowly, with soft kisses and gentle caresses.

She lay next to him and stared up at the ceiling, a smile playing along her lips as she recalled the events of the evening. Several hours had passed. She should have gone to sleep, but she found herself more interested in the sound of his even, measured breathing beside her.

She turned her head on her pillow to watch him, and her smile grew. He was sprawled on his stomach, his face mashed in his pillow but turned towards her. In that instant, he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. The things she had experienced with him in just one night were more amazing than all her previous relationships added up. With a shake, she forced her gaze away from him and slowly shifted towards the edge of the bed. Although inexperienced in such matters, Hermione suspected that spending hours watching her lover sleep was surely not a good sign she was holding her heart in cheque.

His arm snaked out for her before she could get up, and he expertly wrapped it around her waist, pulling her back into bed. He turned on his side and fitted her back neatly against his front. His arm draped over her waist, he easily circled the expanse, tucking his hand back between the mattress and his side. She was certainly not going to sneak off to her own bed like this, and she found the small, sleepy gesture of possession incredibly powerful.

He nuzzled his face into her hair, breathing deeply. "Stay," he commanded.

Hermione chuckled. "Shall I fetch and roll over, too?"

"Mmm... roll over, perhaps. I'll let you know in the morning..."

Leisurely, she stroked his arm where it lay tightly wrapped around her waist. She made no other movement, but was aware of the change in his breathing moments before she felt him stiffening against her lower back.

"How about now?" she asked.

"Now is acceptable, too," he said as they began to make love again.

After that, she did fall asleep. The soft sound of hissing and sputtering woke her in a few hours as the candle on the bedside table gutted itself out. She guessed it was almost dawn, although it was impossible to tell in the dungeons. She slid one rather stiff leg off the side of the bed when again, the arm reached out for her. This time, he snagged her hand and tugged on it gently. Turning her head, she was surprised to find his eyes alert and focused. She sat up in bed and wondered how long he'd been lying awake beside her.

"Stay," he told her again.

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at him. "Shall I remind you what happened the last time you said that?"

He smiled seductively. "I'm testing a scientific theorem," he said, refusing to release her hand when she would have drawn it away. "I need to see if the outcome remains the same over repeated trials."

Hermione laughed. "Oh, I see. It's all for the cause of science..."

"What else?"

She smiled at him, feeling as if she would melt when he asked, "How shall I convince you to stay?"

"Tell me more about this theorem of yours."

"It's genius in its simplicity," he said in the tone reserved for student lectures. "Basically, I tell you to do something, and you actually do it."

An unladylike snort was her immediate response. "While I applaud your efforts, I really don't foresee that one working out for you, mate."

One dark eyebrow rose higher. "And yet, I told you to stay, and here you remain."

Her attempt to hide the grin was unsuccessful. "I remain merely to disabuse you of the notion that your hypothesis has merit."

"I see. Share with me the undoubtedly brilliant reasoning you've used to dismiss my thesis so easily."

She made her voice deliberately imperious. "Well, for one thing, you've changed far too many variables. I'm afraid the study's quite useless now."

With a bark of laughter, he flopped onto his back and hauled her on top of him, so she straddled his waist. Then he slid her lower, dragging her along his hardened length. His face held a look of satisfaction as her mouth formed a small "o," and her eyes widened.

"How shall we proceed, Professor?" he asked, one eyebrow quirked in challenge. "Is there nothing salvageable from our previous research?"

"I'm afraid not. We'll have to scrap our earlier findings and begin the entire investigation over again." Her nails raked across his torso, leaving faint red lines to contrast against his pale chest. She found it very difficult to continue their playful banter. The ability to concentrate on words was replaced with the sudden conviction that she should bite him, lick him, taste him.

"The sacrifices I make for..." he began, but she cut off his words by bending forward and fixing her mouth firmly to his. A part of her brain couldn't believe they were doing this again and briefly wondered if he was trying to make up for lost time. Then his hands slid up her thighs possessively, and she lost the power to wonder...to think...at all.

A chapter of pure smut... I hope you approve. Next up: actual plot advancement! As always, I'm grateful to Karelia and little_beloved for their amazing beta skills and to lettybird for Brit-picking. Special thanks to the lovely Melenka for keen suggestions on smut improvement!

Eleven for a Party

Chapter 13 of 33

Secrets from Hermione's past surface at the Christmas Eve ball with disastrous consequences.

Chapter 13: Eleven for a Party

Hermione and Snape spent the next several days like children with a new toy, never tiring of their wondrous discovery. Their timing couldn't have been better: very few students had stayed behind for the Christmas holidays, and duties were extremely light. Every spare moment was spent hiding out beneath the covers or conducting serious research into the other beds and surfaces of their living quarters.

Christmas Eve arrived, and Hermione sat before her dressing table, applying makeup in preparation for the ball at Malfoy Manor. She had tried to convince Snape they should remain at Hogwarts and send their regrets to the Malfoys, but her attempts to persuade him with other enticements had proved futile, yet satisfying. He had repeatedly pointed out that they'd made a promise to Draco, and she found his insistence on honouring the commitment charmingly noble. She was dreading the evening, but as she was nowhere near ready to explain the cause of her anxiety, her options for avoiding Malfoy Manor...and Lucius Malfoy in particular...were limited. At least she had the thought of dancing with Snape to look forward to.

Sweeping her hair off her shoulders, she arranged it into a casual twist, allowing some tendrils to fall loose and frame her face. She had chosen a deep red gown made of cool silk covered with chiffon georgette. The fabric caressed her bust and hips before falling to an off-centre slit at the knee with soft ruffling. She loved the feel of the fabric and the way it moved with her when she walked, gliding over her skin like soft ripples in a stream.

The top of the gown sported thin straps that crisscrossed behind her neck, leaving a great deal of her back exposed. The front plunged daringly and ended in a festive little spray of glittering crystals. Although the amount of cleavage exposed was more than she would normally allow, it was somewhat hidden by more softly shirred chiffon that draped elegantly across the front. The only way the revealing amount of flesh could be viewed was from directly above, and she fully intended that only one man would be dancing close enough to see that tonight.

Grabbing her cloak, she walked from her bedroom to the sitting room, stopping to admire Snape. He was wearing dress robes, which had always reminded her of a Muggle dinner jacket. He had not yet bothered to fasten the top buttons of his dress shirt, and the ends of the black bow tie were left to dangle enticingly around his neck. The small pair of reading glasses perched on his generous nose somehow added to the appearance of scholarly sexiness, and she realised that she was holding her breath as she surveyed him.

The book he'd been reading was quickly abandoned as she entered the room. He tossed it aside and removed his glasses, eyes narrowing as she approached. His gaze made a slow journey down the length of her body. She had become skilled at recognising the look of desire that came to his eyes, and she smiled in appreciation.

"Do you suppose the band will play a tango?" he asked, looking back at her dress.

Hermione considered her outfit for a moment and realised that with the deep red colour, crisscrossing straps, and the slight ruffling along the slit, it would be an appropriate choice for the scorching Argentinean dance. She felt her pulse quickening at the image of Snape leading her into the sultry steps, their bodies slamming together and legs intertwined. She had never before seen him dance, but he moved with such grace and agility that she suspected his talents on the dance floor would prove impressive, just as they had elsewhere.

"The tango is a Muggle dance," she pointed out. "I'm surprised you're familiar with it."

"I happen to be a lover of art," he commented dryly. Then he took another long, meandering gaze down her body. "In all its forms."

"Is that an invitation?" she asked, batting her eyelashes in exaggerated coquetry. She twirled on the spot, allowing him a glimpse of the revealing back.

With lightning speed, he left the sofa, reaching her just as she spun to face him. His hands clamped onto her waist, and she was pulled against him tightly, held completely

still. There was heat in his gaze: she could almost feel the searing intensity of it, and once again she forgot to breathe. With aching slow precision, he trailed one hand to her hip while the other moved to grasp her hand. Then he pushed her away with enough force to spin her half around, allowing her to face away before stopping her progress with a hard tug on her hand.

Her brain was racing to catch up as he continued to move them around the room. It took several seconds to process the fact that he was actually dancing the tango with her. He spun her around again, taking a step back as she neared. When she ceased spinning, it was her back that stopped hard against his chest. He immediately snaked his free hand around her waist and placed it flat on her stomach, moving his pelvis behind her in rhythm and motion to unheard music. The tops of his thighs pressed against her legs, the warmth of his body easily penetrating the thin fabric of her dress. Using the hand on her stomach in combination with his legs, he moved her hips in perfect timing with his.

Her hand was lifted and placed behind his neck. He skimmed his fingers down the length of her arm before coming to rest against the side of her breast. Her gasp echoed through the room. He repeated the process with her other arm until her fingers clung to the back of his neck, and she melted against him, feeling weak. Having her arms stretched up behind her had caused her back to arch: her chest jutted forward in a wanton pose, open to his exploration. Her eyes closed when his hands sharply caressed her. For a few glorious moments, her brain shut off, and she knew nothing but the feel of his rigid body pressing into her, hard planes perfectly moulded to smooth curves. Her body trembled with recognition as his strong hands slid over her breasts, down her ribs, and across her stomach.

He dipped his head and kissed the skin where her neck met her shoulder, finding a magical spot that instantly sent a bolt of desire to her core. She shuddered as his lips travelled up the side of her neck, once again holding her breath when they reached her earlobe. He flicked his tongue into her ear, eliciting a sound that was part-moan and part-whimper. "We'll never leave if we keep this up," he whispered.

"I'm fine with that," she told him, surprised by the breathless quality to her voice.

The kisses ceased. She waited, wondering if he would change his mind. His forehead dropped, resting atop her shoulder as his rapid exhalations heated her bare skin, and still she waited for his decision. He seemed to consider for a long time...longer than she thought he might...before unwinding her arms from his neck and returning them to her sides. He turned her around and stared down into her face, his expression fierce.

"We'll leave early," he said in a rough voice.

Hermione responded with a simple, "Yes, please." Blood heated and heart racing, she hardly noticed the bracing temperature as they left the castle and journeyed to a spot where they could Apparate to Malfoy Manor.

As far as Hermione could tell, very little had changed at Malfoy Manor since her last visit. She and Snape had Apparated into a narrow lane and approached the large wrought-iron gates in silence. They were swung open wide tonight, welcoming the partygoers. Stepping past them, Hermione suspected the bone-chilling cold seeping into her body had more to do with her own wretched memories than the frigid December evening.

As if sensing her discomfort, Snape placed his hand against her back. She found the gesture just as soothing as the contact. The imposing white manor loomed in the distance, and as they drew near, she could see lights sparkling festively in the diamond-paned windows. Inside the house, an orchestra was playing. Strains of music floated out towards them, cheerful and inviting.

Side by side, they approached the sweeping stone entrance to Malfoy Manor. Hermione's dread rose with each step she ascended, and although there were only a few, thin stairs, she felt as winded as if she'd just scaled a mountain peak. She hesitated at the top, concentrating on taking even, steady breaths as she gathered her courage. Snape leaned in close to her and whispered in her ear, "The sooner we enter, the sooner we can leave."

She chuckled, glad for his words and the way they chased away some of her tension. She turned to face him and was struck by the immense power within his presence. Strength radiated from him, wrapping around her like a warm blanket of peace, calming her more than she would have thought possible, considering she stood at the threshold to the source of so many nightmares. Placing her palms on his chest, she rose on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his.

"Well, well. The mistletoe seems to be working," drawled the familiar voice of Lucius Malfoy from the doorway.

Hermione stepped away from Snape, and a sudden, terrible thought entered her mind. It had been several years since the war, and much had been forgotten and forgiven. But old prejudices still lingered, and she wondered if Snape would despair of his Muggle-born lover now that he was surrounded by the cream of the pure-blood crop.

"Lucius," said Snape in acknowledgment. Hermione was pleased to hear a trace of irritation in his voice, as if he hadn't cared for being interrupted.

"Severus, so good to see you up and about," said Lucius. Then he turned his gaze to Hermione, and she tried not to recoil. "And Miss Granger! How delightful to have you join us... *again*."

Hermione didn't miss the way his smile changed as he ended his statement, as if desiring to remind her of her last visit. *Bastard*, she thought to herself. But she was determined to deprive him of the satisfaction of seeing her upset by memories or in any way fearful of him.

She plastered an amazingly bright smile on her face and said enthusiastically, "Thank you for inviting me. It's lovely to be here."

Lucius stepped back to allow them entrance. They walked into the enormous hall as rows of sallow Malfoy ancestors stared down their aristocratic noses at them. Lucius moved to take his place beside his pale wife, who was greeting a portly little wizard who had just arrived.

Snape removed Hermione's cloak, passing it to a nearby servant along with their heavy coats. She glanced over at Lucius and found him watching her closely, speculatively. She supposed many women would find him handsome: his face was remarkably unlined, and beneath his expensive dress robes, his body appeared toned, a slight bulge of muscles visible in all the right places. She had heard of magical spas in Switzerland where a witch or wizard who was willing to spend a small fortune could obtain the latest in age-reversal spells. Lucius had obviously indulged in the finest treatments his money could procure: he looked at least a dozen years younger than she knew him to be. Even so, she could never get past the brittle, soulless gleam in his eyes to ever consider him physically attractive. With Snape at her side, she made her way back to Lucius and Narcissa and exchanged brief pleasantries before entering the ballroom.

Hermione felt her shoulders relax and a sigh of relief escaped her lips. The first encounter with Lucius had passed without incident, and she was glad to have it behind her.

"I believe you promised me a dance," Snape said in her ear, earning himself a grateful smile. He led her onto the dance floor where she stopped to admire the magical orchestra on display before them. There was a full contingent of instruments, impressive in itself, but even more notable for the lack of musicians. The pieces floated in place, playing their perfect notes as bows raced across strings and flutes danced in the air. Each section had been enchanted to play an amazing selection of works, and even the conductor's baton hung suspended in the air, pointing rhythmically as it led the ensemble.

Snape was an excellent dancer, as she had suspected he would be. He led her around the floor effortlessly, and it soon felt as if they'd danced together for many years, so familiar were they with each other's movements.

Hermione was surprised by how quickly the evening passed. They spent a pleasant couple of hours dancing and visiting with the numerous witches and wizards in attendance, then turned their attention to the many delicacies offered on the sumptuous buffet.

Snape's status as hero soon became evident, and several people treated him like a bit of a rock star. It was obvious he didn't care for the attention being foisted upon him, which Hermione found rather humorous after his years of taunting Harry for fame and notoriety. He did not appear amused when she pointed this out to him, however, and deliciously promised retribution for her cheek.

As the hour grew later, they spent time with Draco and Luna and chatted briefly with Gregor Ustinov, the new Minister of Magic who had replaced a retiring Kingsley Shacklebolt two years earlier.

Hermione had never met Ustinov before and had to admit that his leadership thus far had yielded mixed results. He was obstinately by-the-book, which wasn't necessarily a quality that Hermione disliked, but he had shown himself to favour rules above reason on more than one occasion, and that was never a good sign.

Ustinov was a tall, thin man with rapidly receding wisps of willowy grey hair brushed sideways in an unsuccessful attempt to hide his balding pate. His features were unremarkable other than a pair of abnormally large, full lips that were strangely mismatched to anything else on his face.

"Severus, so good to see you again," he said as he greeted Snape. Hermione noticed he had an odd speech impediment: not a lisp, per se, just a bizarre habit of making his "s's" sound like "sh's," so that Snape's given name was pronounced as "Sheverush." She idly wondered if his inordinately large lips were partly to blame for this.

Snape politely bade the Minister a pleasant holiday and introduced Hermione when Ustinov turned his curious brown eyes on her.

"This is Hermione Granger, a fellow professor at Hogwarts," Snape informed him.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Minister," Hermione said with a smile, feeling a bit childish for her fixation over his speech.

"Yes, hello," he told her, flattening his mouth into an astoundingly thin line while offering his hand for a limp handshake. His murky eyes studied her intently, and a strange snarl curled his upper lip, as if he smelled something unpleasant.

Turning back to Snape he frowned slightly and said, "I must be going." Then he raised one eyebrow and seemed to regard Snape quizzically before turning on his heel and joining other wizards vying for his attention.

"What an odd man," Hermione remarked when he was out of earshot. "I didn't realise you had met him before."

"Yes, he came to St Mungo's for a photo opportunity."

"Oh, of course," she said quietly. She slipped her arm through his in a subconscious gesture of support at the reminder of his many years spent in the hospital. He patted her hand and gazed at her intently, as if he were working out a complicated Arithmancy problem in his head. Then he smiled, and she quickly forgot all about the new Minister of Magic, caring little for anything but the man leading her back onto the dance floor.

She was glad for the many people occupying the ballroom, as it gave her an excellent excuse for diversion. Several times throughout the evening, she had seen Lucius Malfoy watching her, and she had the distinct feeling he was trying to catch her alone. She took careful steps to ensure she remained surrounded by fellow partygoers. The tactic worked, and he seemed reluctant to approach her with anyone around.

She'd been flirting with Snape...suggesting they'd been there long enough...when Draco sought them out and insisted on dancing with her. Snape walked away graciously, which, considering the way she'd just propositioned him, showed amazing generosity.

"I believe I know someone who's going to have a happy Christmas," Draco told her with a knowing smile.

"I haven't any idea what you're talking about," she said with a laugh.

"I'm thrilled for you, Granger. For both of you, actually. Severus deserves something bright and good in his life at last."

"Yes," Hermione agreed and then frowned. She'd been doing everything she could to avoid her past tonight...living a lie that was neither bright nor good. On top of that, she'd been incredibly selfish, so concerned with her own memories of Malfoy Manor, she hadn't once stopped to consider what horrific things Snape had experienced here. Voldemort had used this house as a sort of command post during the war, and as his most trusted advisor, Snape would have undoubtedly been a frequent visitor.

Feeling remorseful, she searched the room as she continued to dance with Draco. She located Snape at last, standing by the fireplace with his arms folded across his chest. An old witch stood beside him, talking excitedly. His shoulders were slightly slumped, and he looked exceedingly bored, but when their eyes met, he instantly straightened. The dull look fled his face, replaced by a slight smile, just for her. She smiled back at him slowly.

"Girl, you've got it bad," Draco drawled as he watched her face.

Hermione looked at him quickly and swallowed hard. "I know," she admitted. She hadn't wanted to think about it, and even now, she wasn't entirely convinced that her heart simply didn't know the difference between intimacy and love. But each time he touched her, she felt her armour slipping further, and she was helpless to stop it. "I just wish he did, too," she told Draco quietly.

"He hasn't taken his eyes off you all night," Draco told her. Knowing his keen powers of observation, she believed he spoke the truth. But it didn't come close to convincing her that Snape's feelings matched her own.

"I think he just likes the dress," she said with a smile.

"Every man in the room likes the dress, love," he confirmed, making her giggle. "But only one gets to leave with the woman inside it."

Hermione felt herself blushing and thought, *it's enough*. She had known going into this that Snape would never be hers to keep. She would just have to learn to savour however much he would give to her while she could and hope it continued to be enough.

They finished their dance, and Draco led Hermione to Luna, who was sitting in the corner watching the dancers with a smile on her face. Draco excused himself, and the two women sat in companionable silence, gazing at the elegant couples swirling around the dance floor, a colourful blur before their eyes. After a few minutes, Luna informed Hermione that she felt like going for a walk. She stood and held out her arm, and Hermione took it, no longer surprised by the way Luna rarely conformed to the normal standards of society.

They strolled around the perimeter of the ballroom, and Luna said, "You and Professor Snape look lovely together."

Coming from anyone other than Luna, the words "Snape" and "lovely" being used in conjunction would seem sarcastic, but Hermione knew she was being genuine. "I had hoped we were being discreet," she told Luna.

Luna smiled her faraway smile and said, "Oh no, it's quite obvious. Of course, people don't always see things the same way I do, so it's entirely possible I'm the only one who's noticed."

Hermione laughed and said, "I've missed you, Luna."

Luna smiled, plainly touched. She looked away and appeared to be contemplating something. "You know, in school, everyone always thought you and Ron would get together. But I never could see that. You're much more suited to Professor Snape. I think you're very much alike."

Hermione arched her brow. "Are you saying I sweep around the castle like a bat and terrorise my students?" she asked with a laugh.

Luna chuckled and said, "I doubt that. No, I mean that you're both smart and charming and noble and strong."

"Don't let Severus hear you say that," warned Hermione. "I can't imagine he'd enjoy being referred to as charming, and he just might hex you for suggesting he's noble."

"But he is, isn't he?" Luna persisted, piercing her with a questioning gaze.

Hermione nodded and felt the absurd sting of tears in her eyes. "Yes, he is," she whispered.

"I'm so pleased for you," Luna told her. "I've been hoping you'd find happiness. Of course, I'm feeling rather happy, and it makes me just want to see everyone as content as I am."

Hermione watched as a small, secretive smile played across Luna's shining face. Without any further preamble, she announced, "I'm pregnant."

Hermione gasped and stared into her friend's face, smiling at the joy she saw. "That's wonderful, Luna! Congratulations!"

"Thank you. It's very exciting. Draco doesn't want to tell anyone yet: he didn't want his parents announcing it to the world tonight."

"That's understandable," said Hermione.

"Mmm. I think he likes the idea that it's just our little secret for now. But I don't think he'd mind me sharing with you," she said. A small frown creased her brow as her voice trailed away.

"I'm honoured, Luna," she told her.

"I think you're rather good at keeping secrets though, aren't you?" Luna asked, and Hermione froze. Her mind tumbled frantically, searching for an explanation for her words...for some idea of what secrets Luna could possibly know about.

Luna elaborated, "You were the one that kept Dumbledore's Army safe from discovery for so long."

Hermione let out a sigh of relief and then cursed herself for feeling so paranoid. Being in such close proximity to Lucius was obviously making her jumpy.

They continued walking and eventually left the ballroom. Soft music flowed into the entrance hallway, caressing their ears as their feet sunk into the luxurious carpet. Luna sent an absentminded wave to one of the portraits on the wall, and they soon entered the drawing room.

Hermione surveyed her surroundings as a chill ran down her spine. The last time she'd been in this room, the furniture had been carelessly pushed against the walls and Bellatrix Lestrange had been using the Cruciatus Curse to torture her. The room looked lovely now, filled with decadent chairs and dominated by the large marble fireplace.

Somehow, she couldn't reconcile the beauty of the room with her memories of it. "Doesn't it bother you to be back in this house?" she asked Luna suddenly.

Luna turned her large blue eyes to Hermione and drew her brows together. "It used to," she admitted. "But I find if I stay away from the cellar, then I don't mind it so much."

Considering the many weeks Luna had spent locked in the cellar of Malfoy Manor, Hermione was amazed that she now seemed so content with her life, having married into this family. Then again, few people could have guessed the secret behind Hermione's intense dislike of Lucius Malfoy: the rest of the wizarding world seemed to accept the fact that he'd repaid his debt to society. Gregor Ustinov's presence tonight only confirmed this. She had no doubt that for all outward appearances, Lucius was an upstanding citizen and a tolerable father-in-law to Luna.

Unfortunately for Luna, Lucius was the only father figure she had left. Xenophilius Lovegood had died peacefully, not long after Luna and Draco had wedded. In many ways, it had seemed that old Xenophilius had just been waiting to make sure his daughter would be cared for before passing from the earth.

"The girls are usually here with us, you know," Luna said. "And there's something about the sound of children laughing that seems to chase away the darkness."

Hermione nodded, then frowned as she watched Luna's eyes grow wide and a bizarre look overcome her features. Luna quickly pulled her arm away and said, "They call it morning sickness, but I always get it at night!" before hurrying from the room in a blur of blue ball gown.

Hermione started after her friend in concern, but she had quickly disappeared around a corner, and Hermione had to assume that Luna knew this house better than she. Making a mental note to send over a bottle of her Sickness Potion, Hermione turned back to the drawing room for one final look. She stood in the centre of the room, and her eyes rose to the magnificent crystal chandelier which was obviously a new addition. She had been in a state of semi-consciousness when Dobby had dropped the old chandelier the day he had rescued them. In her head, she could still hear the horrendous crash as the crystal had shattered into thousands of shards.

"Reminiscing?" asked a cold voice, startlingly close behind her.

Hermione spun, cursing the sound-muffling ability of the thick carpet. Lucius Malfoy stood towering over her, so close the scent of his expensive cologne filled her nose and made her stomach knot. The delight in his smile was a chilling contrast to the menace in his eyes.

"I was just admiring the new chandelier," she told him, pointing to the ceiling. She was hoping he had some unpleasant memories of his own: Voldemort had to have punished his faithful subjects severely for letting Harry slip through their hands that day.

She was glad to see his lips curl in displeasure.

"You've been avoiding me," he accused.

"I'm sure you're imagining things," she told him, stepping around him to leave the room.

He made a derogatory "tsk" as he grabbed her arm and shifted his body to block her exit. "Such appalling manners, Miss Granger. One might be forced to question your upbringing," he said nastily.

"Let go of me."

Rather than releasing her, his fingers bit deeper into her arm.

"That's hardly an appropriate way to treat your kind host," he began, "or your former employer."

Her gaze flicked to the door of the room, checking to see if they could be overheard.

Lucius noted her actions and said, "Ah, let me guess... You haven't told anyone that you worked for me." There was a twisted smile on his face at having made the discovery.

A quick memory surfaced in her mind, transporting her back to her hiding place in a cramped broom cupboard at Arglist Industries. She had been shocked to recognise Lucius's distinct voice and had hidden herself instinctively. She'd held her breath as he had spoken to Henri Garnier, the Director of Arglist, discussing the horrible ways they would use the results of research she had once thought brilliant.

"I didn't *know* I worked for you," she hissed at him. "If you recall, I left the moment I found out."

Lucius' face contorted with fury, lips snarling as his fingers squeezed her arm harder. "I quite clearly remember the fact that you destroyed millions of Galleons worth of equipment and research first, you impulsive little bit..."

"Has anyone seen..." Draco's distracted voice came floating in from the door. Both Malfoy men stopped speaking at the same time, regarding each other coolly in the strained silence. Lucius's hand remained clamped on Hermione's arm, but before she could open her mouth to speak, his fingernails sunk into her flesh in warning. He shielded the sight with his robes, hiding his actions from Draco's vision.

Draco seemed very aware of the expression on Hermione's face, however. He looked back and forth between his friend and his father, and his brows drew together in a frown. "What's going on in here?" he asked quietly.

"That's not your concern, Draco," Lucius replied sternly. "Miss Granger had just agreed to grace me with a dance." Then he turned to Hermione and asked, "Shall we?"

Hermione could see the dare in his cold blue eyes, taunting her to refuse. She considered briefly, wondering how much he was willing to say...how much she was willing to refute...if forced. *So many secrets*, she thought with disgust. He'd be implicating himself as well, but the damage he could inflict in the process was considerable. It wasn't a risk she was willing to take.

"Of course," she said and allowed herself to be led from the room.

Draco was regarding her intently, and she knew she must have looked upset: she could feel her cheeks burning. She averted her eyes from Draco as she walked past, wanting to avoid a scene at all costs.

"Now, where were we, Miss..." Lucius began in a quiet voice but stopped when Draco called out to them.

"Hermione, I forgot... Severus wants you to meet..." he started, but Lucius snapped at him again.

"Don't interrupt, Draco!" he silenced him angrily. "You were raised better."

Lucius ushered her through the hallway and back to the ballroom where she began searching the many faces for Snape.

"Looking for someone?" Lucius asked mockingly. He placed his hand on the bare skin of her back as he led her into a waltz. Hermione shrank from his touch, an act he undoubtedly noticed. He splayed his fingers out and explored, seeming to enjoy the look of revulsion on her face.

Smiling down at her, he said, "Mikolaj tells me the Acromantula Venom was a stroke of genius."

Hermione felt sick at the confirmation that Mikolaj Brukowski, her old Potions professor, was indeed trying to pick up the research she'd left behind. Her stomach twisted more at his next words.

"He's found a way to neutralise the Dragon Bile, though." His smile grew lurid.

"Mikolaj would never be working for you if he knew what you were planning," she told him hotly.

"Oh, but he does know, my dear: he's known all along. Why do you think he encouraged you to accept employment with Arglist in the first place?" he asked, his expression almost gleeful.

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. She remembered how odd it had been when Brukowski had come to her, suddenly suggesting she take the job with Arglist Industries. Her hands began to shake at the realisation that Lucius had been holding the reins, even those many years ago.

He chuckled at her silence and continued to spin her around the dance floor, nearer to the orchestra.

She looked away and stared at the other couples gliding along happily, oblivious to the terrors inside her head as they blithely enjoyed the holiday party. She knew that anyone watching them would think Lucius Malfoy the most charming of hosts. They'd have no idea the evil he was capable of, and they'd never suspect that his arm around her waist felt more like the walls of a prison closing in on her.

"It doesn't matter," she said at length, although she could hear the uncertainty in her own voice. "Brukowski can have all of my notes. He still won't know how to recreate the samples."

Lucius clenched his jaw. For a fraction of a second, an unpleasant snarl crossed his face, fleeing as quickly as it had appeared. She knew she had finally managed to score a point against him. Lucius must have already come to the conclusion that her notes were not enough, and she felt a small ray of hope that the horror she had unintentionally created was truly gone forever.

His features suddenly arranged themselves into a handsome smile. "I fear you underestimate me, Miss Granger," he said, sounding refined and polite. She trusted this side of him even less.

In an equally polite tone, she replied, "Not at all: I've always regarded you as the very incarnation of evil."

"Ah, but I'm a generous man," he said, ignoring her insult. "If you return, I'll forgive you the immense cost of the destruction you caused at Arglist. Mikolaj can be your apprentice: how would that suit?"

"Not a chance," she told him flatly.

"Be reasonable, my dear. A brand new laboratory... The best equipment money can buy... Every convenience in the world at your fingertips. Surely you miss that?" he purred.

Hermione remembered the first time she had seen the amazing labs at Arglist Industries and how desperate she had been to work there. After six years of second-hand, grant-funded equipment at Jagiellonian University, the appeal of everything Arglist had to offer had been overwhelming. They'd possessed equipment she'd only read about in periodicals, some pieces one-of-a-kind. It had been ridiculously easy to accept their offer of employment, and that, she realised in retrospect, should have been her first warning.

The pull had been intoxicating, drawing her in like a lover who knew every illicit fantasy that had ever entered her mind. From the power of running her own lab with her own rules, to the limitless resources provided to her, she'd been given everything she could think to ask for. Too late, she learnt that such greed and desire always come at a terrible cost. She would never allow herself to repeat that mistake, so she answered Lucius's question rather flippantly. "No thanks. I prefer my draughty castle."

"Come now, Miss Granger," he whispered, spinning her in a circle and placing his mouth very near her ear. "Everyone has a price. What is it you want most in this world? Just name it."

Hermione was surprised when a sudden image of Snape rose in her mind. Lucius's smile broadened as he watched her. Too late, she realised the corners of her mouth had lifted when she had pictured her lover. Not wanting him to misinterpret her expression as deliberation, she frowned and shook her head, but her refusal was lost by his next actions. A change in the cadence of the dance had the couples turning large, sweeping circles on the dance floor. Lucius took the opportunity to manoeuvre her around the side of the orchestra and through a heavy black curtain at the edge of the ballroom. A sudden blast of icy air forced her lungs to constrict: he had brought her outside, alone on the cold, dark terrace.

While her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, Hermione tried to pull away from him, determined to find her way back to the curtain. But the man obviously knew his house better than she did and deftly steered her away from her goal, refusing to relinquish his hold. He gripped her arms tightly and backed her into the hard, stone wall of the house. The frigid rock bit into her bare back, causing her to gasp loudly.

The sound of her cry seemed to encourage him, and he pressed himself against her body. She pushed against him, the taste of bile rising to the back of her mouth at the feel of his thighs flattening hers. She beat her fists against his chest, but he was standing so close that it was impossible to put any leverage into her blows. Shock flooded into her brain. She'd been certain that Lucius had always despised her: he'd treated her with nothing but disdain until tonight. But as his body pinned her to the freezing wall and his hips ground into hers, a different kind of fear gripped her. She struggled to push him away, intensifying her efforts to extricate herself.

Although she could hardly be considered a weakling, Lucius's strength proved far superior to hers. She soon accepted the fact that her efforts were futile and drew a deep breath to scream, thinking to draw others onto the terrace.

Obviously sensing her intention, Lucius halted his actions and quickly ducked his head towards her. He whispered into her ear, his voice barely audible but no less threatening. "Don't make a scene, my dear. You wouldn't want to be forced to explain yourself."

Hermione stood completely still, silently loathing him.

"Good girl," he breathed in a whisper, pulling his face back slightly. His eyes travelled over her features, lingering long enough on her lips that she felt a fresh wave of revulsion spread through her body.

"So beautiful," he said, tracing a finger along her jaw. "I seduced you once before," he reminded her, his tone low and sultry. "I can do it again."

Hermione closed her eyes, hating the truth in his words. She *had* been seduced by the offer from Arglist. And she'd been too blinded by desire to question the generosity; to investigate the source of all that money; to learn that Lucius Malfoy owned Arglist Industries. There was no way she would allow that to happen again.

"I believe you'll find I'm no longer a naïve girl," she told him.

"Yes, I can see that," he said, moving his hand to her hip, sliding it slowly up her waist and ribcage. "I must say, I quite like the way you've matured."

The light from the full moon overhead cast long shadows, bathing his features in a ghostly white pallor. Hermione shivered as his face dipped closer, his teeth gleaming in the moonlight like a vampire about to bite.

"Come back to me," he said, almost lovingly.

"You must be mad," she whispered.

His hand tightened around her waist. "I'll give you everything you desire."

Hermione was about to point out that she desired nothing more than the removal of his groping hands, but a slight movement from the corner of the terrace caught her eye.

"I hope I'm not interrupting?" Snape asked smoothly as he approached them, his arms folded.

"Severus!" Hermione cried with a startled gasp. His sudden appearance seemed to surprise Lucius as well: he dropped his hands, and she was able to shove him away as relief coursed through her. Then Snape's words and the tone of his voice sunk into her brain. She froze, trying to piece together what he might have overheard. Dread filled every pore of her body when she imagined how she and Lucius must have looked. Without knowing the context, their exchange could be easily...horribly...misconstrued.

Lucius didn't help matters by turning to Snape and speaking with a tone of mock repentance. "My apologies, Severus. I'm afraid I just couldn't resist the charms of this alluring little witch."

"No!" Hermione shouted, stepping towards Snape with her hands held out in plea. "This isn't at all how it looks!"

Snape lazily shifted his gaze to her. Hermione braced herself for the anger and hurt she would surely see in his eyes, uncertain whether she could bear either. She searched the ebony depths and found... nothing. There was no anger, no disgust, certainly no pain. He might have been looking at a speck of dust for as much emotion as he exhibited.

He turned back to Lucius and indicated Hermione with a dismissive flick of his wrist. "Be my guest," he said, then turned his back to them and walked down the steps of the terrace.

"Severus, wait!" Hermione called after him. She hurried to the top of the stairs, but it was too late. He turned on the spot and was gone with a turbulent crack that split the night and sliced through her pounding heart.

She stood there numb, staring at the spot where he had just been. There was a soft chuckle behind her, and she heard Lucius speak, his tone ingratiating.

"Oops. I hope I didn't cause a misunderstanding... New relationships can be so fragile."

Hermione whirled around and stalked past him, grabbing for the curtain that led back to the house and yanking it aside.

Lucius placed his hand on her arm, halting her progress. "Think about my offer," he said.

"Never," she spat.

The warning tone in his voice was clear. "I believe you will find my patience is limited, Miss Granger. One way or another, you will return to Arglist."

"You can't blackmail me, Mr Malfoy. You have just as much to lose," she tossed at him, hoping it was true.

He chuckled again and whispered, "Perhaps. But I have many other means at my disposal. I'm certain I can find a way to... convince you."

In the distance, some of the revellers were beginning to turn their way as the curtain she held open allowed the cold December air to blow through the orchestra and into the ballroom. She stepped inside, trying to put as much distance as possible between herself and Lucius. All around her, the sights and sounds of holiday merriment continued. She heard nothing but a ringing in her ears and saw only startled faces as she pushed her way through the crowd.

Stumbling into the entrance hallway at last, she paused at the door, desperately trying to stop the uncontrollable shaking that had overcome her body. She was in no shape to Apparate, and she knew if she tried right now she'd end up Splinched. Or worse. But the longer she stood there, the more frantic she became to find Snape, which in turn only intensified her shaking.

"There you are, Hermione," Draco said to her back as the servant who had taken her cloak earlier approached with it in his hands. "I was trying to tell you before... Severus wants you to meet him on the terrace. It sounded pretty romantic..." There was a teasing tone in his voice that made Hermione close her eyes.

"Thank you," she heard herself mumble. She couldn't help thinking of how easily the incident could have been avoided, had she been given this message earlier. Her nausea returned as the irony sunk in. She flung her cloak around her shoulders haphazardly before heading out the door. Then she remembered that Draco had been speaking to her.

With wild eyes, she turned back to him. "Happy Christmas, Draco. Thank you for a lovely party," she added, only vaguely aware that her voice rose with an alarming note of hysteria. She fled through the front door, running across the manicured grounds as the sounds of Christmas music mingled with Draco's calls and slowly faded into the distance.

A/N: At last, I can explain how I chose the name for Arglist Industries. As you probably know, in French *mal* means bad and *foi* is faith, making 'bad faith' the literal definition of Malfoy. My online translator claimed the German equivalent for 'bad faith' was *arglist*, although I've since learnt it's one of the lesser-known definitions (primarily, the word means guile, malice, and cunning, which are also quite appropriate, although it does sound a bit Scooby Doo to name a company Guile Industries). Too bad Flitwick's *Reddo* charm didn't work on proper names... Then again, this would have been a very short story if it had!

As always, huge glomps to Karelia and little_beloved for being such wonderful betas, and many thanks to lettybird for Brit-picking.

Twelve for a Lie

Chapter 14 of 33

Snape discovers the truth about Hermione's past. A secret she'd never meant to reveal also comes to light.

Chapter 14: Twelve for a Lie

Hermione wasn't quite sure how she managed the journey back to Hogwarts Castle. She arrived in the dungeons after what had felt like an eternity, her thoughts jumbled. Entering the living quarters, she was unsurprised...but nonetheless disappointed...to find the sitting room empty. She felt a surge of anger over the way Snape had left her at the party: he hadn't even allowed her a chance to explain. Then again, she doubted there was any possible way her encounter with Lucius could have appeared more compromising. She recalled the innuendo-laced words Lucius had spoken, shuddering to think of how easily her struggles might have looked like encouragement. It was little wonder Snape had misinterpreted the scene he'd witnessed. She had to find a way to convince him her feelings towards her former employer involved nothing but loathing. The truth about her research at Arglist would explain everything, but she fervently hoped it wouldn't come down to that. Since the beginning of their relationship, she had been mentally debating whether or not to reveal the details of her past, but she'd always held back, fearful of what his reaction would be if he learnt of her monstrous activities.

Hermione remembered the look on his face when he had found her on the terrace and realised there was something worse than being seen as a monster. Even his anger wouldn't have been so bad: fighting with Snape was familiar territory. She could have handled that. It was seeing that detached look in his eyes...that utter lack of emotion...that had left her feeling cold all over.

She walked to his bedroom door, relieved to see light spilling out from the crack on the bottom. She knocked softly. "Severus?"

No answer. She listened carefully for movement. Nothing. She knocked again, louder.

"Severus, please open the door," she said.

She thought she heard something at last, the springs on the bed perhaps. But the door remained shut.

Raising her hand, she pounded on the door this time, saying, "We need to talk. I know you're in there. Open this damn..."

The handle was yanked open, and he filled the doorway, looking impatient. "We'll talk tomorrow, Hermione. It's late, and I'm tired. I just want to sleep now. I suggest you do the same. Good night," he said, moving swiftly to swing the door shut.

Hermione panicked. She had to explain; she couldn't just leave everything as it stood, knowing he'd got it all wrong. Without thinking, she stuck her hand in the door to stop it, howling in pain when the slab of wood slammed down hard on her knuckles.

He threw the door open wide and thundered at her, "What the hell are you doing?"

"I must speak to you," she said, cradling her injured hand.

"Let me see it," he ordered and held out his hand for hers.

She ignored her throbbing fingers and stuck her hand behind her back. "It can wait. We need to talk first."

Looking distant again, he said to her, "There's nothing I wish to discuss with you tonight."

"Right... I'll talk, and you can just listen," she offered before he could return to his bedroom.

"I have no desire to hear the details of your affairs, Hermione."

"But you have to understand that there was no affair! Not with Lucius Malfoy...never with him!" she spat.

"Pray do not insult my intelligence. I was on the terrace the entire time."

"Good! Then you heard him threatening me!"

"I heard the whispers of lovers." He spoke in a hiss, and there was disgust in his voice now. He took two steps towards her, leaving the threshold of his room, his lips curling into a snarl. But then he stopped abruptly, as if angry with his inability to remain aloof.

"Not of lovers, Severus," she said, shaking her head. "Believe me, that's not what you heard."

"I heard you gasping in his arms... It happens to be a sound I'm familiar with."

She was confused for a moment: Had she gasped? Then she remembered. "The wall was cold," she whispered.

Disgust had moved from his voice to his face. "Am I to believe you were merely trying to stay warm?"

"No, apparently you're just going to believe the absolute worst of me, no matter what I say!"

He paused, jaw muscles flexing over clenched teeth. "Your past lovers are no concern of mine..." he said, completely ignoring her continued protests, "but I will not tolerate being made to look like a fool." Shaking his head slightly, he closed his eyes for a moment and emitted a deep, fast sigh through his nose. "And to think I actually believed

your reluctance to attend the ball was due to your past trauma at Malfoy Manor."

"It was!" she cried. *At least part of it was* Her stomach clenched with the acknowledgment of the lie...it was a lie of omission, but a lie nonetheless. He snorted in disbelief, and guilt clawed at her insides. They both knew she was hiding something.

"I should have known your attempts to distract me had nothing to do with desire...you simply wanted to avoid having your history with Lucius revealed." There was no escaping the bitterness in his tone.

"That's not true," she whispered, hating she couldn't deny it with more vehemence. Her desire had been real, but so too was the fact she'd been willing to use that desire to convince him they should skip the ball. His assumption on the nature of her relationship with Lucius was false, but it hardly made her actions any less despicable. She had hidden the truth from him and lied to him. Worse, she had used their newfound intimacy to manipulate him. Tears of frustration stung her eyes. She had thought she could bury her past, had imagined it was her safest option. She had never intended to spawn more secrets, or to cause pain and doubt. Snape had only recently revealed some of his insecurities to her, and she had reason to suspect there were more lurking within him. Seeing her with Lucius tonight had to have been an enormous blow to his self-confidence.

"I know it must have looked dreadful, but I promise you: there is nothing remotely intimate or personal in my history with Lucius."

"No?" he asked doubtfully. "I suppose you just randomly chose tonight to make up for that oversight?"

"No!"

"Are you forgetting I was there *the entire time*? I heard what he said... I saw you in his arms. You were all over each other. You looked like a common..." He stopped himself before the insult was finished, but she could guess what he had been about to say. She didn't care to examine the look that crossed his face as he turned to walk away.

"Severus, please listen to me," she pleaded, following him into his bedroom. "I was pushing him away."

"Oh, really? Is that what you call it?" he asked, rounding on her.

"He's stronger than I am," she tried to explain. "I was trying to get away from him."

"Yes, I saw how hard you were *trying*. Did you lose your wand? Or perhaps he was helping you find it..."

"I didn't want to create a scene... at the party," she said.

"Why?" he asked. "If what you say is true, why would you care to spare your host the embarrassment of a scene?"

"I... I..." Her mouth worked to form words, but none came. She knew her arguments seemed shallow without the reasons why she'd been avoiding a scene. She was asking him to believe her on blind faith alone, a task that would have proved difficult for even the most trusting of men in a well-established relationship. Her mind wrestled with telling him more, and she searched for a way to convince him she wasn't lying without revealing everything.

As her reticence continued, he gave her a look of utter contempt and walked past her, leaving his bedroom as if unable to abide being in the same room with her.

She followed him once more, trailing behind as he stalked to the kitchen.

"Severus, please. You have to believe me." She heard the trace of hysteria in her voice, but didn't care.

He turned to survey her, his gaze scornful. "Hermione, stop this. You're going to embarrass yourself," he said with quiet disdain.

"I'm telling you the truth," she said desperately. "Let me prove it. I'll take Veritaserum!"

There was a brief flicker in his eyes, a moment of consideration, but then he looked away and walked passed her again, out of the kitchen. She turned and followed him, knowing she was losing him. The sight of his retreating back confirmed her failure. She had to stop him, had to think of something, anything...

"Please... give me the serum!" she suggested again. "Or you can use Legilimency to..."

"*Legilimens!*" he shouted, spinning around to face her with his wand already drawn. She didn't even have the chance to finish her thought before she was hit by a powerful force, knocking into her so hard she stumbled backwards. Then she was aware of nothing but the feel of her head being split open.

He approached her quickly, his wand still drawn, dark eyes holding hers. Against her will, she felt herself sinking to her knees on the floor, overcome with the searing pain in her head but unable to break eye contact. Images and scenes seemed to flit through her mind, beyond her control. The dizzying speed made her stomach lurch.

Then the images ceased their movements, and she was watching her entire encounter with Lucius tonight, beginning with the moment he approached her in the drawing room and ending shortly after Snape's exit from the terrace. She tried to steer her mind in another direction, away from the fact she'd worked for Lucius, to show there was nothing intimate in their past. But it was too late: he'd seen everything. A part of her felt relief. Surely, this proved she was telling the truth about her relationship with Lucius. She waited for the pain to abate, but Snape appeared to be in no hurry to end his exploration.

Her mind was spinning again, zooming past years of memories before stopping abruptly on that fateful day at Arglist Industries. She recognised her cramped vantage point from inside the cupboard and watched once more as Henri Garnier, the Director of Arglist, stood with Lucius Malfoy. She listened as Garnier explained to Lucius how she'd combined science with magic to travel a path that had begun with researching the effects of potions on Muggles versus wizards and ended when her team had successfully isolated the gene responsible for magical children being born to non-magical parents. She nearly retched when she heard Garnier explain how they'd begun the complex process of mapping the gene behaviours. It would be the final roadblock to Lucius's ultimate plan: the development of a vaccine to prevent the birth of Muggle-born witches and wizards. She recoiled once more from Lucius's twisted delight in the irony that she...a Muggle-born witch...had created the means to wipe out her own kind.

Another pain tore through her head as her mind left the broom cupboard. She was vaguely aware of the fact that she was sobbing, but she couldn't determine whether her tears came from being forced to remember the horrors she'd created at Arglist or if they were merely the result of the tortuous Legilimency session. It hardly mattered, as her crying seemed to have little impact on Snape. Nothing seemed to compel him to release his connection to her mind. They sped from scene to scene: one moment she watched herself destroying her lab with Acromantula Venom and Dragon Bile, the next she was once again setting Garnier's office aflame.

Her head was beyond agony now. She was certain it would burst apart at any moment. But the blur of memories flying around inside her brain didn't stop: it was almost as if he was searching for something. Her recollections of Lucius were coming faster and shorter: random images from the day the Snatchers brought her to Malfoy Manor and long-forgotten bits from encountering him at the Department of Mysteries when Harry had retrieved the prophecy.

Then the images changed entirely, and rather than thinking about Lucius, she found herself concentrating on Snape. Disjointed memories flew through her head in a haphazard fashion. If the pain hadn't been so debilitating, she might have wondered why these thoughts were so scattered compared to the relative organisation of the previous images. Her recent trysts with Snape sped by quickly, like fanning through the pages of a scrapbook. Then came her childhood memories of him: she felt the old, impotent anger as she watched him bully Harry; she was flooded with mortification when he called her an insufferable know-it-all; and her heart raced as she watched herself stealing the ingredients for Polyjuice Potion from his private storeroom. There were other quick scenes from school, then the longer, more ghastly picture of him lying prone on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Next, she was in the headmaster's office, listening to Neville ask why his portrait was missing.

And then, terribly, she saw herself removing his memories from the Pensieve. He seemed to linger on this: the image remained in her head for several long seconds, her body shaking as her mind fought to think of something else...*anything* else. Again, there came the burning pain and the horrible motion as he sped past images, stopping to watch her and Harry discussing what should be done with the memories, and her eagerly volunteering to keep them safe. With a sinking certainty, she realised what was coming, knew where his precise mind would venture next. She fought against the invasion with every ounce of control she had, desperate to stop his probing, until her head felt as if it would explode and the distinct taste of blood permeated her senses. More pain, more spinning, and then finally, inevitably, she was watching herself commit the treacherous crime of entering his memories many years later, watching them, alone in her room.

The pain in her head began to fade. She felt him leave her mind, and she gradually became aware of her surroundings again. She was still kneeling on the floor, just outside of the kitchen. Now that she could move, she sat back on her heels and bent forward, cradling her face in her hands. A relentless drumbeat pounded at her temples. She used her fingertips to massage the area while her palms wiped away the hot tears coursing down her cheeks.

"Where are they?" he asked. His voice sounded strange, eerily detached and distant.

She turned away, unable to meet his eyes. "Please... Let me explain. I only looked once..." she began.

He moved fast...faster than should have been possible for a human...and crouched over her. Rough fingers grabbed her chin, jerking her head around and forcing her to look at him. His face was almost unrecognisable, contorted into a mask of rage that would have immobilised even the bravest of recipients. When his voice came out in a whisper, it was more terrifying than if he'd shouted. "Where are they?"

She was shaking uncontrollably, but she barely noticed. "Wait, you have to understand..."

"*Legilimens!*" He cast the spell again, without warning. She felt her head being torn asunder once more, the pain no less excruciating for its familiarity. An image rose in her mind: she saw herself placing the phial of his memories into a small mokeskin pouch. One final, horrible stab of pain, and she watched herself setting the pouch in the drawer of her nightstand.

He flew away from her. She fell forward, wrapping her arms around herself tightly and rocking back and forth. Tiny red spots appeared on the floor beneath her face, and she realised her nose was bleeding. From her bedroom came the sound of wood splintering, and then he was back, tossing the pouch at her.

"Open it."

She straightened, retrieving the material with trembling fingers. Her hands were shaking so violently she fumbled her efforts to unfasten the knot securing the drawstring. Compounding matters were the tears blurring her vision, making it difficult to see what she was doing. Panic bubbled up inside her.

As Hermione wondered how the act of proving she hadn't slept with Lucius Malfoy had led to this, a fresh flow of tears sprang to her eyes, blinding her. It was little consolation that he now knew she wasn't Lucius's lover. The price for that simple revelation had been the discovery of her two darkest secrets: that she'd unwittingly found a way to wipe out all future Muggle-borns, and that she'd trespassed on Snape's most intimate memories at a time when he was helpless to object. She truly was a monster.

"Open it," he demanded again, fury rising in his voice.

"I am so sorry," she said, looking up at him miserably.

"OPEN IT NOW!" he thundered, advancing on her in a flash. His wand lifted from his side, and he slashed it towards her threateningly, stopping when the tip was no more than an inch from her temple. Angry red sparks popped from the end of the wand, a manifestation of the rage pulsing through the wizard whose knuckles had turned white from gripping its handle so hard.

She fought the urge to squeeze her eyes shut as sparks sizzled and jumped near her forehead. Slowly, she moved her gaze to his wand, staring at it transfixed. He was an immensely powerful wizard: one fast curse could cause her excruciating pain. Or even death, if he hated her enough. The moment stood frozen in time, stretching into the silence with neither moving. She held her breath, waiting for the curse to come.

But it never came: the wand slowly lowered from her head, and she shifted her eyes to his face. He appeared to be visibly shaken, as if shocked by his own actions. She bent her head and returned her attentions to the pouch, concentrating on the drawstring closure.

Reaching into the worn fabric, her fingers closed around the cool glass phial, and she spoke as she extracted it. "I've done two things in my life that I've regretted every single day." The shaking in her voice was mirrored in her hands as she held the bottle towards him. "This is one of them."

He snatched it from her fingers, making no reply. His gaze travelled over her face briefly, surprise still evident as he surveyed her. Then he straightened and walked away, leaving her on the floor. She heard his bedroom door slam shut, and she closed her eyes as the sound echoed through the living quarters.

Clutching her stomach, she bent forward again. Guilt flooded into her as she recalled the day she had viewed the private filaments of thought, so many years ago. She'd been about to leave university and begin her job at Arglist, which should have been a happy time. But her three-year relationship with a fellow student had been unravelling at breakneck speed, and they'd just had their final, terrible row.

She would never understand what had compelled her to do it. She had known it was wrong, had known that entering into someone's memories without their permission was inexcusable, unforgivable. But she had somehow justified her actions, convinced that Snape would never regain consciousness. She had told herself she had just needed to see proof that real, true, gut-wrenching, soul-shattering love had existed in the world.

She had remembered what Harry had said to Voldemort during their last battle, how he'd told him of Snape's love for Lily Evans. And afterwards, when Harry had pulled her and Ron aside and had explained what he'd seen in the Pensieve, it had all sounded so tragically beautiful somehow. Through the years, she had romanticised the memories into a sort of poignant montage of infatuation.

The memory of Harry's words had ceased to satisfy her, though, and she had insisted on having her precious proof. And so she had looked: She had seen Snape's deep love for Lily, had felt the intensity of it along with the hopeless yearning. But the memories didn't end with unrequited love. There had been more, so much more...things Harry hadn't told them about...things she hadn't ever wanted to see, and yet she'd been unable to look away, as if she were watching some horrific train wreck of a life. She'd witnessed first-hand his infinite, overwhelming grief when Lily was murdered and the inescapable guilt of knowing he'd provided the catalyst for the act. Very quickly, the images had become too much to bear.

These were not the storied memories of a fairy-tale love. Instead, she had seen the images of a miserable upbringing. She had watched him being humiliated by James Potter and striking back at Lily, and she'd been carried along on his spiralling trip into darkness with its irrevocably tragic results. She'd served penance alongside him as he'd switched his loyalties and spied on Voldemort, only to be manipulated by Dumbledore and then hated by Harry even as he had worked to save him.

She had always regretted her impetuous decision to enter his memories, and it all came crashing back on her now as she knelt on the floor, crying. She had seen betrayal before, but she had never been the one to commit it. Part of her brain was working like mad for a solution, searching for a way to fix the damage she'd created and make it right. But her heart knew too well that some things were beyond repair.

"Get up."

Hermione looked up with a start: She had not heard him return. He gazed down at her, his expression unreadable.

"Get up," he said again. There was very little emotion in his voice: he sounded mildly impatient at best.

She did as she was told, standing ungracefully while forcing her wobbly knees to lock.

"Wipe your face," he said, holding out a handkerchief. He spoke in curt, clipped tones.

She swiped the cloth over her swollen, wet face, noting that her tears had stopped at his reappearance. Apparently, she was too stunned to cry. Judging by the abundant amount of red staining the handkerchief, the nosebleed had not been similarly affected.

He unscrewed the cap from a small jar in his hand and stepped towards her, raising it to her face as he approached. She stumbled back from him instantly, automatically, and his hand froze in mid-air. A strange look crossed his face at her reaction.

"For nosebleeds," he said tightly, turning the label towards her as his jaw clenched. She studied the bottle closely, seeing the sprayer apparatus on the end. He moved the jar towards her again, and this time, she did not flinch, allowing him to squirt the liquid into her nostril. It smelled like warm summer roses, and when she wiped the handkerchief across her nose once more, she found that it had stopped bleeding.

"Thank you," she offered quietly.

"Show me your hand," he said, ignoring her gratitude.

She held it towards him, unsuccessfully willing it to stop shaking. There were angry red marks across her knuckles. He traced his wand over the area but never once touched her hand.

"It's not broken. Use the Essence of Crystalwort."

She dropped her hand and watched his face. The medical attention had been a surprise, although she suspected it had come more from a sense of obligation than anything else: His extended use of Legilimency had caused the nosebleed, after all. Of course, she *had* been the one to suggest he probe her mind for the truth, and some part of her had to have known he'd discover more about Arglist while doing so. She had never intended for him to learn of her other treachery, though. But considering the nature of her crime, anger over his lack of permission would be the ultimate in hypocrisy. Their actions had been similar, but at least Snape had made no attempt to hide his trespasses. Considering her betrayal, she was amazed that he had returned, and even more amazed when he continued to stand before her, staring.

"You had no right," he told her at last.

"I know. It was incredibly wrong," she said.

"Did you enjoy the show at least?" he asked with a bitter smile. "Did you invite friends over to watch?"

"You know I didn't: you just saw it!" she said. His expression quelled at the reminder of his recent exploration of her mind, and she elaborated, "I was alone. I had just ended a bad relationship."

Dark eyelashes swept down to his cheeks; he held his eyes closed for a moment, lips twisted in disgust. "And did it cheer you to learn that your life would never be as pathetic as the one you were watching?"

Hermione took a quick second to wonder where her newfound ability to say precisely the wrong thing had come from. "It wasn't like that at all... I had only wanted to see what love really looked like."

He opened his eyes, and she stumbled back from the raw pain reflected in their darkness. "It's not pretty, is it?"

She shook her head.

"You had no right," he repeated. "They were never meant for you...or for anyone! I never would have given them to Potter if I hadn't been certain I was dying."

"I understand."

Her agreement only seemed to anger him further, but she could think of nothing else to say. There were no excuses that could justify her actions. It had been a mistake: unforgivable and impossible to undo.

The anger drained from his face, but the torment that replaced it was worse. "I thought they'd been destroyed. When were you going to tell me you'd kept them...watched them?" he asked, his tone accusatory.

Her eyes filled with fresh tears as guilt and shame pressed down upon her, making her shoulders slump. She shook her head, unable to explain how she'd struggled with precisely that question. In retrospect, she should have handed them over on Halloween when he had first returned to Hogwarts. But she hadn't thought of it then, and their relationship had been so rocky that she'd delayed the inevitable, thinking the perfect opportunity would present itself eventually. Once they'd become intimate, she had found more excuses to wait, knowing he would be furious, hating that she would ruin their tentative trust.

"Were you *ever* going to tell me?"

"I... I don't know," she answered. She could be honest with him now, for the first time. It was little consolation.

Several moments passed with neither speaking. "Those were pieces of my soul," he told her at last. "Not a therapy tool for a foolish girl."

"It wasn't therapy...it was curiosity," she tried to explain. "Unforgivable curiosity," she quickly amended at his glare.

She could tell she was once again saying all the wrong things. There was nothing left to offer. With a deep breath, she bolstered her courage and said quietly, "I wanted to know what it was to be loved like that."

His expression darkened at her confession. A muscle near his eye twitched and his nostrils flared like a bull catching its first sight of a matador. "You will never know that," he stated, "because you will never be Lily."

She looked down at the floor, trying to hide the tears. As his words washed over her, she felt herself growing colder and colder until at last she was numb.

"Of course not," she mumbled in agreement.

She had told herself his heart was beyond her reach, but somehow, his words sliced her anew, settling deep inside where all the darkest thoughts liked to play. She felt foolish for having fostered that faint hope of discovering some sort of a future together. He loved Lily. *Always*. And even if he hadn't, whatever chance they might have had for something more had just been destroyed by her damnable secrets and lies.

Biting her lip thoughtfully, she returned her gaze to his face. For a moment, she thought she saw her own remorse reflected in his eyes. Then his expression became guarded, and she blamed the sight on her overwrought imagination.

She said the only thing she could say to him, although she knew it wasn't enough. "I am very... *very*... sorry." Then she turned and walked to her bedroom, knowing he would not stop her, he would not follow. The certainty didn't keep her from listening for him as she slowly closed her door.

Waving her wand over the shards of broken nightstand, she felt sorrow descend upon her so heavily each breath she drew seemed to require more strength than she possessed. She stared at the perfectly repaired table, wishing a spell could somehow fix the damage she'd wrought tonight. But the disadvantage to having read practically every book ever written about magic was the knowledge that such wishes were futile and such spells did not exist.

With unbearable sadness, she removed her party dress and slid naked between the cold cotton sheets of her bed. Memories of their spontaneous tango danced into her mind, unbidden. Her thoughts tortured her with delicious reminders of what they'd be doing right now if not for her treachery. The certainty that she'd never again know the feel of his arms stole into her head and refused to leave, weighing upon her heavily, making her body feel as if it had been cast from lead.

Her ears strained for sounds, and finally, she heard the faraway click of his bedroom door closing. She turned on her side. A single tear slid to the bridge of her nose, clinging there for several heartbeats before finally falling onto her pillow.

The room was quiet except for the occasional hiss of embers dying in the fireplace. Her gaze moved to the clock perched atop the mantle; her eyes focused and then closed. Somewhere amidst the pain and betrayal and heartbreak, midnight had passed them by, unseen. Christmas had arrived.

A/N: Thanks to everyone for leaving reviews on my story... I've been remiss in responding, and for that, I apologize. I'll be anxious to hear what you think of this chapter. It's a tad tragic, but we all know that life and relationships are rarely smooth, and the real test lies in how people move beyond the rough patches. Many thanks, as always, to my lovely betas, ladyinthecloak and little_beloved, and my fab Brit-picker, lettybird. Those girls ROCK!!

Thirteen for the Truth

Chapter 15 of 33

Christmas, Murder-style: recriminations, explanations, declarations... and a new threat is revealed.

Chapter 15: Thirteen for the Truth

The sound of laughing students greeted Hermione when she entered the Great Hall later that morning. Sleep had proved elusive, but at least the pain in her head had faded to a dull ache. The urge to snarl at the children singing Christmas carols was difficult to suppress, but she managed it nonetheless, just as she forced herself to smile and respond to the various holiday greetings thrown her way. Although the timing was coincidental, she still felt inordinately perturbed that Christmas had not been cancelled for her emotional crisis.

Snape had been absent from their living quarters when she'd left her bedroom, and he had obviously decided to avoid the Great Hall as well. She went through the motions of joining the other teachers at the staff table, curling her lip as breakfast materialised before her. Her thoughts were disorganised, random: regrets bounded through her brain like a herd of fleeing gazelles. It was a pointless endeavour, but still, she couldn't stop herself from recounting the choices she had made, examining each scenario for alternatives. Before long, she had slipped into the dangerous game of wondering precisely where it had all gone wrong, as if it could be charted. Her life had succumbed to the butterfly effect...one decision had somehow started the soft wings flapping until eventually, unavoidably, they'd created this tornado, sucking her in, obliterating her world.

Her musings were broken by a voice.

"Is anything the matter, my dear? You haven't touched your porridge!" Filius Flitwick stood at her side, his small frame half-observed by the vacant chair where Neville normally sat. It was not the voice she had wanted to hear.

With a smile pasted on her face, she intoned the requisite holiday pleasantries.

"Would you care to join me?" She indicated Neville's chair, knowing he'd be spending Christmas at St Mungo's with his parents and grandmother.

Filius shook his head. "Thank you, but I've just finished. I saw you ignoring your breakfast and wanted to make sure you were quite well."

Touched by his concern, she gave him a small but genuine smile and said, "Just a slight headache."

He patted her arm and winked. "A bit of overindulgence at the Malfoys' last night?" he asked.

She nodded, hoping he hadn't noticed the blood draining from her face.

"I believe Severus has an excellent potion for times like this. You should convince him to share the recipe!" His eyes twinkled with merriment.

She mumbled her thanks, promising to heed his suggestion. After he left, she relaxed her shoulders and allowed the tight smile to dissolve from her face. Her porridge had grown cold, and the sight of the gelatinous beige mass made her nauseous. She pushed it aside, untouched, settling for strong tea instead.

A shadow fell across the table; lifting her gaze, she saw an owl swooping down with a roll of parchment clutched in its beak. A hastily penned note from Draco was deposited beside her plate. She read his concern over her abrupt departure from Malfoy Manor and smiled at his suggestion that she speak to Minerva about joining him and Luna for the remainder of the holiday. She spent the next hour drafting her response, painfully cognisant of the secrets and lies that had got her into her current predicament but deeming their continuation necessary. As much as she hated lying to Draco, she had no desire to ruin his Christmas...and his excitement over Luna's pregnancy...by explaining the intricacies of his father's loathsome plans. Draco was far too perceptive to be fooled and too intelligent to settle for a sanitised version of the truth. For now, the less he knew the better. She doubted she'd be able to continue the charade for long.

The effort spent making her reply to Draco sound grateful, light-hearted, and suitably convincing drained her. By the time she trudged up the stairs to the headmistress's office later that afternoon, her limbs were heavy.

Finding the office empty, Hermione placed a brightly-coloured box on Minerva's desk. Before the term had begun, she'd found a lovely brooch shaped like a Quidditch Cup trophy. It was inlaid with garnets and yellow topaz, the colours of Gryffindor, and she suspected the headmistress would superstitiously wear it to the matches.

Removing a small envelope from her robes, she placed it alongside the box and turned to leave. She glanced at Dumbledore's portrait and started at the sight of him smiling down at her. Although Dumbledore was always present for the headmistress, he was hardly the type of portrait to content himself with staying in one location for long. It was rare to catch him alone like this.

"Ah! Hermione," he greeted her warmly. "Happy Christmas!"

"And to you, Professor," she told him.

"You seem troubled, my dear."

She smiled at him, not at all surprised that even in portrait form he was keenly observant. "Holidays can be melancholy," she offered.

He looked sympathetic. "You must be correct: Severus was in here earlier looking even more grim than usual." The blue eyes sparkled when her head snapped up.

"That's my fault, I'm afraid," she said, startled by her own admission.

"You've had an argument?"

"Yes... No," she began, looking down, unable to meet his piercing gaze. "I did something... unforgivable."

"I see." He sounded grave.

"It was a long time ago when we all thought he'd never wake up," she tried to explain before stopping abruptly. "There's no way to justify it. What I did was wrong, and I knew it was wrong. And I've regretted it ever since."

Dumbledore pondered her for a moment. "I believe you'll find that if anyone understands regrets and poor decisions, it's Severus. Just be patient. I daresay he'll come around, eventually."

She doubted that. "I don't see how he could forgive this. Has he ever forgiven himself for his own mistakes?"

He paused, seeming to consider her question. "Perhaps not," he agreed at length.

She nodded, the confirmation making her somehow sadder than her earlier confession.

"But it seems to me that forgiveness is a bit like a Christmas cake," he said, and she gaped at him when he actually held up a Christmas cake next to his face in the portrait. "You'll find that people are often willing to give it to someone else even when they'd never want to receive it themselves."

She chuckled at the analogy and could almost hear Ron's voice in her head, proclaiming Dumbledore was off his rocker.

"I hope you're right, sir," she told him finally. She wished him a Happy Christmas again and left.

It was late on Christmas evening when Hermione finally saw Snape. She had returned from Minerva's office to find the living quarters empty. If it hadn't been for her conversation with Dumbledore...and a freshly brewed bottle of headache tonic on the kitchen table...she might have thought he'd packed up and left the castle entirely. Tracing her finger along the bottle of tonic, she wondered about the gesture. Was he feeling remorse for the harshness of his actions the previous evening? She'd spent the day wrapped in a blanket of regrets, sparing very little thought to how much fault he shared.

In one way, she had embraced the pain...the shame she carried for having wronged him could not be assuaged by mere words. Access to her memories seemed like a fair price to pay for having stolen the same from him. If an explosive Legilimency session was the pound of flesh he demanded from her, she was willing to give it, if only to temper the all-consuming guilt that spread like a cancer.

Then again, his journey through her mind had strayed off course *before* he had learnt of her indiscretions. If she hadn't, in fact, had something so monumental to hide, no doubt she'd be feeling very different about his actions.

With her thoughts once again in turmoil, she sat before the fire, book in hand, although the ability to concentrate was as distant as the moon. She let the warmth of her favourite overstuffed chair envelope her, and she soon fell asleep. It was several hours later when rough hands shook her awake.

Snape loomed over her chair, a large scroll of parchment tucked beneath his arm. She straightened and blinked as her eyes adjusted to the darkened chambers.

"Beds are for sleeping, not chairs," he chastised her.

The sight of his face made her throat constrict. It was clear he had not slept: shadows darkened the hollows beneath his eyes, and his skin appeared ashen. For a brief moment, his guard lowered. He searched her face, revealing a glimpse of something so raw, so vulnerable, she flinched from the knowledge she had caused it.

"I'm sorry." She regretted much more than her choice of sleeping locales.

"Did you take the tonic?"

She shook her head. "My head is fine," she said, noting the look of relief on his face. "I didn't realise Legilimency was painful."

His hands clenched into fists. "It rarely is...I've never seen anyone react..." His voice trailed away, and he seemed unable to meet her eyes. "That should not have happened."

"No... It shouldn't have." Her tone held reproof, as much for his actions as hers.

"You were hiding something about me. I had to see what it was."

"How could you know I was hiding something about you?"

"I felt it the instant I entered your mind," he said, as if the explanation should have been obvious. "Have you never attempted to perform Legilimency?"

At the shake of her head, he slipped into teaching mode, sounding just as she remembered from his lectures.

"It's difficult to explain if you've never explored another's thoughts. Individuals...acquaintances, colleagues, friends..." he paused, his expression darkening, "...lovers...imprint upon the mind in very specific ways, as do strong or traumatic memories. By their very nature, deep secrets leave a unique trace. It was immediately clear there were two such incidents in your mind...one involving Lucius, and the other..."

"Your memories." Now she was the one finding eye contact impossible. "I shouldn't have looked at them."

"Yes," he agreed. He sounded weary, and she couldn't stop her gaze from seeking his face. His expression surprised her. "And I should not have pushed beyond what you were willing to show me. We are...neither of us...blameless."

She swallowed, thinking of the pain they'd both inflicted, the decisions that had brought them here. "I never intended my curiosity would overrule my conscience."

In his eyes, there appeared a fleeting moment of recognition, but it was gone in an instant. "I can understand curiosity...obviously...I couldn't resist the pull, either." He frowned, studying her as if she were some puzzle that defied a solution. Shaking his head, he said, "But to have kept this from me for so long... each time we were intimate, knowing this and yet..."

He took a step back from her, still staring intently, and then the mask came crashing back in place. The discussion was over.

"I'm sorry," she said, hating that she had somehow justified living the lie the entire time she'd been sleeping with him.

His gaze flicked over her body, curled into the chair, and his tone became gruff. "You'll injure your neck if you sleep in that ridiculous chair. Go to your room." He sighed, closing his eyes and dropping his shoulders at the unfortunate choice of directives. Had it been any other time, they might have laughed at the preposterous command...go to your room.' Instead, he scowled and said, "Good night."

"Good night," she mumbled to his back as he retreated. She watched his door close, keeping his image in her mind as she stretched the kinks from her neck and departed for her bedroom. Exhaustion stole into her body, creeping along her arms and legs but stopping cold when her mind refused to yield. She lay awake, haunted by the memory of his eyes and the pain she had caused. For the second night in a row, she contemplated the ways they might have been celebrating Christmas if not for the chain of events that had begun at the Malfoys' Christmas Eve ball.

As terrible as she felt, though, some part of her was relieved to share the burden of her secrets at last. It was not the way she would have wished for him to find out, but at least it was no longer tormenting her thoughts. With a bitter sigh, she turned on her side and allowed the approach of slumber. For good or bad, the truth was out there now, and she had nothing left to hide. Unfortunately, the truth made for some very lonely nights.

The remainder of Christmas break passed quietly. Snape was frequently absent, and Hermione had no wish to force her company upon him. They were professional...cordial, even...when discussing students or staff matters. The only personal conversations they held occurred when Snape appeared unable to stop himself dispensing some directive regarding her well-being.

Looking down, she examined her fingers, wiggling them beneath the Burn-Healing Paste he had wordlessly handed her that morning when she had once again filled their small kitchen with smoke. Her cooking skills were not entirely lacking: she could certainly follow a recipe and rarely burnt her dinner. It was the simpler tasks, like toast, that proved a challenge, especially when her mind was distracted and her thoughts unfocused.

A soft knock forced her attention away from her fingers. The students had returned, and the castle had come alive with activity. Vanishing the door, she was greeted by a roll of parchment nearly twice as large as the house-elf who stood clutching it, trembling.

"An owl is delivering this for you, miss." The elf's voice was so high, the windows rang. Hermione had never seen this particular elf before; she was tiny even by house-elf standards. A miniscule napkin hung from her small frame, brushing the floor with its frayed ends. There was a terrified look on her face, and Hermione guessed that an owl large enough to deliver the scroll could have easily carried her off for dinner.

"Thank you," she said, taking the parchment from her. "What's your name?"

The elf looked taken aback by the question. With a wary look, she squeaked, "Pitty, miss...with two t's."

"It's nice to meet you, Pitty," said Hermione, wondering how anyone could have thought the addition of an extra 't' improved the unfortunate name.

Pitty stared up at her with enormous, round blue eyes. Most of the house-elves at Hogwarts gave her a wide berth: They had not forgotten her childhood attempts to secure their freedom with poorly-knitted hats and socks. Although she had long-since abandoned S.P.E.W., she had come to realise that house-elves had excellent memories.

After a lengthy consideration, Pitty bowed her little head to the ground in greeting. Hermione didn't care for the subservient gesture, but she refrained from remarking, knowing it was futile to force her ideals onto others.

The little elf departed with a squeaky farewell, and Hermione took the parchment to the sofa. She unrolled it with a frown, cold dread pressing down upon her as she read the simple message within.

Last chance...

Like the previous post she'd received from the large eagle owl, a scrap of newspaper was rolled into the parchment. This one appeared to have been clipped from a Muggle newspaper: the text was boring and static. She picked it up with shaking fingers and read:

Stuttgart, Germany

A man was found dead in his flat in the Zuffenhausen district, the result of an apparent suicide. Authorities have confirmed his identity as 68-year old Mikolaj Brukowski, a recent émigré from Poland. Mr Brukowski was employed by Arglist Industries in Böblingen, south of Stuttgart. No suicide note was found, but authorities have ruled out foul play. Mr Brukowski's only known relative was a brother who predeceased him in November.

The dread that had filled her turned into something else...something frigid and dark. It spread through her limbs, settling into the tips of her fingers as she sat staring at the cutting in numb shock. Hot tears burned her eyes but did not fall. She had many fond memories of Mikolaj Brukowski, and they flooded her mind, uninvited. He had been her mentor and guide for so many years, and she'd been honoured when he'd begun to treat her as a colleague. It was very hard to believe he had supported Lucius's plan to prevent Muggle-born births, and she suspected he had been duped, just as she had been.

Despite the revelation that Brukowski had encouraged her to consider the job at Arglist Industries, she held no censure for him. In retrospect, he had been acting oddly when he'd made the suggestion, and she couldn't help but wonder if he'd been coerced. And it wasn't as if Brukowski had forced her to accept the lucrative offer. The decision had been solely hers. It had been her ambition...her avarice upon seeing the facilities and being offered such resources...that had convinced her, not the recommendation from Brukowski.

She tossed the papers on the table and held her face in her palms, unable to bear the words any longer. Although the authorities had deemed the death a suicide, she had serious doubts. The message on the parchment seemed menacing...was the accompanying story meant as a warning? At the Christmas Eve ball, Lucius had acted angry with the lack of progress in recreating her research. Had Brukowski been eliminated when he'd ceased to prove himself useful? Surely her gruff but loveable professor had not willingly been party to the type of selective genocide Lucius had proposed. Perhaps he had discovered the truth, and the knowledge had driven him to take his own life.

A wave of nausea swept through her when she contemplated her role in Brukowski's death. It was *her* research that had sent him to Arglist in Germany, whether he had known of Lucius's plan or not. Her work had officially claimed its first victim. She clutched herself tightly and leaned forward, squeezing her eyes against a rush of dizziness.

She did not hear the sound of Snape's footsteps, so she had no idea how long he'd been standing beside her. The feel of a hand on her back had her whipping up in alarmed surprise, grabbing for her wand, relaxing only when she realised who had touched her.

"Are you unwell?" he asked, referring again to the only topic he seemed comfortable to confer on.

"No," she replied. "I'm fine." *If only the same could be said for Mikolaj Brukowski* she thought bitterly. Gesturing to the parchment on the table, she said, "I've received some disturbing news." Then she turned away from him and stared at her knees, deep in thought.

Snape seemed to hesitate; he shifted away but then returned. He was obviously having some sort of inner battle with himself, but Hermione was too lost in her own thoughts to pay him much attention. After several moments, and with an elaborately deep sigh, he sat next to her on the sofa, earning her attention at last.

"Tell me," he said.

Too surprised to speak, she handed him the piece of newspaper and watched his face as he read. She had sorely missed being able to observe him like this. Her eyes searched every line and feature on his face, looking for changes. When he finished reading the cutting, she handed him the parchment. His eyes narrowed when he scanned the brief contents.

Snape set the papers on the table and stared across the room. "I met Brukowski once, at a lecture. He seemed like a good man," he reminisced.

"He was," she confirmed. "At least, I always *thought* he was. We didn't cover ethics much..." She trailed off, thinking in retrospect how regrettable that oversight was.

"And you believe his research was related to yours?"

"Yes. Lucius said he was working to recover the notes and samples I destroyed when I left Arglist."

He seemed to consider for a moment. "This research of yours... it eliminates all Muggle-borns?"

She gasped and tried to explain. "No! I mean... it could, potentially. But that was never my intention!"

"What *were* you trying to accomplish with such research?" he asked.

She paused, feeling the old horrors washing over her. How could she possibly explain when she hardly understood it herself? The circumstances had changed so slowly...with such subtlety...she hadn't been aware that she was being led by a different, darker agenda. In the end, events had spun out of control so quickly she hadn't known how deeply she had been involved until it was too late.

Taking a calming breath, she said, "It began innocently, or so I believed. My initial projects were fairly straightforward. At university, I had used science to examine various potion elements on a molecular and sub-molecular level. My goal at Arglist was to take this one step further, by studying the effects of a potion within the biology of the witch or wizard who received it. Understanding the body's reaction helped us refine potions in ways we had never considered."

She watched him carefully for a reaction. After a moment, he said, "So you moved from experimenting with a potion in a cauldron to a potion in a person."

"Yes." She bit her lip, wishing she had realised at the time what a steep, slippery slope she had strung her tightrope across. "We achieved several successes, and I was honoured when we drew the attention of Henri Garnier, the Director of Arglist. It was Henri who insisted I tour the Muggle branches of Arglist with him. He explained their focus on pharmaceuticals...specifically, the research and development of vaccines. Henri tasked my team with discovering why Muggles are prone to illnesses that witches and wizards are immune to. I had thought we might one day create vaccines for Muggles based on immunities that exist in those with magical powers."

He frowned at her but said, "Continue."

She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. "Unfortunately, I never again stopped to question our direction. I accepted the twists and turns our research had taken as part of the inevitable process of discovery. One breakthrough led to another, and soon we were studying Muggle-borns, like me. Our genetics belie the possibility of immunities to Muggle diseases, yet obviously, they exist. That led to research on the Muggles who had given birth to magical children. Eventually, we isolated a gene that all Muggles have, which, given the right conditions, will produce magical offspring."

She paused and shook her head miserably. "I had completely lost sight of the original goal," she said. "In retrospect, it was a smokescreen anyway, but perhaps if I'd stopped to consider... If I had just once thought about what the results of research like that could lead to in the wrong hands."

She stood up and paced, the memories making her nervous.

In a small, bitter voice she continued, "But I didn't stop and consider. I celebrated my success and started the gene-mapping process, giddy with triumph, never once wondering where it all would lead."

Snape regarded her silently. She found his lack of speech more telling than any accusation. For the first time, perhaps, he could fully comprehend how horrific her actions had been.

"It was complete chance that I was in the lab when Henri brought in Lucius Malfoy," she told him. "It was the middle of the night; I'd just gone back for a notebook, and I recognised his voice. I hid from view and heard them discussing my research...how they could use it to create a vaccine that prevented Muggle-born births."

"You didn't know Lucius owned Arglist Industries?" he asked sceptically.

"Of course not!" she replied. "I never would have accepted the employment contract if I had known!"

"Didn't you investigate the company before you took the job?"

"I... I had met Henri Garnier, and I reviewed the Board of Directors," she offered. It sounded feeble, even to her own ears. In truth, she had only given the organisation of the company a cursory examination.

Her pacing became jerky as her feelings of stupidity grew. "I never saw any mention of Malfoy on anything."

He sighed. "Yes, Lucius has always been skilled at keeping his business interests private. And I suppose you would have required some level of suspicion before launching an investigation into the company's financing."

"I was naïve," she said, turning to him. "I should have questioned it. I should have questioned many things."

She returned to the sofa and sat next to him, clasping her hands in her lap and staring at them, unseeingly. "I was blinded by what they had offered me. My own lab, all the resources and funds I could ask for. It was more than I had ever dreamt of. I started out believing I could do something wonderful, but I ended up... a monster, no better than Lucius Malfoy."

Snape was quiet for a very long time, contemplating her. Finally he spoke. "I understand you find this disturbing, Hermione," he began, "however, I think the term 'monster' is a bit dramatic."

She shook her head. "But look what almost happened..."

"Listen to yourself," he interrupted, sounding impatient. "It *almost* happened. What did you do when you learnt of their intent?"

"You saw what I did...I destroyed the research," she supplied instantly.

"All that hard work?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Of course! I couldn't risk them recreating it somehow..." Her gaze trailed away from him, inexorably drawn to the newspaper cutting on the table.

She could feel his eyes on her as he said, "It's quite easy to be tempted by power. The abilities we possess require immense responsibility. The greater the power, the more difficult it can be to discern the line between right and wrong. Combine that with the invincibility of youth, and you'll find that few are able to resist discovering just how far their magic can be taken."

She considered his words, knowing they were spoken from personal experience, and she pondered the parallels that had sent them on their different journeys into darkness. They seemed to share an insatiable thirst to prove themselves, to validate their position in the wizarding world. In different ways, they had both allowed their quests for acceptance to blind them.

"Even the mighty Albus Dumbledore struggled with this," Snape informed her. "I'm sure Dumbledore would agree that while it is difficult to resist the allure of power, it takes even more strength to walk away once you've experienced it."

"Perhaps," she said, still uncertain.

"Did you tell anyone about this?" he asked.

She nodded. "I met with Kingsley, about a week later." She stared straight ahead, remembering. "I told him everything: the results of my experiments, Lucius's role at Arglist, what would happen if his goals were achieved." Turning to meet his eyes, she finished, "Then I told him how I'd destroyed everything when I trashed my lab and set fire to Garnier's office."

"And what did Kingsley suggest?"

With a dissatisfied shrug, she answered, "Not much. He was upset there wasn't any evidence of the research left to use against Malfoy."

"I'd imagine so," he agreed dryly.

"I don't regret that, Severus," she told him, passion forcing her voice to rise. "I had no choice. Even if I had given Kingsley everything I'd been working on, Lucius hadn't necessarily committed any crimes at that point... I had only heard him speaking of his plans."

He nodded. "It's doubtful such hearsay would have carried much weight."

"Exactly. And you know what the Wizengamot is like... How long do you think a trial filled with cutting-edge, scientific methods would have lasted with those old curmudgeons? It would have been nearly impossible to prove intent. And in the meantime, the research would have been exposed, unprotected...it could have easily fallen into the wrong hands. I trust Kingsley, but there was too much at stake to just hand it over to the Ministry."

She frowned at the almost wistful look in his eyes, but it was gone in a flash. With a sigh, she continued, "Kingsley was very kind. He pretended not to remember my confession of vandalism and suggested I put it all behind me and focus on a new life here at Hogwarts. He said the Ministry would keep tabs on Arglist Industries in general and Lucius Malfoy in particular."

His expression became guarded, but he offered no comment.

With another shrug, she added, "Kingsley retired the following year, and I have no idea what happened during the transition. Even if Gregor Ustinov knows about it, there's nothing he can do without proof. Until this year, I had thought...hoped...it was over for good. I should have known Lucius would never abandon his plans." She let her head fall forward into her hands and massaged her aching temples. "I've made such a mess of things," she said miserably.

She felt his hand on her back again. This time, she did not jump, although she was even more surprised by the contact than when he'd first found her. His touch was brief; in seconds, his hands returned to his lap, curling into loose fists.

After a moment, he said, "Everyone makes mistakes, Hermione. It's our ability to learn from them...to atone for them...that determines whether or not we're monsters."

She thought about his words for a long time. Had she learnt from her mistakes? Yes, there was no doubt in her mind that the regret she felt was enough to ensure she would not repeat her earlier errors.

Lifting her head, she peered at the piece of newspaper on the table. How could she ever atone for the mistakes she'd made at Arglist? A man had just lost his life, and she couldn't help but feel it was partially her fault.

Seeming to read her thoughts, Snape asked, "Why do you feel compelled to assume blame for everything?"

She straightened, looking at him in surprise. "I don't... not for everything," she said. "But Brukowski might not have been at Arglist if it wasn't for..."

He cut her off by saying, "Mikolaj Brukowski was perfectly capable of making his own decisions. You cannot be certain his death has anything to do with Arglist."

"I'd bet my wand on it," she said, her tone laced with bitterness.

He peered at the newspaper cutting, then his eyes slid to the simple statement written on the parchment. "Does this research pose any immediate threats?"

Closing her eyes in concentration, she considered his question. "I don't believe the danger is immediate, no," she said after a lengthy mental debate. "Lucius wouldn't be so anxious for my return to Arglist if he were able to recreate the research without me. I suspect he's been attempting to do just that for the past few years, yet he hadn't attempted to contact me until recently. He must have encountered difficulties; perhaps that's when he brought in Brukowski. But now that Brukowski is... gone..."

Her voice caught, and she couldn't bring herself to finish.

"I know someone at the Ministry who can be trusted. I'll ask him to look into Brukowski's death without bringing any attention to your role with the research."

She shuddered, hating to think her role had anything to do with someone's death.

"Even if his death was related to the research at Arglist, you cannot assume that you are responsible," he pointed out. "Stop blaming yourself for events beyond your control. You did the same thing when you realised I hadn't perished in the Shrieking Shack."

She knew he was right; she was prone to feel guilt over things other people might not think twice about. It didn't matter if her mistakes were accidental...the many sleepless nights she'd spent agonising over having broken Harry's wand in Bathilda Bagshot's house could attest to that. It was simply a facet of being a perfectionist; it was so ingrained in her psyche she would hardly know herself without it.

"I don't know why I react that way," she said. "How can I *not* feel responsible when there's a possibility I could have helped?"

"You always have to be the perfect little Gryffindor, don't you?" he asked with exasperation. "Just like Lily..." His voice trailed away.

Hermione was sure she hadn't heard him correctly. She turned to stare at him, but his attention seemed to be held captive by the elaborate pattern on the sitting room carpet. She didn't dare move...she hardly even breathed. After several seconds, she assumed he was not going to expound on his comment.

But then she saw his eyes shifting. Without turning his head, he glanced sideways at her and spoke. "There are times when you remind me of her," he said quietly, his tone begrudging.

His admission couldn't have stunned her more. "I quite clearly remember being told I would *never* be like Lily."

"I said you would never *be* her...not that you are unlike her," he clarified. He focused on the floor once more and curled his lip. "Although, given our history, I can

understand how the difference might be difficult to appreciate. I've shown you how cruel I can be when I'm angry; it's yet another way in which I seem to be reliving my past."

"Oh," was all Hermione could think to reply with. She turned to stare at him.

"Why do you think I was always so hard on you when you were my student?" he bit out with an angry scowl.

"Because you disliked Harry," she answered automatically.

He didn't bother to argue the truth of her statement. "That's why I did my best to make *his* life difficult. But you..."

He gazed into her eyes, but he seemed unfocused, as if lost in memories. Then he looked away. "It was like watching history repeat itself. Another Muggle-born, sorted into Gryffindor. Another witch who excelled in her subjects...gifted with Potions...the brightest student of her age. Yet another wide-eyed innocent, destined to become Prefect and Head Girl..."

Bemused, she listened to him tick off the similarities between herself and Lily. The coincidence had never struck her before, but it was obviously something he'd given a great deal of thought to.

"... with appalling taste in friends," he finished, piercing her with a stern look. "Watching yet another conceited, attention-seeking Potter strutting through the halls each day was bad enough, but seeing you glued to his side was intolerable."

Hermione had no idea how to respond to this revelation.

Snape remained silent as well, and he seemed immensely uncomfortable to have revealed so much.

"I don't know what to say," she told him.

He turned to face her, his expression unreadable.

"I know I will never be Lily... Truly, I don't want to be," she explained, shaking her head. "Nor would I want to be a substitute for her memory."

"You're not," he said. The frown that creased his brow made her wonder if he was trying to convince himself as well as her.

"Your differences far outweigh your similarities," he supplied. Looking away, he continued, "Lily never forgave me for insulting her."

Having witnessed his memory of Lily's ire, she knew the detriment caused by that simple act. "Are you punishing me for her rejection?" she asked, incredulous. Her indignation rose as she considered the possibility. "Or are you testing me...seeing how much I will take before I cease to forgive you as well? Is that what you've been doing?"

"No," he said, shaking his head, although he looked uncertain. "I don't know *what* I'm doing."

Her sigh of relief seemed to surprise him. Despite the many remarkable things he had told her tonight, she thought this most recent statement was, perhaps, the most promising.

"Well, that makes two of us," she said.

They sat in silence for several moments. Neither seemed sure of how to proceed, yet there was no rush to separate. After several minutes, Hermione said, "You didn't think I was gifted with Potions when I was your student."

"True," he agreed at once. "But I can name only three second-year students who could have brewed a successful Polyjuice Potion: myself, Lily Evans, and, it would seem... you."

She looked away, a different kind of guilt creeping into her mind.

"I cannot believe you had the temerity to steal from my private storeroom!" he said, sounding appalled but perhaps a bit impressed.

Although the crime had occurred more than twenty years earlier, she still blushed over her blatant disregard of the rules...rules that had been so precious to her as a child. "It was important," she said, trying to excuse the infraction. "We had to find out if Draco had opened the Chamber of Secrets!"

He snorted at her reasoning, surprising her by laughing out loud. She had missed hearing the sound of his laugh, missed their teasing banter. Too quickly, though, his smile faded, and he grew serious once more. They withdrew into their private thoughts, and after a few moments, he stood from the sofa.

She knew the bonds of trust between them...as delicate as primrose dotting the hills in spring...had been trampled by his fear and anger, muddied by the footfalls of her mendacity. One conversation could hardly erase the damage they had done.

But it's a start, she thought.

"You realise, of course," he began, turning to look down at her, "this school has no statute of limitations on stealing."

Her head snapped up, and she found him watching her with a sly smile.

"I believe you've just earned yourself a month's worth of detentions, Miss Granger," he advised in that achingly familiar, sultry voice. He seemed to be studying her face closely, keenly alert as he slowly held out his hand.

She stared at his fingers, her pulse quickening. His hand was mere inches away, but the chasm being bridged by the simple gesture was greater than any measurement could quantify.

"Severus," she breathed, taking his hand as she rose from the sofa.

He drew her into his arms, hesitantly, perhaps waiting for her to push him away. When she didn't, he lowered his lips to hers, kissing her with a restraint that made her wonder what demons he was fighting, what internal struggle made him hold back and push for more at the same time. She deepened the kiss, a bit tentative, feeling as if they'd been apart for years rather than weeks. Everything was new again. The same, yet different.

"No more secrets," she whispered after their lips parted at last.

A bleak expression crossed his face, and she wished she hadn't reminded him of her recent trespasses. His features were twisted, but he said nothing. Instead, he crushed his lips against her mouth. His earlier hesitation was gone; whatever battle had raged in his mind had been decided. She was swept away by the intensity of his kiss, lost in sensation and the sudden need for release.

chapter; thanks to everyone who left a review. I enjoyed reading the diverse opinions and engaging in further discussions with those who left comments on my LJ. My apologies for the delay in posting this chapter...I've had squee-worthy out-of-town guests but will try to have an additional chapter uploaded prior to Christmas..

Hidden in a Sigh

Chapter 16 of 33

Hermione ponders labels while Lucius makes his presence felt.

Chapter 16: Hidden in a Sigh

With the arrival of February, a veil of boredom covered Hogwarts, and the grey weeks passed in a fog of cold monotony. Each day seemed endless; morning seeped into afternoon, and evening lingered over its slow death before reluctantly bleeding into night. A Quidditch match between Hufflepuff and Slytherin became the only event worthy of anticipation, but even that proved foolhardy. On match day, the wind came from the north, bitter and relentless. It raced over frosted hillsides, howling through branches laid bare by winter's scorn. The Quidditch pitch echoed with the sound of its fury, ringing out like the dolorous lament of a heart-broken wolf. Madam Hooch's shrill whistle pierced the air, and within minutes, the players' brooms were glazed with frozen rain. Shards of icy mist sliced at the faces of the spectators gathered to watch. The match ended when the Slytherin Seeker finally pried the Snitch...whose wings had frozen solid...from a prison of icicles where it had sought refuge beneath the castle eaves. Even the Hufflepuff fans cheered, grateful the game was over, eager for the warmth of their common rooms.

Within the shelter of the castle, two people seemed oblivious to the pervading gloom. Little by little, Hermione and Snape had moved beyond their shaky reconciliation. While their relationship would never return to the way it had once been, Hermione began to realise that was actually a very good thing. She had suffocated beneath a shroud of regrets and half-truths for too long. There was no longer anything to hide from Snape, and she could breathe deeply at last, relishing her newfound liberation. If only the cost for such freedom had been easier to endure, she might have been perfectly content. But rebuilding the shattered remnants of trust was a complex dance to learn...each time they mastered a new move, the music seemed to change. They stumbled through the unpredictable rhythm of remorse, the erratic tempo of forgiveness. Hermione marvelled at the paradoxical construct behind trust: how something so simple to destroy could require such time, effort, and patience to rebuild.

She became optimistic when Snape once again decided to habit the laboratory, working alongside her as they analysed ingredients and refined potions. By March, his proficiency in using the complex, scientific equipment was significantly impressive. Despite the disdain in his voice when he referred to the microscopes and analysers as her 'Muggle toys,' she noticed he, too, seemed fond of playing with them.

Eventually, she learned to relax whenever she'd journey to her lessons in the dungeons, leaving Snape alone in the laboratory. It might have seemed simple, but for Hermione, this was a major milestone. In the past, she'd been spectacularly possessive about any lab she had worked in, and strict protocol had always been followed. Snape was as obsessively controlling over the order of his workspace as she, so trusting him to stay behind came easier than usual. They worked well together, and she had no doubt the consistency of their precise, methodical efforts played a significant role in their success.

Finding peace in the familiar routine of such protocol and methods, Hermione pulled her notebook closer. She had just finished preparing a gel, and with a careful hand, she entered data for the cell cultures. Times, conditions, sizes, temperatures, and procedures were dutifully recorded, and she soon became engrossed in the entries, losing herself in the unique beauty of creating order from chaos.

"Please refrain from chewing on your lips," said a deep voice from across the room.

She had thought herself alone and started at the interruption. Her surprise turned to pleasure when she focused on Snape's face.

He crossed the room in a few, brief strides, holding her gaze the entire time. In a quiet voice, he informed her, "I rather enjoy having that task to myself."

After glancing at the door, his head dipped towards hers for a very soft, fast kiss. Despite its brevity, a sigh of contentment escaped her lips.

"Shall I cook something special for us tonight?" she offered.

"Does it involve toast?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

She pretended to pout. "Toast is harder than you might imagine," she defended. "But I was thinking of something a little *spicy*." She tried for a sultry tone but couldn't tell if she'd managed it. "I've an excellent recipe for lasagne."

His gaze fell to her notebook as he spoke. "Regrettably, I have a previous engagement," he said. "Are you amenable to a different night?"

"Certainly," she replied, returning to her task. "Tomorrow, perhaps."

She stared at her notes, hoping he hadn't seen the surge of curiosity that had almost certainly flashed in her eyes. It was not the first time she had wondered about his whereabouts. He often seemed to disappear for many hours, but she'd been loath to question him. The thought of becoming the jealous, interrogating girlfriend was unappealing in the extreme. Her brows drew together when she wondered if she could even apply the term 'girlfriend' to herself. As ridiculous as the designation sounded for a mature woman in her mid-thirties, it at least implied some sort of exclusivity. They had never set those parameters, and she began to wonder how he thought of her. Was she simply his lover? A friend with benefits? His significant other? Her teeth returned to her lower lip when she remembered the way he had likened her to Lily. Considering the precarious turns their relationship had recently taken, she was surprised by her sudden desire for a label, irritated by wanting...needing...to know how she fit into his life.

She flipped a page in her journal, pretending to concentrate on her notes as he moved to stand behind her. Her hair was pinned atop her head, and he stroked his fingers along the exposed skin at the base of her neck while saying, "Unfortunately, the antics of your Gryffindor third-years will require my presence at their detentions tomorrow night."

She wheeled around, her personal predicament all but forgotten. "Oh, Severus, you're not being horrid to my Gryffindors again, are you? Surely that nonsense is behind us."

"I resent your implication, madam. Are you suggesting I favour one House over another?"

"Are you denying it?"

"Most definitely," he said, raising his chin and looking quite superior despite the slight twitch at the corners of his mouth. "I despise all students equally."

She tried for an imperious look but somehow doubted it held much weight when followed so closely by her grin. Turning away, she saw Draco enter the laboratory and pounced on him.

"Draco, we need your honest opinion," she blurted before he could open his mouth to greet them. "Didn't Severus always favour Slytherin with more points than the other Houses?"

"Not at all," he replied instantly. "Severus would never stoop to such partiality."

Noting the identical smirks worn by both men, she muttered an unflattering oath. "And they called *me* insufferable," she said, shaking her head in resignation.

Draco's smile grew as he surveyed them. Obviously deciding they should both be equally irritated, he turned his attention to Snape and asked, "Have I mentioned yet how delightful you two look together?"

Snape's smirk transformed into a snarl, but Hermione just chuckled. She imagined few people called Snape 'delightful' and lived to tell the tale.

"What is your purpose here, Draco?" asked Snape.

Placing one hand over his heart, he fixed his gaze on the ceiling and extended his other arm towards the sky. "Ah, Severus," he said with excessive drama. "What is anyone's true purpose here? As Shakespeare said, 'there are more things in Heaven and Earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

Not to be outdone, Snape quoted back to him, "Yes... And 'a fool and his words are soon parted.'"

Draco grinned. "Too right," he agreed.

"How is Luna feeling?" Hermione asked Draco.

"She's quite well. That potion you sent worked miracles on her sickness."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"She looks amazing, too. All that rubbish they say about the sparkle of a pregnant witch is actually true for Luna." He paused to chuckle and shake his head. "She's convinced she has a little bump now, but I'm fairly certain her stomach is just expanding from all the puddings she's eating at breakfast."

"Oh, Draco," she said with dread. "Surely you haven't suggested she's getting fat?"

With a look of utter incredulity, he asked, "Do I look stupid, woman?" Speaking over Snape's unflattering answer to his rhetorical question, he said, "I'd prefer to live hex-free until this baby is born, thank you very much."

Hermione couldn't help laughing, but Draco appeared quite serious. Arching an eyebrow, he said, "I've *seen* the magic my wife is capable of...I learned after the last pregnancy to keep my mouth shut when Luna's around."

"A pity your wife doesn't visit Hogwarts more often, Draco," said Snape.

"I'll relate your regrets to her, Severus," he replied, deliberately misinterpreting the insult. "Actually, you can relate them to her yourself. My purpose here, as you so kindly inquired, was to invite you to dine at Malfoy Manor next Saturday."

Darkness stole through Hermione's mind, extinguishing all merriment and joy, leaving her cold and numb. She willed her features to remain neutral, knowing Draco was too perceptive to dismiss an inappropriate response.

"Dinner with your parents?" she asked. It was difficult to hear her voice over the buzzing in her ears. She exchanged a private glance with Snape, who said nothing.

"Yes, my father keeps mentioning what a charming dance partner you were and insisted I invite you both," Draco told her. "Luna and I will be there as well, of course."

Her cheeks heated, a flush blossoming on her face as anger filled her. She embraced the sensation, welcoming rage over fear. As loathsome as the invitation was, the fact that Lucius would use his own son as a tool to deliver the request had her hands clenching into fists, her fingernails scoring her palms.

Snape spoke at last. "Please thank your parents for the invitation," he said smoothly. "Unfortunately, we are otherwise engaged on Saturday next." He draped his hand over Hermione's shoulder as he spoke.

The gesture did not go unnoticed by Draco. "I rather assumed you'd find better ways to occupy your time," he said with a smirk. "I'll relay your regrets, however false they may be."

"Thank you, Draco," they said in unison.

He looked at each of them, his head swivelling back and forth as he smiled. "Shall I quote you more sonnets before I leave?" he asked.

"Not if you value your life," Snape told him.

Raising his hands in supplication, he bid them farewell and retreated. Snape walked him to the door of the laboratory, stopping at the threshold to exchange a few words. Their lowered voices rendered eavesdropping impossible, so Hermione watched Snape instead, trying to gauge his intentions from body language alone. After Draco departed, he remained at the door, staring into the hallway with a slight frown darkening his visage.

Closing her eyes, she tried to ignore the way Draco's words repeated through her head, a vile echo of a time she'd rather forget. *Charming dance partner*. Her stomach twisted as memories crashed around her: Lucius's anger as they'd danced at the Christmas Eve ball and later, on the terrace, his attempts to cajole and coerce her return to Arglist. She folded her arms across her middle, hands still balled into fists, and thought about the death of Mikolaj Brukowski.

"Have you received any news from the Ministry yet?" she asked.

"No."

She bristled from his curt reply, but he didn't appear to notice.

His voice did not soften when he said, "As I've told you the last fifteen times you asked: I will share the results of the Ministry's investigation when it's entrusted to me."

She turned away, feeling he was being a bit unfair. Surely she had repeated her inquiry no more than ten times ... twelve, at most. It had begun to feel as if help from the Ministry was pointless. Lucius might be obsessed with eliminating Muggle-borns, but he was not stupid, and he was certainly not careless. If he had played a part in Brukowski's death, it was doubtful he'd left any incriminating evidence behind.

Shifting her frustration to this most recent development, she said, "I cannot believe Lucius is using Draco as his messenger for threats."

"Are you certain Draco has no involvement with Arglist?"

"Y-yes." She lacked physical proof, but her instincts rejected the idea immediately. Perhaps the Draco of fifteen years ago...the arrogant boy Snape had known...might have supported such heinous plans. But not this Draco. She felt certain the man who'd just spoken of his pregnant wife with such adoration on his face would never willingly allow the type of malfeasance proposed by his father.

With a shrug he said, "Then, obviously, the invitation was only intended to upset you."

"Well, it succeeded."

"Undoubtedly."

She glared, unwilling to relinquish the fury inspired by Lucius and finding it transferred quite nicely to Snape. He didn't seem at all concerned by the invitation, making him an easy target for her anger. "You think I'm overreacting?"

He offered an impatient sigh. "The problem isn't with *over*reacting, Hermione. It's with reacting, full stop."

"What is that supposed to mean? I should just ignore it?" Her tone rose dangerously.

"Yes, that's exactly what it means."

"Doesn't this bother you at all? Aren't you the least bit disturbed by his tactics?"

"Clearly, you're upset enough for both of us."

His words only increased her ire. "So he can threaten me whenever he wants, and that's perfectly acceptable to you?" she asked with an exaggerated shrug. "But if I dare react to it, then *I'm* the ridiculous one for feeling threatened?"

He closed his eyes and sighed again. "I didn't say you were ridiculous. I am merely suggesting it is ridiculous...dangerous, even...for you to grant him this power. A threat is meaningless if you refuse to feel threatened by it."

She turned away and snapped her notebook shut. There was logic in his argument, and a part of her knew he was right. But she didn't want logic right now...she wanted a fight. The revelation surprised her, and she examined it further while clearing her workspace. As objectionable as the overture from Lucius had been, she supposed it had been Snape's reaction...or lack thereof...that had caused her indignation to swell. He claimed to care for her, yet he seemed more annoyed with her response to Lucius's invitation than the invitation itself. It brought her right back to her recent musings. Was his level of concern over Draco's missive comparable to the depth of his feelings for her? Or were her frazzled nerves creating dissidence where none existed?

Stuffing her journals into her bag with far less care than usual, she glanced at Snape and found him watching her with a troubled frown. He held himself stiffly, arms folded across his chest, regarding her in silence. Not for the first time, she wished she could tell what was going on inside his head, what thoughts were swimming behind those dark eyes. Returning to her task, she realised Lucius's methods were probably old news to Snape. It helped her appreciate why he'd been unfazed by the unexpected invitation, although understanding the techniques of Death Eaters would never come easy. The secretive power moves, the subtle nuances of shifting control, the sly, furtive negotiations: it all made her feel as if her brain would explode.

She was suddenly glad for the straightforwardness of her Gryffindor brethren. At times, it was difficult to go through life wearing her heart on her sleeve, but if *this* was the alternative, she could accept that small annoyance.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and turned to Snape. "I suppose I don't have a lot of experience in dealing with threats. In time, perhaps I'll learn to control my reactions and grant him less power. He certainly doesn't deserve it...thank you for making me see that." She slung her bag over her shoulder and slid off her stool. "I hope you enjoy your evening, Severus."

"Thank you," he replied, his frown deepening.

She nodded and attempted a smile, knowing it lacked sincerity. Still, she was proud of her restraint, pleased with her ability to rein in her emotions, and she walked past him with her head held high. She didn't make it far. Strong fingers closed around her arm, halting her progress. His speed caught her off-guard, and she toppled against his chest. He steadied her, keeping his arms around her when she would have disentangled herself from his embrace.

"Allow me to clear up one small matter before you leave," he told her.

"Yes?" she asked with a sigh, bracing for the inevitable lecture.

"When Lucius harasses you, it is far from 'perfectly acceptable' to me."

"Oh." She'd been waiting for his censure, mentally debating whether or not to hex him if the phrase, 'grow up' left his lips.

"Our reactions to threats may differ, but let me assure you, I take it quite personally when something of mine is threatened." His gaze travelled over her face, his expression almost desperate.

Mine, she thought. The term should have annoyed her, should have had her rebelling at the very notion. She was her *own* woman, strong and independent. Possessive men had never held any appeal for her. But somehow, this was different...*this man* made it different. Where she was independent, he was autonomous to the point of being a recluse. He didn't appear to need or want anyone. What could it mean that he'd claimed her, of all people?

"Have I made myself perfectly clear?" he asked, interrupting her train of thought.

"Perfectly." Unlike earlier, her smile was genuine.

He released her arms, cradling her face with both hands. This time, he didn't bother to glance at the open door. He kissed her without hesitation, without concern as to who might see. His lips were greedy, his mouth covetous, and she responded with a hunger that matched his, clinging to his warmth far longer than wisdom would have allowed. Through the haze of passion, her thoughts once again returned to her earlier quandary, but she no longer cared whether he considered her his girlfriend, his lover, or something else entirely. The need for such description had passed.

She was, quite simply, *his*.

A/N: Grateful hugs to my lovely betas, Karelia and little_beloved, and smooches to dear lettybird who Brit-picks with pride. My sincere apologies for the delay in posting this story ... I will never again tempt fate by suggesting a date for the next update in my author's note. If you're actually reading this and haven't quit the story during my hiatus, I offer you many, many thanks (and applaud your perseverance). Thank you!!!

Fourteen For a Question

Chapter 17 of 33

Why the private storeroom is labeled "private," and why books should be handled with care.

Chapter 17: Fourteen for a Question

As spring approached, the amount of research conducted inside Hogwarts' new laboratory suffered a marked decline. Hermione had offered to help several of her older students prepare for their O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams, sacrificing her lab time in the process. Commandeering an empty classroom in the dungeons, she met a dedicated group of students after dinner each Tuesday.

Her inability to resist a seventh-year Hufflepuff who begged for help with a Charms problem led to further commitments. Students began seeking her advice in all manner of topics...Charms, Transfiguration, Arithmancy. She resisted initially, sending them to consult with their respective instructors. But the tenacity of youth, combined with a fair amount of cunning, proved impossible to thwart. Preying on her contempt for inefficiency, they made an impressive argument for having multiple topics addressed in one study group. She relented, but only after insisting approval be obtained from all professors. To her surprise, this agreement proved quite easy to achieve. Apparently, none of the other teachers were nearly as keen on increasing their workload.

Being a relative newcomer to the teaching profession, she was privately pleased by the students' respect. Additional nights had to be added when word spread and the study group gained popularity. The atmosphere was reminiscent of days spent practicing magic alongside members of Dumbledore's Army in the Room of Requirement. Occasionally, she'd indulge her nostalgia, picturing long-forgotten faces as she watched over the casting of spells and the brewing of potions.

Other than diminished laboratory time, the only drawback to her new endeavour was fewer free evenings. A night to herself was rare. An evening with Snape was even scarcer. Tension from upcoming exams seemed to make the students do incredibly stupid things, and he often presided over detentions late into the night. He continued to disappear for his 'previous engagements' as well, although he remained taciturn on his whereabouts. No matter his location, he invariably came to bed after Hermione.

Some nights, she would awaken just long enough to notice him sliding into bed beside her. Through a dreamy fog, she'd feel his strong arms circling her waist, or the weight of his head on her pillow before she'd drift back to sleep. At other times, the warmth of his body would infuse her dreams, slowly coaxing her from the depths of slumber. She'd reach for him with heavy limbs, her eyes half-closed. His hands on her body quickly banished any traces of somnolence. Soft caresses turned passionate, demanding, until simple need took over. With every facet of mind and body awakened, she'd cling to him in final release, calling his name into the darkness.

Having enjoyed her share of serious relationships, she thought she had a fairly good idea of what sex was all about. She was wrong. The intensity of her reactions to Snape's touch was unlike anything she'd experienced before, as was the level of desire he could arouse. Her responses pleased her body but troubled her mind. As a scientist, she knew the flames that burned brightest and hottest always extinguished themselves first. She wondered if their passion was like that...if it would consume them completely until they simply burned out, empty and spent. If the sparks they created were any indication, they were heading towards a definite supernova.

A smile graced her features as she thought of their mutual fireworks. It disappeared when she remembered Snape had distributed detentions again tonight and would likely be gone for hours. Her untouched dinner received a petty shove across the kitchen table as her sigh stirred the air. Too many nights had passed with nothing more than sleeping together in the same bed. Frustration warred with longing. Contemplating his proximity did not improve her disposition. A wall of grey stone was all that separated them...no doubt he was in the Potions classroom right now, making his students squirm.

"Lucky students," she muttered. Then a mischievous little thought danced into her mind, and she hurried to her bedroom.

Within minutes, she had located a box of school things her mother had sent when she'd returned to Hogwarts. At the time, she'd chuckled over the inclusion of her old school uniforms. But she wasn't laughing as she shimmied naked into the familiar pleated skirt. By the time she pulled the starched, white shirt onto her arms, her body ached and her pulse was racing. She draped the tie beneath her collar, leaving it to dangle across her chest, unfastened. Most of the shirt buttons were ignored, revealing the tops of her breasts and a fair amount of cleavage. She slid bare feet into tall leather boots and surveyed her reflection.

She'd never appreciated how short the skirt was until now. Dark tights had always been worn beneath, so the sight of her legs exposed to mid-thigh above her boots was something new. Turning to the side, she decided the womanly curves she'd lacked at nineteen might also be responsible for the skirt's higher hemline. The mirror reflected her dismissive shrug. She was surprised the outfit still fit after so many years, relieved to find it snug in all the right places. After donning prim robes, she tousled her hair and left the living quarters.

Once inside the Potions office, she peered around the door, careful to conceal her presence. Detention had started over an hour ago, and three students huddled around a table at the far side of the classroom. They appeared to be filling hundreds of small jars with beetle eyes from a large, burlap sack.

"Perfect," she whispered.

Gathering her robes, she breezed through the classroom, barely glancing at the occupants. Snape's gaze landed on her briefly, but his attention was soon diverted by a question from one of the students. Making her way through the maze of tables, she entered the private storeroom and closed the door behind her. A wave of her wand filled the room with soft light. She waited in silence for a few moments, then cracked open the door.

Pointing her wand through the narrow slit, she whispered, "*Diffindo*." The burlap bag split apart, sending thousands of tiny eyes cascading over the table and onto the floor like a soundless, black waterfall.

An angry-looking Snape approached the scene, ordering the students to repair the bag and retrieve the wayward ingredients. If she hadn't suffered far worse fates in detention herself, she might have felt more remorse for her actions. But recovering beetle eyes was hardly a difficult task. It would keep the students busy for some time, an added bonus.

Opening the door, she interrupted Snape's lecture on carelessness. "Professor Snape, could you help me with something, please?" Her loud voice carried across the room.

His head snapped around, eyes narrowing at the sound of her voice. They'd clashed over students before; no doubt he anticipated another fight. After a moment's consideration, he threatened the students with future detentions and stalked towards her.

Racing across the room, she flung her robes to the floor, surprised to find her hands shaking. She turned her back to the door and attempted a seductive pose against the shelves. One arm stretched high above her head as she pretended to reach for a bottle.

"Yes, what is it you..." His speech halted the moment he entered the room.

She forced a note of innocence into her voice. "I can't seem to reach this bottle, Professor Snape. Will you help me?"

Turning her head, she watched him over her shoulder. His lips were frozen into a circle, forming the shape of his last word.

She twisted to face him, slowly dragging her arm down her chest. The combination of movements proved the perfect catalyst for her shirt to gape open, drawing the full attention of his gaze. He seemed keenly interested in the way her hand lingered on her breast. After several moments, his gaze traversed the rest of her costume.

With apparent calm, he crossed his arms and entered the room, leaving the door open behind him. He walked around her from one side to the other, investigating her body from every angle.

Unable to take his silence any longer, she cleared her throat. "So ... Can you help me out here?"

"There are children outside." His voice was soft, holding the slightest trace of reproof.

She pointed her wand at the door. It closed with a satisfying thud. "*Colloportus*," she said, locking it.

"They have excellent hearing," he chastised.

"*Muffliato*," she said, pointing her wand again.

He watched her in silence for several long moments, arms still folded over his chest.

"What are you doing in here alone?" he asked. He sounded angry.

"I just..."

He cut off her protest. "Students are *never* allowed in my private storeroom, Miss Granger!"

Her mouth snapped shut. She watched his brows raise, his challenge clear.

He wants to play, she thought as her pulse pounded in her throat. *Excellent*.

"I was only going to borrow the supplies, sir."

"Turn around," he ordered.

She faced the shelf.

"Which supplies?"

She pointed to a random bottle on the top shelf. His approach was almost silent; she heard nothing but a faint rustle as he stood behind her. The coarse fabric of his robes grazed the backs of her thighs. He reached for the bottle she'd indicated, turning the label.

His lips brushed along her ear, his breath warm on the sensitive skin. "That happens to be *Lobelia Cardinalis*," he said quietly.

She closed her eyes, letting his voice wash over her.

"It's very rare," he whispered. The tip of his tongue traced the outer curve of her ear. "Very delicate."

She knew all this, of course...she had harvested the beautiful red flowers herself. But she doubted the aquatic plant held any relevance to their conversation.

"Why would you require this ingredient?" he asked.

She tried to form a coherent answer, but found concentration difficult when his fingertips skimmed along her thighs. "I...I can't say, sir."

His voice changed, becoming dangerously low. If she hadn't known they were pretending, his threat would have chilled her. Instead, molten desire speared her.

"It's time you learnt the consequences of stealing from my storeroom." His hands seized her hips, jerking her back against him. Her gasp echoed through the small room.

She felt him harden as he gripped her tight, grinding himself against her. With a slow, tortuous rhythm, he stroked her body with his own, rubbing up and down, over and over. The repeated motion lifted her skirt, scraping his robes along her bare backside.

Then he stopped all movement, and she groaned in protest.

"This isn't the first time you've defied the mandates of this school, is it, Miss Granger?"

She smiled, noting the distinct husky quality edging his voice. Turning her head, she answered, "You can't prove that, Professor."

With deft speed, his hands left her hips. He grasped the lapels of her shirt, wrenching it open in one move, her buttons ricocheting off the bottles with several soft pings. The stiff fabric was pulled from her shoulders but wrapped around her wrists, securing her arms behind her. Cold air rushed across her breasts and hardened her nipples. His fingertips traced taunting circles around the points.

"Your cheek and impudence will not be tolerated here, Miss Granger."

He cupped her breasts, teasing the delicate skin.

"How shall we punish such impertinence?" he asked.

She trembled beneath his hands, whimpering when he tormented her nipples with a series of gentle strokes and light pinches. "Oh, I'm sure we can find a suitable method," she said, moving her trapped hands lower until her fingers stroked his erection.

"Wicked girl," he murmured against her ear. Wrapping his arms around her, he spun them both to face the center of the room. Everywhere he touched felt unnaturally heated, as if his hands were made of fire. When his fingers slid beneath her skirt and ventured higher, her body became an inferno. In one swift motion, he slid his boot between her ankles, sweeping her foot aside to spread her legs. Flames raced across her newly exposed skin as he alternated rough explorations with tender caresses, making every touch a surprise.

"On your knees, witch," he growled into her hair, nudging her legs. She sank to the ground a second before him, surprised when a soft pillow appeared beneath her. His hands continued their exploration, fingers teasing her thighs, dancing ever so softly over her most sensitive flesh. With each pass, he came infuriatingly close to touching her in the way she needed. But torture seemed to be the order of the evening.

"Severus," she pleaded.

"That's *'Professor'* to you," he chided.

He peeled her shirt away, finally freeing her arms. She began her own exploration and thought this was the best idea she'd had in a very long time.

Her palms met cold stone as he urged her forward. The short skirt was hardly restrictive, yet he yanked it up over her back. She inhaled sharply at the feel of chilled air striking her bare skin. He paused to release his trousers, prolonging her anticipation. She thought she might explode from waiting, but then he pressed against her, skin on skin at last.

Powerful hands returned to her hips. He entered just the tip of his erection into her, holding her prisoner when she tried to push back against him. She trembled with expectation and still he held her there, waiting.

"Would you like to learn what happens to rule-breakers?" His tone was teasing, but his voice was raw.

"Yes," she moaned.

"Yes ... *what?*"

She couldn't think, couldn't concentrate on what he'd asked. "Yes ...*please?*"

His deep chuckle resonated, flowing from his body into hers. "You're the one who started this game ... Now play along." He shifted, pushing inside her just slightly before withdrawing.

Comprehension dawned at last. "Oh! Yes, *sir,*" she amended, rewarded by another shift, another withdrawal. Unable to bear the slow torment any longer, she shoved back against him once more, desperate for deeper penetration.

He'd obviously anticipated her. His fingers tightened on her hips, holding her in place, immobile. Her frustration was as blatant as her arousal. He seemed to take delight from both, chuckling as her curse split the air. "Such insolent behaviour, Miss Granger ... and yet *another* violation. Are you completely incapable of obeying the rules?"

"Obedience was never my strong suit, Professor. I suppose you'll have to work ... *harder* ... to teach me." She thought her words might snap his control, but still he teased her.

"Are you certain that's what you want?"

Her breath expelled in an angry rush. "Yes!" she nearly shouted. "Damn it, Severus, if you don't fuck me right now, I swear I'll..."

Whatever threat she'd intended was lost when he thrust hard, filling her entirely, their cries of pleasure and triumph mingling. When the initial shock had faded, he pulled back and repeated the move, only this time, he entered her so slowly she felt every inch of him. He continued his slow assault, gradually increasing speed when she moaned his name. Soon he was driving into her with a pounding rhythm of hard, fast thrusts. It was too much...the frantic pace, the feel of his rough robes slapping her bare ass, his fingers digging into her hips, jerking her back against him each time he lunged forward. Her screams echoed through the small room as her muscles contracted around him.

She lowered her head and waited for her body to stop shuddering. Her loose hair swept along the floor beneath her in perfect time to his continued thrusting.

Somehow, he increased the tempo. His visceral growl sent tremors along her back. Leaning forward, he reached a hand around her hip, his deft fingers stroking her into fevered arousal once more. She threw her head back, revelling in sensation but thinking it impossible to climax again so soon. She was proved wrong when her body shook with the force of her release. Seconds later, his hands moved to her waist. He rocked forward, spilling himself inside her with one final shudder.

Panting, gasping, they collapsed onto the ground, grateful for the stone's ability to cool overheated flesh. She spent several minutes lying beneath him, dazed and numb. Thinking of what they'd just done, she tried to suppress an irreverent giggle. She failed.

"You find this amusing?" he asked, his mouth against her ear.

"A bit," she admitted. "I've never behaved like such a teenager before. Even when I was a teenager!"

"Mmm ... You seem to be having quite an impact on my better judgment as well." He attempted to extricate himself from their tangled limbs, his movements stiff as he rose to his feet.

Casting her gaze to the floor, she frowned at the lone pillow. "Why didn't you Conjure yourself something to kneel on?" she asked as she cast about for her discarded shirt.

"I ... I was distracted."

She turned in surprise, her shirt forgotten. It was rare to hear any admission of weakness from him.

"But you ensured I had a pillow?" she asked, tilting her head to consider him. "That's very sweet."

His derisive snort proclaimed his disagreement. "That's right: you've found me out. Only a true gentleman would be considerate enough to provide a pillow before taking you on the floor."

She shrugged off his attempt at deflection. "I still think it was sweet."

He shook his head and turned away. "Of all people, *you* should know better."

Frowning again, she continued to search for her shirt. Either he was truly annoyed with her for imagining him capable of kindness, or he didn't trust her enough to believe her comments genuine. Neither option held any appeal.

She found her shirt flung across a jar of toad tongues and tugged it on. Few buttons remained, so she tied the ends together and searched for her robes. Snape located the garment first and draped it around her shoulders with elaborate care, his brows furrowed. She suspected something more than the simple fastening was responsible for his look of intense concentration.

Drawing her into his arms, he inhaled deeply and whispered against her ear. "You realise, of course, we'll never again be able to look at our private storeroom the same way."

She chuckled and nuzzled into his chest. "I suppose not."

"I doubt I'll be able to enter the room without becoming aroused."

"Lucky for you, there's a willing witch nearby to help."

"Yes," he agreed. "Very lucky."

She smiled against his chest. Stepping back, she winked at him and said, "Good night, then."

He cupped her face in his hands and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "Good night, my foolish girl."

Unsealing the door, she plucked a random bottle from the shelf and left the room. Her smile remained hidden as she hurried to the living quarters, ignoring the faces of the students in detention. Once inside, it spread across her face, remaining in place when she stepped into the shower. Remembering his parting words, she shook her head and laughed out loud. His voice had been tender, even if the sentiment...foolish girl...had been ridiculous. But only Snape could turn what had once been an insult into a term of endearment.

The following morning was Friday, the one day Hermione's schedule allowed her to sleep late. Unfortunately, Fate had a sense of humour and woke her promptly at six. She fought back, trying to reclaim the precious commodity, but her efforts proved futile. By half-past, she gave up and padded to the kitchen for tea.

Snape was already showered and dressed. There were times she wondered if he ever slept. He sat at the breakfast table reading the newspaper, looking scholarly and sexy in a very *I-just-did-nasty-things-in-the-storeroom* kind of way. Her smile spread as she spied the thin reading glasses perched on his nose. She loved him in glasses. Stopping by his side, she placed a sleepy kiss on his damp hair, trailing her hand along his back and arm as she continued on her quest for caffeine.

Just for fun, she closed her eyes and concentrated on the spot beneath the kettle. She imagined holding her wand, envisioned herself casting the spell to start a fire. A little whooshing sound heralded her success. Opening her eyes, she grinned at the flame beneath the kettle. She had used silent, wand-less magic for basic spells in the past, but never for fire. Of course, small fires had always been her specialty.

"Why do you insist on wearing those preposterous Muggle clothes?" asked Snape, intruding upon her self-congratulatory musings.

She regarded the black camisole and loose trousers...her standard pyjamas...with a curious frown. The outfit had never drawn his censure before. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed him staring at her rear with blatant admiration, despite his catty question.

Strolling back to the table, hands on her hips, she replied, "Well, I used to wear them because they were comfortable." She paused to lean across the table, placing her palms upon his newspaper and moving her face closer, until the tip of her pert nose bumped into the end of his long, hooked one. "But from now on, I believe I'll wear them just to irritate you."

He raised one eyebrow, a reluctant smile tugging at his mouth. "You are hopeless," he informed her as she turned to fetch the boiling water. "I was in a perfectly foul mood until you came along and ruined it."

"The day is young, my surly friend." She brewed two cups, feeling rather chipper despite the early hour. "I daresay you'll find something or someone to ruin it again."

"No doubt," he agreed, tucking his glasses into his robe. He folded the newspaper and slung it atop a pile of books and homework assignments.

"Why the foul spirits?" she asked, bringing the cups to the table.

He thanked her and swept his hand towards the newspaper. "The Ministry and their complete and utter lack of competence," he spat.

She glanced at the paper but couldn't discern which story had drawn his ire. The mention of the Ministry drew her thoughts to Mikolaj Brukowski, as did most things these days. With effort, she refrained from asking about the investigation into Brukowski's death, knowing Snape would have shared any information he'd been given.

"Wankers!" she cried out, slapping the table with enough vehemence to earn his smile.

He surveyed her over his cup and remarked, "You're in rare form this morning."

She beamed at him. "I made fire without my wand!"

"Yes, I saw that."

She'd been expecting praise. When he remained silent, she offered an exaggerated pout. "It's the first time I've tried that spell wand-less."

"That's very impressive," he told her dutifully.

"You don't *sound* impressed."

"You don't need me to confirm what a powerful witch you are. Surely fire is nothing compared to defeating the Dark Lord?"

She blinked. "But I didn't defeat anyone; that was Harry ..."

He cut her off, sounding churlish. "Spare me the Harry Potter Fan Club propaganda. 'The Boy Who Lived' would have been 'The Boy Who Lived to Eleven' without your help."

"I think you're giving me too much credit," she argued.

"Nonsense." He dismissed her protests with a wave of his hand. "Potter's simply *taken* too much credit. As a first-year, would he have progressed to the Mirror of Erised if you hadn't told him which potion to drink?"

She remembered how stymied Harry had been by the logic puzzle guarding the Philosopher's Stone. "That was a brilliant riddle," she said. "Even if it didn't stop Voldemort."

"It was never intended to," he said with a shrug.

"Oh." She sipped her tea and considered.

"It *should* have stopped Potter, though ... *would* have, had he been relying on his own insignificant brainpower."

"Oops."

"Yes," he agreed, shaking his head at her. Then he stared across the kitchen. "But at least I tried. Despite Albus's penchant for playing with the boy's life, I preferred to employ certain safeguards."

Bitterness lent a cold edge to his tone. She'd always assumed his work for Voldemort had been dreadful, but now she wondered if Dumbledore had been any better. What atrocities had he been asked to commit in the line of duty? Years had passed, but in many ways, he remained buried beneath a mountain of secrets and lies. Leading a double life with two such manipulative masters had to have been a horrid existence. It was little wonder he had seemed so resentful.

"I'm sorry we always gave you such a hard time," she said, setting her cup aside.

His lips pursed as if he didn't quite trust the sentiment. Then he sighed and said, "If I recall, it was not *entirely* one-sided."

She smiled, touched by the admission and the obvious discomfort it had caused. Abandoning her chair for his lap, she straddled him, watching surprise colour his face. In perfect mimicry of his actions the previous evening, she cupped his face in her palms and kissed him tenderly.

A tiny voice floated along the far reaches of her soul. It danced in the back of her mind like a familiar piece of music, simple and comforting. Then it whispered one word

against her consciousness:

Love.

Her heart thudded against her chest, and she forgot to breathe. The logical part of her mind dismissed the word instantly. It was impossible! She'd taken such careful steps to guard against this. It was absurd! He'd shown her a unique ability to inflict emotional pain. It was ridiculous! Ludicrous! Insane! What kind of a fool would fall in love with such a man?

Foolish girl.

Drawing back, she stared into ebony eyes and felt goose-bumps prickle her arms. A thousand warning bells sounded an alarm in her head, a deafening siren alerting her to the danger of such folly.

"What's wrong?" he asked, frowning.

She couldn't tell him. Of course she couldn't...there was nothing to tell, after all. Whatever crazy notion had put the thought into her head was mistaken, the product of too little sleep or too much stress.

She searched her mind for something...anything...to tell him.

"As long as we're making confessions ..."

"Yes?"

"I should probably admit to setting your robes on fire in my first year."

He stammered, "You ... you what?"

"I set fire to your robes. At Harry's first Quidditch match. I thought you were cursing his broom." She offered an apologetic smile, his flummoxed expression worth the revelation.

"That was Quirre!" he exclaimed, his voice rising. "I was performing the counter-curse!"

"Mmm." She nodded her agreement and kissed him again. "Harry explained as much, later."

His eyes widened. "Do you realise what would have happened if you'd been caught setting fire to a teacher's robes?"

"Expulsion, I'd imagine," she answered matter-of-factly.

He shook his head, looking suitably horrified. "I've misjudged you...I *had* thought you the responsible one of your little trio."

"I was!"

He snorted his disbelief. "Arson in your first-year? Followed by theft from my private storeroom the next?"

"Oh, dear, there does seem to be a bit of a pattern. I suppose I've always had it in for you." She smiled and slipped her fingers behind the waistband of his trousers.

He was not so easily distracted. "We haven't even touched upon your teenage years. I dread to discover what crimes you committed for an encore."

"Sadly, that discussion will have to wait. You're late for class, Professor."

He glanced at the clock and cursed. Collecting the stack of books and papers, he kissed her and stood, dumping her rather unceremoniously upon the table.

She waved her farewell, watching his robes billow as he fled the room. The *Daily Prophet* lay discarded on the table, and she pulled it closer, her mind on her tea. The movement revealed a small book that had been obscured by the newspaper, and she recognised the title at once. Knowing Snape would require the book for his first class, she left the kitchen, hoping to catch him in the office.

Her thumb fanned the pages as she walked through the living room. Complex charts for harvesting potion ingredients zipped by at great speed, creating a kaleidoscope of rows and columns. A distinct pause occurred halfway through, and her attention was drawn to a scrap of paper tucked between two pages. She gave it the barest of glances, but one word jumped out, causing her step to falter: Arglist.

Stopping in the middle of the room, she removed the tiny placeholder and scanned its contents. It appeared to be an article from an obscure trade magazine. She searched for a date but found nothing. No more than a small blurb, the cutting announced a team of promising young magical scientists who had joined Arglist Industries in the wake of Mikolaj Brukowski's tragic death. Her stomach twisted into a knot. It had been weeks since Lucius had attempted to threaten her...now she understood the cause of her reprieve.

She returned the paper to the book. Disjointed thoughts tumbled through her mind as she tried to make sense of this latest development. Lucius could have only one purpose in hiring the team of wizard-scientists. She bit her lip, calculating the odds of her research and experiments being duplicated. How long before they were able to reproduce her results? It was impossible to predict...there were too many unknown variables. And she could hardly concentrate when her brain kept circling back to one thing: Snape.

How long had he known about the new team at Arglist? Why hadn't he told her? As if summoned by mere thought, the door to the living quarters Vanished. He hurried into the room, stopping short when he saw her.

Without thinking, she pasted a smile on her face and ordered her feet forward.

"You forgot one," she said, thrusting the book into his hands.

He stared into her eyes, frowning as the seconds ticked by in silence.

Her smile did not falter. Knowing the best defence was a strong offence, she frowned back at him and asked, "Is anything wrong? Did you forget something else?"

Shaking his head, he peered at the book. "Just this." He kissed her cheek and left.

Her shoulders relaxed, and she wondered what instinct had prevented her asking about the article. Was it wise to be so cautious, or was she a fool for not trusting him?

Foolish girl.

She recalled her earlier thoughts, unsurprised when her stomach performed a perfect somersault. Again, she attempted to dismiss the stubborn word from her mind. She was *not* in love with Snape. Didn't her response to discovering the article prove as much? If she loved him, she would have trusted him.

Her argument rang false. She *did* trust him ... in certain areas. Sex games in the private storeroom required a significant amount of trust. She shuffled to the shower, trying to pinpoint the reason for her hesitation. Not trusting him with her heart was one thing...her prudence there was likely a sound choice. But her research at Arglist was another matter, one in which he'd never given her cause for doubt. Other than Kingsley, he was the only person she'd confided the truth to. She struggled to understand why she had feigned ignorance about the article. It all came back to one question.

Why had he hidden it from her?

She frowned and returned to chewing on her lip. Remembering how upset she'd been by the invitation to dine at Malfoy Manor, she knew she'd found her answer. The realisation Snape didn't fully trust *her* stung a bit...even if it was mutual. But she couldn't blame him for wanting to avoid a repeat of their recent argument. She could almost hear him telling her to calm down, to school her reactions to Lucius and his plotting.

Deciding to spend her free morning soaking in a tub of bubbles, she adjusted numerous taps until the scent of almonds and orange blossoms filled the room. She could ask Snape about the article tonight, confront him head-on for hiding it. Sighing, she snapped off the taps and abandoned that plan. An indignant confrontation would hardly prove her ability to control her responses. Especially when his likely defence...his unwillingness to see her upset...would only weaken her case. Perhaps the wisest course of action was to refrain from acting at all.

Submerging herself in liquid luxury, she closed her eyes and let the scalding water ease the tension from her limbs. Hours passed, but she remained in place, willing her mind to relinquish her fears and doubts.

Thanks so much to Karelia and little_beloved for beta work, and to lettybird for Brit-picking.

Fifteen for the Past

Chapter 18 of 33

A trip to Diagon Alley turns ominous.

Chapter 18: Fifteen for the Past

The first Saturday of April flaunted its mild, pleasant temperatures with little modesty. The sky was so vibrantly blue it bordered on the absurd, demanding a second look from all who stepped outside. Spun-sugar clouds dotted the horizon like whitecaps breaking on an ocean of sky. The sun shone strong and proud, claiming victory over the endless assault of cold, wet weeks and basking Hermione in golden warmth as she made her way into Hogsmeade.

Yellow daffodils smiled a cheerful welcome when she entered the village. She'd been looking forward to meeting Luna in Diagon Alley long before she'd known the weather would be so cooperative. Luna's due-date was rapidly approaching, and a shopping trip for various baby necessities...plus lunch, of course...had been arranged weeks earlier.

Quaint buildings became a blur of spinning colours as she Disapparated. A symphony of city sounds soon filled her ears, signalling her arrival in Diagon Alley. Her shoulders dropped when she opened her eyes and discovered she'd left the pleasant weather far behind. Nothing but darkness met her, from the heavy rainclouds overhead to the temperaments of her fellow shoppers. A black-robed figure bumped into her, knocking her aside and hurrying past without apology. She glared at the retreating wizard's back as her mood soured.

By the time she entered Schitz & Drewls Baby Emporium, she was already calculating how long she'd need to stay in London before she could return to Hogwarts. She searched the store for Luna and tried to ignore the bizarre items lining the shelves. Pausing alongside a display of giant suction cups attached to multiples tubes and hoses, she wondered if shops like this intimidated all childless women. How could so many products be required for the care of one tiny, little baby?

A tug on her sleeve drew her attention, and she tore her gaze from the shelf. Luna's face glowed, and her eyes sparkled like perfect sapphires. Draco hadn't exaggerated how lovely she looked.

"Am I late?" Hermione asked after they embraced. She had intended to arrive at Schitz & Drewls early, hoping to suss out an appropriate baby gift.

"Not at all...I arrived early. I rarely shop without the girls. It's pleasant to browse without having to referee the fights."

"Ah, yes." She poked a cautious finger at the suction cups. "What are these?"

"Breast pumps."

Her expression must have relayed her horror, for Luna chuckled. "Not everyone uses them, but they can be convenient."

"Oh." She cast another dubious glance at the display, thinking they looked more like primitive torture devices than anything else. "I knew a mother would know."

Luna smiled. "Actually, I haven't a clue what half of this stuff is for."

The admission cheered her almost as much as the breast pumps had scared her. She strolled through the aisles with Luna, whose "bump" could no longer be blamed on pudding consumption. They stopped to admire a selection of enchanted rattles, listening to a variety of classical melodies playing with each shake. An assortment of impossibly small socks drew their attention next, and she couldn't resist the purchase.

"Pink or blue?" she asked Luna, holding up a pair of each. "Or would you prefer something less gender-specific?"

"Blue," replied Luna, a smile spreading across her face. "We opted to learn the baby's sex this time."

"A boy! Oh, congratulations, Luna. How exciting."

"Yes." The beauty of her smile was marred by the frown wrinkling her forehead.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Draco and I are thrilled to have a boy, of course. But we really didn't care, one way or another. We only decided to find out the sex in advance to see how

much of the girls' old clothes we could reuse."

"Okay," she said, waiting for more. It was obvious something was still troubling her.

"It's just Draco's parents," she began, quickly amending, "not his parents...his father."

Her spine stiffened at the mention of Lucius. She wondered what he had done to cause her friend such consternation. "What about Mr Malfoy?" she prompted.

"Well, he's been very excited about having a grandson, which is lovely, of course. But it's nothing to do with the baby, I fear. It's all about carrying on the Malfoy name and having a male heir. It's a bit overwhelming at times. He can be so ... He's just so ..."

"Fanatical?"

"Yes! That's it, exactly. He's already given this baby far more attention than the girls."

"It's just a different mindset," she said, grasping for reassurance despite a heavy sense of foreboding. "Misogyny is strong in the older wizarding families."

"Yes, I've noticed that, too." Luna's hand rose to her stomach. She seemed unaware of the rhythmic circles she traced along the expanse as she stared into the distance. "I suppose it's time to remind my in-laws they'll have *three* lovely grandchildren, not one."

"Mmm. *That* sounds like a fun discussion."

Indignant on behalf of the twins, she endeavoured to purchase a simple trinket for each of the girls, hoping to balance the ever-growing stack of parcels for the new baby. She combed the aisles of Schitz & Drewls, but couldn't find any gifts suitable for two young ladies.

"I know just the place," exclaimed Luna, hastening their departure.

Balancing a sizable stack of bags and boxes, she followed Luna down the street and through a crowded doorway. A flash of flame-coloured hair across the room captured her gaze, and she blinked in wonder at the familiar sight of Ron Weasley. Luna had brought them to Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, and if the number of customers jostling her aside was any indication, the shop was quite successful.

While Luna left to peruse the shelves, she found a somewhat secluded spot for their parcels and watched Ron from a distance. He hadn't changed much in the decade since she'd last seen him. The bright red hair and freckles were the same, and only a hint of middle-aged paunch resided on his lanky frame. He stood behind the counter with a pretty young woman who nodded eagerly as he demonstrated a spell to operate the till. She tossed her long, blonde braid over her shoulder and whipped a wand from her pocket.

Hundreds of coins...a fountain of gold and silver and bronze...soared into the air when she jabbed her wand at the coffer. To his credit, Ron merely held his wand aloft, seemingly oblivious to the eruption of money. His silent charm acted like an invisible umbrella, protecting them from the heavy metals raining down. The young woman flew to the floor, her lovely face contorted with embarrassment. Ron just shook his head and gathered coins with a wave of his wand and an exasperated smile.

Crossing the busy shop, Hermione stood next to the queue and said, "Hello, Ron."

"Hey," he mumbled. His quick glance across the counter turned into a classic double take, and he stared at her, mouth agape. "Blimey!"

She laughed. "It's good to see you, too."

He stammered for a moment before replying, "Yeah. Wow! How are you?"

"I'm well, thanks. How are you? How is your family?"

The blonde woman rose, her hands full of coins. She glanced at Hermione and then at Ron, but he seemed unaware of her presence now.

"Great ... They're great! Everyone's married now. Well, everyone except Charlie and me." His cheeks turned scarlet. "They've all had kids, too. You should see the get-togethers at the Burrow...complete chaos."

The image made her smile. She turned her attention to the blonde woman, who appeared to be in her late twenties. It was easy to read the adoration and anxiety in her face as she watched Ron. Recalling his deplorable manners, she said, "Hi, I'm Hermione Granger. Ron and I were at Hogwarts together."

She held her breath when their gazes met. A pair of astonishingly purple eyes watched her, making her think of gardens filled with lilacs and violets. Having dabbled in genetics, she couldn't help wondering if the colour was natural or the result of spellwork.

"Oh, yeah," said Ron. He jerked his head to the side. "This is Penny. She worked at the inn back at Ottery St. Catchpole, but they dismissed her, so Mum sent her here."

The worship in Penny's amazing eyes turned to mortification.

Before he could further embarrass the woman, she said, "It's lovely to meet you, Penny. You have the prettiest eyes I've ever seen."

Ron turned and frowned as if he'd never considered Penny's eyes before.

"Thank you," said Penny while a demure blush crept onto her face. "It was an accident, really. My mum tried to colour my hair when I was little and botched the spell. She never tried to change them back for fear of blinding me. Or worse."

"You know, my mum's good with house and beauty spells," offered Ron. "She could probably fix them for you."

Hermione's heavy sigh drew his attention.

"What?" he asked.

"There's nothing to *fix*, Ronald...they're beautiful the way they are."

"Yeah, well, I didn't say they weren't."

"You implied as much by suggesting they should be repaired."

"I only meant Mum could change them back if she wanted."

"Yes, but why would anyone want to change something so lovely?"

He jammed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. "I was just trying to be helpful."

"Helpful would be..."

The retort died on her lips when she saw the eyes in question watching them bicker. Taking a deep breath, she accepted that Ron's manners were no longer her concern. She supposed she should take comfort in knowing some things in life would never change.

"How are your mother and father?" she asked when the silence became awkward.

"They're okay. Getting on in years but still going strong. Dad's going to retire from the Ministry next year."

"Lovely. I'm sure he's looking forward to that."

"Yeah, except he's probably going to drive Mum daft."

She could only imagine the projects Mr Weasley had been planning for his retirement and didn't doubt Ron's prediction. "My sympathies to Mrs Weasley," she said with a laugh.

"She'll need them," he agreed. "You could give them to her in person, you know. I'm sure she and Dad would love to see you. And you could bring your husband," he added, making it sound like a question.

"Oh, um ... I never married." She glanced at Penny, who looked a bit distraught at the direction their conversation was taking.

"Really?" asked Ron, sounding surprised. He failed to notice Penny's shoulders sagging as she stared at her feet.

A soft voice floated on the air behind them. "But of course you would bring Severus with you, Hermione," said Luna.

Ron's snort of laughter drew a quizzical look from Luna as she joined them at the counter. "Hermione and Severus have been dating for several months," she elaborated with a serene smile. "We're all quite happy for them."

Hermione closed her eyes. "Wow, Luna," she said. "That's really not the way I had intended for people to learn of this."

Resigned, she opened her eyes to find Ron staring at her open-mouthed, a look of horror on his face.

"Snape?" he asked in obvious disbelief. "You're taking the piss, right?"

"Don't say that."

"Bugging hell, Hermione! He's ... he's ..." he spluttered, his eyes growing wild as he appeared to search for a suitably shocking phrase, "... He's a teacher!"

"As am I!"

"Well, you weren't when we were kids, and he was still a teacher then," he argued. "He's much too old for you!"

"He was semi-Petrified for the past fourteen years, you dolt. For all intents and purposes, he's only a few years older than us. Besides, I hardly think age is an appropriate measure for compatibility."

"I think it's romantic!" Penny chimed in.

"Romantic?" asked Ron with a sneer.

"Sure. He's a hero!" Penny's face grew almost as dreamy as Luna's. "Just imagine him lying alone in St Mungo's all those years ... Then he wakes up and finds love was waiting for him the whole time."

"I assure you it's nothing like that, Penny," she interjected quickly, watching Ron's face turn an unhealthy shade of green. "We happen to be colleagues who share similar interests and a mutual respect. That is all."

Ron excused himself on the pretence of assisting a customer, nearly bowling Penny over in his haste to exit the conversation.

"I think it's romantic, too," said Luna after he'd left.

"Let's find something for the girls," said Hermione.

The shelves of the joke shop were packed with an impressive assortment of gifts and toys. Miniature dragons breathed a variety of noxious odours while enchanted roses nipped the noses of anyone who tried sniffing them. A pair of matching Pygmy Puffs was eventually selected for the twins. Hermione left Luna at the counter and went in search of Ron.

She finally cornered him behind a rack of bubble-blowing wands. "It was good to see you again," she said. "Please give my regards to your parents."

"Right," he told her. He scratched his ear and frowned, placing his hand on her arm when she turned to leave. "Hermione, watch yourself with Snape, okay?" he implored. "I know everyone thinks he's a hero, but I don't trust him."

"You don't know him," she said, mirroring his frown.

"And you do?"

Heat coloured her cheeks. Could she truly claim to know Snape? Could anyone?

"I know I trust him," she said. The calm conviction in her voice wasn't half as shocking as the actual proclamation.

"So did You-Know-Who," he retorted, looking pained.

"And so did Dumbledore."

"Yeah, but Dumbledore was batty," he said. "I'm saying there was a reason You-Know-Who trusted Snape all those years. He did a lot of *really* bad things."

"It was war, Ron. He was a spy ... He had to do bad things."

"I dunno. Maybe." His shoulders rose and fell in slow motion. "But would *you* have been able to sit by and watch You-Know-Who murder innocent people without trying to stop him?"

She looked down, knowing the answer at once. Never comfortable with the necessity of sacrificing a few for the greater good of many, she would likely have made a dreadful spy. But Snape's ability to separate himself into those roles didn't necessarily make him evil. If terrible acts had to be committed to achieve a virtuous result, was the person performing the acts terrible or virtuous? She suspected a crowded joke shop was hardly the place to debate such topics.

"I understand your point. But we've all changed a great deal in the past fourteen years."

"People don't just stop being Death Eaters. There was something rotten in Snape long before he was a spy that made him do rotten things. That doesn't just go away because he's had himself a fourteen-year lie-in."

Closing her eyes, she thought about the rotten things she had done at Arglist and wondered if there was something fundamentally rotten inside her. What would Ron say if he knew she'd almost destroyed all future generations of Muggle-borns?

She spoke in a quiet voice. "We've *all* done rotten things."

He looked down quickly, perhaps remembering the time he'd abandoned their Horcrux search. "Just be careful, okay? I don't want to see you hurt."

"I'll be fine," she assured him. "I'd like to see you happy, as well." She glanced across the shop and saw Penny pretending not to watch them. A clatter filled the air when she saw them watching her and tried to duck out of sight, knocking over an entire canister of Vanishing Ink pens. "Purple-eyed witches don't come along very often, Ronald."

He shuffled his feet. "She's a sweet kid. Kind of needs someone to look after her."

Before she could volunteer him for the task, Luna appeared, reminding her she was eating for two and the lunch hour had almost passed. Gathering the parcels, she bid Ron a hasty farewell and waved to Penny before returning to Diagon Alley.

The grey skies had turned ominous. Angry clouds suffocated the daylight, coaxing shadows out of hidden corners and filling the streets with darkness. A solitary raindrop landed on her nose, a baleful warning from above. She had no sooner wiped it away than the entire sky split apart, delivering on its threat of an impending deluge. Conjured umbrellas and silent charms kept them dry, but she was relieved to see the sign for the Silver Chalice, grateful for the warmth that enveloped them as they stepped through the door.

A quiet attendant removed their cloaks and parcels while the maitre d' approached.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Malfoy," he said, bowing to Luna.

Seeing Luna addressed with such deference was an odd experience, but the fashionable restaurant was known for its superior service and decorum as well as exceptional food. It was one of the more exclusive establishments to have opened in Diagon Alley since the defeat of Voldemort, and reservations were exceedingly difficult to obtain.

They were ushered to a private table, and she realised how much respect the Malfoy name...or at least the Malfoy fortune...still claimed. Gilded mirrors covered the warm, wood-panelled walls as they passed through the main dining room and entered an area reserved for members.

Richer woods and more elaborate mirrors continued the theme, but the room was spared from darkness by the many glittering chandeliers hanging like crowns over each table. Crystal fobs sparkled amongst the candles, bathing the diners below in soft, shimmering light. A glass fireplace in the middle of the room was stunning in its transparency. Made entirely from thick, clear blocks, the structure had been charmed to withstand heat from the flames dancing merrily within, visible from all angles.

A Vivaldi concerto drifted in the background as they took their seats. "This is very swanky," she commented.

Luna glanced around the room as if startled by the observation. "Yes, I suppose it is," she agreed. "I've only dined here with Draco's parents, but the Sussex Pond Pudding is divine."

She couldn't help but giggle at that.

A waiter materialised and recommended the restaurant's acclaimed steak, kidney, and mushroom pie. It exceeded her expectations, and a sleepy contentment settled upon her as their dishes vanished. While Luna savoured pudding, Hermione stirred her coffee and contemplated baby names with minimal sincerity.

"Do you suppose you and Severus will have children?" asked Luna.

If she hadn't been sipping her coffee, she might have avoided the fit of choking and coughing brought about by Luna's question. She waved off the waiter who had appeared...discreet towel in hand...to offer assistance. When she could breathe again, she shook her head and said, "It's doubtful."

Luna looked crestfallen. "Don't you want children?"

She considered for a moment. "I'm not sure. I always assumed I would have children one day, and the idea was not altogether unpleasant."

Luna rolled her eyes. "Yes, but do you *want* children?"

"It's difficult to say," she countered with a shrug. "I prefer to base my decisions on facts and experience, but I lack both in this case. I could only speculate on the things I'd need to sacrifice if I had a child: sleep, solitude, sleep, spontaneity, sleep."

"That's only when they're little babies."

"I'm sure you're right." She'd had this discussion before, albeit with herself, and it was never satisfying. "And I'm sure it's not *all* sacrifice. Parents must get something very special in return to make it worthwhile, or they wouldn't keep having children."

"Yes," agreed Luna with a happy sigh. "It *is* wonderful."

"I'll take your word for it. I can only guess at the negatives, I have nothing tangible for the positives, and there are multiple unknown variables."

"Oh, Hermione," Luna said, tilting her head. "It's not an equation, it's a baby!"

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway. I don't even know how to define my relationship with Severus...I'm certainly not ready to worry about children!"

Luna set her spoon aside and gazed across the table, her pale brows drawn together in question. "Have you told Severus you're in love with him yet?"

She was glad she hadn't been drinking her coffee again, grateful to avoid any further choking fiascos. "No," she answered, hoping Luna wouldn't press the subject.

"Why not?"

"I don't know," she said, quickly adding, "I don't know that *I* am in love with him." She wished she could make Luna appreciate how complicated this was.

"Why must you make everything so complicated?"

"I don't *make* them that way. They simply *are* that way."

"Hermione, love is the simplest...the easiest...thing in the world."

"Maybe for you ..."

"For everyone!" Luna yelled, slapping her hand on the table so hard coffee sloshed onto the tablecloth.

Her eyes widened at Luna's vehemence, and the few remaining diners cast curious glances their way. She couldn't remember a single instance when Luna had so much as raised her voice in the past.

Luna seemed equally surprised by her outburst. "Oh!" she exclaimed and covered her mouth with both hands. She stared across the table with eyes so large they could belong to a house-elf, a look of utter shock upon her face.

Hermione remembered how serious Draco had been when he'd spoken of his refusal to argue with his pregnant wife. At the thought of Luna frightening Draco into silence, a small giggle escaped her throat. The sight of Luna's stunned expression elicited another, and soon Luna lowered her hands and joined in the merriment. Their laughter became contagious, feeding on itself, making conversation impossible. They were still chuckling when a familiar voice interrupted them.

"What a delightful scene," said Lucius Malfoy from behind her chair.

Her gaze flew to one of the many mirrors decorating the walls. All traces of mirth vanished when she saw him watching her, a triumphant smile lighting his face.

"Oh!" said Luna. "Has anything happened with the girls?"

"I'm afraid so," he said. "They're both fine, but there was an unfortunate incident with a Disillusionment Charm. We can hear them, but we simply cannot find them."

"Oh, dear. I'm so sorry, Dad," Luna apologised.

Watching in the mirror, she saw him bristle at Luna's choice of honorific.

"Not to worry, Luna. But Narcissa was hoping you would be so kind as to return to the Manor. Perhaps the girls will listen to their mother and reveal themselves."

Luna looked across the table and frowned.

"You should go," she reassured her, waving away her concern. "We were finished, anyway."

"Excellent," said Lucius. "You can use the fireplace in the manger's office to Floo directly to the Manor. I've already had your parcels sent along."

"Thank you so much," Luna said and rose from the table.

Hermione attempted to stand as well, but she was stopped by Lucius's hand on her shoulder.

"I feel terrible for interrupting your outing, Luna," he said, his tone obsequious. "I hope it eases your mind to know I will assume your duties here and do my best to entertain your charming companion."

Hermione's derisive snort was covered by the manager's arrival. She said goodbye to Luna and watched her departure in the mirror, her dread building. Then she willed herself to meet Lucius's gaze, fighting the urge to flee from his satisfied smile as he took Luna's vacated chair.

Somehow, she just knew this wasn't going to end well.

A/N: Thanks ever so much to my lovely, lovely betas and Brit-picker ... The amazing Karelia, the fabulous little_beloved, and the hypnotic lettybird.

Sixteen for Discovery

Chapter 19 of 33

Hermione makes a plea for teamwork.

Chapter 19: Sixteen for Discovery

Hermione stared across the table, refusing to flinch from Lucius's cold gaze. She would not allow his humourless smile to intimidate her this time. When thoughts of Mikolaj Brukowski's death caused her hands to shake, she merely leant back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest, tucking the telltale trembling from sight. Lucius turned to address a waiter who had appeared, and she looked away, drawing even breaths through her lungs. Her half-full coffee cup beckoned her, begging to be tossed in his face. The satisfaction from imagining the scenario did not linger. Such an action might provide a brief victory, but in the end, it would only prove he had once again managed to upset her.

The words Snape had spoken several weeks earlier floated through her mind. By reacting to Lucius's manoeuvres, *she* was the one granting him the power to threaten her. If she could just remain aloof, like Snape, perhaps she could shift the balance of power. Such bravado was easier to contemplate than enact. Again, memories of her mentor teased her consciousness. Had the man sitting across from her murdered her former professor? The Ministry's investigation had failed to implicate him...they were still convinced Brukowski had taken his own life. Her doubts remained strong, and she wondered if she might turn this unfortunate meeting to her advantage. Surely Lucius was the type of man who enjoyed boasting of his successes. If she could steer the conversation to Brukowski, could she coax a murder confession from him?

"I hope Luna wasn't too worried," he said after the waiter departed. There was a distinct lack of sincerity in his voice.

"And I hope you didn't manufacture an incident with the twins simply to meet with me." She forced herself to smile. "You could have just asked."

His lips thinned. "My previous invitations have been rejected."

"Yes, I've been quite busy," she said with a careless shrug. Her coffee had grown cold, but she swallowed a bitter mouthful while searching for a way to manipulate the conversation. A dull ache had formed in the centre of her forehead. She couldn't fathom how a person could spend any length of time living a charade and felt her respect for Snape increase.

"How fortunate we are to find ourselves with a free afternoon," he said, rising from the table. "Come, my dear. I have something you simply *must* see."

Too late, she realised she should have anticipated this. He held his hand out, and she studied the carefully manicured fingernails while considering her next move.

"Surely you're not scared, Miss Granger?" he asked, his lips curling.

"Of course not," she replied. The warning bells in her head were ignored as she took his hand and rose from the table. An attendant materialised with her cloak, and Lucius draped it across her shoulders. Inside her robe, she grasped the handle of her wand, drawing courage from its familiar feel. She followed Lucius to the back of the restaurant and through a door, stopping when he paused in a dark alley. She did not fear for her safety, a realisation that surprised her. Lucius wanted something from her, so he'd be a fool to hurt her. Of course, she'd be a bigger fool to trust him.

His smile held menace as his fingers slid around her arm. "Side-Along will be best, I believe."

"Great," she said with far more enthusiasm than she felt.

"We'd best make sure I don't lose you." White teeth glinted in the darkness as his lips parted. He snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her closer until their hips touched.

Soon she was spinning fast, and her excellent lunch rose in her stomach. She had never cared for Side-Along Apparition, but she suspected this particular journey was being made intentionally uncomfortable. They stopped with a sudden, violent lurch. His deep chuckle tickled her ear when she toppled into his chest. She stepped away, thinking she'd say something witty to show how unaffected she was. But the walls refused to hold still, and her attention was focused on keeping her lunch down.

When the room stopped spinning, she gazed around, quickly surmising they had Apparated into his office. An enormous desk dominated the centre of the room, heavy mahogany with intricate carvings. The large chair sitting empty behind the desk was covered in dark green leather and looked just as haughty as its usual occupant. Elegant lamps sat on antique tables, dotting the perimeter of the room.

Lucius removed his travelling cloak, inviting her to do the same. She shrugged aside the garment and continued to survey the room. Several paintings covered the walls, and while most were classic Impressionist, one Baroque piece in particular caught her attention. Handing over her cloak, she approached the painting for a closer inspection.

Inside a modest frame, one woman played an elaborately decorated harpsichord while another stood beside it, singing. A man was seated between them, with his back to the viewer. His head was framed by two paintings, one of which she recognised as Baburen's *The Procuress*. A violin lay upon a table while a double bass littered the black and white parquet floor in the foreground.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" asked Lucius, his breath warm upon her hair.

She'd been so intent on the painting she hadn't heard him traverse the thick rugs covering the floor. A crystal glass was pressed into her hand, and she sniffed the ochre liquid swirling within. Watching him sip from an identical glass, she winced when the scent of strong alcohol washed over her, burning her eyes.

His proximity made her skin crawl, but she was determined to remain detached. "Vermeer?" she asked.

"Very good." He bowed his head in acknowledgment before shifting indecently close. "Have you seen it before?" he whispered into her ear. He sounded like a child with a naughty secret.

"Of course," she said, recalling art history classes from university. She kept her movements nonchalant and walked away. "It's called *The Concert*. As I recall, it was stolen from an American museum and never recovered." She turned back, her face composed as she casually perched upon the edge of his massive desk.

He offered no response, his attention seemingly diverted by an intense scrutiny of her skirt. The sheer, flowing material had been appropriate for the spring weather she'd enjoyed at Hogwarts but seemed out of place now. It was also distinctly Muggle in appearance. She watched his gaze flicker from her skirt to his desk and back again, and she wondered if he feared she might contaminate his furniture.

The thought lifted her lips, but her smile froze when she met his eyes. There was something possessive about his expression, an unsettling determination that made the hair on her forearms stand on end. This time she listened to the alarm sounding in her head and scooted off the desk, setting aside her drink, untouched.

"Surely you didn't bring me here for the stolen artwork?" she asked with a confidence she didn't feel. She walked to the lone door in the room, pausing to glance over her shoulder. His face was impassive, and she wondered if her imagination had tricked her. He watched her for a moment before draining his glass in several long swallows.

"Quite so," he confirmed, crossing the room. He grasped the doorknob but held the door closed. "Naturally, this painting is but a copy of the original." His smile held such wicked delight it was obvious he was lying. "A most superior copy."

"You clearly have an appreciation for the masters, Miss Granger," he commented, peering down his aristocratic nose at her. "I must show you my entire collection some day...there are several pieces you might find surprising." An ominous nod accompanied his words. "Remind me to arrange a private showing for you."

Fat chance, she thought, although she murmured a noncommittal, "Mm."

He opened the door at last, and she squeezed by him, stepping into an empty hallway. Nearly four years had passed since she'd stood outside the executive suites of Arglist Industries. Little had changed. She glanced behind her and frowned at the small, nondescript door. It was little wonder she had never noticed it during her employment...it looked as if it led to a broom cupboard, not the owner's private office.

A hand on the small of her back steered her towards the end of the corridor, towards the lower levels and the laboratories. She was unsurprised to find herself at Arglist, and now that they had left the confines of his unfamiliar office, her confidence grew.

Passing by the door to the Director's office, she seized on the opportunity to discuss Arglist employees. "I had heard there was a fire in Henri's office a few years ago," she said, referring to the inferno she had created the night she'd destroyed her research.

"Yes," he confirmed with a thin smile. "Henri was a careless man."

"Was?" she asked. A sense of foreboding stole over her as they rounded a corner and approached what had once been her main laboratory.

"Henri is no longer with us." His tone made it impossible to gauge whether Henri was no longer employed...or no longer living.

"You seem to have difficulties retaining your employees, Mr Malfoy," she said as they paused outside the double doors. "Myself ... Henri ... Mikolaj ..."

"Attrition is the bane of all managers." He cocked his head and frowned at her. "Some employees are simply harder to replace than others," he added, opening one door wide.

Her involuntary gasp echoed off stainless steel shelves and pristine worktables. The facility had housed an impressive array of scientific and magical equipment four years earlier...now, it boasted items she had only dreamt of using. There were Aurascopes unlike any she'd seen before, gleaming Reductate-Imagers coveted worldwide, and she counted no less than three Biometrons. Half the equipment she knew to be years away from public availability, and she wondered how Arglist had managed to obtain so many samples. She meandered further inside, yearning to examine each piece in depth.

Stopping at a cauldron cast in pure platinum, she couldn't resist running her finger around the cold metal rim. It was large...nearly twice the size of any solid gold cauldron...and likely cost more than the Director's annual salary. A notebook lay open beside it, and she scanned the data with interest.

The hypothesis being examined was one she recognised at once, having abandoned it early in her research. If the new team of wizard-scientists put their efforts into pursuing this line, their time would be wasted, their results abysmal. It was the best she could hope for. With the seemingly endless resources available to them, it was still just a matter of time before they'd be able to duplicate her research.

"That's proprietary," said Lucius, reaching around her to close the notebook.

"It's also a gross dereliction of procedure," she informed him. "Research notebooks should be secured in a locked cupboard when not in use."

"Ah, you see why we're eager for your return, Miss Granger?"

"You've hired an entire brains trust to work here. Surely my presence would be superfluous."

"On the contrary, your presence is the only thing we're lacking." He turned away and gazed across the lab, disgust lending a brittle edge to his voice. "I'm told the brightest minds in the world are at work in this room, yet months have passed without the slightest notion of progress. They seem to be missing some critical dynamic."

He turned back and frowned. "And by all accounts, the one component they're missing ... is *you*."

"I'm sure they'll manage without me ... eventually." Recognising the truth in her statement made her all the more determined to stop it.

"I grow impatient," he stated. "I need you here. Now. Let us find whatever is necessary for you to finish your research."

She shook her head.

He ignored her. "We'll start with money, shall we?" He stated a figure so large she was certain she hadn't heard him correctly.

"Not enough?" he asked when she remained silent. "Double it, then."

"I don't want your money, Mr Malfoy," she told him. Judging from his reaction, he seldom received such a response.

"What *do* you want, then?" he asked. His gaze swept the room. "The team will be yours to command, and this lab will belong to you...forever." At her puzzled expression, he continued, "It's yours. Do whatever you wish with it. When you leave, you may take everything here with you."

"I can't help noticing your employees are rarely in a position to take anything with them when they leave. Did you make this same offer to Brukowski?"

His expression was guarded. "That's between Mikolaj and the Devil," he replied. "You needn't worry about his fate, Miss Granger. If you return to Arglist, I will personally guarantee your safety and well-being."

She turned away to hide her anger. Did he really believe she'd trust a single word he uttered? His assurances meant nothing, useless promises for a proposition she'd never entertain. He could offer every conceivable enticement, and she would still refuse him. As long as her return meant the end of Muggle-borns, she would never capitulate.

Her hand trailed over one-of-a-kind tools and implements as she walked amongst the shining tables, shaking her head. Many years had passed since her first glimpse of this room. She was no longer naïve...she had paid the price for temptation, having learnt the hard way that Arglist demanded souls in exchange for their Galleons. The generosity was a ruse, a pretty mask to adorn a monster fed by darkness and hatred. She knew all this, and yet ... and yet ... there was still that familiar longing, that pull of desire, filling her with regret. What breakthroughs could she make with these resources at her fingertips? Bitterness flooded her senses, and she railed against Fate for offering such gifts at such an unbearable cost.

Reaching the end of the table, she spun around and met Lucius's hungry gaze. "I'll return with one stipulation," she said.

"Name it."

"Arglist and its subsidiaries must abandon any research harmful to Muggles and Muggle-borns."

He stared at her for several moments before throwing his head back, filling the room with cold laughter. "Do you suppose I'd offer all this simply for your charming personality?"

She held up her hands and pleaded, "Please hear me out, Mr Malfoy. This is an incredible facility, and you've employed the brightest minds available. Just think what could be accomplished with such assets! You could put an end to so much suffering."

His gaze wavered between amusement and disbelief. "Good heavens, Miss Granger, are you honestly trying to convert me?"

"There are serious problems plaguing the world, Mr Malfoy," she continued, undeterred. "Problems *we* could solve. Never before has there existed such an opportunity to see the benefits of magic and science working in harmony. This ..." she said, gesturing wildly to the lab and its contents, "... This could be the key to everything!"

His continued silence might have meant anything, but she chose to believe it was encouragement and plodded on. "Poverty ... disease ... hunger: these burdens affect wizards and witches as well as Muggles. And just look at the state of the environment! I realise the Muggles are to blame for the rapid destruction of the planet, but we *all* must live here. If you dedicated even half this facility towards finding solutions, I'm certain we'd have a real chance at success."

She approached him as she spoke, continuing to argue her case. His silence allowed her time to search for angles, to grasp for any means to convince him. "Imagine how amazing it would be if *you* were the one responsible for such progress. You would be ensuring a better world for your new grandson ... for all future generations of Malfoys."

Drawing nearer, she saw a flicker of something pass before his eyes. She should have realised sooner the power in mentioning his unborn grandson...hadn't Luna just told her how fanatical his dedication was to the baby? Stopping before him, she smiled up into his face, watching for any sign of assent. He seemed excited by her proposal...his eyes glazed with interest. It was more than she had dared hope for.

She had managed to spark an emotional connection, so she shifted her focus to logic. The key was finding a way to appeal to him on *his* level. She thought of two aspects she had always associated with the Malfoy name: money and power.

"Consider the financial implications," she said. "What price would the nations of the world pay to put an end to these global crises? It could mean great fortune for you."

"I'm already a wealthy man," he said, shifting closer.

She saw the greed in his eyes and knew he desired more, despite his words.

"Yes, of course you are. What about the less tangible benefits, then? Who wouldn't want more respect, more loyalty ..." she paused, considering the obvious danger in tempting him further, then finished, "... more power?"

The greed in his expression grew, darkening with the stain of lust. "Power is always desirable." His voice was no more than a whisper, harsh and breathless. "Tell me."

She licked her lips and tried to navigate the slippery path she'd chosen. This was a risky game, but surely the ends justified the means. "A man who facilitated the end to so much struggling would be a hero unlike any the world has known. No Minister of Magic was ever so powerful...the influence of the entire Wizengamot would pale in

comparison."

His breaths were so rapid each whiskey-scented exhalation fanned her hair as he leaned closer. "Yes," he hissed.

He obviously wanted more, and she briefly considered stopping before she promised something she'd regret. But there would be time later to deal with his avarice. Success was in her reach...she just needed his commitment to change the mission of Arglist.

Tipping the scales, she placed a beseeching hand upon his shoulder and said, "You'd be the most powerful man known to either world."

He moved fast, surprising her. In an instant, his arms closed around her, holding her tight while demanding lips covered her face. Her attempts to reach her wand only seemed to increase his ardour. She cursed herself for thinking she could reason with someone whose ideals were so fundamentally different than her own. Anger coursed through her, hot and blinding. Her body shook with rage, the fury so strong it burned a path down her arms and into her fingers. The force of her wrath strengthened while it changed, transforming into raw power that pounded through her in waves, growing too fast to control. The air filled with a crack of thunder as magic burst from her body. Lucius flew backwards, crashing over a table several metres away. By the time he stumbled to his feet, her wand was drawn.

"Enough," he said, raising his hands in surrender.

"*Stupefy!*" she cried. A bolt of red light shot across the lab, sending him back to the floor.

He remained immobile for several moments. Slowly, he pulled himself into a sitting position, drawing his knee high and resting an elbow upon it. With his other hand, he massaged his chest and glared at her. "Bad form, Miss Granger," he said. "As you see, I am unarmed."

She swiped the back of her hand across her mouth, trying to erase the taste of him. "Bad form, yourself," she bit out. "As you see, I was provoked."

"Fair enough," he said, inclining his head. He continued to rub his chest while assessing her. "Your powers have certainly grown with time. That's an impressive spell to have cast without a wand."

She felt no need to acknowledge his compliment. Her wand still targeted his chest, and she debated what spell to use if he stood again. Flitwick's voice squeaked inside her mind: *Never cast in anger, children!* She ignored the warning, hardly trusting Lucius's change in tactics.

"May I stand now?" he asked, his tone formal.

"You may." Her fingers twitched on smooth vinewood. *A hair-loss curse? The honesty hex, perhaps?*

"Thank you," he said and rose to his feet. "You may lower your wand, Miss Granger...I promise to practice restraint. This was hardly my plan for soliciting your return to Arglist."

After several moments and more than a little reluctance, her wand rested at her side. She did not relinquish her grip and hoped he appreciated how easily she'd jinx him again.

"Thank you," he repeated, bowing his head. "Forgive me for taking advantage of the situation. I was simply overcome by your passion."

"I see," she said, crossing her arms. "And did my passion convince you to cease work on your current project?"

His smile spread slowly. With a tilt of his head, he flicked his gaze over her body and replied, "I'm afraid not. But you weren't employing your passion to that end, were you? Perhaps you'd like another opportunity to convince me to reconsider?"

"Perhaps you'd like me to knock you onto your arse again," she said, raising her wand. She found his arrogance just as intolerable as his suggestion.

"If that's the sort of game you enjoy, I suppose I could indulge you."

The dull ache in her head had grown to a steady pounding. "I'm with Severus," she reminded him.

"And you believe Severus deserves your loyalty?" His laughter was chilling. "How delightful!"

"Why wouldn't he?" she asked, not understanding his implication and growing weary of the subterfuge.

With a devious smile, he replied, "Why indeed? He's *very* good, isn't he?"

First Ron, now Lucius...why was everyone trying to warn her away from Snape today? Her sigh conveyed her annoyance.

"If there's some reason I shouldn't trust Severus, just come out and say it, Mr Malfoy."

"And ruin the fun of your discovery?" he asked, his smile turning cruel. "That would hardly be sporting. You're a bright girl. I'm certain you'll uncover the truth ... sooner or later."

"We're done," she announced and spun on her heel.

Making her way to the executive suites, she heard his footsteps behind her as she neared the door to his office. The knob refused to turn in her hand, resisting the silent *Alohomora* she cast.

"Allow me," he said, reaching around her. The knob glowed emerald when his hand touched it, and she heard tumblers turning within the lock. He pushed at the door, holding it open with his arm and said, "After you."

Having no desire to brush against him as she navigated the small passage, she pointed inside and said, "You first."

He smirked and entered the office, retrieving her cloak with a flick of his wrist. Ignoring her outstretched hand, he gestured to his desk and said, "Why don't we sit and discuss this as professionals, Miss Granger? Perhaps you'd like to finish your drink?"

She dropped her hand and stared at him. An article of clothing was hardly enough to engender her stay...he could keep the sodding cloak for all she cared. But something else bothered her, and she hesitated. Shaking her head, she spoke slowly.

"No," she said, the simple word protracted with uncertainty.

"No?" he repeated, lifting his eyebrows. "To the drink or to the discussion?"

The urge to leave was overruled by the taste of failure. She had come here with a purpose, yet she was no closer to achieving her goal than she'd been before his appearance at the Silver Chalice. Rather than answer his question, she posed her own into the silence.

"Did you kill Mikolaj Brukowski?"

Surprise crossed his features briefly, replaced by sly appraisal as he approached her. A dark smile played upon his lips and spread across his face like ink bleeding onto parchment. Her stomach twisted when he stopped before her. As if mocking her earlier response, he shook his head in exaggerated slow motion, drawing out the lone syllable of his reply.

"No," he said, holding her gaze and making her realise the folly of such a question. There was only one answer she'd believe, and he was far too cunning to supply it.

He walked around her, draping the cloak over her shoulders before speaking into her ear.

"Consider my offer," he said. Lowering his voice, he amended, "*Both* my offers."

She moved into the centre of the office before turning back to meet his eyes.

"Never," she said. The room echoed with the force of her conviction.

Deranged anger exploded onto his face, twisting his features and creating an indelible memory as she Disappeared from view.

A/N: Thanks so much to Karelia and little_beloved for amazingly fast beta reading. I am very grateful to everyone who nominated and voted for this story in the OWL Awards!! I cannot express how delighted I was to learn "A Murder of Crows" won third place in the "Best Drama" category. What an honour!

Of Passions Unsurpassed

Chapter 20 of 33

Hermione tells Snape about her travels, but his reaction isn't quite what she expected.

Chapter 20: Of Passions Unsurpassed

Apparating into Hogsmeade, Hermione barely registered the return of flawless blue skies and crisp spring air. The mistakes she'd made in trying to handle Lucius gnawed at her. Her mind refused to relinquish the afternoon's events, berating her foolishness one minute and mocking her naïveté the next. Rather than listen to the constant censure from her inner know-it-all, she opted for analysis, safe and familiar. Each misstep was systematically examined as she trudged along the well-worn path to Hogwarts.

This is what comes from fourteen years of relative safety, she thought. Time had weakened her defences and dulled her reactions. She shook her head and dismissed the excuse as too simple and far too convenient. More than the passing seasons were to blame for her lapse of judgement.

Descending into the dungeons, she entered the living quarters and attempted to organise her thoughts. The sight of Snape lounging on the sofa provided a welcome distraction. A small book rested in his lap whilst his long legs stretched out before him, feet propped upon the table. He drank wine of such deep red colour it was nearly black, like midnight in a glass.

Her heart clenched. Ron's warning evaporated, and her mind pressed a heavy blanket over the incident with Lucius, smothering unpleasant memories. Any lingering sense of unease would undoubtedly fade the moment she felt Snape's arms around her. She resolved to join him on the sofa as soon as she'd cured her headache.

"Did you enjoy your trip?" he asked while sliding thin reading glasses from his nose.

The inquiry surprised her, as she imagined he had little interest in shopping and even less tolerance for babies.

She hesitated, then nodded. "I had a pleasant time with Luna," she said and walked through her bedroom to find an appropriate potion. "Until her father-in-law arrived, at least," she added, her head stuck inside a bathroom cupboard.

The contents of each shelf were thoroughly examined for the precious elixir, but her quest proved unsuccessful. Frustration grew faster than the throbbing in her head. She opened drawers with a vengeance and slammed them shut when the remedy remained elusive.

"Lucius joined you." His statement came from the doorway, and she jumped at his sudden proximity, her nerves still raw. "What did he want?" he asked.

Moving to the cupboard beneath the basin, she muttered, "What he always wants: me." The declaration held more than one meaning now, and her headache intensified. "He sent Luna off on some rubbish about the twins. Then he ... he said there was something he wanted to show me."

Abandoning the search, she stood and gingerly massaged her forehead. "Do you have any headache tonic?" she asked. For the first time, she noticed his stiff posture.

He ignored her question. "Naturally, your superior intelligence prevented you from leaving with him."

Her gaze crept away as she chewed her lip, mumbling, "One would have thought."

Silence ensued until his angry sigh tore it apart and demanded her gaze. "Where did he take you?"

"Arglist," she admitted after a brief pause.

A muscle near his temple jumped. "Are you ... unharmed?"

"I'm fine."

His eyes closed for a moment, and he released his breath as if he'd been holding it. Then he grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "What the devil were you thinking?"

"Don't shout at me...I have a headache."

"You're lucky that's *all* you have, you impetuous creature." His hands slid down her arms before falling to his sides. He seemed to be wrestling with whether or not to shake her again.

Visions of snuggling on the sofa fled, leaving a chasm that quickly filled with indignation. She had hoped for a modicum of approval. At the very least, she felt she deserved some sympathy. Hypocrisy niggled at the fringes of her awareness, but she disregarded it, temper flaring in the wake of his anger.

"You were the one who said I was giving him too much power by feeling threatened."

"Do not twist my words to justify your lack of prudence! Overreacting to a dinner invitation is entirely different to meeting privately with Lucius...at Arglist, of all places."

Rather than admit he was right, she strode past him and flung her cloak upon her bed with more force than necessary. She didn't realise he had followed her into the room until he spoke, very close behind her.

"Given the conditions under which you departed your laboratory, I'm surprised you'd be willing to return."

"Well, it's not as if I knew we were going to Arglist when we left the restaurant." She regretted the statement the instant she uttered it and winced at his sharp intake of breath.

"You had no concept of where you were going." Each word fell from his mouth like a stone, heavy with accusation. "And how did you travel to Arglist?" he asked, though she was certain he already knew the answer.

She cleared her throat and turned. "Side-Along."

Rage swirled over his face, colouring his cheeks, turning his eyes to black ice. Vicelike fingers gripped her arms again. He shook her once before tearing his hands away as if her skin had scorched him. His hard stare was impossible to meet, so she dropped her gaze and watched his hands ball into tight fists. The silence grew, swelling and festering until it was too large to ignore. When she lifted her eyes at last, it was only to watch him storm from the room, slamming her door with enough force to rattle the fixtures.

She closed her eyes as impotent anger surged through her limbs, burning her fingertips. Her breath expelled in a loud, irritated sigh. How dare he scold her? Her actions were far less hazardous than any mission he'd undertaken for the Order. She was hardly an innocent ingénue or a hapless, green novice...she'd fought in a war, for Merlin's sake.

When her door flew open a moment later, she whirled on the spot, ready to battle him blow for blow. Her determination was somewhat squashed by the phial of headache tonic he thrust at her. Judging by his expression, it was meant to ensure a fair fight rather than be taken as a peace offering. She swallowed two large mouthfuls and waited for the war to resume.

Once the pain had abated, she decided to change tactics and appeal to his sense of reason. But rational arguments were difficult to find and even harder to sell. She had no choice but to concede the folly of her decisions.

"I will admit leaving with Lucius was a bit ... risky," she said.

He interrupted with a snort of disgust.

"I assumed he'd take me to Arglist...it was the only logical destination," she said. "My safety was never in jeopardy. He needs something from me."

"I fail to see how his needs translate to a guarantee of your safety."

"Harming me would defeat his purpose. If he hurts me, he'll never get what he wants."

His expression darkened. "That's a dangerous delusion. Surely you realise Lucius has ways of hurting you *specifically* to get what he wants?"

She swallowed hard, reluctant to consider the methods Lucius would employ if desperate. The memory of his cruel lips on her face was chilling enough. She wondered how Snape would react to him propositioning her and swallowed again. His anger seemed to be growing rather than diminishing, convincing her to remain silent on that aspect of her afternoon. She had no wish for a repeat of Christmas Eve, when jealousy had clouded his judgement. One battle at a time.

"I know what he's capable of, Severus. But I'm not completely helpless, either. Surely *you* realise I can take care of myself...I've been doing so for the past twenty years."

"If this is any indication of your decision-making abilities, it's a wonder you're still alive."

"It wasn't that long ago you were commending me for defeating Voldemort. How fickle your praise is!"

"Are you suggesting you would have agreed to Side-Along Apparition with the Dark Lord?"

"Of course not, but..."

"Of course not, *full stop!*"

"Don't lecture me, Severus!" Frustration forced her voice to rise, though she barely realised she was shouting. "I'm not a child!"

"Obviously not...a child would have exercised more caution!"

"I exercised caution," she said through clenched teeth. "I had my wand ready the entire time." *Almost.*

He stalked closer, ostensibly repositioning himself in case she required further shaking. "Have you learnt nothing from your past dealings with Lucius?"

"I have! That's why I needed to prove he could no longer intimidate me."

"There are better ways!"

"I had to confront him about Brukowski's death."

"At what price?" he yelled.

"It would have been worth it, had he confessed!"

"That doesn't matter anymore! You could have ruined everything!"

Her mouth opened to argue, but she snapped it shut, confused. Puzzling her more than his words was the expression of pure shock on his face. The look did not linger, fleeing the instant he squared his shoulders.

"What does that mean?" she asked. "What could I have ruined?"

"Nothing ... I misspoke," he said and turned away. Long fingers swept through silky black hair. He rolled his head in broad circles, stretching the muscles in his neck and shoulders before staring at the ceiling.

His refusal to answer only deepened her unease. Doubt crashed into her mind like a tidal wave, a great torrent of questions flooding her brain and making her dizzy. The small article she'd found tucked inside his book...why hadn't he ever mentioned it? The mysterious nights spent outside the castle...where did he go and with whom did he meet? The insidious hints Lucius had dropped...what had he been implying?

"Severus?" she asked, refusing to continue until he turned and met her eyes. "Are you involved with something at Arglist?" She was pleased when her voice did not falter. "Is *that* what I might have ruined?"

Dark eyes narrowed. For a moment, they held such loathing he seemed capable of anything. Then he turned away again. Slowly shaking his head, he brought his hands to his hips, his stance defiant. "For a bright woman, you can be incredibly thick sometimes."

She folded her arms across her chest, her jaw set. "And what exactly am I missing, O Wise One?" she asked.

His arms lifted from his hips and crossed, a perfect mirror of her posture. He turned back and said, "You're an insolent girl, and I don't know why I waste my time on you."

She hadn't thought her day could get any worse, but she'd obviously been too optimistic.

He sighed. "For reasons beyond my comprehension, I have begun to care deeply about your welfare. About ... *you*." It was hard to tell which part of his confession disturbed him more...the fact he harboured serious feelings for her, or the fact he was being forced to voice them.

Words eluded her. If his declaration hadn't been delivered with such reluctance, the sentiment might have actually cheered her.

"When you conduct yourself with so little regard for your safety, it forces me to question the wisdom of my involvement," he said.

"Is this your way of saying you were worried about me?" she asked.

"Why else would I be so angry?"

Her gaze lowered to his arms, still folded across his chest. She had assumed his anger was a criticism of her competence, not his personal, defensive reaction. Remorse rolled into her mind like a heavy fog, slithering around her doubts until even the questions that had plagued her earlier began to feel like paranoia. She dropped her arms and accepted his concern. Considering all that had happened, she supposed his fears were not entirely unfounded.

Before she could form a reply, he spoke again. "I have a vested interest in your presence, in keeping you here with me. You've insinuated yourself into my life now."

Her laugh was hollow, devoid of humour. "You make it sound rather unpleasant. Do you feel I seduced you against your will?"

"No, of course not," he said, brows furrowed. "But we've progressed very far, very fast. I find it disconcerting at times. I never imagined you'd become more important to me than...."

She held her breath, waiting.

He seemed surprised and retreated at once, shifting his weight to his heels. The distance was insignificant, yet he found a way to build a wall in the slight space.

Donning his composure like armour, he straightened and peered down at her. "You've become important to me," he said. "This escapade notwithstanding, I happen to enjoy our current circumstances. And I have no desire to see that...*us*...ruined."

"I see," she said. It was, perhaps, the most inelegant revelation she'd ever heard. And considering the time she'd spent with Ron, such an achievement was impressive.

He frowned again, fingers returning to rake deep valleys through his hair. She stilled her tongue and ignored the analysis her mind begged to offer.

"You know how selfish I am," he said. "You've seen it...experienced it...more than most."

"Okay."

"And you're willing to accept this?"

"I'm willing to accept it's unlikely to change," she said with a shrug. They were bound to disagree on whether his actions were *always* selfish.

"Right. Then you must also be willing to accept responsibility when you take foolish risks and endanger something so dear to me."

The delivery still lacked finesse, but she didn't mind as much. "All right," she agreed with a nod.

He blinked and seemed surprised by her capitulation, suspicious of her ready agreement. But her case had lacked merit from the beginning, making it somewhat easier to abandon. If he could set aside his stubborn nature, so could she. It was plain to see how disturbed he'd been by her trip to Arglist. Confessing the reason for his distress had to have cost him dearly.

"I didn't realise you felt this way," she said.

His lips pushed into a thin line. "Now that you know, I trust you will refrain from courting disaster again?"

"Yes, Professor," she intoned. His raised eyebrow made her smile, but her humour didn't last. "You needn't worry...I have every intention of staying as far from Lucius as possible." She pressed her hands against her stomach as a pair of sinister grey eyes haunted her memory. "He's not just evil, Severus. I think he's mad."

He drew her into his arms. For a moment, he clutched her tightly, the ferocity of his embrace just as intense as his earlier anger. Then he relaxed and his hand caressed her back. The tenderness was almost her undoing. She fought the urge to break down, to let his strength chase away all the ugliness. Delayed shock slammed into her, a powerful cocktail that mixed with relief over having escaped Arglist...and Lucius...unscathed. She shook her head, denying the fear, refusing the panic. The bastard deserved neither.

Determination renewed, she cleared her mind and slid her hands behind Snape's neck. His head dipped forward instantly. She found his mouth and plunged her tongue inside. The taste of wine still clung to his lips, and she drank him in, greedy for more. His arms tightened, melding their bodies together. It was all the encouragement she needed to urge him across her room. When they reached her bed, she pushed him onto his back and stood with her hands on her hips.

"If I *had* been trying to seduce you, I believe this is how it might have looked."

Lifting the sides of her skirt, she hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her knickers and slid them down. Satisfied with the brief glimpse of thigh, she let him stare down her blouse while she bent forward to guide the satin from her ankles. Her skills at opening his many buttons had been honed, and she quickly divested him of clothes. She climbed onto the bed and straddled him. Her knees squeezed his waist, and she hovered over him, waiting, refusing the contact of heat to heat. His hands clawed their way beneath her skirt and gripped her thighs. She pinched her knees tighter when he tried to pull her down, her legs trembling with effort.

"Patience," she said in warning.

She took her time with the buttons on her blouse, enjoying his expression as he watched her slow, deliberate progress. He muttered an oath and moved his hands higher,

deft fingers teasing, promising pleasure, then retreating. She slid her body over his and mimicked his pattern of offering and denying, advancing only to retreat. His growl of frustration pleased her more than it should have. Victory became a foreign concept when his fingers exacted revenge, and he stroked her faster. She shifted her position and plunged onto him with sudden fierceness. The pace was frantic and wild, too desperate to maintain. She rode him through her crest and beyond. When his fingers dug into her hips, she threw her head back and smiled. A deep groan announced his final surrender, and she claimed each tremor of his tense shudder as her personal spoils.

Although a pillow would have been softer, she collapsed onto his chest instead. Slowly, the world stopped spinning, and she remembered how to breathe.

"Need to improve my seduction technique," she mumbled after several minutes. "Must last longer next time."

"I have no complaints with the current method."

Straightening her legs, she shifted halfway off his chest. Within seconds, her eyelids became so heavy she had no choice but to close them.

He draped his arm across her shoulder and traced lazy circles on her back. "Although," he said, "the opportunity to test further refinements sounds promising."

His heartbeat drummed an enchanted lullaby against her ear. "Mmmph," she said when the witty retort in her head floundered before it reached her lips. Sleep claimed her before she could attempt the words again.

She sprinted along the familiar hallways of Hogwarts as the battle raged. Even through the dodging of spells and Death Eaters, there was a sense of coming home, of relief for being done with that damned tent. She had no sense of how the battle would end...who would win or lose, who would live or die. But no matter the outcome, she knew today meant the end. Either peace would return, or her life would be sacrificed in its pursuit. She was ready for either scenario.

The staircases were eerily still. She hurried up the steps, taking two at a time. The higher she rose, the more deserted the castle became. She'd never felt so alone. The sounds of the battle faded. She climbed staircase after staircase until her lungs burned, but still more stairs appeared. The lack of progress did not deter her...she had to reach the top. Waiting above, just out of reach, was something critical, something she'd overlooked that would prove imperative to her survival. If only she could find what it was.

The stairs transformed into a landing, and she sped through the door that appeared. Stepping into the cold night air, she glanced at the familiar objects littering the top of the Astronomy Tower. Two realisations hit her at once: she was no longer eighteen ... and she was no longer alone. Lucius stood across from her, waiting.

She spun away, but the door through which she'd just entered had disappeared. Her hands flew to her pockets.

"Looking for this?" he asked, holding up her wand. Smiling, he flung it over the side of the tower.

"You have no business here."

"Then why were you searching for me?"

She frowned. Was Lucius the crucial detail she'd overlooked? She couldn't imagine how that could be. "You aren't allowed on school grounds."

"Nonsense. My son is here."

"Draco belongs here. You don't."

"And who do you suppose will remove me? You?" His patronising laughter chilled her.

"What do you want?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"But you don't want me...you've always despised me."

"True. And yet, every time you refuse me, it only strengthens my determination to have you."

"I'll never return to Arglist."

"Of course you will." He stepped closer. "You already have."

"No." She shook her head.

"Destiny will not be denied. I will rid the world of Muggle-borns, and you will help me."

Each time he moved forward, she stepped back. Soon her legs hit the cold stone of the tower wall. "I'd rather die than help you."

His expression hardened as he reached for her. "That can be arranged, as well."

She tried to jump away, but her movements were unnaturally sluggish. He caught her by the throat and squeezed his fingers slowly, licking his lips as he watched her struggle for breath. Just as darkness clouded her vision, he released her. Relief for the great gulps of air scorching her lungs was short-lived. Grabbing her waist, he lifted her into the air and threw her over the wall as easily as he'd tossed her wand. Instead of plummeting to the ground, however, she clung to the side of the Astronomy Tower.

"What are doing down there?" asked Snape, sounding more annoyed than concerned.

She gazed up at his dark silhouette, squinting at his shadowed face. Pure, white moonlight streamed down upon his back, forming a perfect halo around his black hair.

"Take my hands," he said.

"I can't." Despite her tenuous grip, she was terrified to let go of the ancient stone.

"Trust me."

She had no choice and reached for him. His fingers tightened around her wrists and pulled her higher. Just as she began to wonder why he hadn't used magic to lift her, Lucius's face appeared beside him. She opened her mouth to issue a warning, but the dark eyes staring down at her filled with hatred and stole her breath.

"You foolish girl." With a shake of his head, he dropped her into the gaping maw of eternally black night.

She fought the pull of gravity, the sharp sting of betrayal. Her arms flailed madly as she descended into darkness, desperate for something to break her fall.

Thrashing beneath the bedcovers, she awoke with a start, drenched in sweat. Shapes materialised in the dim light as she sat upright. A scream formed in her throat when her coat rack pretended to be an intruder, but it died as reality slowly penetrated her dream-soaked mind. She listened to her breaths wheezing through her lungs, echoing in the quiet bedroom.

"What's wrong?" asked Snape beside her.

She whipped around and glared at him, her fingers itching for her wand. Bitterness filled her mouth at the memory of his betrayal. She stiffened when he reached for her, but he merely caressed her arm while indulging in a large yawn. She drew a deep breath and shook her head.

"Bad dream," she answered at last. Her voice felt raw, as if she'd shouted in her sleep.

"Tell me."

"No, it's alright. It seems ridiculous now, anyway." *Foolish*. She shivered.

His fingers closed around her arm, and he pulled her into his embrace. He stroked the hair above her ear, much like her mother had done countless times when she was a child. Long after he'd pressed soft kisses to her forehead, his lips remained against her temple.

"It was only a dream," he whispered.

She nuzzled closer and believed him.

Karelia and Little_Beloved are the dearest betas in the fandom, and lettybird lets me know when I've taken too many liberties with the Queen's English. Thank you, ladies...you're the best!

Seventeen for Fear

Chapter 21 of 33

Plans and wagers and threats. Oh my!

Chapter 21: Seventeen for Fear

Two weeks after her unplanned visit to Arglist, Hermione still searched for a way to stop Lucius. Solutions proved as elusive as Madam Pince's smile, and frustration soon battled anxiety for the privilege of keeping her awake at night. A trip to the Ministry was the next logical step.

If only the new Minister for Magic inspired the same confidence and respect Kingsley had commanded. Gregor Ustinov had acted so strangely when she'd met him at the Malfoys' Christmas Eve ball, and she wondered how receptive he'd be to her accusations against Lucius. But with each passing day, the pressure to do something...*anything*...magnified. A giant clock seemed to shadow her every movement, its imaginary ticking a perpetual reminder of a reality she could not escape. Time was running out.

"Absolutely not," said Snape when she told him of her plans.

"I can't just sit here and do nothing while an entire team at Arglist is hard at work."

"Meeting with Gregor is hardly the answer."

"Why?"

"Because you will be little use against Lucius when you are incarcerated."

She looked away and bit her lip.

"Gregor is a man of limited vision," he said. "I doubt he will appreciate...or even understand...how Lucius intends to use the Arglist research. To have any hope of convincing him, you would need to confess your entire history with Arglist, and the moment you do that, he will arrest you for the costly destruction of private property. You will be made into an example: the face of the Ministry's perseverance against criminals."

"Then I won't tell him about the vandalism."

"I see." He arched one eyebrow. "You are willing to sit before the Minister for Magic and calmly lie to him about a crime you committed?"

"I could."

"Perhaps. But whether you *should* is an entirely different matter."

"Yes, I happen to be familiar with the 'could' versus 'should' argument," she said. Several months had passed, yet those two words had remained on the chalkboard in the Hogwarts laboratory, her private reminder to question everything.

"Then surely you know better than to act in haste. This is not one of your wisest strategies."

Her shoulders fell. "Maybe not, but I'm out of options."

"Not necessarily. From what you saw in that journal at Arglist, we have time to develop a comprehensive plan of attack."

"If they haven't already abandoned that particular line of inquiry." She prayed they hadn't. "Whatever the case, I still think I should tell the Minister what Lucius is capable of."

He folded his arms across his chest and sighed. "Even if Gregor believes you, it is doubtful you could avoid custody while he decides how to proceed. Do not forget what

happened to Hagrid when the Chamber of Secrets was opened: the Ministry requires little evidence to hold someone for questioning. Trust me, Hermione...you must do whatever is necessary to avoid Azkaban."

The horrors of the wizarding prison sent a shiver down her spine, yet still she struggled against his reasoning. It wasn't in her nature to shirk responsibility. Razing the laboratory at Arglist...while seemingly justified at the time...was still a serious legal violation. All crimes carried consequences, a reality she had been prepared to accept when she had confessed to Kingsley. But at that time, she had also believed the problem had been solved, the threat nullified.

In many ways, her position was more precarious now than it had been four years earlier. Snape was right...she couldn't risk being sent to prison if she wanted to ensure Lucius was stopped. "I agree with what you're saying, in theory. But I'm not comfortable with no one else knowing of his plot."

He seemed to consider her words. "I suppose that is a valid point," he conceded. "The Ministry should be apprised of Lucius's plans, however unlikely Gregor is to act upon them." He rummaged through a stack of newspapers by the sofa. "*The Prophet* had something about him travelling abroad ... Ah, here it is ... He is in Africa until Saturday next. I shall inform his secretary I need to meet with him upon his return."

"We need to meet with him," she corrected.

"I need to meet with him."

"I really think I should come, too."

"I really disagree."

"He's bound to ask questions only I can answer."

"Precisely. All the more reason you should stay here. I can provide enough information to steer him onto the correct path if he is willing to follow it. That is what you want, yes?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then it's settled."

She started to argue but thought better of it. The Minister would be less likely to dismiss the accusations if they came from someone detached from the situation, with no ties to Arglist. And her recent encounter with Lucius had proved her deficiency with subtle negotiating skills, whereas Snape would know how much...or how little...to say without compromising her position.

Although she was unaccustomed to relinquishing control, Snape was clearly the best candidate to address the Minister. She accepted his insistence with a nod. "Since when did you become so bossy?"

He shrugged. "It must be your influence. People who live together often develop each other's traits after a time."

"Hmm. That explains my newfound desire to scowl at my students."

"And your sudden, overwhelming urge to take me to bed at every opportunity?"

She snorted. "I wasn't aware of that one, actually."

"Then allow me to enlighten you." He slipped his fingers around her wrist and pulled her to his bedroom.

Although the Minister was seldom in the office at the weekend, Snape had somehow convinced his secretary to arrange a meeting for the very Saturday morning on which he would return to England. Rather than the relief she had expected to feel as the meeting approached, Hermione's apprehension increased with each passing day. By Friday afternoon, she had handed out more detentions in one week than she had over the course of the entire school year.

A cup of tea and a scalding hot bath were all she desired when she locked her office and returned to the living quarters late on Friday evening. She rolled her head from side to side in a fruitless attempt to relieve the knots in her neck and shoulders. The kettle clattering atop the stove almost covered a soft, persistent knock. She frowned and left the kitchen.

A flick of her wand vanished the door to reveal Pity, the tiny house-elf who had delivered the article about Brukowski's death. Her stomach clenched when she saw another enormous scroll clutched in the elf's hands.

"Hello, Pity," she said and forced a smile upon her face. It wasn't the elf's fault her mail had held such unwelcome news.

"Good evening, miss," squeaked Pity.

"Have you had an enjoyable school year thus far?" The smile froze on Hermione's face when enormous tears filled Pity's eyes. The elf's tiny body shook so violently the scroll bounced against her long nose. "Pity, what's happened ... what's wrong?"

"Nothing, miss," she answered at once, as if the river of fat tears rushing down her face was a natural occurrence. "This came for you."

She took the proffered scroll and immediately saw the source of the elf's distress. An angry red gash ran the length of her arm, oozing thick blood that glistened in the torchlight.

Hermione uttered a squeak of her own and fell to her knees. "What happened to your arm?" She tried to get a closer look, but the elf hopped out of reach, and she had to remind herself to tread carefully. Sitting cross-legged upon the floor brought her closer to Pity's level, but she still towered over the little creature.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to startle you. But that cut looks serious, and it needs to be healed."

"It's just a scratch, miss."

She frowned at the wound, unable to dismiss the deep cut so easily. Something else disturbed her, as well...if house-elves were capable of powerful magic, why hadn't Pity already mended her injury? "Do you know how to heal this?" she asked.

An ocean of secrets could have hidden in the large blue eyes that stared up at her, unblinking. After an interminable wait, she answered, "Pity is still learning the healing magic, miss. Pity will practice more tonight, after the mail is delivered."

A house-elf's age was difficult to guess, but Pity's confession seemed to indicate her small size was the result of youth, rather than genetics. Hermione couldn't fault the elf's resolution to learn the proper method for healing herself. Still, the wound looked truly dangerous and convinced her something should be done at once. She doubted Pity would accept her help outright, so she was forced to find a different approach. She just hoped Pity's curiosity equalled her determination.

"Pity, I've been conducting some extremely important experiments, and I wonder if you might be willing to help me?"

The large eyes gazed at her with interest, although she did not answer.

"You see, I need to document the effects of Dittany on powerful, magical creatures, but I've had no opportunity for study as yet. Would you allow me to use some on your arm?"

Pitty peered at the long, dark wound, as if considering.

"It would be of enormous assistance to me," Hermione added. Perhaps the elf's innate desire to serve would overrule her hesitation.

"All ... all right, miss," she squeaked after a moment.

"Thank you." Hermione Summoned bandages and bottles from the cupboard and performed a simple cleansing spell on the wound. Splitting the lone drop of Dittany into smaller portions proved time-consuming, but she couldn't risk using too much. At length, she was able to direct an appropriately tiny droplet towards Pitty's arm. A puff of purple smoke floated from the wound.

Hermione tilted her head and said, "Huh." Her desire to study Dittany's effect on house-elves had been a ruse, but the purple mist...so different from the vibrant green smoke when used on humans...still surprised her. The cut healed as they watched in silence. Soon even the bandages she had Summoned were deemed unnecessary.

"How did this happen?" she asked Pitty while sending the supplies back into her quarters.

A shudder wracked the elf's small frame. "The owl thought Pitty was his dinner, miss."

She glanced at the large scroll and recognised the heavy parchment at once. *Damn Lucius and his sodding eagle owl* she thought. She could only imagine how terrified Pitty must have been. Given the size of the bird, a dinner of frightened house-elf was not an impossible scenario.

"Isn't there anyone else who can retrieve the mail from the owls?" she asked, ignoring her vow to stop meddling in the affairs of other creatures.

"All house-elves deliver the mail at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry first, miss."

"First?"

"Yes, miss. The mail is Pitty's first task to learn. Then Pitty might learn the laundry, or the kitchens, or the gardens ... or wherever else Pitty is sent."

This confirmed her suspicions about Pitty's age. "What if the headmistress were to request a different assignment for you?" she asked. "One that didn't involve the Owlery?"

Pitty looked fearful. "Pitty would never ask Headmistress McGonagall for special treatment, miss. Pitty is honoured to serve at the most noble Hogwarts School of..."

"Yes, yes, of course," she interrupted. "But isn't there some area of the castle where you'd feel *especially* honoured to ... um ... serve in? The kitchens? The common rooms? The library?"

She saw a flicker in Pitty's eyes and pounced. "The library?"

Pitty shuffled her feet and stared at the ground. Her whispered reply was barely discernable. "Pitty's mother loved books, miss. Pitty thinks the library is the most wonderful room at Hogwarts."

"I couldn't agree with you more." She smiled and stood. Having no desire to read Lucius's latest missive, she flicked her wand at the scroll and sent it to the kitchen table. After reinstating the door to her quarters, she said, "I shall speak to the headmistress at once."

The elf's resulting protest seemed half-hearted. "Pitty does not wish to trouble anyone, miss."

"It's no trouble at all. I needed to see the headmistress anyway," she lied.

She hurried from the dungeons before Pitty could change her mind. Once inside McGonagall's office, the lecture she received on the ways of house-elves was surprisingly brief, given her dubious history with S.P.E.W. After relating the details of the incident, she had little trouble convincing McGonagall that Pitty belonged in the library.

"Thank you," she said after the appropriate arrangements had been made. "I'd feel terrible if an owl ate her."

McGonagall agreed. "I appreciate you bringing this to my attention. It's hardly worth taking a chance when such a simple solution exists."

Hermione smiled, pleased with the all-too-rare sense of accomplishment.

"I'm glad you came to see me, Hermione." McGonagall laced her fingers together and rested her hands upon her desk. "I've been meaning to speak to you for some time on a personal basis."

"Oh?" The serious tone made her wary. "About what?"

"About the arrangements between you and Severus."

"Ah."

"How is ... everything?"

She swallowed. "It's ... um ... fine?"

McGonagall watched her, lips pursed and a somewhat grim expression on her face.

She tried not to squirm as the silence extended, but restraining the movements of both her limbs and tongue proved impossible. "Truly, Minerva ... it's fine. He teaches his students, I teach mine. Your decision to split the classes seems to be working just fine. And in our spare time, I have the laboratory, and he has his ... whatever it is he has," she said, waving her hand through the air. "It's all perfectly fine. We haven't had any issues with sharing the living quarters, so even that has been fine. Overall, I'd say it's just ... um ... it's..."

"Fine?"

She cleared her throat. "Yes."

A movement on the wall caught her eye. Dumbledore materialised within the frame of his portrait and appeared to listen to their conversation with great interest.

"You were hardly *fine* with the arrangements the night Severus returned," McGonagall said. "And let's not forget the war you two waged against the House points system earlier this year."

She chuckled. "I believe Severus and I have finished our fight over points now."

"I should hope so." McGonagall lifted her chin and sniffed.

Her relationship with Snape had certainly progressed since their initial meeting on Halloween, in this very office. Perhaps it was unwise to try to hide it any longer. "I believe it's safe to say we're done fighting, full stop." She drew a deep breath to gather her courage. Keeping her voice even, she asked, "Might I inquire, Headmistress, as to the rules regarding relationships between staff members?"

Two perfect, pink circles appeared on McGonagall's cheeks.

From his portrait, Dumbledore clapped his fingers together. "Ho-ho, Minerva. I do believe you owe me a bag of sweets!"

McGonagall cast a stern gaze at the wall. "Our wager involved more than a relationship."

"Just a matter of time," he replied, bouncing.

Hermione stopped wondering how it was possible to deliver sweets to a portrait and frowned. Her gaze swivelled back and forth between them, and she barely stopped herself from spluttering. "You've been wagering about this? About Severus and I ... becoming involved?"

"Oh, don't look so appalled, Hermione," McGonagall said. "When you're eighty-seven and headmistress, let's see what *you* do to occupy your time!"

Living with Snape had taught her the power of a slowly raised eyebrow, and she did not hesitate to employ it now. "I take it you were wagering against us, Minerva?"

Dumbledore chortled while McGonagall became engrossed with tidying the quills on her desk. "You weren't exactly friendly on Halloween!" she pointed out with a huff.

She couldn't help but smile at that. "That's true, of course. I'm still not quite sure how this happened. We despised each other intensely, I assure you."

"Ah, but hate and love are closer than you might think," said Dumbledore.

"No one's mentioned love," Hermione reminded him. There was that blasted word again, creeping into conversations where it had no business. It made her just as uncomfortable now as when it had first floated into her mind. She turned to McGonagall. "We're not in love," she insisted, refusing to examine just whom she was trying to convince. "We care for each other, of course. We have similar interests, and we enjoy each other's company. It's nothing more than a close relationship ... A relationship I'd very much like to continue, if that is acceptable within the boundaries of the school."

McGonagall nodded. "So long as you conduct yourselves with an appropriate level of decorum, I don't perceive any problems with it."

"You can rely on us to act professionally." She was quite proud of her ability to maintain a neutral expression despite her mind filling with memories of their antics in the private storeroom.

"Why are young people so afraid of love?" Dumbledore asked with a sigh.

"I'm not afraid," she protested. "And I'm not exactly young, either."

Her words dragged the corners of his mouth into a rare frown that chased the sparkle from his eyes.

"It's not fear, Headmaster," she assured him. "It's reality. Only a fool would fall in love with someone who will never love them in return."

He slid his half-moon spectacles down his nose and peered at her. "Perhaps," he said. "But refusing to acknowledge love is the act of a fool, as well. And isn't withholding love far worse than foolish? Allowing what could easily be a false assumption to guide such an important decision is dangerous and cruel...to both parties."

It was impossible to hold his gaze without flinching, so she stared at her hands, clasped in her lap. Had she made a false assumption...was there room in Snape's heart for more than Lily?

A fleeting image entered her mind, a misty vision from the memories Snape had given to Harry. She saw the Patronus he had cast, heard his tortured reply of "Always" when Dumbledore had asked if his love for Lily remained. The silver doe wasn't a mere assumption...false or otherwise. It was proof of a love strong enough to transcend both death and time. And it was all the confirmation she needed to know the safeguards around her heart were vital.

She wasn't quite sure how the conversation had taken such a turn, but it was past time to end it. "Thank you for your advice, Headmaster," she said. "But I know what I'm doing."

He dropped his shoulders but replied, "My pleasure," before turning to depart his frame.

Hermione rose from her chair and said, "Goodnight, Headmistress. I appreciate your willingness to change Pity's duties."

"Goodnight, Hermione." Her gaze did not lift from the neat line of quills upon her desk. Despite having wagered against their relationship, it seemed even McGonagall was disappointed with her response.

Hermione returned to the dungeons, her mood darkening with each step. How many successful relationships had McGonagall and Dumbledore had? What right did they have to judge the way she handled her feelings for Snape? She poured a glass of wine and muttered her way into the kitchen.

The scroll she'd abandoned earlier rested upon the table. She snarled at the paper, surprised her mood could sour any further. With a deep sigh, she abandoned her wine and sat.

Two photographs fell into her lap when she unrolled the length of parchment. The scroll fell from her fingers when she looked down at the first image and froze. Her parents stood before their home. Seemingly unaware of their photographer, they went about their activities, her father watering his prized hydrangeas while her mother stood to the side, sipping from her mug of coffee before laughing at something he had said. The charming scene blurred as Hermione's hand shook.

Dread threatened to steal her breath, but she forced herself to retrieve the second photograph. It took a moment to decipher the image, but when she finally realised what she held in her hand, she stood so fast her chair toppled onto its back. She kicked it aside and stumbled to the sink.

Her stomach rose as she opened the tap for cold water and splashed some upon her face. The photo remained on the table, but she hardly required it to recall the sight of Mikolaj Brukowski, his face unnaturally bloated and discoloured above the rope around his neck. His lifeless eyes were wide open, covered in a milky film that made it clear he'd been dead for several days when the picture had been taken.

As the implication of the combined images sunk in, terror wrapped its icy fingers around her throat. She snatched her wand from the table and cursed the time she had wasted in the headmistress's office. If Lucius had harmed her parents...

She couldn't think of that now, couldn't think of anything but ensuring they were safe. It had been several years since she'd had any need to cast her Patronus, but short of asking McGonagall to reverse the Anti-Disapparation charms on Hogwarts, it was the fastest way to reach them. Her first attempt yielded a feeble grey mist. Fear distracted her, but she pushed it from her mind and focused on finding a strong, positive memory.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" She jumped when her familiar otter failed to materialise but spoke to the creature that had appeared in its place. "My parents...please go to them, please see if they are in any danger. Tell me if there are any traces of magic other than my own in and around their home."

The animal flew from the kitchen and nearly ploughed into Snape as he entered their living quarters. He cursed and ducked his head, performing an odd little jig that would have been humorous if not for the reason her Patronus had been cast.

He straightened his robes and joined her in the kitchen. "What the devil was that?"

"My Patronus." She turned away, unwilling to examine why its form had changed or what the new guise might symbolise.

"That was not an otter," he said.

She flicked her wand at the tap she'd left running and wondered when he'd had reason or opportunity to learn the shape of her Patronus. Rather than respond to his statement, though, she crossed the room and retrieved her fallen chair.

"What happened in here?" He was beside her in an instant, his hand upon her arm. When she remained immobile, he tugged at her, pulling her around until she was forced to meet his gaze.

"Tell me," he said.

"Lucius. He sent ... He..."

"What? What has he sent now?" His fingertips dug into her shoulder.

She couldn't bring herself to relate the threat, to describe the grisly images, as if giving voice to such horrors would only cause them to manifest. She pointed to the table and said, "He sent those."

He studied each photograph, deep lines creasing his brow. "Your parents?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And Brukowski." It wasn't a question. He set the photos aside and opened the scroll.

"What does it say?" she asked in a whisper.

"You haven't read it?"

She shook her head. "I didn't get past the photos."

He watched her for a moment before scowling at the unfurled length of parchment. "It says, 'Think of all the suffering you could prevent.'"

"I see." How clever Lucius must have thought himself, twisting the plea she had made to him at Arglist, using her own words against her.

"You sent your Patronus to your parents?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

"I'll leave for their home as soon as it returns," she said.

"Do not worry yourself just yet. Lucius will not act until he is certain you have received the scroll. Even then, he will likely wait."

"How can you know that?"

His eyes became hooded. "I've spent enough time inside his mind to understand how it functions." He returned the scroll to the table. "This is a game to him, nothing more than a series of moves and countermoves. He knows exactly what those images will do to you. He's depending on them to terrify you, to stay with you every moment of every day, until you cannot picture your parents without seeing Brukowski's face. Your thoughts will fester and you will become paranoid, too afraid to make any move for fear it might be the wrong one. He will wait until you are convinced the situation is hopeless, and *that* is when he will strike."

She shuddered. Snape's casual insight chilled her almost as much as Lucius's methods.

"If he's harmed them..."

"He hasn't," he said. "Not yet, at least. He would not bother with such threats if he had any immediate plans to act against them."

She drew strength from his confidence but chewed her lip, debating whether to travel to her parents' home tonight. Fifteen years might have passed, but they were still rather jumpy over the magic she'd used on them during the war. She didn't relish the prospect of worrying them again...especially if, as Snape believed, Lucius was more intent on coercing her than harming them. Once her Patronus returned, she could decide how best to proceed. Waiting only heightened how powerless she felt as she moved around the kitchen in ever-widening circles.

"He has to be stopped," she mumbled.

"And he shall be."

Determination returned like an old, familiar friend. She stopped pacing and lifted her chin. "I'm going to the Ministry tomorrow."

"Don't be rash," he said, teeth clenched. "I realise you are upset, but we agreed I should meet with the Minister alone."

"That was last week. This changes everything."

He folded his arms. "What use do you suppose you will be to your parents...or to the entire population of Muggle-borns for that matter...when you are locked in Azkaban, slowly losing your mind?"

"That's not fair. You know I have to..."

The sudden reappearance of her Patronus halted her argument. She listened to a lengthy report on her parents and felt some of her tension ebbing. Only once she was assured of their safety did she stop to admire the enormous silver bat flapping around their heads. Its wingspan was well over a metre, yet it navigated the room with grace. The large, pointed ears and expressive round eyes actually made for a rather cute face. She had heard the giant fruit bat referred to as a flying fox, and seeing one so close, she could appreciate the resemblance.

Its mission completed, the bat evaporated into a swirl of shimmering mist.

"A bat?" asked Snape. He raised his eyebrows so high they disappeared into the shock of black hair that had fallen across his forehead. "Your Patronus has changed into ... a bat?"

She couldn't tell whether his disdain was a result of the change itself or if he simply disliked bats. Whatever the case, she was in no mood to discuss it now.

"I'm going to the Ministry tomorrow, Severus...with or without you," she said.

"We have been over this countless times," he said and scooped the hair from his eyes. "By all means, visit your parents tomorrow ... Content yourself by ensuring they aren't vulnerable. But you must return directly to Hogwarts afterwards."

"I'm not asking for your approval," she countered. "And I hardly require your permission for this." Perhaps the paranoia was already taking hold, but she couldn't stop herself from saying, "You have no right to dictate where I can and cannot go. Just what are you hiding now, anyway? Why are you so determined to keep me away from the Minister?"

"I thought I had made my reasons very clear." His eyes flashed like daggers, a perfect match to the cold steel in his voice. "But perhaps my concern just isn't good enough for you."

She shrank from his vehemence, but his anger quickly shattered her suspicion. "Of course it is," she whispered, closing her eyes. She was no stranger to guilt, yet even the familiar bitterness of regret couldn't replace her unease. "Forgive me, please ... I can't seem to control any of the thoughts running through my head."

He nodded and said, "I understand."

"I'm glad," she said. "I hope you can also understand why I must do this. I will not rest until I've used every means possible to ensure their safety."

His lips mashed together while he studied her. Just when she was certain he would never speak, he sighed and said, "Very well. Tomorrow morning, we shall journey to the Ministry together. But for your own sake, Hermione...please allow me to lead the conversation with the Minister."

She shrugged. "Okay." *Unless there's something really important I need to add.*

He tucked the scroll and photographs into his robe. She wished she could forget the images so easily, but in this instance at least, out of sight did not equal out of mind. She drained her glass of wine while he watched her through narrowed eyes.

"Shall we try to sleep?" he asked.

With a nod, she accepted his outstretched hand.

He squeezed her fingers. "This will all be over soon," he whispered.

Rather than provide comfort, his words sent goose bumps along her arms. Long after he had fallen asleep beside her, she lay awake and listened to his rhythmic breathing while his reassurance echoed through her head.

This will all be over soon.

A/N: Thanks ever so much to Karelia and Little Beloved for the speedy beta on this chapter!

Eighteen for Surprises

Chapter 22 of 33

A visit to the Ministry yields more questions than answers, but at last they arrive at a plan. Perhaps.

Chapter 22: Eighteen for Surprises

Hermione squeezed the arms of her chair.

The stiff leather refused to yield, much like the man before her. Too many hours had passed since she and Snape had taken their seats across from Gregor Ustinov, the Minister for Magic. With each wasted minute, the ability to hold her tongue proved almost too difficult to manage until she was certain one more inane question would make her scream. She thought of her parents and watched her knuckles turn white.

"It was delivered to the Hogwarts Owlery and accepted by a house-elf," said Snape, answering the Minister's question about how they had obtained the scroll. Again. "A return was neither provided nor requested."

The Minister peered at the photographs, the tip of his tongue protruding from his abnormally large lips.

"And your tracing spells revealed nothing?" he asked.

"Only the approximate date and time the letter was written: Thursday, quite late in the evening," Snape replied. He did not relate the string of expletives he'd muttered when their many spells had failed to reveal proof of the author. "Perhaps your Aurors will have greater success."

The Minister grunted. "We shall see. You can hardly expect me to confront Mr Malfoy otherwise."

The last thread of her patience stretched so thin it could cut stone. "On the contrary, that is precisely what we expect," she said, no longer caring that she spoke to the titular head of the wizarding world. "We have explained exactly what he has planned and how he will accomplish it."

"Your claims have been noted, Miss Granger," Ustinov said. "But if the Ministry arrested citizens solely on accusations from former, disgruntled employees, I assure you, Azkaban would fill in a day. Perhaps less."

"I understand. But we're not asking you to arrest him solely on accusation." She was aware of Snape shifting beside her, ostensibly to catch her eye and issue a warning. She ignored him.

"I see," Ustinov said. "Then you are prepared to offer something more ... conclusive?"

"Miss Granger has already told you everything she knows," Snape said.

"Mr Malfoy must think she knows a great deal more," he replied, waving the photographs at Snape. "That is, *if* her story is to be believed."

"It is simply one more indication of how desperate he's become," Snape said. "I assure you, Miss Granger cannot offer the type of evidence you seek."

Although the room was almost stiflingly warm, her skin chilled as she listened to Snape spin more lies. The duplicity itself did not disturb her nearly as much as she had anticipated...after countless hours of bureaucratic babble from Ustinov, she could muster little remorse for the act. She just hadn't been prepared for how easily Snape could manipulate the truth. She searched for the tiniest of signals when he strayed from the facts: a subtle change in breathing, too fast or too slow. She watched his eyes, waiting for them to shift ever so slightly. Perhaps he would blink too much or too little. But despite her intimate familiarity with his expressions, she could find nothing to indicate when the truth ended and the lie began. It unnerved her.

She told herself she was being ridiculous: a spy wouldn't survive an hour without the ability to lie, let alone several years as the enemy's most trusted advisor. By all rights, Snape should be considered the most skilled liar alive. The realisation brought little comfort.

The Minister watched her expectantly, so she cleared her throat and agreed with Snape. "Any physical evidence I might have been able to provide was destroyed during the lab accident at Arglist, several years ago. Mr Malfoy believes my return would enable the recreation of the lost research, but he is mistaken."

Ustinov tapped the tip of his quill against his desk and narrowed his eyes. "I find the timing of this so-called accident rather intriguing. It coincides directly with your departure from Arglist Industries, does it not?"

"It does."

"Coincidences can indeed be intriguing to contemplate," Snape said, drawing the Minister's gaze. "But they hold no bearing on today's discussion."

"I'll decide what does and does not have bearing today, Severus." Ustinov shook his index finger at Snape, as if lecturing a toddler. "My predecessor might have been willing to ignore procedures and rules for you, but times have changed. Shackbolt acted on instinct far too often. You'll find this office adheres to much stricter guidelines now."

Snape cocked his head to the side and spoke so slowly...so deliberately...each word stood as its own sentence. "Is. That. So."

After casting a quick glance at Hermione, the Minister glared at Snape.

Hoping to diffuse the brewing quarrel, she quickly interjected. "We know his intentions for the research, Minister, and the lengths he will travel to implement his plan. These photos prove what he's capable of. He murdered Mikolaj ... Surely an investigation is warranted..."

"An investigation was already conducted into the death of Mr Brukowski," Ustinov replied. "It yielded nothing more than an inconvenience to Mr Malfoy and a waste of Ministry resources."

"Lack of evidence hardly proves he's innocent," she countered. "It simply means he's cleverer than your investigators."

"Hermione ..." said Snape in warning.

"Cleverness isn't the issue here, miss, given the severity of the charges you've made," said Ustinov. "The Ministry follows a strict protocol when dealing with allegations from former employees. We would need a great deal more than anonymous notes and wild speculation to pursue one of the most well-respected members of our community, who, I might add, happens to sponsor several Muggle charities."

"And has he sponsored your re-election campaign as well?" she asked.

Both men spoke at once.

"You are out of line, young lady..." said Ustinov, slapping his desk.

"That's enough, Hermione..." said Snape.

She raised her hands. "I'm sorry...truly, I am. That was uncalled for." Extending her palms towards the Minister, she beseeched him to understand. "But please, try to imagine you had received those pictures ... that you were looking at a photo of your own parents. Surely, you'd be just as concerned as I."

To her surprise, he returned his gaze to the photos and frowned at them for several moments.

"Perhaps the Ministry can spare some Aurors to protect the Grangers?" Snape suggested quietly.

Ustinov sighed but pushed his quill and some parchment across the desk. "Provide your parents' address, and I will arrange a Ministry guard for them."

"Thank you." She did as instructed. "How soon do you suppose they could begin?"

"No later than this evening." He gathered the papers and photos from his desk and shuffled them into a file. "I'm sure you are anxious to forewarn them."

She didn't care for the finality in his voice. "I appreciate your concern for my parents' safety," she said, "but until Mr Malfoy is stopped, they will remain in jeopardy, as will all future Muggle-born witches and wizards. Isn't there anything the Ministry can do?"

"Not without a good amount of evidence, all of which seems to have been destroyed when you last left Mr Malfoy's employ," Ustinov said. He leant back in his chair and regarded her with raised eyebrows. "Unless you'd like to accept his offer and return to Arglist?"

"That's out of the question," Snape said.

She frowned. "I ... I suppose it would enable me to prove what he's..."

"Don't be foolish," Snape interrupted.

"Now, Severus, let the lady speak," Ustinov said, his smile strangely cunning. "After all, she was Mr Malfoy's ... *employee* ... long before she was your ... colleague."

Snape's whisper held more warning than a shout. "Just what are you implying, Gregor?"

Hermione wondered at the tension filling the air, the obvious animosity between the men. The undercurrent felt large enough to swallow her whole.

After several uneasy moments, Ustinov's shrug dispelled the mounting friction. "Surely, Miss Granger's many years as an Arglist employee give her a unique advantage. Who better to find the proof needed for a conviction?"

"It's too dangerous," Snape said. "Send someone who is specialised in undercover field work, someone who has experience infiltrating an operation such as this. Not her."

"That would require a significant commitment of Ministry resources." He studied his fingernails. "Why should I bother?"

A muscle twitched in Snape's cheek.

"Because it's the right thing to do," Hermione said. Neither man acknowledged her...Snape continued to stare at the Minister, who in turn continued to stare at his fingernails.

Finally, Snape asked, "Do you have a Pensieve?"

"Of course," said Ustinov.

He turned to Hermione and said, "The memory of when you first saw Lucius at Arglist."

Her stomach tied itself into a knot. The time had come to pay the piper, but she couldn't help wonder how high the cost would be. Nothing about the Minister seemed particularly trustworthy. She stared into Snape's eyes, and beyond all reason, something in his dark gaze reassured her, convinced her. She lifted her wand to her temple and extracted the proof the Minister seemed so desperate for. The memory swirled in the stony depths of the Pensieve as she explained, "You'll recognise Mr Malfoy, of course. The other man is Henri Garnier, who was the Executive Director of Arglist."

While the Minister viewed the memory, she tried to suppress her own recollection of that night. Lucius's voice rang through her mind, dark and twisted, and she relived his cold delight over a Muggle-born discovering the means to eliminate her kind. She jumped when Snape squeezed her shoulder, but before she could summon a grateful smile, the Minister spoke.

"Such a pity the Wizengamot has declared memories inadmissible as evidence," he said, his lips pursed. His tone seemed to indicate that given the opportunity, he'd prosecute her right alongside Lucius. "I assume the mysterious lab accident occurred shortly after this incident?"

"That's correct," she said. "I provided a full report to Kingsley after the ... accident. Did the Ministry never investigate Arglist?"

"That information is classified," he said. He reopened the file on his desk and sifted through several papers. "You accepted employment at Hogwarts after leaving Arglist?"

"Yes."

"Once there, you began working with the younger Mr Malfoy?"

"Yes," she said with a frown. "But Draco doesn't have anything..."

"Has the father never attempted to contact you through the son?" Ustinov asked.

"No, of course not."

"Other than an occasional invitation to dine at Malfoy Manor," Snape clarified.

She turned to him and shook her head. "But ... Draco wouldn't have known ..." she began, her words failing as she remembered how keen he'd been for her attendance at the Christmas Eve ball. She clenched her fists when a scene from her recent nightmare surfaced. What had Lucius said when she had told him he had no business at Hogwarts? *Nonsense. My son is here.* She shook her head again to clear the dark smoke of doubt. "Draco has no involvement with Arglist," she stated clearly.

"Just another coincidence, then?" asked Ustinov.

"That's right."

He turned to Snape.

"It seems likely," Snape offered. "He was hired several years before Miss Granger, and there are indications the relationship between father and son is somewhat strained."

The Minister drummed his fingers on his desk.

"The most damning evidence will only be procured from a well-placed spy inside Arglist," said Snape.

Although the thought filled her with dread, Hermione had to admit she was the perfect candidate. "That could take months, Severus ... years, even," she said. "We don't have that kind of time. If I went back to Arglist..."

"No."

"Lucius is losing patience," she said.

"Then we shall find a way to placate him until the Ministry can act."

"But how?" she asked, searching for some method to stall the progress at Arglist. "Perhaps I could ... recreate ... certain notes and offer them in exchange for my parents' safety," she said. "If I changed some of the data, it would take months to discover the discrepancies."

"Too easy," said Snape, shaking his head. "Lucius is not a fool...he is certain to suspect you would never provide him with anything truly useful."

The Minister cleared his throat. "Miss Granger, your memories appear to be remarkably vivid. Why not offer some of those instead?"

The thought sent her mind reeling. "Never! I'd Obliviate myself first!" She turned to Snape for support but found his gaze distant, almost calculating. "No, Severus," she said. "It's not an option."

"No doubt Lucius has already considered how valuable your memories are," he said, making her shiver. "Fortunately, there exists a high risk of damage when one attempts to forcibly extract something so delicate. I imagine that is the only reason Lucius has not already wrested them from your mind."

"In that case," said Ustinov, "he'd almost certainly be willing to deal for them."

"No," she said again. "We cannot risk the information ever seeing the light of day."

"Not as they stand now, perhaps," said Snape. "But if the memories were altered, the risk would be negligible."

"You just said he isn't foolish, Severus," she reminded him. "Altered memories are terribly obvious."

"That is true ... in almost all known cases."

The Minister laughed. "So you've heard of Remy, have you?"

"Remy who?" asked Hermione when Snape did not comment.

"An old French wizard...Remy Nissante," explained Ustinov. "The very reason memories are not, in fact, admissible as evidence."

Snape elaborated. "He could alter memories so that the change was transparent, making it impossible to discern fact from fiction. The Department of Mysteries spent years trying to learn his methods, to no avail. It was a natural-born talent, impossible to replicate."

"What happened to him?" she asked.

"He was exiled when the Ministry deemed his skills too dangerous."

"It's an old witch's tale, Miss Granger," said Ustinov. "Nothing more."

"I'm loath to contradict you, Gregor," said Snape in a tone that belied his sentiment, "but I've seen his work firsthand."

With a frown, Ustinov asked, "How is that possible? No one has been able to find him for at least three decades. He can't still be alive?"

Snape shrugged. "He was fifteen years ago," he said. "Dumbledore maintained contact with him throughout the war."

Hermione wondered what uses Dumbledore might have had for altered memories during the war and found the possibilities endless, if a bit alarming. The ethical debate fled her mind when she found both men watching her, waiting.

She couldn't guess how a memory was altered, but the process undoubtedly involved its removal from her mind, the very thought of which left her cold. Her gaze sought the open file on the Minister's desk. She watched the photograph of her parents, the casual way her mother tilted her head to laugh at her father. The knot in her stomach tightened. What choice did she have?

"If ... if the memories are thoroughly altered," she said, "then I suppose I could offer them as a premium for my parents' safety. At least it would allow us to control the flow of data at Arglist while the Ministry builds a case against him."

"Then it's settled," said Ustinov, closing the file once more. They stood to leave, but he said, "I need to speak with you alone, Severus. You may wait outside, Miss Granger: this will only take a moment."

She found the Minister's secretary waiting in the outer office and smiled when the plump witch offered tea. "Thank you, er ..." she said, searching for a nameplate.

"The name's Mildred, dear. Mildred Gibbons, but everyone calls me Millie."

"Thank you, Millie. I'm Hermione."

"Oh, of course I know who you are," she said with a wink. "It's not every day we get a visit from a war hero. Two at once is indeed a rare occasion!"

Hermione accepted a paper cup full of strong tea and complimented the intricate tatting on the tea towel.

"When you get to be my age, you enjoy making things like that," Millie said. There appeared a distinct twinkle in her eyes when her gaze slid towards the Minister's closed door. "Of course, you probably have much more ... interesting ... things to occupy your time."

She was far too mature to be blushing like a schoolgirl, so she ignored Millie's implication...as well as the heat on her cheeks...and changed the subject. "We appreciate how quickly you were able to arrange the meeting today."

"It was a pleasure, my dear. More so for me than the Minister, I'd wager," she added in a whisper as she pushed a plate of biscuits towards Hermione.

Despite her reluctance to encourage gossip, Hermione couldn't stop herself edging closer to the desk when Millie leant forward. She nibbled on a biscuit and asked, "What makes you say that?"

With a nod towards the Minister's door, Millie said, "There are plenty around here who'd rather see Severus in that office."

Hermione blinked. "Severus? As Minister for Magic?"

Millie nodded. "And don't think the Minister doesn't know it."

From inside the Minister's office came the sound of voices raised in argument.

"... *not a professional* ..."

"... *have a job to do* ..."

She tried to decide which voice belonged to Snape while she strained to hear more.

Millie offered a knowing smile. "You see?"

She frowned. They were rather insulated at Hogwarts, but still ... Snape as the Minister for Magic seemed a bit far-fetched. "Do you truly believe he could run for Minister, if he desired the job?"

"Run ... and win," she answered. "I'd be surprised if he hasn't already been approached."

She remembered the way he'd been treated like a celebrity at the Malfoys' Christmas Eve ball. Maybe Millie was right. He hadn't seemed very keen with the attention, though, and she had always assumed a quiet life held more appeal for him. But perhaps she was simply projecting her own preferences.

The door to the Minister's office opened. Snape looked furious, but he quickly turned his back and shut the door, his head down. When he approached Millie's desk, his features were placid once more.

"Millie, my love, you have my endless gratitude for organising this meeting so expeditiously," he said.

Hermione found it difficult to decide what shocked her more: Millie's flustered giggle or Snape's agreeable temperament.

"Anytime, Severus," Millie said. "Anytime. And here are the details of that *other thing* you asked me to arrange." She handed him an envelope while cocking her head in Hermione's direction with a notable lack of subtlety.

"Eight or nine?" asked Snape.

"Eight," Millie replied.

"Perfect." His smile was so charming Hermione felt a rare...and completely inappropriate...stab of jealousy when he added, "I'd be lost without you, Millie."

She could only imagine how ridiculous her expression must be.

He smirked and offered his arm. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Of course." With a wave to Millie, she joined him at the door and frowned at the envelope in his hand. He merely quirked his lips when he caught her staring at it.

The Ministry had been empty when they'd arrived, but now a moderate crowd of witches and wizards dotted the corridors. Many stopped to speak to Snape or shake his hand. By the time they arrived back at the Atrium, she couldn't help but wonder why he'd returned to a diminished, job-sharing role at Hogwarts when he likely could have had any job he desired at the Ministry.

Despite the distraction, her thoughts soon turned to the upcoming conversation she'd be forced to have with her parents. She fidgeted with the clasp on her cloak and tried to imagine their reaction to hosting a pair of Ministry guards for the foreseeable future. But at least they would be safe.

She stopped at the Apparation area and placed her hand on Snape's shoulder. "Thank you, Severus."

"For?"

"For everything ... for ensuring the Minister sent Aurors to my parents, for convincing him of what Lucius intends, for helping to clean up this mess I've made." She sighed and added, "For lying on my behalf."

He scowled. "I've lied for far less worthy causes," he said. "And you must stop blaming yourself for the situation at Arglist."

Before she could look down, he caught her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. "I am quite serious, Hermione," he said, his voice stern. "Had you not made this discovery, someone else would have. And I doubt they'd care half as much about setting it to rights."

She nodded, grateful for his viewpoint as well as his support. "Thank you," she whispered. She wondered if she would ever be able to express how relieved she was to have him on her side.

"Do not thank me yet...there is still much to be done."

Drawing a deep breath, she prepared herself for the next hurdle. "I'll see you tonight, back at Hogwarts. I need to ring my parents and figure some way to explain why wizards will soon be watching over them."

He frowned at her, his lips drawn into a tight line. Without even drawing a breath, he blurted, "*I should comewithyou.*"

It took her a moment to realise what he had said. Comprehension left her speechless, staring at him with her mouth agape.

"Aurors are competent, but at the end of the day, they are nothing more than employees of the Ministry," he said, lifting his chin. "There are several spells that should be performed, as well as some very intricate enchantments to be placed upon your parents' home and property."

"Okay," she said and refrained from mentioning the many protective charms she had cast during the Horcrux search. She had every confidence in her abilities to protect her parents' home, but his concern for their welfare overruled any compunction she might have felt to prove her skills.

The idea of taking Snape home to meet her parents caused a ball of nerves to bound through her body, making her voice sound a bit strangled when she suggested they use the Ministry Floo to reach Diagon Alley.

Once inside the Leaky Cauldron, Snape commandeered a table in a hidden corner while Hermione entered Muggle London in search of a telephone kiosk. She returned a few moments later, having arranged to meet her parents in an hour's time.

"They were home," she said. "I told them we'd be there at three o'clock. It's not far. Of course, nowhere is very far when you can Apparate, right? They live in Marsh Gibbon. It's outside Bicester. In Oxfordshire. There's a small park not too far from their house. We can Apparate into the park and walk the remaining distance. It's a lovely area. They really seem to like it. So ... yes ... three o'clock." She cleared her throat and clasped her hands.

He pushed his glass towards her. The small sip of whiskey burned a trail down her throat. She hoped it would prove just as caustic against her nerves.

"We should have plenty of time to perform the necessary enchantments before the Aurors arrive," he said. "When we return to Hogwarts, I shall speak to Albus and see whether or not he can direct us to Remy."

She nodded and stared across the room. Anxiety filled her when she thought of the task she'd agreed to, the dangerous memories she would need to produce.

"Tell me about your parents," he said.

It was obviously meant to distract her, and she welcomed the change in topic. "They're dentists," she said, as if the simple statement could offer everything he needed to know about them.

He rolled his eyes. "You were an only child?"

"Yes," she said, thinking it was something else they had in common. "They were nearly forty when they had me...I believe they had tried for many years to have a child and had given up hope when I came along."

"What was their reaction when they learnt you were a witch?"

She smiled. "Well, they're both quite practical, so I think they were more relieved than surprised. As far-fetched as it had to have sounded, at least it explained the bizarre activities in our home."

"What sort of bizarre activities?"

"Oh, the usual things, I suppose. The random levitation of toys, the spinach changing into spaghetti, the clocks stopping whenever bedtime approached." She ticked the incidents on her fingers as she spoke. "And then there was the mystery of the disappearing bathwater. They'd spent a small fortune on plumbers by the time I had turned ten."

His laughter floated in the air and wrapped around her like a blanket, spreading warmth through her body.

"It's quite mind-boggling for Muggle families, really," she said with a smile. "I daresay they should be warned from infancy. Actually, I'm surprised this hasn't been addressed before now."

"Ah, I believe we have stumbled upon the source of your next crusade," he said.

She stuck out her tongue. "I just think there needs to be a better way to alert them."

"No doubt," he agreed.

"My parents were very accepting ... very supportive. I know everyone isn't so lucky."

"Indeed," he said. "Some Muggles take a great deal of convincing before they will allow their children to learn magic. Others have outright refused."

She tried to imagine her life without magic. They might as well have told her she wasn't permitted to breathe. "Those Muggles give the whole lot a bad name," she said. "Like those dreadful people Harry lived with."

He paused, his drink raised halfway to his lips.

She was too lost in the memories of decades past to wonder why he had grown so pale. "Harry always hated going back to Surrey each summer, and rightly so. His uncle was mean-spirited, and his aunt was horrid." She shook her head and remembered how cold the woman had been. "I cannot understand how someone could treat their own relation so poorly."

"Petunia always had a penchant for cruelty," he said quietly.

She frowned over the long-forgotten name. How had he remembered...

One look at his face, and it felt as if a bucket of ice water had been dumped upon her head. How could she have forgotten his connection to Harry's aunt? She had only meant to make a point about certain Muggle families. "I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't mean ... I forgot ..."

His curt nod only made her feel more wretched. He had spent his morning confronting the Minister...fighting on her behalf...and had insisted on personally ensuring the safety of her parents. In return, she had reminded him of the disastrous consequences his choices had carried. She cursed her wayward tongue and blamed his many years at St Mungo's for her memory lapse. Given the time he'd spent in stasis, it was difficult to imagine him as a contemporary of the Dursleys.

He swallowed a large gulp of whiskey. "It is true I never cared for the boy," he said. "Still, it brings me no pleasure to learn he had a miserable childhood."

"Of course not," she said. "I never meant to imply ... I wasn't trying to blame you." She frowned again, certain they both knew he was hardly blameless but unable to fathom a way out of the moral quicksand she had wandered into.

"I am fully cognisant of the role I played in orphaning the boy."

She thought about mistakes and blame and regret, and out of nowhere, Dumbledore's odd Christmas cake analogy popped into her mind. In very short time, Snape had forgiven her crimes against him: the stolen memories and the lies she'd told to avoid their discovery. Yet he had spent decades denying himself a similar absolution. "Everyone makes mistakes," she said. "You once told me atonement was far more important than fault. Look at everything you've sacrificed in the name of redemption, Severus. Don't you think you've paid for your sins by now?"

The fury that crossed his face should have frightened her, should have had her knees trembling beneath the table. Instead, it only elicited an unfamiliar ache deep inside her chest.

He rose and swiped his empty glass from the table. In a deadly whisper, he said, "You have no idea what you are talking about," before walking to the bar.

She crossed her arms and fought the sting of his words. It was not the first time someone had snapped at her for offering unwelcome advice. And it was unlikely to be the last, considering her inability to stop providing it. With a scowl, she wondered what had disturbed him more...having his own words used against him or being told he was worthy of the redemption he had earned. Perhaps he had lived so long with remorse that the alternative was simply too daunting to contemplate.

She had to admit it was somewhat hypocritical to insist he forgive himself when she still clung to regret like a lifeline. Being a perfectionist was yet another trait they seemed to share. The personality made it nearly impossible to tolerate failure and accept forgiveness. They were their own worst critics.

Snape returned with two full glasses and a surprising absence of anger. He pushed one of the glasses across the table and watched her with his brows drawn. "There are some sins that can never be forgiven," he said, resuming their conversation as if he'd never left.

"Quite so," she agreed, then, daring the return of his ire, she added, "but this isn't one of them."

His nostrils flared, but before he could speak, she said, "Perhaps some things happen for a reason."

"*That* is an insult to empirical thinking," he said. "It sounds suspiciously similar to something Dumbledore would say."

"Thank you," she said, deliberately misinterpreting the barb. "Although, the headmaster has been far too busy lecturing me about love to mention destiny."

His eyes widened, and he quickly looked down. With a furrowed brow, he stared at his whiskey glass and rubbed at an errant water spot. "Can you truly believe we are destined for the choices we make?" he asked after several moments. "Was I nothing more than a pawn to the whims of Fate?"

"Of course not," she said. "But you *were* integral to the defeat of Voldemort, and you would not have been in that position but for one poor choice."

"Only one?" he asked, abandoning the smudge and rolling the glass between his hands. "I assure you the figure is much higher."

"One hundred?" she asked. "One thousand?" When he frowned and shook his head, she merely shrugged. "I don't see anyone blaming you for the past; do you? We've all had fifteen years to arrive at quite the opposite conclusion, in fact. You are the only one denying yourself now. Everyone else has forgiven you."

His jaw clenched. "The dead cannot forgive."

"No, but the living can," she said. "And among the living, Harry would have the most reason to resent you, yet he's forgiven you, as well."

He raised his glass to his lips.

"He's even named his youngest son after you: Albus Severus."

Her timing could not have been worse. A fine mist of whiskey sprayed her face, her clothes, and the table as he choked on his drink. Without a word, she withdrew her wand from her cloak and performed a silent cleansing spell.

"You ... um ... hadn't heard that before?" she asked.

"No."

She hadn't meant to smile, but his panicked expression forced her lips to twitch. "Ginny was surprised by the choice, too," she told him. "But she said Harry was adamant. He told her you were one of the bravest men he'd ever known."

His scowl was immediate. He withdrew slightly, just enough to hide his face in the shadows.

She wondered how it must feel to suddenly learn one's familiar, mutual dislike for another was no longer so mutual. There was little time to consider it, though, as a glance at her watch showed it was time to leave.

The inn had grown busy, and they jostled their fellow patrons to reach a quiet spot from which to Side-Along Apparate. Snape's hand on her back steered her towards a secluded corner. Her anxiety over the upcoming visit to her parents fled at his touch. She smiled, and for the second time in as many days, she thought of how far their

relationship had progressed. Considering how badly their recent conversation could have ended, the exchange of opinions only confirmed her assessment. She felt closer to him than ever before.

Something told her she was not alone in her feelings when, rather than take her elbow for Side-Along, he drew her into his arms and kissed the tip of her nose. She slid her hands along his chest and returned the favour to his lips. His arms tightened around her.

After their lips parted, he arched one dark eyebrow and asked, "Has anyone else named their children after me?"

"Oh, yes ... hundreds have," she said, fighting to keep the smile from her face. "For several years after the war, Severus topped the list of most popular wizard baby names."

"You cannot be serious."

The smile won at last. "You're right...I made that last bit up," she confessed, squealing when he pinched her bottom in revenge. "But I should probably warn you about Harry's other son."

"Don't tell me..."

"James Sirius Potter."

He winced.

"I believe he'll be starting Hogwarts in a few years," she said.

"Not another one," he said, disdain mingling with resignation.

Rather than comment, she patted his shoulder and then spun, Disapparating them both with a gentle pop.

Many thanks to little_beloved and Karelia for their beta of this chapter!

Nineteen for the Family ...

Chapter 23 of 33

A visit with the Grangers leads to a startling revelation.

Chapter 23: Nineteen for the Family ...

Golden sunlight smiled down upon the tiny village of Marsh Gibbon, winking through leaf-heavy branches to warm the soggy ground. Beneath the shelter of a massive horse chestnut tree, Hermione and Snape appeared without a sound, undetectable but for the chattering of a startled squirrel. Hermione peered through the leaves and surveyed the park.

"We're alone," she said. She pulled aside a branch and searched for the road. "The house isn't far. We'll just travel east and..."

Words failed her the moment she turned to address Snape. He had removed his robes, and rather than his usual long, black tunic, he wore a simple white shirt, open at the collar. She stared at the plain garment and swallowed. Her gaze strayed to his waist, to the shirt neatly tucked into dark trousers, and her mind instantly supplied a scenario in which she wasn't encumbered by the typical plethora of buttons.

"My eyes are up here," he said with a crooked smile.

She should have been embarrassed, but she smiled back. "You look rather nice all Muggled up."

"Thank you," he replied with an exaggerated bow.

Remembering how impulsive his decision to accompany her had seemed, she frowned at the lack of wizardswear. "Had you planned on meeting my parents when we left Hogwarts this morning?" she asked.

"No, I had a far different motive for donning such garb." He looked uncertain. "I thought we might dine together tonight."

"Don't we always?"

"I was thinking of something a bit more refined than the staff table at Hogwarts."

"Oh," she said.

"I believe we have earned a dinner outside the castle, far from the eyes of staff and students."

Her smile returned. "I'd like that very much."

"Reservations have been made for eight o'clock," he said, rifling through his folded robes and removing the envelope Millie had given him. He handed it to her and said, "I have been assured of this establishment's reputation."

Inside the envelope, she found maps and directions to Chutney Mary, an Indian restaurant in Chelsea. A review from a Muggle newspaper had also been included, and a quick scan revealed an impressive amount of praise for the cuisine as well as the romantic atmosphere.

"I'm sure it will be lovely." She stowed the envelope and turned away. "Thank you."

The gesture was so simple...so basic, really. Something normal couples undoubtedly did countless times over the course of their relationship. Why should the act of something so ordinary leave her feeling so moved? He seemed to have arranged everything solely for her benefit, from the intimate setting to the timing of a much-needed

distraction. That uncomfortable feeling returned to her chest, and although some part of her recognised it for precisely what it was, she pushed the thought aside and stepped beyond the tree's seclusion.

"We'd best go," she whispered when she sensed Snape behind her.

"After you."

They travelled along a quiet lane in silence while she rehearsed a way to inform her parents of their upcoming surveillance. As important as the task was, she couldn't stop her mind from wandering, from imagining what her parents would think of Snape and how he would react to being thrust into typical Muggle life.

She occupied herself by calculating the growth rate of her apprehension, unsurprised to find it directly proportionate to the decrease in distance separating them from her parents' home.

More for her own assurance, she said, "My parents have always enjoyed the witches and wizards they've met. I'm certain they'll accept your presence without question."

"I was not worried."

"Of course not," she said, fluttering her hand in the air to dismiss the thought. "They'll be far more focused on me, regardless ... wondering why I haven't yet married and provided them grandchildren to spoil." She closed her eyes and sighed. Why had she felt compelled to share that?

He was silent for several paces. "Why haven't you married?" he asked finally.

She thrust her hands in her pockets. The answer she'd always given her parents...that she hadn't yet found the right man...suddenly felt like a lie. She *had* found him: a man with whom she could envision spending the rest of her life without ever growing bored. Admitting it wasn't nearly as shocking as she had anticipated, probably because finding him had turned out to be the easiest part. She doubted she could ever fit into Snape's life...or into his heart...in any way that might have fulfilled her preconceived notions of a proper, long-term commitment. Right man ... wrong circumstances.

"Something else always seemed more important," she answered at last. "First, there was university, and then I poured my life into the research at Arglist. It's tough to maintain a relationship when you're busy fulfilling the secret agenda of an evil wizard."

He snorted softly. "Yes, I can well recall," he said. "But you left Arglist several years ago."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Have you no desire for marriage ... for children?"

Why was he asking her these questions? "I suppose a lot would depend on who the hypothetical husband was," she said.

The lane turned sharply. They startled a pair of magpies as they rounded the bend, and Snape watched the birds fly into an empty field. She wished she could see his expression. It was impossible to guess his thoughts, but somehow she doubted they had anything to do with the birds that had claimed his attention.

"I must admit," he said, still looking away, "I was rather surprised when I heard you had escaped betrothal."

"Escaped?" She smiled. "You make it sound like a prison sentence. Or worse."

"I do not wish to impugn the concept of matrimony. I had simply assumed you would marry..."

He stopped short of uttering a name, and she stared at him until he continued.

"Young," he said with a frown. "I had assumed you would marry young, perhaps after post-graduate studies."

"There was a time when I had assumed the same." She shook her head. "But I doubt you'd find many little girls who dream of dying an old maid, in a house with thirty cats."

In the distance, her parents' home became visible through the trees, and she pointed it out as they approached. The nearer they drew, the more his pace seemed to slow. "I wonder what little Miss Granger dreamt of as a girl?" he asked quietly.

"Little Miss Granger was quite practical and boring, I assure you." The memory made her laugh. "Whilst other young girls fantasised about fairy tale princes and magical castles, I had my sights set on a Nobel Prize."

"Ah, yes." She could almost hear him smiling around the words.

"Ironic, really," she said, "when you consider I now live in an enchanted castle, surrounded by magic spells and mythical creatures." There was only one piece missing from the fairy tale. She bumped her shoulder against his, her voice playful as she said, "Don't tell anyone, but I've been having an affair with a prince, as well. Sure, he's only a half-blood, but happily-ever-after doesn't come without a bit of sacrifice."

Carefully tended flowers lined the edges of her parents' property. She stepped closer to admire her father's handiwork, but Snape grasped her hand and pulled her around. He studied her face, his countenance so serious it made her wonder if he had changed his mind about meeting her parents.

Several moments passed before he said, "Hermione, I..."

She had never seen him so hesitant. "Yes?" she asked when the silence grew awkward.

"I..."

"She's here, Eleanor!" called a deep voice from the garden, drawing their attention.

Snape released her hand when the front door opened, and she mumbled, "Sorry," before turning to greet her father and mother. After a quick embrace, she introduced Snape and watched everyone shake hands and size one another up.

Each time she saw her parents, she was struck by how much older they appeared. They remained middle-aged in her memories, but the greyed hair and smiling, lined faces revealed a couple closer to eighty than sixty. Thanks to the Arglist team's early genetic research, Hermione had been able to provide potions that might lessen common ailments seen in elderly Muggles. There was nothing she could do to prolong their lives, but if she could spare them the pain of arthritis or stave off dementia, then perhaps something good would have come from her time at Arglist.

"Your mother insisted on baking the instant she heard you were coming," John Granger said.

Eleanor Granger nodded. "I made your favourite, dear. We were delighted you rang...it's not often we get to see you so unexpectedly." Her deep blue eyes regarded Snape with obvious interest.

Hermione's stomach sank. Earlier, she had told her parents there was an important matter she needed to discuss with them. One look at their faces told her precisely what assumption they had made from her request for an urgent visit. Arriving upon their doorstep with Snape at her side had likely added to their expectation of a happy

announcement. She swallowed past the regret that thickened her throat. This was going to be harder than she'd thought.

Her father gestured towards the house. "Shall we?"

"I'd love to tour the gardens later," she told him and followed her parents inside.

His ready agreement made her smile, but the results he had achieved through organic gardening justified his pride. Hermione had harvested enough herbs and flowers over the summer holidays to fill half the Potions storeroom, and she was eager to see what spring varieties she might sample.

After hanging their robes on a coat tree, they left the narrow hall and entered a small parlour. The scent of freshly baked scones made Hermione's mouth water. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, and suddenly she was five years old, standing beside her mother, covered in flour after her first cookery lesson.

"I've acquired three new first-editions since you last visited," said her father, tempting her with another indulgence as he gestured to one of the many bookshelves lining the walls.

"I can't wait to see," she said.

Snape expressed a similar interest. After admiring the books for a moment, she left the men discussing Defoe and went to help her mother prepare tea.

Eleanor had obviously been waiting for her. "We'd best hurry. Your father does tend to go on about his books," she said the moment Hermione entered the kitchen.

"I doubt Severus will mind...he shares our affinity for reading."

"He seems like a pleasant young man."

"Mm-hm." Few people would dare describe Snape in such a manner, but thus far, he had done nothing that could contradict her mother's statement.

"Have you known him long?"

"Yes, actually." She avoided her mother's scrutiny by piling still-warm scones onto a faded Spode tray. A lone currant lay on the baking pan, and she popped it into her mouth, its plump sweetness reminding her she'd skipped breakfast in her haste to reach the Ministry.

"Don't they feed you at that school of yours?" asked her mother. "I swear you've lost a stone since last we saw you."

Her mother was correct, as usual, but the weight loss had more to do with stress than the quality of meals at Hogwarts. "It's been a ... a busy year."

"I had gathered as much," replied her mother, lifting one carefully pencilled eyebrow. She glanced at the kitchen door and craned her neck in the direction of the parlour, as if checking to see if they'd be overheard. "I believe I understand now why your letters have been so brief this year."

"Mum, please don't get the wrong impression from my bringing Severus here today."

"And what impression would that be? That the two of you are ... together?"

"Right."

"But aren't you?"

"Well ... yes, I suppose so ... *we are* in a relationship." The soft smile on her mother's face unnerved her almost as much as the calm acceptance. "I just don't want you to imagine it's more serious than it actually is."

And still, her mother did not speak.

The silence nearly broke her, but it was the truth she saw reflected in the perceptive blue eyes that finally forced more words from her mouth. She looked down and rubbed at an imaginary spot on the baking pan. "I suppose it ... it *is* serious, in a way, but it's not what you'd consider ... traditional."

"Darling, you are a witch who teaches magic and flies on dragons," she said. "I gave up on traditional a long time ago."

Hermione smiled her agreement, but her expression froze at her mother's next question.

"Now, why haven't you told your young man that you're in love with him?"

"I ... how do you know ... what makes you think ..."

"Hermione, dear, please don't underestimate me." She set a stack of cups and saucers on a tray and said, "It doesn't matter how old you grow or how far apart our worlds become. I will always be your mother, and there are simply some things you cannot hide from me."

She ought to be used to this by now. There had been a similar lecture after her first year at university, when her mother had somehow known she was no longer a virgin. Denial had been futile all those years ago. It seemed even more pointless now.

"You win, Mum." She dropped her shoulders and voiced the thought she had refused to acknowledge, the truth that had plagued her dreams. "I do love him."

There...she'd said it. She glanced around the room, but the walls didn't shake and the roof did not collapse. It was a promising start.

"I'm very happy for you, dear," said her mother. "But why does the thought of love make you look so miserable?"

"Sorry," she replied. "It's just ... complicated."

Her mother studied her with a frown. "You think he doesn't feel the same for you." It was not a question.

"I know it."

"He's told you this?"

"Yes," she said. "Before we even began the relationship, he told me he wouldn't pretend to be in love with me." She warmed the teapot before adding tealeaves and hot water, grateful for rote tasks to keep her from dwelling on that day, her easy acceptance of a loveless relationship. "It wasn't an issue at that point," she said, justifying the decision to herself as well as her mother. "I did not pretend to be in love with him either."

"But your feelings have obviously changed since then." When Hermione nodded, she asked, "Isn't it possible his have changed, as well?"

Hermione did not answer. There was no way she could explain the history...his ties to Lily...in the time it took to brew the tea.

"Not to argue semantics," continued her mother, "but saying you will *not pretend* to love someone isn't quite the same as saying you will *never* love them."

She resisted the urge to bite her lip. "I suppose ..."

Her mother seemed content to let her ponder in silence while she added the tea service to the tray with the cups and saucers. Hermione stacked plates and cutlery onto another tray where the scones sat beside a pot of Devonshire cream and a bowl of homemade jam.

She followed her mother into the parlour and ignored the rush of butterflies in her stomach when Snape rose to take the heavy tray from her mother's hands.

After pouring the tea, her mother turned to Snape and asked, "What do you do at Hogwarts, Severus?"

"I teach Potions, the same as your daughter."

"Ah, excellent," said her father.

Hermione slathered her scone in far too much cream and took a generous bite, savouring each velvety crumb as it melted in her mouth.

"Isn't it remarkable she now teaches her least favourite subject?" her father asked. When Snape merely raised an eyebrow and tilted his head, her father continued, "Oh, yes ... She was not fond of Potions at Hogwarts, although I believe it had more to do with the professor than the subject."

She chewed fast and waved her hand, desperate to stop her father from elaborating further.

It didn't work. "I suspect that old Potions master would be heartily impressed if he could see her now," her father said.

She swallowed at last and said, "Dad, you should know..."

"I am sure you are correct, Mr Granger," Snape said, silencing her protest by fixing her with a gaze that stole the words from her mouth, the breath from her lungs. Although he addressed her father, his eyes held hers as he spoke. "I doubt any of his students have accomplished half as much as your daughter."

She wasn't sure how much time passed before she remembered to close her mouth.

He broke the spell at last and turned his attention to her parents. "Unfortunately, great accomplishments can prove to be great burdens, with far-reaching consequences," he said.

"That is precisely why we're here," agreed Hermione. "In light of some ... information ... we have received, the Ministry of Magic has arranged a protective guard for you both."

Identical expressions of confusion stared back at her. Her stomach twisted, but she spared no time for guilt and launched into a highly abridged explanation for the Aurors' upcoming presence. Her parents soon surmised the threat to their safety was merely an extension of the danger facing their daughter, and their concern immediately shifted to her welfare. She was grateful for Snape's company, as the assurances he offered seemed to ease her parents' worst fears.

They spent the next two hours securing the surroundings with complex spells and protective enchantments. As the sun skimmed the horizon, two figures approached the house. Their drab, brown robes identified them as Aurors, the result of the Minister's edict requiring colour-coded departments within the Ministry.

Snape asked the Aurors a series of questions about the Ministry before moving to several seemingly random inquiries about Lucius, Arglist, and Malfoy Industries.

After introductions were made, her parents explained their routines and commitments, including a much-anticipated bridge tournament that night against their neighbours, the Gilberts. Hermione smiled at their relief when they learnt they would still be allowed to attend, provided the Aurors accompanied them under the guise of a Disillusionment charm.

Hermione frowned as she watched her parents lead the Aurors on an inspection of their house and environs. "I'm sure Lucius has the resources to bribe half the Ministry," she said to Snape when they couldn't be overheard. "I hope it's not a mistake to trust these men."

"It is not a mistake," he answered without pause. "Their loyalty and sense of justice is strong, although they seem less than impressed with Gregor. Most importantly, neither man has any affiliation with Lucius or his interests."

"How can you know that?" she asked. When he did not reply, she answered her own question. "You used Legilimency on them."

"That disturbs you."

"It just seems like such a violation."

"They relinquished their expectation of privacy when they assumed responsibility for the lives of others," he reminded her. "Would you have me ask permission first?"

"You could at least warn them."

"And give them an opportunity to employ Occlumency?"

She supposed there wouldn't be much point to that. "Is that why you asked such odd questions about the Malfoys? To surprise them into revealing something?"

"In effect, yes," he replied. "An unexpected question can provide just enough space to slip behind even the most hidden thoughts."

She wrapped her arms around herself, chilled despite the warmth of her jumper, and remembered the thoughts she had once been so desperate to hide from Snape. At least the Aurors had been spared the pain she had experienced during Legilimency...they had seemed completely unaware of Snape entering their minds.

"Occlumency is only effective if the subject can anticipate the Legilimens's next several moves," Snape said, slipping into the role of professor. "Much like chess, it requires a keen strategic mind, making it impossible for some witches and wizards to learn."

She thought of Harry and nodded. She had been so frustrated with him in fifth-year when he had failed to master Occlumency as Dumbledore had requested. But perhaps he had been genuinely unable...not just unwilling...to learn the skill.

"You still seem unconvinced," he said.

"I just wish there was another way."

"Do you trust Gregor and the Ministry so implicitly that you would risk your parents' lives to protect the rights of a stranger?"

"I don't trust Gregor at all," she replied.

"Then you must be prepared to make difficult choices," he said.

She glanced away and saw her parents exit the house, flanked by the Aurors. "I can sacrifice some morals if it means their safety," she said. "Within reason, of course."

"I am not suggesting we eliminate Lucius outright," he said, "although it would provide a simple solution to our problems." At her startled expression, he shook his head. "Even I draw the line at cold-blooded murder."

"I'm glad to hear it." Admitting she was in love with a former Death Eater was enough of a blow for one day.

"Tell me honestly, though," he said, lowering his voice as the others approached, "Had I learnt they'd been sent here to kidnap and torture your parents, would you care how that information had been obtained?"

The scenario terrified her, the possibility too real to even contemplate. "No," she stated firmly. "No, I would not."

He watched her for a moment and then nodded. "That's what I thought," he said before repeating her earlier sentiment. "I'm glad to hear it."

Her mother insisted the Aurors join her inside for leftover scones, and her father took advantage of his captive audience to show off gardens that could have featured at the Chelsea Flower Show. Hermione admired the vibrancy of the flowerbeds where brilliant red and orange tulips bled into showy yellow daffodils, a tropical sunset over an ocean of bluebells and grape hyacinth.

"You've done an amazing thing here, Dad," she said as they left the flowers for a patch of young herbs.

"Thank you," he replied. "I don't fancy leaving this house."

Guilt returned when he gave her a very pointed look.

"Australia was fine," he said, "a bit of a lark, in the end. But your mother and I are far too old for such adventures now. We're quite content to live out our lives here, however long that may be...two days or twenty years."

"I understand," she said. "I will do everything in my power to make sure it's the latter."

Seeing Snape's frown, she explained, "After sixth-year, I modified their memories and sent them to Australia with new names and false histories." When he merely stared at her, she cleared her throat. "I thought it best they forget their daughter, just in case."

"You couldn't have been more than seventeen at the time," he said.

She nodded.

"Those spells would have required exceptionally advanced magic."

"I'm an exceptional witch." Her wink only drew more silent scrutiny.

"Quite so," he said at last. His hand brushed against hers as they followed her father to a field of budding lavender. She thought the light touch was accidental until his knuckles grazed her wrist again. His fingers stroked the side of her hand, softly, quickly, his little finger briefly hooking hers before he broke the contact.

Her smile remained while they finished viewing her father's accomplishments, fleeing only when the time came to part ways. She hugged her parents and kept the image of them waving goodbye fixed in her mind, her determination to stop Lucius...even if it meant risking her memories...bolstered by the visit.

As they walked, they tested the range of the Anti-Apparition field the Ministry had placed upon the area, satisfied when it extended nearly all the way to the small park where they'd arrived earlier. The horse chestnut tree loomed in the distance, an impressive silhouette against the rose-hued shadows of dusk.

Several hours had passed since she'd devoured her mother's scones, and her appetite returned with the thought of hot pillows of naan and a thali full of spicy vegetables. She wished she could alter the circumstances precipitating her travels today, but at least she had the unexpected pleasure of dining outside the castle to distract her now.

"I think it's best we don't mention our dinner plans to anyone at Hogwarts," she said.

"Oh?"

"Minerva and Dumbledore are already far too interested in the status of our relationship. There will be no stopping them if they hear we dined at some romantic Muggle restaurant. Merlin help us if they ever learn you came to meet my parents...they'll be wagering on wedding dates and names for our children next."

She had nearly reached the tree before she realised Snape was no longer beside her. Turning around, she tried not to laugh at his expression.

"Don't worry," she said, trudging back to where he stood motionless and unblinking. "I did my best to discourage them."

He captured her hand and tugged her closer. "Marriage and children ..." He shook his head, his frown so severe it etched deep lines across his forehead. "You must realise I cannot give you those things."

"I don't recall asking you for them."

"Yet you cannot deny you want them."

"Perhaps." She shrugged. "Some day. Right now, I want to be with you more."

"Even if you are wasting your time?"

Her temper flared. "It's my time to waste. And it just so happens I don't consider you a waste of my time."

"But to assume otherwise would defy logic."

"Of course it does...there is no logic to love."

Apparently, there wasn't much forethought or caution, either. The words tumbled from her mouth before she could consider their wisdom. The effect was immediate.

He dropped her hand and stumbled back, his earlier frown twisting as he continued to shake his head. She turned away, unable to meet his gaze for fear of what she might find in his eyes. Why couldn't she have held her tongue? She had barely admitted her true feelings to herself...surely, it was too soon to share them. What if he rejected her, pushed her away?

Then he doesn't deserve your love, said a strong, determined voice in her head. Several moments passed while she searched for an argument, but the wisdom was impossible to deny.

"Right," she mumbled and turned back around.

Her ears rang, but she squared her shoulders and found his eyes. "Surprise," she whispered.

She tried to gauge his expression. Night had descended, making it impossible to discern anything but shock in the burgeoning moonlight.

He stepped closer. "Hermione, I ... I can't ..."

She waited for him to continue, but he seemed unable to summon words.

"Can not?" she asked. "Or will not?" She wondered if he appreciated the difference.

Now it was his turn to spin away, revealing nothing but his back, his hands at his sides clenching and unclenching into fists. She thought she felt him flinch when she wrapped her fingers around his arm and forced him to face her.

"I wasn't expecting you to reciprocate," she said. "I hadn't even planned on telling you...I certainly don't expect you to fall to your knees and confess your undying love for me."

He dragged his palm down his face. "Why must this be so difficult?" he asked, looking more tortured by her proclamation of love than if she'd performed the Cruciatus curse.

"I assure you this isn't easy for me, either," she said. "I always thought love would be tender and sweet and safe...I never expected any of this. Do you think it brings me joy to accept my love will never be returned?"

Her heart slammed against her ribs, each beat a protest to the unfairness of having its efforts ignored. She lowered her voice and asked, "Do you think I find comfort in loving a man whose heart belongs to another?"

He shook his head. After several moments, he whispered, "This is not possible," as if he genuinely did not believe her. "How could you allow this? How could you ever love such a man?"

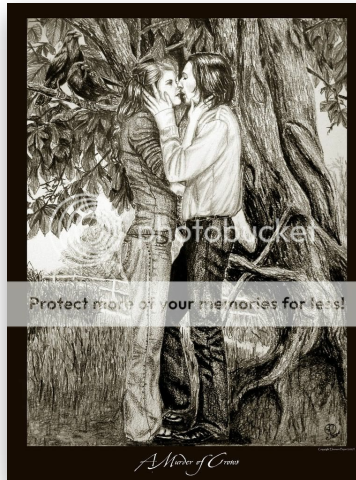
She swallowed. "How could I not?"

Time stood still while she waited for him to speak, to refute her claims and tell her she was being foolish. He said nothing, just studied her with such intense concentration she might have thought he was searching her mind if not for the lack of pain in her head. The ache in her heart made up for it as the minutes crept by.

He inhaled deeply. With one final shake of his head, he bridged the small gap between them and cupped her face in his palms. Relief rolled over her when his lips touched hers. She closed her eyes and let everything fade away. She knew fear and doubt would return the moment their lips parted, just as she knew the stoic, moonlit tree would still be standing when she opened her eyes. She would deal with that later...for now, there was just the magic of a kiss. And for one perfect moment, she allowed herself to dream.

My thanks to little_beloved and Karelia for their beta prowess, and to Melenka for alpha reading.

My sister commissioned the incredible Ellygator and gifted me with beautiful artwork for this chapter. It makes me swoon every time I see it. I hope you enjoy it as much as I! And if you've never seen Elly's work before, be sure to check out her gallery on Deviant Art: <http://ellygator.deviantart.com/gallery/>



... For Spirits and for Guises

Chapter 24 of 33

A day for remembrance.

Chapter 24: ... For Spirits and for Guises

The sky was turbulent on the second of May, a tempest of heavy, swirling clouds. Cold winds swept across the castle grounds while an angry rain lashed at the windows, turning day into night. The darkness caused more than one student to oversleep, but even the clamour of hurried footsteps could not compete with the pounding rain and whistling wind. By noon, the skies had grown so dark spare torches had to be lighted throughout the castle. Hermione roamed the hallways, passing in and out of grey shadows. She blinked when a group of seventh-years floated past her in silence, their faces ghostly pale in the flickering torchlight.

It was an appropriate day for spectres.

The headmistress had delivered a sombre speech before breakfast, reminding everyone of the monumental struggle that had taken place at Hogwarts fifteen years earlier, how they owed their current liberties to the bravery and sacrifice of all who had fought on the second of May. Hermione had watched the students' faces as McGonagall had

spoken, but other than some solemn nodding from the older children, few had seemed to comprehend the significance of the day.

How quickly we forget, she thought. How easy it was to become complacent, to feel safe in the absence of danger. Perhaps that was why recognition of the anniversary had become such a vital exercise...to ensure gone would never result in forgotten.

As had been the case for the past fourteen years, McGonagall had acknowledged the anniversary with nothing more than her pre-breakfast speech, refusing to allow anything to interfere with impending exams. A larger, more public event had always been held at Hogwarts between the second and third weeks of June, after the exam results had been delivered but prior to the Leaving Feast.

Snape's recovery...and his subsequent return to Hogwarts...meant this year's crowd would be larger than usual, and the *Daily Prophet* had already published the schedule of activities for the event. The Minister would be on hand to bore the attendees with a speech that promised to be even longer and more tedious than last year's. Thankfully, McGonagall and Flitwick would balance the pomp with speeches of their own. Hermione had even heard rumours of the headmistress visiting with Harry, but she doubted he'd ever agree to speak at such a public venue.

Coordination of the speeches was one of the few tasks Hermione hadn't directly assisted with. She wasn't sure what she'd been thinking at last month's staff meeting when McGonagall had volunteered her to chair the committee responsible for planning the anniversary event. The organisational challenge had appealed to her structured mind, and the suggestion had been seconded before she had considered the strain it would place on a calendar already overfilled with classes, lab work, and a twice-weekly study group. But she enjoyed a full workload and soon found an added benefit to her hectic schedule. When work filled her mind, she could not dwell on impending dangers, on the time when she would remove her memories of Arglist and trust a stranger to alter them.

It was easier to trust Snape. After they had returned from London, he had spoken to Dumbledore's portrait and had sent an owl to Remy Nissante's last known address in Mexico. As much as she hated waiting and inaction, she dreaded the day when Remy's response would arrive. She tried not to think of it, tried not to worry about how much could go wrong. Snape seemed confident the plan would work, and he had far more experience with the business of deception. It felt strange to consider some of her faith in him came from his talent for artifice, so she tried not to think of that, too.

There were plenty of other topics to occupy her thoughts. That they all seemed to revolve around Snape did not surprise her, given her recent revelations of her true feelings. Today of all days, it seemed natural he should dominate her thoughts. How could she remember the battle and not think of him?

As if the simple act of picturing his face could conjure his presence, the door leading to the courtyards opened and his rain-soaked form appeared at the far end of the corridor. Using both hands, he ran long fingers through his wet hair and slicked it back from his forehead. He flicked his wand at his clothes to dry them before he moved forward. Although separated by the length of the Entrance Hall, she could still see his lips quirk the instant his gaze rose to her face.

Her chest tightened. In a flash, his features shifted and changed, and she saw him as she had fifteen years ago, lying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. She shook her head to clear the memory, but it persisted. There was his face, twisted by pain, stark white against the rivers of dark blood running down his neck and through his fingers. She remembered the sounds he had made as he'd tried to speak and the sickly sweet smell of death hanging in the air.

She had watched him die that day...or at least she'd thought she had. And although the scene had horrified her, she had felt no particular emotional pull, no sorrow beyond a basic regret for another wasted life, another brilliant mind corrupted by evil.

Today was different.

Today she relived those moments in the Shrieking Shack with fresh eyes and a deeper comprehension. Watching the man she loved struggle for life...seeing his determination to fulfil his duty, to use his last breaths to ensure Harry had whatever information he would need to challenge Voldemort...squeezed the breath from her throat and propelled her feet forward.

She didn't remember crossing the length of the hall, but suddenly she was in his arms, kissing his cheeks and his nose and his chin. Heat from his body proved him flesh and bone, not spirit, and after two shaky breaths and a quiet hiccup, she closed her eyes and kissed his lips. He tasted of cold raindrops and warm, salty tears. The security of his embrace chased the demons from her mind, and even the frown on his face seemed to hold more concern than consternation.

He cupped her chin and thumbed aside her tears. "Do not cry, my foolish girl."

"I'm so glad you're not dead," she whispered.

His frown deepened. "As am I." He slid his fingers around the back of her neck and pulled her closer.

She waited for his lips, but a stern shout interrupted them.

"That's enough!" The headmistress's voice echoed off the walls. She hurried forward but stopped short when she recognised them. "Oh!" she said, "I mistook you for a pair of students." She lowered her chin and peered over her spectacles, one eyebrow markedly higher than the other.

"It's my fault, Headmistress," Hermione said. She wiped her eyes and thought the older woman's expression softened. "I attacked Severus ... I'm afraid I was a bit overwhelmed by memories today."

"I understand." The headmistress studied Snape, her lips pursed. "Severus, I ... I apologise for trying to kill you ... repeatedly ... fifteen years ago."

He seemed surprised. "I accept your apology, Minerva," he replied after a moment. "It seems a popular day for absolution."

"That's settled, then." She straightened her already-straight, tartan-lined robes and seemed reluctant to meet Snape's gaze. "And now I believe we should once again discuss your speech for the anniversary event in June."

Snape sighed. "As I have already told you, I have nothing to say that anyone would want to hear. This is precisely the sort of nonsense I had hoped to escape by returning to Hogwarts." He silenced her protests with a shake of his head. "Now, if you will excuse me, I would like to take my lunch before the students have consumed all the soup."

He turned and hurried away, preventing any further argument.

"Hermione, can't you convince him?" the headmistress asked once they were alone.

Hermione shrugged. "I doubt it. He seems quite determined to avoid the spotlight. I can't think of anything I could do to change his mind."

"Can't you?"

She ignored the implication and shook her head.

"I want you to encourage him to make that speech," the headmistress said. "Use every means at your disposal."

"Minerva, you are the headmistress *and* his boss. If you cannot sway him, what hope do I have?"

"I would have thought that was obvious," she hissed, "given your ... *position* ... with Severus."

Hermione stared. Had the headmistress just suggested she take advantage of her intimate relationship with Snape to cajole a speech from him?

"I hate to disappoint you," she said, "but there isn't a single *position* in the entire Kama Sutra that could change Severus's mind once it's been set."

The headmistress closed her eyes, sighed, and shook her head. "I'm sure you'll find a way." She turned on her heel and marched away before Hermione could protest.

Hermione stared after her, her hands upon her hips. She wondered what Snape would say about the headmistress's tactics and set off for the Great Hall to find out. After barely one step, the sound of something squishy made her stop and turn.

Neville trudged down the same corridor Snape had traversed, and like Snape, he also appeared to have walked through a hurricane. The similarities ended there. It was a wonder he could see: whatever hair wasn't plastered to his head hung down into his eyes. And instead of drying his robes as Snape had, he left a small river along the floor as he approached Hermione. He rubbed his head and stared at her as if he'd seen a ghost.

She performed a drying spell on his hair and robes. "Are you okay, Neville?"

"Snape," he said.

"Oh, no." She guided him to a nearby bench and sat beside him. "What did he do?"

"He ... he thanked me."

"What? When?"

"A few minutes ago," he said. "I was working in Greenhouse Two when he came in. I didn't know what to say, given what today is. I mean, what *do* you say?"

She lifted her shoulders and shook her head...obviously, she had no advice to offer on the subject.

"Anyway, I thought perhaps he needed some Potions ingredients, but he said he'd come to discuss a serious matter." He rubbed at his head again. "I know this sounds ridiculous, but for a moment, I swear I thought he was going to give me detention!"

She laughed. "Oh, Neville. Surely, your boggart has changed in the past twenty years." When he did not comment, she cleared her throat and said, "So the serious matter he wanted to discuss ... it involved thanking you?"

"Yeah. He thanked me for killing Nagini and for noticing his portrait was missing from the headmaster's office."

She swallowed and waited for the familiar taste of guilt. But other than a fleeting moment of regret, she was surprised when the nagging little voice of blame remained silent.

"More than anything, he said he was grateful I'd read to him every week at St Mungo's," Neville continued. "I guess some of the stories made it through."

She smiled and squeezed his shoulder. "Well done, Neville."

He stared into space, his brows drawn together. "He seems different now."

"I think it just feels that way because you're an adult...your perspective is different now."

"No, he's definitely changed. He seems ... I dunno ... less angry." He tilted his head and met her eyes. "It's because of you, isn't it?"

"I doubt that." Although she had no cause to hide her relationship with Snape, something had always stopped her from discussing its details with Neville.

He leaned towards her suddenly, a frown on his face. "Are you ... happy, Hermione? With Snape, I mean. Are you happy together?" He looked so anxious, so concerned, as if he would not rest until he'd heard the truth firsthand.

She saw no reason to deprive him of it. "Yes, Neville, I believe we are. He still delights in driving me mad, but he also understands me as no one else could. He knows me better than I know myself at times."

Neville looked confused, as if he couldn't fathom how the sentiment she expressed could relate to the man he knew.

"It's by no means a perfect relationship," she clarified. "I haven't a clue as to where it all might lead ... if anywhere. But I am happier with Severus than I'd have ever thought possible, and I am determined to enjoy it for as long as it lasts." She tried not to speculate on just how long that might be. Revealing her true feelings to Snape had not resulted in his confession of the same, but neither had it been as unwelcome as she had feared. She couldn't guess whether he'd ever return her feelings. Only time...or Snape himself...could provide that answer, and both remained mute. She had noticed him studying her when he thought her unaware of his scrutiny, but there was little point in asking his thoughts until he was ready to share them.

"I'm glad you're happy," Neville said. "That's all that matters, even if ..."

She prompted him when he grew silent. "If what?"

His chin dropped to his chest, and he mumbled so quietly she could scarcely hear him. "I'm always too late. Ginny. Luna. And now you. My timing stinks."

She thought of the night-blooming poppies he'd brought her, of Snape's insinuation he was interested in more than friendship. Despite both men's assertions to the contrary, it still didn't quite ring true.

"Neville, we've worked together for nearly four years now. I imagine something would have happened long ago, had we belonged together."

"I suppose you're right," he said. "It's just disconcerting. I think I might fancy a girl, but before I can decide for sure, she's fallen for someone else. You and I were always the last ones standing, and I just thought someday ... if we didn't have anyone else ..." He shrugged.

She didn't care for the role of consolation prize, but she doubted that had been his intention. She brushed the comment aside. "Trust me, Neville," she said, "When you find the right girl, you won't have to wonder whether or not to pursue her. You'll just know."

"Is that how it was for you and Snape?" he asked.

"Not exactly." She wouldn't particularly recommend the way she and Snape had begun their relationship. "But I believe it was very much like that for Harry and Ginny."

"And Draco, with Luna?"

"Perhaps," she said. "Although in many respects, I think Draco with Luna rather defies explanation. They are a force unto themselves." Smiling, she snaked her arm through his and pulled him from the bench. "Let's see if there's any soup left, shall we?" She steered him towards the Great Hall.

As they passed through the massive wood doors, she shook her head and said, "I wish I hadn't mentioned your boggart. Now I can't stop picturing Severus in your gram's dress, wearing that ridiculous vulture hat."

He laughed, but the smile on his face froze when he glanced at the staff table.

She followed his gaze. Snape scowled at them, his spoon half raised to his lips, dark eyes narrowed at the sight of their entwined arms.

Neville quickly disentangled himself and hurried to the far end of the staff table. Hermione shook her head and took the vacant seat next to Snape. She returned his silent stare, and when he raised one eyebrow with slow deliberation, she did the same, in perfect mimicry.

"I suppose you were showing Longbottom how pleased you are he escaped death, as well?"

She snorted. He did not appear amused, but the thought of Snape jealous of Neville was simply too ludicrous to take seriously.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "I was giving him advice on relationships."

Now it was his turn to snort, albeit a bit louder than hers had been.

"Hush." She elbowed his ribs and smiled at the steaming bowl of soup that had appeared before her.

"You have nothing more to say?" he asked when she dipped her spoon into the masterpiece of wild mushrooms.

"Have I mentioned how sexy your hair looks all wet and dishevelled?"

"Do not imagine you can distract me with flattery, madam." The stern tone might have been frightening if not for the grin he tried to hide.

"I wouldn't dream of it, sir," she replied. "Besides, if I were of a mind to distract you, I would do this ..." She snaked her hand into his lap and slid her fingers up his thigh.

"Hermione!" The warning faded into a moan, losing much of its effect.

"Severus?" asked Professor Sinistra from his other side, "are you all right?"

He grunted. "It was ... the soup. It burnt me."

Hermione made a sympathetic sound. "You poor dear," she whispered. "I happen to have an excellent salve for burns." She lowered her voice to a purr and elaborated, making it clear the particular balm she offered could not be found in any apothecary shop.

He removed the stray hand from his lap but no longer bothered to hide his smile.

As the lunch hour drew to a close, the students slowly deserted the hall and headed to their afternoon classes. Professor Sinistra excused herself the moment her bowl was empty, leaving Snape and Hermione isolated at one end of the staff table.

"I see you are determined to abandon all rules and reason today," he said.

"Something like that." She chuckled. "It's your own fault, though. You started it by being jealous of Neville."

He scowled again. "I would not term it jealousy," he said. "I was merely ... curious."

"Ah, yes. Curious." She raised her gaze to the ceiling and sighed. "If you must know, I was helping Neville recover from the shock of your speech to him in Greenhouse Two."

The scowl deepened. "Had I wanted it broadcasted throughout the castle, I would have invited Peeves."

She waved aside his concern. "I doubt he's told anyone else...he was still quite stunned when I found him. You have no idea how terrifying it is when you're pleasant to people."

"Precisely why I try to avoid it."

She made a tsking sound and watched the headmistress enter the Great Hall. "Speaking of terrifying ... I've been told I must convince you to speak at the anniversary event in June."

He shifted his chair to face her. "I'm afraid you are wasting your time."

"That's what I told her." She shrugged. "But she claims my role as committee chair means I must solicit your commitment."

"It would not matter if you chaired the Wizengamot. I shall not change my mind."

"I thought as much," she said. "You probably won't believe this, but she actually suggested I use our intimacy to convince you."

The corners of his mouth twitched.

"It's not funny, Severus."

He leant closer. "Perhaps I *have* been too hasty in my refusal," he said, his voice low enough to quicken her pulse. "I suppose you deserve the opportunity to at least *attempt* to persuade me."

She could not hide her smile. Of its own volition, her body shifted towards him until their noses were mere inches apart. "I'm afraid I might require *several* opportunities," she whispered. "After all, you are an exceedingly stubborn man."

"I do not deny it." He shifted closer still. "But your powers of persuasion are more than sufficient to..."

An exasperated sigh interrupted his suggestion. They straightened in unison.

"Must I separate you two today?" asked the headmistress.

Snape lifted one eyebrow. "Certainly not," he said. "Professor Granger was simply attempting to solicit my speech for the June event."

The headmistress's lips thinned, as if she struggled to keep herself from speaking. "Oh, very well," she said at last. "Carry on."

"She must really want that speech," Hermione remarked after the headmistress walked away.

Snape agreed and glanced at the clock in the Great Hall. A room full of third-years awaited him, but Hermione's next class wouldn't start for another three hours.

"Come," he said, rising from the table. "I shall accompany you to the laboratory."

"Actually, I need to visit the library first," she said, walking beside him as they departed the staff table. She had been waiting for a chance to check on Pitty, the young house-elf she'd helped reassign from the Owlery. "And after that, I'm to meet with a Muggle florist...a relative of one of the battle victims."

He frowned. "Which one?"

"Do you remember the Creevey brothers? Colin and Dennis?"

"Miniature Muggle-borns?"

"That's them," she said. Her smile faded fast. "Colin was too young to fight...he shouldn't have been here. I suppose he snuck back amidst the chaos, but he didn't survive long enough to see the final outcome." As they walked through the Great Hall, her heels clicked upon the floor where Colin's small body had once rested. She could see it all so clearly: the tear-streaked faces clustered in groups, the long row of bodies in the middle of the room, the fiery red sky at dawn. For a moment, she couldn't breathe. There were too many memories...too many images from that day.

The feel of Snape's hand brushing hers yanked her from the past. They stopped at the staircase, and he gazed down at her, a small crease wrinkling his brow. "Are you certain you wish to do this?"

"I'll be fine." She squared her shoulders and nodded.

"Of that, I have no doubt." His knuckles grazed her cheek. "No more crying?"

"For now," she said. It was the most she could promise.

The storm had kept the elder Creeveys from travelling to Hogsmeade, so they'd sent their daughter in their stead. Rain still pelted the windows, and Hermione was glad Minerva had instructed the gamekeeper to escort their lone guest to the castle.

Except for an abundance of mousy brown curls covering her head, Sandy Creevey looked as if she'd been born to play the role of Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan*. She certainly didn't look old enough to run the family business. Hermione quickly dismissed her initial impression when their conversation revealed a sharp mind behind the young face. It was clear the flower shop in Leeds...the Creeveys' retirement project...owed its success to Sandy's business acumen.

"There were just the three of us ... Colin, Dennis, and I," she said when Hermione asked whether there were more siblings. "I'm the youngest...I was only nine when Colin died."

"I'm very sorry," Hermione said. "I remember your brothers well, although neither were in my year."

Like her brothers, Sandy seemed enthralled with every glimpse of magic the castle provided. She stared at the many portraits on the walls, her green eyes as wide as a house-elf's each time an occupant waved down at her. Hermione steered her into the empty Great Hall, hoping for fewer distractions.

"They were right," Sandy said as she craned her neck to watch lightning race across the enchanted ceiling. "My brothers spent every moment of their holidays talking about Hogwarts, raving about how incredible it was. I always wondered if they'd exaggerated." She shook her head, her cropped curls bouncing as she walked to the windows. "But it truly is amazing, isn't it?"

Hermione followed her gaze and nodded. The lake was just visible through the rain-streaked glass, its surface hammered by the storm, rolling and bubbling like an immense cauldron of boiling water. As if on cue, the giant squid lifted one tentacle into the air and waved at the castle. Hermione smiled when Sandy gasped. Hogwarts certainly knew how to create an unforgettable impression.

"If I recall correctly, your brothers were quite enthusiastic about attending Hogwarts," she said.

"Indeed they were," Sandy said. "It made for rather insufferable summers."

Her gaze moved to the Whomping Willow, which snapped its branches towards the lake as if trying to fling rainwater at the squid. "I couldn't wait to get my letter," Sandy said. "I counted the days till my eleventh birthday."

Hermione frowned. "It must have been difficult to attend a Muggle school after hearing your brothers' tales of Hogwarts."

"In primary school, I thought I was just biding my time," she said. "You see, I knew I was a witch from a very early age."

"But ... but I thought you were a Muggle!"

"I suppose I am ... now," she said. "But I could perform magic as a child. When I was five, I played in the garden while my mum was planting seeds. I held one in my hand...zinnia, I think it was...and within minutes, it had flourished into a fully mature specimen."

"Impressive," Hermione said. "May I ask ... "

"What happened?"

Hermione nodded.

"I'm not sure," Sandy replied. "It stopped when I was nine, when they came to tell us Colin was dead. I watched my mum and dad that day, the way they just fell apart ..." Her voice cracked, and she had to stop and clear her throat. "They didn't believe it, initially," she said. "They thought Colin's magic would have protected him, would have made him invincible. They were devastated. We all were." She turned and met Hermione's gaze, her eyes shining. "Something inside me died that day, I think. I tried a few spells after that, but it was gone...I could never do magic again. And my letter from Hogwarts never came."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said again. "I wish I could think of something else to say, although I know words provide little solace."

"It's actually a relief to speak of it," Sandy said. "Outside of my family, you're the first person I've ever told any of this to."

"Well in that case, I feel honoured." She hoped her smile hid her sadness as she once again considered how much had been lost to the war. The list of victims could not account for collateral damage, for the Sandy Creeveys of the world.

"Would you like to see the monument?" Hermione asked. "It won't be officially presented until the event in June, but I could show you now, if you'd like."

"I would," Sandy said. "Thank you."

Hermione led her to a seemingly deserted classroom and wondered at her impulsive offer. The headmistress probably wouldn't approve of her revealing the statue prior to the event, but something about Sandy had made her dismiss the warning voice in her head. Snape had been right...she seemed to have little regard for protocol today.

She pointed her wand at the corner of the room and whispered a spell. A cylinder of white marble appeared, stretching so high it nearly touched the ceiling, its diameter as wide as the Christmas trees reserved for the Great Hall.

Sandy whistled. "It's enormous," she said. "How ever did you get it in here?"

"Magic," Hermione replied and smiled when Sandy rolled her eyes and said, "Oh, right."

They approached the monolith together. Knowing what would happen when Sandy stood close enough, Hermione left her alone and walked around the statue, providing the young woman some privacy. She glanced at the names of the witches, wizards, and magical creatures carved along the base and, bracing herself, she stepped forward.

A small section of the marble...about the size of a dinner plate...rippled to life, as if suddenly fluid. It stretched and moved, and within seconds it had moulded itself into the shape of a face that pushed outward from the stone.

"Hello, Fred," she whispered.

The face offered no reply other than an achingly familiar smile and a mischievous bounce of its eyebrows. It blew an exaggerated kiss at her, then shifted and changed, until it had formed into the face of Remus, and another plate-sized circle appeared beside it to reveal Tonks. They smiled their kindly smiles at her, and she forced the image to remain strong in her mind, to replace the memory of their lifeless bodies staring up at the ceiling of the Great Hall after the battle.

Both faces shrunk back into the statue. She heard the sound of soft sobs, but before she stepped away to console Sandy, another face appeared.

"Hello, Professor," she said to Dumbledore.

He hadn't technically been a casualty of the battle, but both she and Harry had campaigned to have his image included on the memorial. For all his faults...and looking back, she realised there were many...she still believed he had always had the best intentions at heart, even if his execution of such had resulted in dire consequences on more than one occasion. She did not envy him the decisions he had been asked to make. And she found she could not judge him too harshly, given her own experiences and history, the mistakes she had made at Arglist. She did not possess enough arrogance to assume she could have performed his role any better than he had.

Dumbledore lowered his chin, and although his face was nothing but a smooth expanse of white marble, she could picture the blue eyes sparkling as they had in life. His spectacles slid down his nose, and he shook his head at her slowly. She knew he would not wish to be mourned.

She stepped back and the statue returned to its original state, a massive beam of cold, white stone. A team of magical artists had spent years perfecting the monument. The talent and skill required for such a feat had been unlike anything Hermione had seen before, but she thought the result had been worth the effort.

She walked around the statue and joined Sandy, who stood staring into the wide-eyed face of Colin Creevey.

"It's amazing," Sandy whispered. "Beautiful and horrible at the same moment."

Hermione nodded. She had felt the same way the first time she'd seen the monument. "I think it needs to be a bit horrible," she said. "I think the day we're unmoved by such a sight is the day they died in vain."

"We cannot allow that to happen," Sandy said. She lifted her small hand and rested her palm on Colin's cheek. "We shall remember them. Always."

The timing of this chapter, while completely coincidental, resulted in a violent departure from my usual Author's Note. I doubt the archives would appreciate my annotating the chapter with an op-ed piece, so I've removed it to my blog. If you'd like to read it, you may do so by copying and pasting this link into your browser: <http://dailydoseofdiscontent.blogspot.com/2009/09/older-but-not-wiser.html>

Twenty for a Gift

Chapter 25 of 33

Hermione searches for hidden meaning.

Chapter 25: Twenty for a Gift

Having little time for research, Hermione groaned when a knock on the laboratory door interrupted her study of a salamander blood chromatogram. Friday evenings provided her only opportunity for lab work, and she was in no mood for distractions. She marched to the door and flung it open, only to find dozens of students clustered in the corridor. After a quick scan, she recognised each face from her after-hours study group, and her hands went to her hips.

"All right, you lot," she said. "I never thought I'd say this, but it *is* possible to study too much."

She had dissolved the group at the close of May, a month that had passed in a blur of activity. "You know the material inside and out," she assured them. "Just keep practicing the spells on your own, and you'll do fine."

"We're not here to study, Professor," said Jim Dawkins, a burly seventh-year Hufflepuff. He shuffled closer and indicated a clumsily wrapped package. "We wanted to give you this."

"What is it?"

"Just something to thank you for all the extra help you gave us this year."

"Oh." Her shoulders dropped, and she accepted the package he shoved at her. "That wasn't necessary." They followed her into the lab, their eager eyes scanning the unusual equipment.

"I was more than happy to help with your studies," she said. "You certainly shouldn't have felt obligated to..."

She gasped. Inside the package, a very ornate, very old book lay nestled in a swatch of black velvet. Her finger traced lightly over the title: *Magical Arts: A History of Creative Witches and Wizards*. Although there were many references to the book, few editions remained in existence, and even the top wizarding library in Britain lacked a copy.

Unable to resist a peek inside, she carefully lifted the cover and opened pages at random. A painting in rich, deep blues made her smile. It was clearly a Renoir, yet unlike all his other works...certainly unlike anything displayed in Muggle museums. Tiny white boats bounced upon waves so fluid and real her finger upon the page felt wet. She could smell the brine of the sea-misted air and hear water lapping against the hulls of the boats when she poked at them. The group of sea-bathers in the foreground

seemed not at all pleased with her intrusion as they turned their softly focused gazes upon her. She quickly turned the page, her heart racing when hundreds of jumbled musical notes arranged themselves onto staves and a symphony roared to life. *Beethoven*, she thought, and flipped another page, stopping at a sonnet entitled, "My Wand for Your Kiss." Her smile broadened. She couldn't wait to see her father's reaction when she told him Shakespeare had been a wizard.

"Do you like it?" asked Jim.

"It's amazing." She shook her head. "I have spent years searching for this book...it's terribly rare and terribly expensive. However did you manage to buy this?"

"Well, we didn't buy it, exactly."

She froze. Surely they hadn't stolen it.

"We worked for it," Jim said quickly. "We earned it."

"How?" she asked.

A pretty Ravenclaw fifth-year volunteered the answer. "It was Professor Snape's idea, actually," she said. "We weren't sure what you might like, so we had a contest to determine who would ask Professor Snape for a suggestion."

Hermione had a feeling the task had fallen to the loser of the contest, not the winner.

"Professor Snape said you would like that book," explained Jim, "but he said it would be impossible to buy one."

"He was correct on both counts," she said.

"So he gave us his copy of the book instead," said the Ravenclaw. "We just had to work for him, in return. He said it was important we learn the value of sacrifice."

"What sort of work?" She almost dreaded the answer.

"Oh, loads of stuff," said Jim. "We gathered ingredients for the Potions storeroom, we scrubbed cauldrons, we did extra essays ... we even tutored some of his first-years ... mostly the Muggle-borns." Jim scratched his head. "He never ran short of ideas, really."

"I can well imagine," she said. "I'm surprised you were able to accomplish all this while devoting time to your class work and our study group."

"We worked for Professor Snape during our free periods," said the Ravenclaw. "And we all skipped the last Hogsmeade weekend."

A missed visit to Honeydukes and Zonko's was probably the greatest sacrifice they'd made in their young lives. Hermione blinked the moisture from her eyes and escorted them to the door. "Thank you all so much," she said. "I cannot wait to read it."

She hugged the book to her chest and watched them hurry away. They probably thought her mad for desiring something as boring as a book. She smiled and doubted they would ever understand the perfection of their gift.

As impressive as her students' efforts had been, it was Snape's role she couldn't ignore. That he owned the book in the first place was a surprise, but that he'd be willing to relinquish his ownership was almost too shocking to wrap her mind around. Such a book was to be treasured above all other possessions, more valuable than a gold cauldron, more meaningful than a diamond. Her smile froze.

A diamond.

The very symbol of romance and commitment, of two souls bound together in ceremony.

She gazed at the worn book in her hands and knew its worth far exceeded any chunk of compressed carbon. Albeit through proxy, Snape had just given her what had to be his most valuable possession. And surely, he wouldn't have parted with it unless...

She shook her head. It couldn't be. Yet the more she considered it, the more she felt certain he wouldn't have given her the book unless he felt confident *it*...and therefore, *she*...would always remain near.

The thought made her head spin, so much so she almost missed the platinum flash hurrying past her door.

"Oi!" she called.

Draco's face was barely visible amidst a tower of boxes and bags. At her shout, he stopped in the middle of the corridor and paused for a moment, as if trying to decide whether to leave or to stay. Finally, dozens of parcels floated towards her with Draco following close behind. She stepped aside. The boxes were piled onto the floor while the bags took up residence along her worktable.

"You've been avoiding me," she said.

"Can you blame me?"

For one horrible moment, she thought he knew about her trip to the Ministry, her private war against his father. But he leaned against the table, his legs casually crossed before him, and said, "Rolanda and Filius have regaled me with horror-filled tales of you and your task list for the anniversary event."

"Oh, it's not that bad," she said.

His pale brows rose, but he remained silent.

She dodged his gaze by scooting onto the table across from him, afraid he would realise she'd been avoiding him, too. If everything went according to plan...if she and Snape achieved the best possible outcome...Lucius would spend the rest of his life in Azkaban, and Draco's life would inexorably change. She was, in essence, trading the safety of her family for the destruction of his. Standing on the right side of morality didn't make it any easier to hurt her friend, to rob his children of their grandfather. She had lain awake countless nights, searching for another solution, but the reality seemed inescapable. She pushed it from her mind, one more nightmare added to the mountain of things she tried not to think about.

"Volunteerism for the event has dwindled," she told him, "so I've been forced to assign a task or two to some of the staff. Any horror has been grossly exaggerated, I assure you."

"I'd like to help, really I would," he said. "But with the baby due in a few weeks, I've been trying to spend more time at home, helping Luna with the twins."

"How is she feeling?"

"She's faring well, I believe. Just a bit impatient now that the time has almost arrived."

Hermione smiled. "Please let her know I've been thinking of her."

"I shall."

"Given the circumstances, I suppose I can grant you a reprieve from anniversary event duties."

"I appreciate that," he said. "I certainly have no wish to disrespect the task list."

"Do not mock the task list," she warned.

He smirked. "I hear it's colour-coded."

"It is."

"With symbols and a legend?"

"Maybe."

"And organised into a timeline?"

"Perhaps."

When he seemed unable to contain his laughter, she retrieved her quill and pretended to write on her hand. "I only called you in here for gift suggestions, but that settles it: one Gryffindor sleep-suit for baby Malfoy. There ... done!"

"Don't forget to mark that off your task list."

She lifted her chin. "For your information, that particular item was not on my task list." It was on her shopping list, inside her desk.

"Let me guess: the weekend chores list?"

"Keep at it, my friend, and I'll make it a Hufflepuff sleep-suit."

He shook his head. "Just cruel ..."

"You know I love all the Houses equally."

"An easy claim to make when Gryffindor leads the House Cup race."

"Do they?" she asked. "I hadn't noticed."

"Liar."

She changed the subject. "Isn't there anything you need for the baby?"

"Definitely not." He glanced at the boxes on the floor and shook his head. "The baby has more than enough already."

"Well, you're no help at all." She pretended to pout.

"If this is something you feel strongly about, I can only recommend you focus your attention on Luna, rather than the baby."

"That's a lovely idea."

"Isn't it, though?" His arrogant smile faded as he turned his head and gazed out the window. "She never asks for anything," he said quietly. "Never complains ... never gets upset. She deserves to be spoiled for a change."

His devotion to Luna was plain to see, a fierce and beautiful thing. She wondered if Snape would ever feel the same about her, and without thought, her hand reached out to touch the book she'd just received. *In time, perhaps ...*

For now, she could only smile at the dreamy expression on her friend's face. "Draco's in loooooove," she teased.

"Hush, woman." His grin softened the admonishment.

Changing the subject again, she hopped off the table and pointed to the boxes and bags littering her laboratory. "What's all this, then?" she asked. "Moving sale?"

He glanced at the pile and shook his head. "I made the mistake of having lunch at the Manor today," he said. "Mother saved every blessed outfit I ever wore and insisted I take them all with me."

She plucked a tiny white shift from a box and toyed with the fussy lace collar and green satin ribbons.

"Oh yes, I can absolutely picture you in this," she said.

He sneered but dumped more garments upon the table, and they passed several minutes admiring elaborate little hats and thick, woollen socks.

"Your mother was very keen on keeping you warm," Hermione remarked, stroking a miniature ermine cloak lined with shimmering dragon's hide.

"I was a very cold child."

"You don't have to remind me," she said. Seeing him wince, she added, "Luckily, you've improved with age."

"I wouldn't call it luck, pet, but I appreciate the sentiment."

She handed the small cloak to him. "I think it's lovely your mother saved all this."

"I suppose it is." His brow furrowed as he folded a small blanket. "I shouldn't complain, as I've done nothing to discourage her enthusiasm. It's nice to see her enjoying herself for a change, not worrying about..."

His frown dissolved the instant he met her gaze, replaced by a smooth, smiling mask. "She's quite excited, obviously."

"Is there anything ... of concern ... with the pregnancy?"

"No, of course not," he said. "Everything seems to be progressing as expected."

"Then why is your mother worried?" She already knew the answer but couldn't help ask the question. When Draco just smiled and shook his head, she placed her hand on his arm and felt, rather than heard, his sigh.

"Father has been acting strangely," he said.

She swallowed. "Luna mentioned he was rather ... fanatical ... about the baby being a boy."

"That's an understatement," he said. "But this began before we learnt the sex of the baby ... before we learnt of the baby at all, actually. Mother believes it's getting worse each day. He's obsessed with something, but he won't confide in her."

She lowered her gaze to the floor. She knew precisely what had caused Lucius's obsession, but how could she tell Draco without jeopardising the Ministry's investigation? "Are you ... are you close to your father?"

"You honestly have to ask?"

She held her palms up. More than magic separated families like the Malfoys from the Grangers. She had no idea how they behaved towards one another in private.

"I always thought Father was rather obvious about his disappointment." He drew a deep breath and recited a refrain he'd obviously heard before. "My flying skills were lacking, my Quidditch play inferior, and my grades could never compare to those of a ... a Muggle-born."

"Nor could anyone else's," she protested.

"That's hardly an excuse," he said. "Not that it would have mattered in the end, since marrying Luna was the ultimate crime. Her blood will never be pure enough for him."

She had never heard him so bitter, but he spat the words out as if he couldn't bear their taste upon his tongue.

"I had no idea," she said. "I knew there had been problems, but Luna said you'd reconciled..."

"Yes, when the twins were born, he deigned to speak to us again," he said. "I would have gladly told him to sod off, but there was Mother to consider, and even Luna encouraged it, for the girls' sake."

"One would never suspect, to see you all together."

"I should think not. We would never allow an outsider to witness such familiarity." He leant in close to her, pale eyes hardening until they looked so much like his father's she clasped her hands to keep them from trembling. "You must never forget what it means to be a Malfoy," he said. "Power is our birthright, and it is our duty to command it, to wield it against those who would taint the purity of our heritage. There are no obstacles we cannot eliminate, no secrets we cannot uncover. We never fail. We never concede defeat. And no matter how bleak the circumstance, we carry on as ever before, with our heads held high." His smile was cold enough to raise the flesh on her arms. "It's what we do, my dear girl. We're Malfoys."

For a moment, she stared into Lucius's hate-filled eyes and forgot to breathe.

"And now I've frightened you," Draco said. He stepped back, and there was nothing but concern upon his face.

She shook herself. "No, I..."

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I only meant to illustrate a point."

"Right." She rubbed her arms, unable to overcome the sudden chill.

"I had no choice but to memorise the doctrine," he said, frowning at her movements. "That doesn't mean I still subscribe to it."

"Of course not," she whispered.

He turned to sort through a pile of baby socks, and she frowned at his back. Growing up, she had known him to be spoilt and pompous, nothing more than the pampered child of wizarding aristocracy. While the assessment had been accurate, it hadn't necessarily been conclusive. Wealth and privilege certainly hadn't spared him from the scars of evil.

"Whatever it is he's planning now," he said, "I just hope something happens soon to ease Mother's fears."

Knowing the opposite was likely to occur, she touched his sleeve. "Draco, I ... I'm so sorry."

"Do not squander your sympathies on me, love," he said and patted her hand. "I no longer hold the slightest interest in fulfilling my father's expectations. My life improved once I stopped living it for him...perhaps the same will hold true for Mother some day."

She nodded, and they folded the remaining garments in silence.

When the bags and boxes were once again piled high, he turned to her and said, "I'm glad you stopped me from leaving today. It's been too long since we've chatted like this."

"I only wish I could do something to help." *Rather than make matters worse.* "What is Luna's opinion on all this?"

"I haven't mentioned it to Luna."

Her surprise was short-lived. "Yes, I can understand why you wouldn't. Best not to worry her, with the baby so close."

"Exactly."

The baby's impending arrival had weighed heavily on Hermione's thoughts, as well. Any legal action against Lucius would likely spark a maelstrom of media attention and gossip...hardly an ideal environment for the birth of a child. As much as she longed for resolution, for the threat to be gone, some part of her also hoped Draco and Luna would have time to enjoy their newborn in peace before the truth was revealed.

"Have you decided on a name for your son yet?" she asked.

"We have, indeed," he replied. "We shall call him Scorpius."

"I was being serious."

"So was I, unfortunately," he said. "Scorpius Hyperion Malfoy."

"That's quite ... impressive," she said, trying to backpedal. "And appropriate, of course, since the Scorpius constellation is best viewed in summer. Its appearance should coincide nicely with the baby's birth."

He laughed. "That's precisely why Luna chose it. Personally, I prefer 'Max,' but she insists double consonants aren't nearly as much fun as one would think."

"Hmm ... Max Malfoy. It lacks that certain sense of grandeur that Scorpius Hyperion possesses."

"I suppose." He scooped the bags from the table and pointed his wand at the boxes on the floor.

"Do you need a hand with that?" she asked.

"I can manage, thanks."

While Draco gathered his parcels, she carefully wrapped the length of black velvet back around her precious book. She was anxious to return to her living quarters and hoped Snape would be there so she could thank him in person.

"You haven't seen Severus lurking about, have you?" she asked.

"Not since lunch...oh, bugger!" A precariously balanced box teetered and then tumbled to the floor, spilling its contents.

She knelt beside him and began gathering the scattered clothes. His reply took a moment to register, but when the implication hit her, she froze.

"Severus was still at the Manor when I left, after lunch," he said. "I'm sure he's returned by now, though. His meetings with Father rarely last long."

"He ... he visits your father often?" Bile rose to the back of her throat. She swallowed it.

"Um ... I suppose so." His task required enough attention that he failed to notice her reaction. "To be honest, I seldom go to the Manor myself anymore. I really couldn't say how often Severus is there." He frowned and met her eyes.

"Right," she said quickly. "I'm sure they have a great deal to catch up on."

"Fourteen years' worth," he agreed, although his frown did not fade. "Is everything still all right between you two?"

"Never better." Until a few moments ago, it hadn't been a lie.

"I thought so," he said. "In all the years I've known Severus, I've never seen him act this way towards a woman."

"Oh." What the hell was she supposed to do with *that* now? "Okay."

"Relax, Granger," he said. "The worst is over. Stop analysing and start enjoying."

"Right," she said again and forced a smile.

They left the lab together, Draco levitating his tower of boxes before him while Hermione related every fact she'd ever read about the Scorpius constellation. By the time they reached the Entrance Hall, he seemed relieved to escape her company, so she departed for the dungeons, her mind in turmoil.

The torches lining the damp stone walls struggled to light fast enough as she hurried down the long staircase. She had never allowed her imagination free rein, yet it happily conjured scenes of Snape at Malfoy Manor, conspiring against her. She told herself such thoughts were mad...Snape would never betray her.

Then why had he been meeting with Lucius?

The question turned around and around in her mind, but no matter how she examined it, she could find but two possible explanations. One was terrifying, the other infuriating. Both meant untangling an intricate skein of lies, a task that would be simpler if she could confront Snape in person.

The Potions classroom and office were empty, and beyond the Vanishing door, their living quarters held nothing but more empty rooms. Perhaps he was still with Lucius, and Draco had been mistaken about the duration of their meetings. She thought of travelling to the Manor but rejected the idea the instant it entered her mind. Resigned to wait, she threw herself upon her chair and stared into the fire.

The flames seemed as restless as her thoughts. Questions echoed through her mind, jostling for attention, demanding answers.

He was a spy, she reminded herself. His skills had been unrivalled during the war. That kind of training...that way of life...wouldn't just vanish, even with a fourteen-year lie-in. But just whom was he spying on? Was he loyal to her or to Lucius? She wished she could dismiss the latter outright, but Snape hadn't exactly helped his cause by hiding his activities.

Then again, he'd allowed himself to be seen by Draco. He had to have known she might discover his whereabouts. It seemed a rather obvious mistake to have made, and he hadn't survived this long by making obvious mistakes. Why hide the truth in such a careless manner? Unless he planned to Obliviate her memory. She frowned into the fire. Perhaps she'd confronted him before, and he'd already Obliviated her memories. Perhaps several times ...

She curled her legs beneath her and shook her head. It was so easy to believe the worst when doubt screamed with such resolve, overwhelming the timid whispers of faith. Sitting in the darkened room, alone save for her traitorous thoughts, reason broke free of her meagre hold and uncertainty quickly blossomed into suspicion. Like an unruly child, it bounded through the playground of her mind, overturning stones and poking a stick at all the insecurities she had tried so hard to hide.

He doesn't care for you sang a voice drenched in malice. He never has, and he never shall.

You are nothing to him...a pawn to be sacrificed, a pebble to be kicked aside.

A foolish girl.

Their private endearment seemed almost sinister now. She glanced at the velvet-enrobed book still clenched in her hand and frowned.

"No," she said.

The lone word rang through the empty room, startling her, but chasing the other, cruel voice from her head. She refused to listen to the taunts, refused to believe Snape capable of such betrayal. Why would he have spent so much effort and care helping her students arrange the perfect gift if he was just using her? It didn't make sense. But trusting his intentions did little to allay her fears, given his lies. She wondered if she could ever understand...much less forgive...whatever convoluted logic had led to such deceit.

Lost in thought, she listened to a soft, tapping sound for several moments before she realised its source. She hurried through the living quarters and Vanished the door to find her favourite house-elf waiting on the other side.

"Good evening, Pity," she said.

"Evening, miss," she squeaked and held out a heavy scroll.

Hermione frowned. "I thought you were done with the Owlery?" She had visited Pity twice since she'd been reassigned, and each time she'd been more delighted by the transformations she'd seen in the young elf.

"Oh, yes, miss. Pity is most grateful to work in the library now." Her smile seemed larger than her face would allow. She pointed to the scroll and said, "But this just came

for Professor Snape, and Pitty is faster than Nobey, so Pitty wanted to deliver it, miss."

Hermione assumed Nobey was the elf assigned to the Owlery following Pitty's departure, but her thoughts were more focused on the rolled pages in her hands. She stared at the exotic colour of the parchment, at Snape's name scrawled in bright red ink. Dread made the paper feel heavier than it was.

"Nobey said the owl that delivered it made an awful noise and had bright blue feathers," Pitty said. "Nobey thinks the owl was ill."

"I think it's more likely the owl was a parrot." She flipped the scroll over to reveal the return address: Veracruz, Mexico. Her dinner turned to lead in her stomach.

Of course, she thought.

Of course the response from Remy would arrive now. Her misgivings about Snape had never been greater, and she desperately needed time and attention to sort them all out. She had never embraced the idea of having her Arglist memories extracted and altered...and that had been before she'd learnt of Snape's visits to Malfoy Manor. She closed her eyes and wondered how she could ever go through with the original plan now.

Pitty shifted her weight from one long-toed foot to the other. "Is miss unwell?"

"Miss is getting there," she muttered. At Pitty's worried expression, she shook her head and tried to smile. "I am quite well, Pitty, thank you. I just wish I knew where Professor Snape was, so I could give this to him."

"Pitty can find him!" Her tiny body quivered as she clapped her hands together. "Pitty knows how to staff-trace!"

"Staff-trace?" She frowned. "I'm sorry, Pitty, but I don't know what that means."

Pitty bounced up and down. "All the house-elves at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have the power to trace magic, miss. If ever there is an emergency, Pitty can locate all the staff members for the headmistress in minutes."

It never failed to amaze Hermione when the ancient school revealed another secret. Too bad this one couldn't help her. "That's wonderful, Pitty," she said, "but I'm not the headmistress, and this isn't an emergency." *Not yet, at least.*

Pitty turned her head and cast a furtive glance into the empty Potions office. "Pitty wishes to help, miss," she whispered. "Pitty will see where Professor Snape is and tell miss." Before Hermione could voice her protest, she heard a soft pop and Pitty disappeared.

Standing beneath the empty doorway, she spoke into the silence. "I'll just wait here then, shall I?"

She folded her arms and tapped her foot. For all the skills she had acquired, the ability to wait patiently still vexed her. Waiting and toast-making ... two talents she would never master. Perhaps they were linked, she thought, and tried not to jump when Pitty reappeared with another pop. It was so rare to see anyone Apparate inside Hogwarts she couldn't help but be startled by the sight.

"I'm sorry, miss, but Pitty does not know where Professor Snape is." Her ears drooped so low they brushed her shoulders.

"That's all right, Pitty," she said. "I appreciate you trying to find him for me."

"But Pitty *did* find Professor Snape," she protested.

"Oh, I thought you said..."

"Pitty cannot say where Professor Snape is, because Pitty does not know."

"You mean you didn't recognise the place where you found him?"

Pitty nodded.

"I see." The sinking feeling returned. Hermione described what rooms she could remember from Malfoy Manor, surprised when Pitty rejected them all. She tried some other likely locales: the taverns and shops of Hogsmeade, the businesses of Diagon Alley. All were given careful consideration, yet all were abandoned.

Hermione's frustration grew along with Pitty's misery, until she snapped her fingers and seized upon a sudden idea. "Can you take me there, Pitty?" she asked. "Can you use Side-Along Apparition during a staff-trace?"

"Of course, miss!" She leapt into the air and held out her tiny hand.

Although it had been her idea, Hermione hesitated. How many times had she chastised Harry for reckless behaviour? Yet here she stood, poised to break countless rules and rush headlong into the unknown. The alternative held even less appeal, though...she couldn't take another minute in this room, alone with her thoughts.

"Are you able to Apparate in such a way that no one will see us or hear us?" she asked Pitty. "I want to ensure our arrival goes unnoticed."

"Yes, miss." Pitty's nod was solemn.

"Right."

She dismissed the many arguments pushing into her mind, mumbled, "Off we go, then," and held her breath when Pitty's entire hand wrapped around her index finger. The spinning sensation stopped a second after it had begun, the smoothest Side-Along Apparition she'd ever experienced.

She opened her eyes and gazed down a long, dark corridor, to where a shaft of light rimmed a set of double doors. One door stood slightly ajar, allowing Snape's voice to float from the room. She listened for a moment and swallowed the panic before it choked her.

Pitty squeezed her finger, her tiny fist trembling.

"You should return to Hogwarts," she told the elf. "Quickly, Pitty, before anyone notices your absence."

"But, miss..."

"It's quite all right," she said. "I know exactly where I am now...I've been here before." *I just never wished to return.*

After a brief pause, the elf silently disappeared.

The sound of Snape's voice drew her closer. She crept through the shadows until she reached the end of the corridor, careful to let the double doors shield her presence. A gap by the hinges offered a narrow view of the room beyond the doors. Inching forward, she peered into the main laboratory of Arglist Industries and watched her world collapse.

Cloaked in Shadows Black

Chapter 26 of 33

Listeners ne'er hear good of themselves - English proverb

Chapter 26: Cloaked in Shadows Black

Hermione's heart raced, then stopped entirely when a familiar silhouette blocked her view of Snape. Lucius paced the Arglis laboratory, mere metres from where she stood outside the double doors not daring to breathe. She removed her wand from her robes by touch alone, never once shifting her gaze from the scene before her.

It was not the first time she'd hidden at Arglis, listening to a conversation never meant for her ears. She had thought nothing could be worse than the minutes she had passed in that cramped cupboard, learning of Lucius's true intentions for her research.

She had been wrong.

"There are fewer specifics than last time," Snape said, his quill racing across the pages of an open notebook, "but the team should know where to focus their attention." He slid the journal across the table and folded his arms.

"And *this* will enable us to isolate the Muggle-born gene?" asked Lucius, flipping pages.

"I have no idea," Snape said. "I never claimed to be a scientist."

"No, you claimed to be a Legilimens." He tossed the book onto the table. "Perhaps your skills aren't quite as masterful as you'd have me believe."

"My skills have provided you more data in two months than your team has produced in two years."

"Yes, and I've paid you more than I've paid them."

Snape raised one hand from his forearm and studied his fingernails. "If you have doubts, I can cease my efforts right now."

"That won't be necessary," Lucius said. "My doubts are a result of the girl's skills, not yours. I wonder if she hasn't distracted you from our goal?"

"As you well recall, I do not tolerate distractions."

"Granted," Lucius said, "but I also recall you having rather repugnant taste where women were concerned."

"So you find her repugnant now, do you?"

"I find her ... in need of tutelage." He turned, and even from her hidden corner, Hermione recognised the madness she had glimpsed during her last visit to Arglis. "Miss Granger has cost me a great deal of time and expense, and one way or another, she shall be made to pay. I have plans for her future."

As chilling as she found the prospect, it was Snape's reply that froze her blood.

"Her future does not interest me," he said, "so long as your plans do not hinder my ability to coax the research from her memory."

"Your concerns have been noted."

"I am quite serious, Lucius. No more threats, no more foolishness with her parents. That latest stunt may prove more costly than you realise."

"The Minister does not frighten me."

"I'm referring to more than just Ustinov," Snape said. "She has already threatened to Obliviate her memories of Arglis."

"She ... she what?" The heel of his boot struck the floor. "What a reckless thing to suggest. I assume you were able to dissuade her?"

"I was," he said. "But I must urge you to exercise patience in the coming weeks. Once I have finished with her mind, you shall have ample time to seek whatever reparations you desire from her."

"How cold you are!" Lucius said. "Haven't you even the slightest regret to see her go?"

"What possible use could I have for keeping her?"

Lucius made a tsking noise. "After all these months, I would have thought the answer obvious. Surely, you will mourn the loss of your eager bed partner?"

"Quite the contrary, I assure you. After all these months, I shall welcome the return of peace and quiet."

"But *she* will be most desolate without you, yes?"

Snape shrugged.

"Come, now, Severus. Modesty does not suit you." Lucius moved beyond her line of sight, but not before she had seen the sly smile on his face. "I have heard she's formed quite an attachment."

"Mm."

"Perhaps more than a mere attachment?"

"She fancies herself in love, I believe," Snape said.

The sound of laughter made her jump, so close it seemed only the thickness of the door separated her from Lucius. Her wand grew warm beneath her fingers. She did not doubt her ability to curse Lucius, but duelling Snape was another matter. She wasn't sure if she'd be unable to hurt him—or if she'd want to hurt him far too much.

"How delightful," Lucius said. "Even *you* must appreciate the irony, Severus. But why aren't you laughing?"

"You've not yet paid me enough to find this amusing," Snape said. He slid off his stool and walked around the long, stainless steel worktable.

Lucius joined him and retrieved the journal. "Very well. I'll have the next instalment transferred to your vault in the morning. Perhaps then you will share my humour."

He mumbled a reply she couldn't hear, then he said, "It's nearly midnight, I must return to the castle. We really should curtail these late-night sessions."

"Very soon, we'll be able to stop them altogether."

Both men started for the doors.

"We're getting close now," Lucius said. "I can feel it."

Hermione stepped back, focused on her destination, and spun.

Nothing happened.

She blinked, remembering too late the Anti-Apparition fields surrounding Arglist—only employees and visitors would be granted access past the charm. Pitty's magic must have been able to penetrate the barrier, just as Dobby's had at Malfoy Manor. Lucius had learnt very little since the war if he still underestimated house-elves.

The sound of their footsteps spurred her into action.

She gripped her wand and took several steps back, one hand upon the wall to keep her from stumbling. Her breath caught when their bodies blocked the strip of light from the laboratory. She quickened her pace, still walking backwards. The door opened. A blur of black robes appeared, and then she rounded the corner. She fled down the new corridor and prayed they hadn't heard her.

Everything looked different than she remembered. She scanned her surroundings for familiar sights as she ran, desperate for a way out. The night cast heavy shadows, and each hallway presented a new obstacle course. She nearly cried out when a cloaked figure blocked her path, only to realise it was nothing more than a potted tree. She heard voices behind her as she rounded another corner. Her step faltered when a deafening clap followed a flash of light. She thought a spell had been cast, but another flash of light illuminated the corridor, revealing the large windows of the south lobby and the raging thunderstorm beyond. And freedom, provided she could escape the security guard yawning behind a long wooden desk.

The shadows became her allies, dark friends who sheltered her position. She aimed her wand at the guard. It was rather unsporting to curse someone when their back was turned, but she spared no time for niceties. Her silent spell shot a beam of red light across the lobby. The guard's body went stiff for a moment, and she worried that a shield charm had been cast around him. But then he slumped forward like a rag doll and lay sprawled across his newspaper, unconscious. She hurried through the glass doors and into the driving rain, not daring to look back.

For the second time in four years, she fled Arglist under cover of night. Betrayal joined regret this time, but she couldn't dwell on that now. She gauged the range of the Anti-Apparition field while she ran, her lungs burning. The journey of mere minutes felt like hours. At last, she stopped beside a low hedge and held her sides. She squinted through the downpour and studied the grounds she'd just crossed for movement. No one appeared to be following her.

Her gaze rose to the building nestled against a wooded mountainside, its façade far too generic to foster such depravity. No one would suspect the plots that had unfolded within those innocent walls. She tried to steady her breathing, tried to still the trembling that had begun in her hands and spread through her limbs. Cold rain stung her skin. She welcomed each drop, her face lifted to the sky as if the rain could wash the scene from her memory. But it was too much to ask. She pushed sopping hair from her brow and forced her senses to clear enough for Apparition. Unlike the night she'd left Arglist four years ago, her mind did not hesitate to offer a destination. The setting would have been unacceptable in any other circumstance, but tonight she did not pause to question it. Eyes closed, she clutched her wand and disappeared without a sound.

The rain that had fallen at Arglist was gone. Silence ensued, broken only by her clothes dripping puddles onto the floor and an occasional rumble of thunder. Either the storm had just passed, or it would soon be upon her.

She opened her eyes and sneezed.

Lumos, she thought, and light poured from the tip of her wand. The room had been painted grey by years of dust. If she had cared more, she could have performed a brief cleansing spell on the entire Shrieking Shack. She decided a little dust wouldn't hurt her. Nothing could hurt her now. She was numb.

Lightning flickered through the room like a strobe. In one corner sat a sagging chair, its shredded upholstery the handiwork of many a rodent visitor. She sank into the rotting cushions and stared out the window.

"*Nox*," she whispered. Darkness engulfed her.

Facing south, the window provided an excellent, albeit grime-smeared view of the approaching storm. The violence suited her mood and matched her wild thoughts. If only the thunder would reach a decibel loud enough to drown the memory of Snape's cold voice.

She fancies herself in love.

The scene at Arglist replayed through her thoughts, more incriminating with each viewing. Her chest ached, and she wondered if she wasn't quite as numb as she had imagined. She recalled the arguments she had used earlier, when she had searched for a way to explain Snape's visits to Malfoy Manor. Did they still apply—had she just witnessed the master spy in action?

Of course she had. He had proven the breadth of his talents tonight, just as he'd proven precisely where his loyalties rested. She needn't have worried whose side he was on. His devotion extended no further than his own worthless hide. Hadn't he tried to tell her how selfish he was? She had refused to listen, refused to see him as anything but the tragically misunderstood hero she'd created after having watched his memories.

She wondered how much Lucius had paid him. What price had they put on the elimination of Muggle-borns? She closed her eyes and pressed a hand to her stomach. It all made sense now. The inexplicable absences, his anger when she'd returned to Arglist, his accusation that she could have ruined everything. At last, she understood: she would have ruined his access to the Malfoy fortune.

She'd been such a fool, believing he cared for her. All those times she'd caught him studying her, all those long, meaningful glances when anything had seemed possible. She had almost convinced herself he was on the verge of some personal revelation, some proclamation of his true feelings.

Her hollow laughter pierced the room and sent tiny feet scurrying through the darkness.

She should have known better. He hadn't been searching his soul—he'd been searching her mind. Each tender gaze had been a ruse. Each lingering touch had been nothing more than a distraction to hide his true intentions: Legilimency.

She massaged her temples and remembered how painful her experience with Legilimency had been the night of the Malfoys' Christmas Eve ball. He had proclaimed her mind too difficult to penetrate without detriment, and she had trusted his expertise. But it had been just another lie, a cunning way to tap her memories for months without fear of detection. Had she not been so hungry for his approval, perhaps she would have questioned how her untrained mind could be stronger than a highly skilled Auror's.

She drew her knees onto the chair and hugged them to her chest. The book she had received tonight was just one more example of how desperate she had become. She'd been so eager for proof of his feelings she had likened the gift to an engagement ring, convinced he wouldn't part with it unless he believed their futures entwined. How naive. It seemed so obvious now—once she was out of the way, he would simply take back the sodding book. How could she have been so blind?

She fancies herself in love.

There was her answer, of course. She bowed her head and waited for tears that never came. She hadn't just *fancied* herself in love. No man had ever challenged her the way he had, and her feelings for him were different—stronger—than any she'd experienced before. Perhaps that was why a persistent voice in her head still demanded she find another explanation. Despite the conversation she'd overheard, despite the mounting proof against him, a part of her could not help but rebel against the obvious answer.

She told herself she was an intelligent woman, far too wise to fall for someone who could be so callous with her affections. But there was little room for IQ in matters of the heart. Clever women still made mistakes, still trusted deceitful men who turned their dreams into pathetic, feeble things. She certainly wouldn't be the first bright woman to make a poor choice. Yet something still didn't feel right. If anything, it all felt a bit too familiar.

She abandoned her chair and walked through the empty house. Each step stirred the dust and left a clean mark upon the floor. She hadn't been inside the Shrieking Shack in more than fifteen years, yet nothing had changed. She opened doors until she found the room where she had watched Snape die. Lightning revealed the dark pattern where his blood had stained the floorboards. For several long minutes, she stared at the spot where they had left him for so many hours, believing him dead. He had languished alone in the sorry old shack, no friends to mourn him, no relations to claim him. A proper death for a traitor.

Fifteen years ago, the evidence against him had been irrefutable. He had chosen sides the moment he had murdered Dumbledore, and he'd given them further proof when he had nearly killed George in the flight from Privet Drive. She had trusted the evidence fifteen years ago. She had believed him capable of the worst crimes imaginable. Nothing had changed.

The floorboards groaned as she crossed the room and stood above the dark outline. Fifteen years ago, she'd been wrong. If nothing had changed, was she wrong again?

Her eyes burned, but doubt still choked her. When the truth had been revealed all those years ago, his allegiance to the Order had been the result of one thing: Lily. Or, as Dumbledore would claim, love. The same argument couldn't be made now—Lily had nothing to do with Lucius, and the Order had been disbanded long before Arglist had become a threat.

She was left with the same questions she'd had earlier. Was he lying to Lucius and hiding it from her? Or had her entire relationship been a lie?

There was only one way to find out.

She squared her shoulders and left the crippled old building. Rain soaked through her clothes once more, but she had far more pressing matters on her mind. Beneath the streaks of lightning, she found the muddy path to Hogwarts and splashed up the hill towards the castle.

It was time for answers.

Only six chapters left! (Might have a wee epilogue, as well.) My thanks, as always, to Little_Beloved and Karelia for beta-reading, and to Melenka for an alpha pass.

Twenty-one for Letting Go

Chapter 27 of 33

Hermione confronts Snape.

Chapter 27: Twenty-one for Letting Go

Damn him.

The words became her mantra, an angry chant that echoed through her head with every step. Where darkness made the trek to Hogwarts difficult, the rain made it downright treacherous. Propelled by impatience, Hermione hurried along the slippery trail. She ignored the mud that coated her robes each time she lost her footing. As her pace increased, so, too, built her rage. Her mind leapt from the scene she'd witnessed at Arglist to the bloodstained floor of the Shrieking Shack.

Damn him.

Damn him for toying with her love, for crushing her heart as easily as he might smash an ant beneath his heel. Damn him for making her care too much. After what she had seen tonight, the memory of his death should not have caused still more pain. It wasn't fair.

Damn him, damn him, damn him.

She knew rational thought had abandoned her, but by the time her wet boots stomped down the stairs to the dungeons, she no longer cared.

Inside the living quarters, she stopped short at the sight of Snape pacing before the fireplace. Her hands shook. He spun at her approach, but the accusation in his eyes turned to concern when he took in her appearance.

"What the devil happened to you?" he demanded.

A thousand accusations sprang to her mouth, followed by a thousand questions. She voiced neither, yet the phrase that had plagued her seemed to carry both.

"She fancies herself in love?"

His eyes widened a fraction before closing entirely. Then his shoulders dropped, and he whispered, "Dammit."

Fury unlike any she had known filled her, pulsed through her veins, boiling and expanding until it had no choice but to burst forth. She wanted to scream, wanted to curse, wanted to hurt him as he had hurt her, to watch him experience just half the pain ripping her in two.

She wasn't aware of the wand in her hand until she had pointed it at his chest.

Angry red sparks dripped from one end, hissing and spitting and dying their spluttering deaths at her feet. Snape lifted his gaze to hers so slowly she thought their eyes might never meet. And then she wished they hadn't. For the first time since leaving Arglist, her grip on the smooth wood faltered.

He wasn't allowed to look so haunted, wasn't allowed to tear at her chest with his expression alone. He wasn't allowed any pain but the pain she caused.

"Do it, then," he whispered. Disgust twisted his face. He closed his eyes again and waited.

A dam burst inside Hermione.

Wand dropping to the floor, she flew across the room until all at once she was upon him, beating her fists against his chest, crying, "How could you? How could you?" with each small blow.

That he just stood there, hands clenched at his sides, refusing to defend himself, only infuriated her more.

"Bastard!" she shouted, raining her wrath against his chest until her arms shook from the effort. When the force of her assault weakened, when she could no longer find the strength to do more than shove against his robes, she dropped her head and covered her face with her hands.

His arms encircled her, but she summoned enough energy to resist his embrace.

"Don't touch me," she said.

His hands dropped to his sides and tightened into fists. "What, precisely, do you suppose you witnessed tonight?"

"You tell me," she said. "Or is difficult to keep all the lies straight?"

His jaw tightened, but he remained silent.

"Fine, I'll go first," she said. "You've been using Legilimency to steal my research and sell it to Lucius. Tell me, is he paying you extra to turn me over once it's all said and done? I certainly hope you'll receive a bonus for..."

"Stop it." He reached for her again, but she knocked his hands aside. "How could you think me capable of that?"

"You deny it, then?" she asked. "I was there, Severus. I saw ... I heard ... everything."

"I do not deny what you saw or what you heard," he said. "But I take great issue with the way you have decided to interpret it."

"I suppose this is where you'll remind me you were once a spy."

"How could you require such a reminder after what you witnessed tonight?" he said. "Espionage is the one realm in which I have always excelled."

"Yes, you are quite the master of deception." When his lips thinned, she said, "Let's hear your brilliant plan to spy on Lucius, then. Amaze me, *Professor*."

"A brilliant plan would be wasted on someone like Lucius," he said. "It is enough to appeal to his avarice and feign an interest in ridding the world of Muggle-borns. Lucius enjoys nothing so much as having his thoughts repeated back to him."

"And telling him I was in love with you?" she asked. "That I was no more than a burden to be borne? That wasn't espionage...that was just cruel."

"What sort of game do you think we're playing here?" His voice rose with his anger. "I can hardly walk away simply because I find the rules distasteful. How would it appear if I took offence whenever Lucius mentions your name, if I cursed him each time he relates his plans for you?"

She wrapped her arms around herself. Although she knew he was right, she wasn't ready to concede him any points.

"It is nothing more than a role." Weariness seemed to infect his body, from the tone of his voice to his deep sigh. "I can only imagine how upsetting it was to hear such things, but you must appreciate the advantage it has wrought. By gaining his trust, I could ensure the safety of your parents."

"My parents!"

She fell to her knees and scrambled for her wand. The giant silver bat appeared at her whispered incantation. "Find my parents and bring back a report on their welfare, please" she said.

The bat lingered, beating its shimmering wings around their heads faster and faster as if distracted by the emotions in the room. Hermione frowned. Casting a Patronus had always been the one spell she'd struggled with, but she had thought she'd remedied that after the war. At university, she hadn't rested until she had not only perfected the charm but had found ways to manipulate her Patronus that others hadn't considered.

She batted her hand through the air and shoosed the flapping wings from her face, whispering, "Knock it off, Toby," beneath her breath. The bat circled Snape once, then left the room. She shook her head and wondered what other quirks had developed when her Patronus had changed. The otter had been tiresome at times, but it was never this contrary.

"Your parents are fine," Snape said, his brow furrowed as he watched the bat's departure. "Lucius has no plans to harm them. He only wished to frighten you."

"And you stood by while he threatened them?"

"Certainly not." His back became rigid. "Had I any knowledge of those photos beforehand, I would have found a way to spare you the images."

"Oh, I don't doubt that," she said. "I'm sure I proved quite the inconvenience when I demanded an audience with the Minister."

His lips pulled back from his teeth in an ugly snarl. "I wonder why you bother to ask questions when you haven't any intention of listening to the answers."

"And I wonder why my parents are being protected by a Ministry guard and enough wards to bar an army of Death Eaters if Lucius has no plans for them."

"I thought it wise to employ every possible precaution," he said. "I believe in being proactive."

He lifted his chin, perhaps subconsciously, and her gaze dipped to his shirt where the scar from Nagini's fangs lay hidden behind his collar. Once again, she was back inside the Shrieking Shack, watching him die. He had struggled for each breath, yet still he had used his final moments to help a boy he had loathed. How could such a man condone the plans she had heard at Arglist tonight?

"What about the Legilimency?" She cleared her throat, dismayed by the catch in her voice. "Were you being proactive each time you probed my mind?"

He shook his head. "I have only used Legilimency against you once, and I am certain you can recall that instance."

"I don't believe you," she said, but her words lacked conviction. "I think you made the session on Christmas Eve more painful than it needed to be, so I'd imagine myself immune and not notice you searching my mind later."

He paled. "I never intended to cause you pain that night." His hand trembled when he reached for her, and because she had no business longing for his touch, she stepped back. He dropped his hand, but the shocked expression remained on his face. "The more subtle forms of Legilimency cannot be used with you," he said. "I discovered this early...the night of my return, in fact...when we were fighting in Minerva's office."

She recalled them bickering, but if he had attempted to learn her thoughts on Halloween, she certainly hadn't been aware of it.

"Your mind resisted," he said. "I could have pushed, but the intrusion would have been obvious. It is one of the reasons I had to cast a strong *Legilimens* on Christmas Eve."

She closed her eyes. The revelation was filed for later discussion, and she returned to more immediate concerns. "If you haven't been violating my mind, then where did you find the data you gave to Lucius? My former co-workers?"

"No, Lucius eliminated that avenue long ago," he said.

She tried not to think of whatever horrors had been inflicted upon the men and women she had worked alongside. Yet another mistake to regret.

"Thus far," he said, "I have taken the information you revealed on Christmas Eve and corrupted one or two elements to ensure failure."

"You've sold him nothing but modified data?"

A cold smile curled his lips. "He has paid millions for a stack of worthless notes."

Someday, she knew she would appreciate the justice in that.

"The method is far from ideal, though," he said. "I have depleted the information, and Lucius has limited patience. To continue any longer would jeopardise my position."

She nodded. It sounded reasonable, but she had expected no less. "It seems a great deal of time and effort could have been spared, had you simply asked for my assistance."

He looked away...he had to know what would come next.

"It leaves but one question." She refused to continue until he met her eyes. "Why did you lie to me?"

"I had to," he replied instantly.

"Why?" she demanded. "And if you claim it was to avoid a scene like this, so help me, Severus, I will hex your lying tongue right out of your mouth."

He sliced his fingers through his hair. "There was too much at stake," he said. "If Lucius discovered the truth, more than the research would be compromised. I had to be certain I could trust you."

"It was *my* bloody research!" She stamped her foot, but the thick carpets muffled the sound. "Of course you could have trusted me."

"It's not that simple," he said. "I have made it a rule to trust no-one, and doing so has served me well. Far too many have died after placing their faith in the wrong person."

She thought of James and Lily Potter and wondered how many others he had seen lose their lives for making that fatal mistake. Having lived through two wars...playing both sides...would only have magnified his distrustful nature.

"I can understand your initial hesitation," she said, "but surely, once Lucius began to threaten me..."

"His threats merely served to highlight the risk," he said. "Lucius proved how easily he could get you alone the day he interrupted your lunch with Luna. And then you proved a great deal more when you agreed to Side-Along Apparate with him to an undisclosed destination."

She flushed. Hearing Lucius speak of her tonight, she realised just how dangerous that decision could have been.

"I would rather have you alive and feeling betrayed than ... the alternative," he said. "And after your excursion to Arglist, you left me no choice but to keep the truth from you."

"You have the perfect answer for everything." She brought her fingertips to her forehead and rubbed at the ache behind her temples. "But then, even your lies are perfect, aren't they?"

He folded his arms. "No more so than yours."

Now her head throbbed in earnest. "How many times would you have me apologise for what I did with your memories?"

"Not the memories...the lie I refer to is far more recent."

"What lie? I have been completely honest with you since..."

"You never told me Lucius kissed you when you accompanied him to Arglist."

"I ..." Her mouth snapped shut. *Bugger.*

"No, I had to listen to his filthy insinuations and search his mind to see precisely what had transpired. Do you think I enjoyed learning of it in such a way? Do you not understand what torture it is to see you in his arms?"

She didn't know what to say.

"Why didn't you tell me he had assaulted you?" he asked quietly.

She had believed him better off not knowing. "I ... I didn't want to fight about it," she said. "You were angry enough just knowing I'd gone to Arglist. Telling you what he had attempted would have served no purpose."

"I see."

By the arch of his eyebrow, she suspected he didn't. "Can you blame me, considering the way you overreacted when you saw us at the Christmas Eve ball?" she asked.

"After your behaviour that night, you left me no choice but to keep the truth ... from ... um ... you."

Double bugger.

She wished her phrasing hadn't matched his so precisely. The logic couldn't excuse her omission without exonerating his in the process.

He sighed and shook his head. "We are, both of us, fools."

"One of us is, perhaps," she said. "The one who was foolish enough to fancy herself in love."

His eyes narrowed. "You know nothing of love."

"That's rich, coming from a man who has spent the past thirty years pining for a ghost." She clutched her wand when he stepped closer.

His gaze flicked to her hand. "You claim to love me, yet you still refuse to believe me. What sort of love loses faith so easily?"

"You dare to question *my* faith?" Her temper built until she could no longer stand still, and she paced to the fireplace and back. "Let's consider this, shall we? Do you have any idea what kind of faith is required to love someone who will never return your love? To stay with a man who is forever determined to draw first blood, lest he risk his blasted heart again?"

She whirled on him. "Do you know what it's like to live each day being compared to a ... a memory? If she were flesh and bone, perhaps I'd stand a chance. But how could anyone compete with a spirit, much less a spirit who is more fantasy than reality? I've tried, Severus, truly I have. Until now, I've ignored all the doubts, and I've found a way to excuse everything you've thrown at me."

Her shoulders were suddenly too heavy, so she let them roll forward. "If I'm a bit short on faith, it's only because I've had to use so much to come this far."

He stared at her for several minutes, his brow so wrinkled she wondered if it would ever smooth. The room was silent, save for the fire crackling in the grate. Such a comforting sound. And so much safer than the words that needed to be said. She folded her arms and tried to remember if she had ever before felt this cold. Fatigue wrapped its bony fingers around her limbs and tried to pull her down, down into the ground where darkness would chase the dreams from her head. The fireplace beckoned, but Snape's words stopped her before she could cross the room.

"You're wrong," he whispered.

She turned. Her heart stopped when his hand reached inside his robes.

"There is truth in what you have said, but you are very much mistaken about one vital element."

He pointed his wand towards the kitchen, and silver mist shot from its tip. She closed her eyes. The last thing she wanted to see was his doe Patronus, the very embodiment of his love for Lily.

"Look at it," he hissed.

She shook her head, eyes still closed. He crossed the room quickly, too quickly for her to raise her wand and stave him off. He spun her around and forced her to face the kitchen. His arms held her fast, twin vices that pinned her to his chest. Heedless of her struggles, he offered no more than a grunt when she kicked the heel of her boot into his shin.

"Look at it!" he said again.

The fight melted from her body when she raised her head. Standing just inside the kitchen, its nose buried in the bowl of fruit on the breakfast table, stood a small silver mare. Sensing their gaze, the mare shook her mane and fixed Hermione with steel-coloured eyes.

"Where's the doe?" she asked.

"Where's the otter?" he retorted.

Having studied Patronuses extensively, she already knew the answer. But all she said was, "Gone."

"Why?" His breath was warm against her ear, and his lips brushed her skin when he asked, "Why did it leave?"

She ignored the resolution she'd made to stop biting her bottom lip. "It's not ... uncommon for a Patronus to change. The phenomenon typically occurs between adolescence and adulthood, although trauma and ... other factors ... can stimulate a transition at any point in time."

"Why did Nymphadora's Patronus change?"

"I have no idea," she lied.

"Do you not?"

She bit her tongue when the question hung in the air. The answer demanded to be spoken. She had to respond...to remain silent went against her very nature and would have required far more strength than she could summon.

"It ... it might have had something to do with Professor Lupin." Now she was stuck. She could no more tear her gaze from the mare than she could stop herself from filling the silence with facts. "A Patronus can represent many things, though. They do not *necessarily* refer to a specific person. Most often, they're indicative of the qualities and characteristics valued by the caster."

In her youth, the joy and wild abandon of the otter had appealed to her, had spoken to a part of her soul that had longed to be free from responsibility and structure. As she had matured, her Patronus must have, as well. She wondered when she had begun to favour private, unfairly maligned creatures. Had it happened after Snape had entered her life, or had it begun much earlier, when she had first viewed his pilfered memories?

"Why did your Patronus change?" he asked. "Trauma or ... other factors?"

She shook her head.

"Why?" His fingers dug into her arms.

"Love," she whispered.

"Yes!"

Why had he made her confess it? She'd already told him she loved him; it was hardly a revelation. "What is the point of this?"

"Love." His whisper was fierce. He pulled her tighter against his chest.

She frowned. "You cannot mean..."

"Can I not?"

"You don't love me, Severus," she said. "You have told me time and again it's impossible."

"Do you think I haven't tried to convince myself it was?" He spun her around to face him, his gaze wild. "I have attempted every means I know to deny it, yet it persists, never waning...growing stronger with each passing day, although that, too, ought to be impossible." He searched her face, as if she were a puzzle whose solution defied him. "No, it must be love. Nothing else can cause this ache."

"But you love Lily," she said. "Always."

He winced. "If only that were true."

Once again, his logic escaped her. She frowned and shook her head.

"There is great benefit to loving a ghost," he explained. "They cannot leave you, they cannot hurt you. And they are incapable of lies."

"But they can never love you in return."

"That is only an issue for those who are worthy of requited affections."

She looked away. It was not safe to linger in his gaze, to allow his eyes to distract her.

She could accept that his dealings with Lucius had been an act...he was, after all, a brilliant spy. And a part of her could even understand why he hadn't told her of his endeavours, especially after her unplanned visit to Arglis in April. But love? Could she believe he loved her, that he had relinquished his bond with Lily after all these years?

A blur of silver mist answered her question. For all the time she'd studied Patronuses, for all the mysteries that still remained, there existed one undeniable, indisputable truth. A Patronus could not be altered. It could be manipulated, to be sure, but the form it would take could neither be controlled nor counterfeited. Many had tried, but like a wand choosing its wizard, the base magic was unalterable. Which meant one thing:

The doe was truly gone.

The idea of love settled over her slowly, like sunlight melting through layers of fog. She had fought against it for so long that being loved in return was a possibility she had not dared to entertain for any length of time.

She watched the compact mare stroll through their kitchen and wondered what traits she might share with such a creature. It was a shame, really...she would have much preferred to be likened to a wise owl or perhaps a ferocious lion. She supposed she ought just to be glad his Patronus hadn't changed into a mule.

"This doesn't have anything to do with my old horse teeth, does it?" she asked.

He stood behind her and exhaled slowly, as if he'd been holding his breath. "Only inasmuch as that hideous bat reflects my mannerisms."

"Toby isn't hideous." She spun around, hands on her hips. "I happen to think he's rather cute."

"You ... you named your Patronus?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

His expression revealed the answer. "What was the otter's name?"

"Billy." Her face grew warm.

"I see."

She turned back to watch the mare. "I suppose she does look a bit regal."

"Indeed she does." He stood behind her again, closer this time, and lifted his hands. She saw them hover over her shoulders, as if he wasn't sure whether he'd be permitted to touch her just yet. Finally, his fingertip brushed along her arms. "She's magnificent," he whispered. His hands slid around her waist, and when she offered no protest, he pulled her against him. "She is strong and beautiful. Courageous, intelligent. Loyal."

Perhaps a mare wasn't such a bad Patronus after all. "You forgot incredibly, unbelievably forgiving."

He stiffened, then buried his nose into her rain-soaked hair, his breath hot against her frozen neck. "I feared she might be too wilful for that."

"I would have thought so, as well."

She relaxed into the warmth of his chest. His arms tightened, and for the first time since her conversation with Draco, she felt safe. It seemed Dumbledore had been correct...love was more powerful than any magic she had encountered. Nothing less could have silenced her doubts.

Arms entwined, they watched the shimmering mare for several moments. A scroll of parchment lay unfurled upon the sideboard, and the horse's wide nostrils flared when she sniffed it. Hermione recognised the coloured paper at once...the missive from Mexico.

"Remy has offered his assistance," Snape said.

The mare vanished.

Fingers of fear slid around her throat, until her reply was a barely audible, "Oh."

She pulled from his embrace and retrieved the scroll.

Remy had summarised the process he would follow for altering her memories, and although the majority of work would be performed in Mexico, the preliminary tasks he'd assigned were more daunting than she had anticipated. Her old memories had to be removed beforehand, and she would need concise ideas for how each new memory should look. He would then guide her through a series of re-enactments, and once she had removed the memories of these new, faux scenes from her mind, he would combine and edit both sets together, performing his unique magic that rendered the splices undetectable.

Although it had to be done, the thought of removing her memories still made her head spin. Her stomach soon followed.

"We must act quickly," Snape said. "The team at Arglis will soon discover the notes are useless."

She nodded. If they had any hope of stopping Lucius, of ending this nightmare once and for all, they would need the altered memories. Without them, the Ministry would never have enough time to build a case against Arglis.

"All right," she said. "After exams, we can..."

"No," he said. "We cannot afford to wait, especially after what you witnessed tonight."

"Why should that make any difference?"

"If Lucius finds out what I have..."

"I'm not going to tell him!"

"You wouldn't have to," he said. "It is written all over your face. We cannot risk him discovering the truth...we must proceed immediately."

"Exams start on Monday," she said. "We can't just disappear."

"I shall speak to Minerva in the morning," he said. "I am certain I can convince her, given the circumstances."

"Right," she whispered, and then shivered. "Tomorrow, then."

He pointed his wand towards the bathroom, and the sound of water rushing from several taps filled the living quarters. "You are chilled to the bone," he said. "A hot bath, then sleep, if you are able. We can start fresh in the morning."

She followed him into the bathroom and stripped off her mud-encrusted robes while he dumped oils into the tub. The scent of jasmine made her sigh. He fiddled with the taps and cast uncertain glances her way, watching her every move from beneath a shock of hair that had fallen across his eyes. When the last of her clothes had been dropped onto the floor, she slid into the pool of scalding suds and moaned. Finally, the warmth she had craved. She rested her head and closed her eyes as little by little her limbs thawed. When at last she opened her eyes, she was surprised to see Snape hadn't budged from his position beside the taps. She met his gaze, and a different sort of warmth spread through her body.

The fact he had waited for her invitation made it easier to issue. She held up a sponge and said, "Wash my back?" Her pulse quickened when he removed his robes and tunic. He walked around the tub and knelt behind her, surprising her again when he poured soap into his hands and began to quite literally wash her back.

His fingers slid along her spine. He kneaded the tension from her shoulders in ever-widening circles until nearly all her muscles had turned to liquid, and she thought she might just sink beneath the bubbles, a pile of melted goo. But then his fingers moved around her ribs to tease her breasts, and she found the strength to pull him into tub, trousers and all.

The water had grown cold by the time the last of their cries echoed through the living quarters. Whispers of love followed, timid and unpractised, where once there had been silence. Neither could muster enough energy for a particularly effective drying spell, so they fell into bed with hair still damp from the bath.

The nightmare would soon return, but Hermione refused to dwell on it. She memorised the feel of his arms around her, the scent of his skin beneath her nose. Outside, she knew the horizon had already been painted by the first blush of dawn. But daylight was for other creatures. She dwelled in the dungeons, where darkness always reigned and where she could pretend the night would last forever.

I apologise for not responding to very many reviews, but I have challenged myself to complete this story by Halloween. Meep! I truly appreciate receiving the feedback, so please do not mistake the lack of reply for a lack of enthusiasm. I look forward to answering them very, very soon!

Grateful hugs, as always, to Karelia and Little_Beloved for being lovely betas, and also to Melenka for reading with sharp alpha eyes.

And Never Looking Back

Chapter 28 of 33

Things remembered and things best forgotten.

Chapter 28: And Never Looking Back

Hermione awoke to the sound of conversation, the give and take rhythm of speech from the sitting room. Snape, and another voice too high to be human.

Pitty.

She slid from the bed, still naked. Pitty had yet to bring good news, so it was little wonder her stomach wobbled upon hearing the familiar squeak. She hurried to the chest of drawers and strained to catch their words.

"Pitty brought it right away, Professor," said the elf.

"Thank you, Pitty," Snape said.

Several moments of silence followed. She donned jeans and assumed both Snape and Pitty had left the quarters, but as she searched for a top, she heard their voices again.

"I may require your assistance later," Snape said.

"Pitty would be honoured to help, sir."

"I shall call if I need you," he said. "That is all."

"But, sir, a reply was requested."

"No reply, Pitty. This demands a personal response."

"Yes, sir."

She tugged on a faded grey jumper, ignored the state of her hair completely, and sped from her room. The quarters were empty. She wondered if Lucius had disregarded Snape's warning and had sent yet another threat. As much as she dreaded the coming days, in some ways it would be a relief to hand over her altered memories. At least she would no longer jump each time someone knocked upon her door.

She shuffled into the kitchen to start the kettle but stopped short at the sight of a tray perched upon the counter. She smiled. No doubt she would be enjoying breakfast in bed right now, if not for Pitty's unexpected visit. A fresh pot of tea sat steaming beside a cup and a saucer, and beneath a silver dome she discovered eggs, sausages, and...most impressive of all...two slices of perfect, golden-brown toast.

"Show off," she whispered.

A single rose lay alongside the cutlery, its petals like the raven's wing, so dark they almost glistened. Some women...most women, perhaps...might find a black rose offensive, but she had grown rather fond of all things ebony. She smiled and plucked the blossom from the tray. Only Snape would offer such an unusual token the morning after confessing his love. Her lips brushed the flower when she brought it to her nose, and she watched, fascinated, when the colour seemed to change wherever she had touched it, swirling and flowing until all traces of darkness seemed to bleed away entirely, and she was left with a flawless, white rose.

She didn't need a mirror to know a rather daft expression had fixed itself upon her face. She didn't care. What had seemed impossible just yesterday now lifted her mood so high even the clouds of Arglist couldn't entirely block the sun.

She loved him, and he loved her.

How something so simple had proved so difficult for two smart people, she would never know. If not for the rose, she might have convinced herself it had all been a dream. But her dreams rarely ended so well. She rummaged through the cupboards for a vase, then devoured her breakfast...lunch, really, given the late hour...before beginning the tedious tasks Remy had outlined.

Several hours passed while she chronicled her memories of Arglist. She started with the final breakthrough, when they had all sipped champagne from beakers, and worked backwards through the many months of shifting hypotheses. An ugly headache had begun to claw at her eyes by the time she dropped her quill onto her notebook. Her muscles ached from sitting hunched over the journal for so long. She stretched her arms over her head and was startled by Snape's dark form filling the doorway. How long had he stood there, watching her?

"You're back," she said, the statement as obvious as her relief.

He swept into the room and set a large, leather case and several books onto the table. Before she could even read the titles, he had claimed her mouth, his lips almost desperate, and she wondered if he, too, had begun to question whether last night had been a dream. His fingers slid behind her neck. Although escape would not have occurred to her, he held her captive, demanded surrender. The instant she complied, he opened himself to her: his lips, his heart, his very soul laid bare, and she drank them all in with his kiss, greedy for more. He released her mouth just as she began to imagine a new use for the breakfast table.

"I am sorry I was gone so long," he said.

"I like the way you apologise."

He straightened, and the white rose caught his gaze.

"Thank you for breakfast," she said.

"I had planned it to be a rather more intimate affair."

"Mmm, that would have been nice," she said. "I thought I heard Pitty earlier. Did Lucius send another message?"

"No," he said, "although we cannot trust his patience to last. I spoke to Minerva, and she has consented to our imminent departure."

Despite his confidence the previous night, she was still surprised the headmistress had agreed to release both Potions professors from their duties. "How ever did you manage to convince her?"

He sat and looked positively ill. "Speech."

"Speech?" When he muttered something about the headmistress and harpies, she said, "Oh! She made you promise to speak at the anniversary event?"

"I fail to find this amusing."

She covered her smile with her hand. "You'll be brilliant," she said. "Anyone who can mesmerise a roomful of first-years cannot fail to impress."

"Somehow, I doubt anyone wants to hear a lecture on Potions."

"Well, no. But as this will mark the mysterious hero's first public appearance, I imagine everyone will be eager to listen, no matter the topic." She didn't miss the way he recoiled when she had called him a hero. "Just speak from your heart."

He gave her such an appalled look she couldn't help but laugh. She held up her hands and said, "All right, perhaps that wasn't the best suggestion. I really think you're making this more difficult than it needs to be, though."

"And I think you are enjoying my misery far too much."

She feigned offence. "Quite the opposite, I assure you. I was rather looking forward to coercing the speech from you."

"Bold girl." He pulled the leather case closer.

She plucked the topmost book from the stack and read the title aloud. "*From Admonitio to Recordatio: A Compendium of Mental Charms*" The mood changed at once.

He took the book from her hands and threw it across the table. "Pitty and I searched the entire library," he said, "but I have yet to find one bloody reference to the effects of large-scale memory removal."

"Oh." She had never removed more than a few memories at a time and hadn't considered the limits of such magic. "Perhaps it's never been attempted before."

"Perhaps," he said. "I consulted Albus, as well, for that very reason. He has never removed more than a dozen in one sitting."

She considered for a moment. "But you gave Harry more than that in the Shrieking Shack."

"Precisely!"

"So it must be safe," she reasoned.

He shook his head. "Only if we assume the fourteen years I spent at St Mungo's were due entirely to Nagini's attack."

"You don't think..."

"I don't know," he interrupted. "And that is not a position I care to be in."

"Right." She fidgeted with the hem of her jumper. Removing the memories presented enough dread without adding this extra worry. "Did Dumbledore have anything else to offer?"

"He seems to think volume shall not be an issue, that the true danger lies in how willingly the memories are given, not in the number removed." He didn't seem convinced.

"You don't believe him?" she asked.

"I believe he is willing to take risks that aren't always necessary."

She had to agree. Still, there didn't appear to be much choice. "I'm sure it will be fine."

He pushed the hair from his brow and nodded. "I have grown rather fond of your mind, despite the occasional bit of folly it generates."

"Flatterer."

"Therefore, I think it wise that we should pause frequently," he said. "I have devised a series of tests to ensure your faculties remain sharp."

She laughed. "No tests, Professor...I haven't studied!"

"If at any time you begin to feel uncomfortable in any way, simply tell me, and we shall cease at once."

"I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you weren't being so serious."

He reached across the table and took both of her hands in his. "Hermione, I ... I realise how upsetting this will be for you, and if I could find a way to spare you the pain, I would. If there were any other options ..." His frown fell from her face to her journal, where she had filled page after page with memories to be removed.

She squeezed his hands. "I know." She, too, had searched in vain for some alternate method of stopping Lucius.

He shook his head. "I fear our time has almost expired," he said. "I must take every possible step to ensure no harm befalls you."

"I'll be fine." She couldn't remember a time when she'd seen him so apprehensive. "I trust you."

He closed his eyes and lowered his head to their clasped hands. His lips brushed across her knuckles.

It was still difficult to imagine the situation as anyone's problem but her own. She was as grateful for his help as she was touched by his concern. Just months ago, she had been desperate to hide the secret from him...she had never expected he'd become her ally when the nightmare refused to die.

She waited until he straightened, then spoke with far more enthusiasm than she felt. "The sooner we begin, the sooner we can trade Scotland's wild shores for the beaches of Mexico."

He nodded and opened the leather case. Inside were hundreds of empty glass phials, just waiting for her memories. Acid rose to the back of her throat. She drew a deep breath and remembered what Dumbledore had said about the memories being given willingly.

This was not going to be easy.

The first hour was unpleasant but not painful. Her head began to ache during the second hour, and by the third, nausea joined the party. True to his word, Snape interrupted her periodically and presented a variety of questions...from Arithmancy equations to naming the ingredients of complex potions. Aside from the vice twisting her head and a shaky stomach, she appeared to suffer no lasting effects from the mass memory removal.

They paused for dinner, and although she had no appetite, she managed a bit of soup under Snape's watchful gaze. She tapped her quill against her notebook and frowned. Despite their progress, more than half the entries still remained. She wasn't sure how much longer she'd be able to continue, but she touched her wand to her temple and forged ahead.

Midnight came and passed while she continued down the long list of memories. It soon became difficult to think past the throbbing in her head, much less convince herself she *wanted* to proceed. Each memory took longer to remove than the previous, a fact that did not escape Snape's notice.

"I believe you have reached your limit," he said. "We can finish this tomorrow."

"No," she protested instantly. "I'd rather just have it over and done with." There was no way she could stomach another day of feeling this way. She glanced at her list and ordered the words to stop swimming before her eyes. Nearly three-fourths of the memories had been marked through...surely it made more sense to simply complete the job now.

"You are obviously too proud or too stubborn to admit when you are in pain."

"I'm fine." She stifled a yawn with her hand. "Just a wee bit tired, that's all. Perhaps some tea ..."

She could almost feel him frowning at her back when she moved to the stove. She kept her expression neutral, despite the invisible force squeezing her skull. By the time she returned with her cup, she felt well enough to pluck her wand from the table and start on the next memory. His fingers circled her wrist before she could touch her head.

"No more," he said. "I must insist we stop now."

"And I must insist we continue."

"This is not the time for bravery."

She leaned across the table and grabbed his chin in her fingers. "Oh, you think you know me so well," she said and pressed her lips to his.

"I shall not be distracted by a kiss."

She shrugged. "And I shall not be dissuaded. Come, Severus...a tropical paradise awaits us in Mexico. I long to see the Gulf and listen to marimba." Somehow, the reality of what lay before them seemed less intimidating when she pretended they were simply leaving on holiday.

He studied her for several moments, all scowls and frowns, but her smile did not falter. At last, he said, "You will stop the instant it becomes painful, yes?"

"Probably not."

"Hermione!"

"I'm teasing you," she said. "Of course I will stop if it hurts too much. I'm no fan of pain."

His scowl deepened, but after a moment he released her wrist and said, "Very well." He tilted his head to read the next entry in her journal, then labelled an empty glass phial.

Time became an arbitrary thing, irrelevant to her progress. One by one, she made her way through the list of memories until her stomach threatened to return the soup and her head screamed in protest. She tried not to flinch at the sight of her wand, but each memory had become barbed and jagged and seemed to tear at her brain on its way out. Despite her reassurance to Snape, she had simply dealt with the pain and had not stopped until the last memory had been wrested from her mind. Under any other circumstances, the thick line she drew through her last journal entry would have left her feeling accomplished and proud. She hadn't the enthusiasm for either. Her vision blurred, so she turned from the page and focused on Snape.

He tucked the last phial into the case and snapped it closed. The noise made her wince.

"We should have stopped hours ago," he said.

"It's just a headache...I'll feel better once I sleep."

He removed a delicate green bottle from his robes and slid it across the table. "This should help."

"Headache tonic?"

He hesitated. "No, this is closer to the potion I gave you after our night at the Three Broomsticks."

"Brilliant." She took a small sip

He shook his head. "Drink it all."

She did as instructed and despite her pain, she couldn't help but try to identify the ingredients. The bitterness had to come from either asphodel or sneezewort. She thought she recognised wormwood, and indeed, her nausea seemed to fade. Perhaps valerian root, as well?

Asphodel, wormwood, valerian roots ...

She frowned. Three of the main ingredients in the Draught of Living Death.

The room spun. She tried to speak, tried to open her mouth, but her movements were sluggish. No words came, and even her thoughts seemed to fade. The air was too heavy to breathe, too thick to swim through. She sank beneath the waves where sound became muffled and distant.

She would have slid from her chair if Snape had not scooped her into his arms. He carried her into her bedroom, eased her onto the bed, and tucked the blanket around her limp body. She heard his voice from far away, as if he spoke to someone in the outer rooms. Then his face loomed above her, and she fought for lucidity.

No! The word echoed through her mind, but the fog made it impossible to voice.

He leaned forward, and his lips brushed against her ear. "You cannot despise me more than I despise myself right now," he said. "Perhaps someday you will understand why it was better this way."

He pressed a kiss to her temple, whispered softly into her ear, "Remember the mare."

Then he stood and addressed someone in the room. "I leave her to you."

Consciousness slipped away before she could hear their reply.

My thanks to Karelia and Little_Beloved (the birthday girl!) for their beta of this chapter! Much appreciation to Melenka for alpha-reader tips, as well.

I am on holiday in the wilds of Pennsylvania Amish country but shall return to civilisation (and cell phone signals and satellite internet that does not cut out every time the wind blows) soon. Only four more chapters (and the epilogue) remain. Many thanks to anyone who was kind enough to leave a review...I derive so much pleasure from reading them, and I look forward to answering them soon!

Twenty-two for Denial

Chapter 29 of 33

Hermione awakens.

Chapter 29: Twenty-two for Denial

Sound penetrated the layers of sleep first. Sharp, piercing noises like nails on chalkboard or cutlery scraped across a plate, the pitch so high she thought her ears might bleed.

So this was to be her torture. A melody so shrill she would be driven mad, promise anything to escape it. Her captors would be disappointed. She would not break so easily.

She lifted her eyelids slowly. Her bedroom was dim, yet a thousand needles pricked her eyes. The fireplace provided the only light, and standing before it, silhouetted by flames, stood the source of the noise. A singular creature, no larger than a child's doll. It stared into the fire and raised its fragile arms. The flames leapt at its command, an orchestra of fire that danced and twirled, conducted in perfect time to the wail of its screeching song.

She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them again.

"Pitty," she croaked. Merciful silence filled the room.

The little elf jumped onto her bed, as graceful as a cat but with far less heft. She crept to the pillow and peered at Hermione, her eyes almost fearful.

"Pitty is sorry she woke you, miss."

"Is ... is anyone else here?"

"No, miss," she said. "Professor Snape left hours ago, and Pitty is to stay here until he returns."

"He's not coming back." Fear coiled around her throat, disjointed images from their last moments together. Before he had drugged her, stolen her memories. She closed her eyes. In some perverse sense, she supposed they were even now. Only *his* memories hadn't contained the secret to Muggle-born annihilation.

She struggled to pull herself upright. Fresh pain sliced through her head, made worse by the sight of Pitty hopping up and down atop the bedcovers.

"No, miss," trilled the elf. "Professor Snape said you must rest."

She swung her legs onto the floor and cradled her head in her hands. Even with her eyes closed, the room refused to hold still. It was impossible to determine how long the effects of the Draught of Living Death would last...she'd have to calculate the size of the dose in relation to her weight first, and the drumbeat in her head made even the simplest of equations daunting. Taking a different potion was out, as well. A variety of ingredients might counteract her symptoms, but without knowing the exact formula of Snape's potion, she might risk even worse complications.

"I need the toilet, Pitty." It was not strictly a lie. She needed a plan, as well. Perhaps a bit of walking would speed the potion from her system, would wake her sluggish brain.

The elf waved her hand over Hermione's abdomen and instantly, the need to relieve herself disappeared.

"Now you must rest, miss," Pitty said.

"I've rested enough," she said. "Professor Snape took something of mine, and I need to get it back."

A small green bottle materialised in the elf's hands.

"Pitty, no..."

"Pitty is sorry, miss. But Professor Snape gave Pitty a very important task. Pitty must take care of you, miss, and see to all your needs, and make sure you stay safe."

She shook her head and regretted it. Leave it to Snape to find the one house-elf in all of Hogwarts who not only tolerated her presence, but seemed to care for her with an almost fanatical devotion. Why had he even bothered? Unless ...

She frowned and held up her hand, stalled the bottle's path to her lips.

"Pitty, what, precisely, did Professor Snape tell you?"

"Professor Snape said you would sleep for a very long time, miss. But should you wake up, Pitty is to give you this potion to keep you safe. Professor Snape will return soon, after he attends to his very important business matter."

Her thoughts began to focus, sharpen. Behaviour that had seemed merely odd the day before was examined with new clarity. Something had happened after he'd left the quarters yesterday morning...something dire. All the signs had been there. He'd been worried, certain their time had run out. He'd wanted to spare her pain, but he'd been convinced there were no other options. Convinced it was better this way.

Remember the mare, he had said. The image of his new Patronus raced through her mind, followed by a streak of rage so hot beads of perspiration dotted her brow.

Whatever had happened, he had dismissed her as a hindrance, had left her behind and kept her in the dark...literally...by drugging her with a potion so she'd be unable to follow him.

She had thought her headache bad before, but now it pounded with each beat of her pulse. "Of all the convoluted, save-the-damsel, macho, grandstanding bollocks!" She pummelled the bed to punctuate her anger.

Pitty took two small steps back, her eyes as large as saucers.

"What makes him think he has any right to act without me?" she snapped.

Pitty shook her head.

"And with my sodding memories, no less! Do I look helpless? Incompetent?"

"No, miss."

"Oh, Pitty, when I finish with him, he shall wish for another fourteen years of snake-induced coma."

"Yes, miss."

"Where's my wand?" She glanced at the nightstand. "The kitchen!"

Pitty ran from the room and returned seconds later, clutching her wand.

She supposed she should take a few minutes to formulate some sort of a plan. But he had left hours ago. What was taking so long? What if his plan...whatever the hell it was...had gone horribly wrong and Lucius had...

"Pitty, can you staff-trace Professor Snape and tell me where he is?"

"Yes, miss." She hesitated. "But Professor Snape said..."

"Professor Snape told you to take care of me, Pitty ... to look after my needs. I *need* you to tell me where he is."

The elf rocked back on her heels, clearly distraught, but then disappeared with a little pop.

Hermione staggered to the chest of drawers and traded her too-warm jumper for a plain white tee shirt. The effort left her dizzy, and although her stomach was quite empty, she heaved into her rubbish bin until her head felt as if it might split apart.

Her hand shook when she swiped it across her mouth. Across the room, Pitty stood just inside the doorway and wrung her tiny, elfin hands like dishrags.

"Did you find him?" she asked.

"Yes, miss. Professor Snape is in the same room where he was last time."

"And the blond man? Was he there again, as well?"

"Yes, miss."

She stood on legs made from rubber and stuck her wand into the back pocket of her jeans. "I need you to take me there, Pitty."

"Miss, you are not well," the elf protested. "You must stay here." The small green bottle appeared once more.

"I'm fine, Pitty. I know Professor Snape asked you to care for me, but there is far more at risk here than my safety."

"But Pitty must..."

"Haven't I been a good friend to you?"

Tears sprung to the elf's eyes.

She hated to play this card, but every second they delayed brought new, horrible scenarios to mind. She had to know what was happening at Arglist. "I need a friend now, Pitty. Desperately."

Pitty's little face crumpled. Her sobs filled the air with a noise far worse than her song, a shriek that would have made a banshee cover her ears.

"Help me, Pitty." She stretched out her hand. "Please."

"All right, miss," she cried at last.

She sighed her relief. Before the elf could take her finger, she asked, "Can you Apparate us into the building and allow me to navigate from there?" Her last escape from Arglist had been too close for comfort. Best to avoid the lab for now.

"Yes, miss."

"Excellent. Just squeeze my finger as soon as we're inside, okay?"

Pity nodded and wrapped her tiny hand around Hermione's finger.

She was prepared for the spinning, but not for the pressure that crushed against her skull. Pitty squeezed her finger, and she pushed aside the pain long enough to focus on her destination: Lucius's office, far enough from the lab so she'd have time to consider her next move.

Her feet were planted firmly on the thick carpet, yet the walls still spun around her. The room was unchanged from her last visit: the oversized wooden desk in the middle, the lord-of-the-manor furnishings, the purloined Vermeer on the wall.

"Thank you, Pitty." She pulled her finger from the elf's tight grip. "I shall return to Hogwarts soon."

Pitty nodded and vanished without a sound.

She walked to the painting and wondered if the Ministry couldn't at least arrest Lucius for possession of stolen artwork. The crime carried a stiff penalty in the Muggle world, surely there was something...

She whirled when a door opened behind her, fumbled for the wand in her back pocket. But she was too late.

"*Expelliarmus! Stupefy!*"

The curses shot across the office, almost too rapid for one man to have cast them both. Her wand tore from her fingers and sailed across the room. She tried to follow it, her hand reaching for the impossible, but the powerful stunning spell propelled her back. She slammed into the wall with enough force to rattle her teeth. Her neck snapped forward, then back. The sickening thump of her head against the wall made her gag. In cartoonish slow motion, she slid to the floor.

A swirl of black robes filled her vision, the hem of perfectly tailored trousers above custom, dragonskin boots. If she could have moved, she might have gathered the bile that had pooled in her mouth and spit on them. She cursed her carelessness, cursed Snape for drugging her, and cursed the potion for making her so weak she couldn't throw off the effects of one simple stunner. But mostly, she cursed Lucius and the cruel smile that spread across his face when he crouched before her.

"Well, well. What have we here?" Rough fingers grabbed her chin and tilted her head back until she was forced to meet his eyes. "*Rennervate*," he whispered.

She jerked her chin from his grasp, but his wand stabbed into her cheek and pinned her face against the wall.

"I have a rather special punishment for trespassers," he said. "On your feet."

He stood, and she attempted the same. He licked his lips when she couldn't quite disguise how much effort it took to find her legs. "You must be exhausted, my dear. All those memories you removed, just for me ..."

She said nothing, just turned her head, as if disgusted. It wasn't an act, and it allowed her time to search for her wand. She spotted it at last, next to the open door. *Perfect*. If she could just cross the distance, distract him somehow ...

She held her breath. *Accio wand*, she thought. It might have twitched, but she'd need it to do a lot more than that if she had any hope of escape. Nonverbal spells were obviously pointless. Not only had her silent summoning failed, the spell had consumed energy she could scarcely afford to waste.

She flinched when cold fingers wrapped around her arm. Her attempts to pull free did nothing...balance eluded her, and she stumbled as if drunk.

"You obviously need to rest." He gestured towards his desk. "Have a seat."

"I'll pass, thanks." She would not repeat the mistake she had made in April.

"It wasn't a request," he said, and her stomach sank. "I want you to sit on my desk, just as you did the last time you were here."

"And I want you to go to Hell."

His laughter was cold, frozen by madness. She should have held her tongue.

In a pleasant tone, almost conversational, he said, "*Crucio*."

Pain unlike any she had felt in fifteen years ripped through her, twisting and turning while a thousand razor-sharp teeth tried to tear her flesh from her bones. Her knees buckled, and she sank to the floor. He ended the spell within seconds, but she was left panting for breath in the last position she ever wanted to be: on her hands and knees, at his feet.

"Groveling already?" He grabbed a fistful of her hair and dragged her upright. She hated to grant him any satisfaction, yet she could not stifle her cry.

He jerked her back against him. With his hand still coiled in her hair, he pulled her head back, farther than her neck could comfortably stretch. Warm lips brushed her ear. She tried to twist her body away, tried to claw at his hands and pry open his fingers. He clamped an arm around her stomach and tugged her back again. Struggle seemed pointless, but the alternative could not be borne. He held her tighter and laughed, then slid his tongue inside her ear. Each stroke of moist heat turned her stomach, and she doubled her efforts to break free. Her fingernails dug a trench along his hand just as he drew her earlobe into his mouth and sucked on it. Triumph did not last, could not match the revenge he exacted when he bit down hard. The delicate flesh tore. Her eyes watered and although she stilled at once, she refused to cry out this time.

He pulled his lips away and panted into her ear, each breath like the roar of a hurricane. The hand in her hair loosened enough for her to see the long red trail he left on her shoulder after he wiped his mouth on her shirt.

"Shall we try again?" he said. "My desk. Now." He released her hair and shoved her into the centre of the room.

She stumbled towards the desk, her gaze locked on her wand. She wasn't likely to get another chance at it. She surged towards the door. Fear propelled her, gave her more speed than she would have thought possible. Just a few more steps, and she'd taste freedom.

"*Accio wand!*" she shouted as she neared the door.

The wand jumped off the floor and flew towards her. She reached her hand into the air, but something was wrong...the arc was too high. The wood streaked over her head. Even as she leapt for it, she saw the door slam shut before her. By the time she spun around, Lucius had snatched her wand from the air. She watched him tuck it inside his breast pocket and swallowed bitter defeat.

When he lifted his gaze, the look in his eyes made her knees shake.

She braced for the worst.

"*Imperio.*"

The throbbing in her head stopped, and sweet, glorious oblivion took over. Fear vanished. There was just happiness and a sly little voice to guide her movements. She strolled to the desk and wanted nothing more than to perch upon its edge.

It was like floating atop the waves without a care in the world, like the peace she'd felt at Snape's strange, healing song.

Snape.

The voice quickly chased the thought from her mind. She spread her legs into a wide vee, but the hands that skimmed her thighs were all wrong, the hips that ground against her too cruel. Sharp teeth bruised her neck, and she knew other lips should be kissing her.

Her own small voice raised its timid hand at last and asked why she would allow Lucius to touch her this way. The carefree feeling began to fade, although the sly voice grew louder, more demanding. She ignored it at last, pushed it aside in favour of grim acknowledgement. With cognition came the return of sensation, the return of that tribute to agony masquerading as her head. She yelled aloud when pain and frustration surged through her body.

He raised his head and seemed unconcerned with her fists beating against his chest. "That didn't last long," he said. "But no matter...I prefer my fillies with a bit of spirit. Makes it so much more rewarding to watch them break."

Her thoughts flew to Snape and his mare. Determination returned. She had to find a way out of this...it couldn't be as hopeless as it felt. She wouldn't allow it to be.

Her attempts to shove him away were met with the same annoyance he might show a pesky fly. He batted her hands aside, then pinned her wrists to the desk above her head.

His free hand snaked beneath her shirt and pulled aside her bra. "Do you have any idea how often I've imagined you on this desk, naked beneath me, screaming for mercy while I took you again and again?"

He smiled when her body trembled.

"It can't be near as often as I've imagined you in Azkaban, rotting in darkness, screaming for a Dementor's Kiss," she said.

His response was swift. He wrapped his fingers around her throat while the hand beneath her shirt assaulted her breast. She would have yelped if she could have breathed.

This is bad, this is bad, this is bad.

His fingers squeezed harder until darkness coloured the edges of her vision. The thought of what he might do to her if she lost consciousness gave her sudden clarity.

She had to have her wand. And there was only one place to get it.

"Please." She had no voice, so she mouthed the word and tried to pull his fingers from her throat.

He eased his grip enough to allow speech.

"Please," she whispered, her voice like gravel. "I'll do whatever you want."

"Yes," he said, "yes, you will." His hand slid from her throat and down her chest.

She closed her eyes and cleared her mind of everything except the small pocket where he had stashed her wand. The desk became her stage. She'd prefer torture to the entertainment this audience demanded, but she slipped into her role as if her life depended on it. And perhaps it did.

She slid her arms up his chest, careful to avoid the wand for now, and circled his neck. He was easier to fool than she would have thought. He met her lips without hesitation, biting her tongue in his haste to plunge inside her mouth. If he guessed her shudder was filled with revulsion, not desire, he did not seem to care.

Her fingers slipped beneath his robes, that much closer to her goal. She panicked when he stilled, but he raised his head and swept the contents of his desk onto the floor, then shoved her into the centre and clambered between her legs. He pushed up her shirt, and she arched her back, hoping to distract him. It worked.

Her little finger hooked the satin-lined pocket, and she plunged her hand inside. The wand was halfway removed before he realised what she had done. His roar of rage convinced her to act swiftly and make it count. They fought for control of the wand. She wrapped both her hands around the cold wood...one at the top, one at the bottom...and held on tighter than she'd ever held on to anything in her life. Lucius clutched the shaft between her hands. She tried to wrench it away and prayed it wouldn't snap.

He rose to his knees and jerked the wand from side to side, using his greater leverage to slide her back and forth across his desk. Her hands grew slick with sweat, but still she held fast.

He angled the wand towards her face and shouted, "*Stupefy!*"

She ducked without a moment to spare. His spell blasted a hole in the desk and showered her face with splintered wood. She doubted she'd be so lucky a second time. With a mighty effort, she twisted her body and pulled the wand to one side, as hard as she dared.

Her momentum was impressive. Lucius followed the wand's path over the side of the desk but did not ease his grip, even when he dropped to the floor. Nothing could have made her release the wand, so she had little choice but to follow him. She tumbled onto his chest, her fall braced by his body. Despite the scuffle, her fingers still clutched the slippery wood. She scrambled to her feet and pulled her wand with all her might. But Lucius rose to his feet, as well, and the tug-o-war continued.

It ended as quickly as it had started.

If she hadn't been so focused on wresting the wand from his hands, she might have wondered why he'd released the prize so suddenly. But her heart sang with triumph, and a spell sprang to her lips. She never saw his fist until it slammed into her temple.

The world went black.

She wasn't sure how long she stayed in the endless void of her unconsciousness. When she opened her eyes, colour had returned. She wished it hadn't. The walls oozed an unnaturally bright shade of yellow. She lay in a heap on the floor, but the plush carpet looked different now, stained with a fluorescence that burned her eyes and squeezed her stomach. Her head felt hot, as if a fire had ignited where fist had met skull. Heat pulsed across her face.

Over the buzz of a thousand angry bees, she heard Lucius whisper a spell, felt her arms pulled behind her, wrists bound at the touch of his wand. He hauled her to her feet and shoved her facedown onto his desk. Just when she thought things couldn't get any worse...when her brain froze at the words he whispered into her ear, the promise of things he would do to her...just when her darkest of nights couldn't get any darker, darkness itself spoke from the doorway.

"How long does it take to fetch a bloody drink?" asked Snape.

Thank you for all the wonderful reviews...I cannot express how much I appreciate feedback on this story. Three chapters (and a hefty epilogue) remain, and I can barely contain my excitement! My thanks, as always, to Karelia and Little Beloved for their beta assistance, and to Melenka for alpha-reading suggestions.

Twenty-three for Pain

Chapter 30 of 33

The final visit to the Arglist laboratory.

Chapter 30: Twenty-three for Pain

Lucius straightened and pulled Hermione from the desk. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said to Snape. "I came for a drink but stayed for the show."

"I trust you have finished here, and we may return to the business at hand?"

"Almost," he said. "You're just in time for the grand finale."

"You must know I have never shared your affinity for melodrama."

"Ah, but this is the best part," he said, "wherein our tragic heroine discovers the ultimate betrayal at the hands of her lover."

"Severus?" she whispered.

For the first time since he'd entered the office, he looked at her...really looked at her...and she trembled at what she found in his eyes.

It's an act. She told herself he was playing a part, just as she had when she'd tried to steal her wand. He was simply a much finer actor than she.

"Tell her what you've done, Severus," Lucius said. "Show the clever girl how wisely she bestowed her love."

"Very well." He crossed the room, and she searched his face for something...concern, regret, disappointment...anything beyond the cold disgust.

He stood before her, lips peeled back from his teeth. "You have caused me nothing but misery since the first day you entered my life."

"No." She blinked away the tears that sprung to her eyes. A jagged blade ripped through her skull.

"Did you honestly think I had grown to care for you?" His eyes burned into her, held her captive.

She couldn't look away, and although she hadn't summoned it, the silver mare pranced through her mind.

"I would rather a lifetime of abstinence than have you sully my bed any longer," he said.

"Severus, please," she begged, "don't do this."

Somewhere behind her, Lucius clapped his hands together. She hardly heard. Memories flew through her mind, snapshots from their time together, random images that hit her so fast she felt dizzy. She heard herself speak of love beneath the horse chestnut tree, saw herself cradle the book she'd received from her study group, felt his arms wound tightly around her as they fell asleep each night, limbs entwined.

"Your heritage, while repulsive, is but one of your many objectionable facets," he said. "Even without your inferior breeding, your personality renders you intolerable."

The scenes that bounced through her mind were so wholly at odds with everything he said that each memory brought more pain than the last until she was certain her head would burst apart.

"Your very presence is a disgrace to the world of magic," he said. "You are unworthy to call yourself a witch. Your skills are mediocre, your intelligence average, and I shall be relieved to rid myself of you."

Again, the silver mare appeared in her mind, and she relived the first moment she had seen it. She felt his lips, heard the words of love he'd hissed into her ear. She could no more escape the pain than she could stop the tears streaking down her face.

He whirled away, and the dagger was pulled from her head.

She tasted blood a second before she felt warmth trickle into her nose. Another second passed before comprehension dawned. The sudden, sharp pain, the parade of memories, the nosebleed: it all made sense now. She had never imagined any scenario in which she would welcome Legilimency, yet now she nearly staggered from relief. He had forced the images into her mind, had forced her to recall their most intimate moments...not to underscore her pain, but to give her something to cling to beyond the horrible words he had been forced to speak.

Lucius tugged on her hair, pulled her head back until she stared at the ceiling. "Don't even think about spilling your filthy blood on this rug." He flicked his wand at her face. Her nostrils clogged, and the skin inside her nose dried so fast she felt it crack.

"Now may we proceed?" asked Snape.

"Of course," Lucius said. He slid his arm through Hermione's and marched her towards the door.

"Perhaps you should leave her here, lest you become distracted again," Snape said.

"That won't be necessary." He patted her arm. "I find myself just as eager to conclude our business as you."

Snape shrugged and left the office ahead of them. Her eyes stayed on his back for the duration of their journey to the laboratory. He obviously had a plan, but how badly had her arrival impacted it?

She spotted the familiar leather case first, sitting empty atop one of the long, stainless steel worktables. Dozens of phials stood in racks next to the case. Across the lab, an ornate Pensieve waited beside more racks and phials. She felt Lucius's eyes on her, heard his breathing quicken, as if he awaited her outrage.

She thought it best to satisfy him. "No," she moaned. When Snape turned, she glared at him and said, "How could you, Severus? Why?"

Lucius took her to the far table and pushed her onto a stool behind the Pensieve. "He has one hundred million reasons, my dear. But we haven't time to count Galleons...we must examine the remainder of your precious memories."

Snape brought a rack of phials from beside the leather case. She watched a memory swirl into the Pensieve and waited for Lucius to be lost inside it before she spoke to Snape. His eyes widened the moment she opened her mouth, and after an almost imperceptible shake of his head, he returned to the table across the lab. She pursed her lips and vowed to remain silent.

Lucius rose from the Pensieve and smiled at her. "How does it feel to be a dying breed?"

"Return my wand, and I'll show you."

He abandoned the Pensieve and moved around the table. "Say please," he whispered, his face so close she felt his breath.

"Please."

"I didn't hear you," he said. "Say it louder."

She shook her head.

He removed her wand and held it before her, his eyebrows lifted as if in question.

"Please," she said.

His lips lifted. "Again."

She closed her eyes and wondered why she had bothered. "No."

The wand touched her forehead. "You know you want it," he whispered, his tone as suggestive as a lover's. He moved the smooth, wooden tip down her nose, then traced it around her lips. "Ask me nicely, and I just ... might ... give it to you."

Snape interrupted the response that sprang to her mouth. "Is this how you refrain from distraction?"

Lucius merely chuckled.

"I'm curious," said Snape. "Once you isolate the gene responsible for creating Muggle-borns, how will you remove it?"

"With something called gene therapy," he answered. "I don't pretend to understand it, but I'd wager our little interloper here does." He jabbed his wand into her arm.

"I'm not a geneticist," she said.

"And I am not a patient man." The tip of his wand glowed red-hot.

The information was readily available, so she cleared her throat and spoke before he could dream up new ways to hurt her. "Gene therapy is the process wherein healthy genes are used to replace non-functioning or mutant genes."

"You see that?" said Lucius. "We always knew Mudbloods were an aberration of nature, and now science has confirmed it...they come from mutant genes."

"How does it work?" Snape asked before she could object to Lucius's assessment.

She took a deep breath. "The technology is still in its infancy, but the most common delivery method is viral vector, where a virus is re-engineered to remove its harmful aspects and the gene of choice is added."

"Five points to Gryffindor," Snape said. "Continue."

She felt certain he knew all this already, but she elaborated anyway. "A virus transports its complete gene sequence...its genome...into cells when it attacks. By adding a gene to the structure of the virus, the new gene will be incorporated into the host cell for the life span of that cell. Depending on the type of virus used, if the host cell later divides, its descendants will also contain the new gene."

"We shall vaccinate all Muggles with the proper genes and ensure the end of Mudbloods forever," Lucius said.

"You can't use gene therapy for that," she protested. "It's much too dangerous. Even in small, controlled studies, there have been cases of cancer, autoimmune disease...even death...attributed to gene therapy. It cannot be deployed across a mass spectrum of the population, as you propose. The biology of each Muggle is far too unique to make it safe."

"If their biology is too weak to survive, then the world is better off without them," Lucius said. "Every Muggle shall receive this gene therapy...the benefit is the same whether they live or die."

"No!" she said. "You cannot..."

"Every Muggle in the world?" interrupted Snape. "That seems ambitious, even for you."

"Impressive, yes?" he said. "I have worked hard to ensure the supply chain is controlled by Malfoy Industries and its subsidiaries, with the aid of Disillusionment charms and a few well-placed Imperius curses, of course."

Hermione shook her head and searched for anything to contradict the madness. "Muggles vaccinate for a reason, though," she said. "Unless you introduce a new disease, you'll never convince them they need another vaccine."

"I won't have to," he countered, "thanks to our old friend, the Disillusionment charm. In Africa, my vaccine shall masquerade as the shot for yellow fever. In India, they'll believe it prevents polio. And so on and so forth across the globe."

"Let us hope you can execute as well as you boast," Snape said. "I shall remain sceptical until I see proof."

"What further proof do you require?" said Lucius. "We've been altering vaccines for years; one need only review some of the scandals reported upon by Muggle newspapers to see our handiwork. The parents blame the doctors, and the doctors, in turn, blame the manufacturer. In the end, they determine a bad batch of vaccines caused the mass side effects, and the best part is they're absolutely right. They just have no idea why."

Hermione thought of the needless pain inflicted upon so many unsuspecting families. What other atrocities had he committed in his madness?

"What have you done?" she whispered.

"What a little hypocrite you are!" Lucius said. "Would you have me believe you never infected animals in the course of your scientific experiments?"

"Of course I did." It had been the least favourite part of her job. "There is often a point when animal testing becomes necessary."

He shrugged as if she'd answered her own question.

"But you weren't infecting animals."

"Was I not?"

"They were humans," she cried. "Innocent children!" Her body shook with rage.

"They were Muggles." His lip curled as if he found the very word unpleasant. "Vile creatures, breeding out of control like a pack of filthy rats, remarkable only for how utterly unremarkable they are. They fill the air with their stench and destroy everything they touch. How could anyone regret the loss of such a nuisance? I've done the world a favour by eliminating so many. They are nothing but a pestilence. Worse than the cockroach, but with one small difference."

She shook her head. She didn't want to know.

He smiled. "It's much harder to kill cockroaches."

Whatever evils she had thought him capable of before seemed to pale when compared to the horror of this reality. Shock numbed her. She closed her eyes to block the sight of his face.

When the first spell shot across the lab, she heard, rather than saw, Lucius's startled response. Her eyes flew open just in time to see his wand spiral through the air and land in Snape's hand.

Lucius snatched the other wand...her wand...from the table and moved behind her stool. The air around them cracked liked thunder, and several brown-robed figures materialised behind Snape. Before she could identify them as friend or foe, they turned in unison and pointed their wands at her. Snape's hand sliced through the air, and her wand flew from Lucius's grasp.

She had no time for relief. Spells shot across the room, and Lucius pulled her to his chest...a human shield.

"Mind the girl!" Snape shouted above the noise of breaking glass and rebounding spells.

He needn't have bothered, as Lucius dived to the floor and pulled her with him. With her wrists still bound, she was unable to brace her fall and cried out when her already-tender head struck hard tile.

"Stay where you are unless you wish her dead!" Lucius shouted.

Curses ricocheted through the lab. Hundreds of phials exploded overhead and showered them with glass and potions. Hermione scrambled to her knees...slipping and sliding without the use of her hands...and tucked her chin to her chest. She watched her memories drip from the table and pool onto the floor beside her knees. Lucius watched them as well, his eyes glazed with madness. She used the distraction to edge away from him, but he grabbed her arm and yanked her back against his chest, crouching over her as they huddled behind the table.

"Halt!" shouted a strong voice. All spells ceased.

Hermione frowned. The voice seemed familiar.

"Mr Malfoy, this is Gregor Ustinov. Show yourself, sir."

Lucius tightened his grip and pinned her to his chest, his breaths loud in her ear. Knowing how close his face was, she jerked her head back as hard as she could. She prayed the sickening crunch she heard was his nose breaking, rather than her skull.

"Bitch," he hissed, his voice distinctly nasal. He punched his fist into her back. Her cry was quickly followed by the sound of a scuffle across the lab.

"Gregor..." Snape's voice held more than a warning.

"Delay is pointless, Mr Malfoy," said Ustinov. "You are surrounded. Do not make this any harder on yourself."

"Up," Lucius whispered and urged her to straighten. She lifted her head slowly, certain she'd be hit by a multitude of spells the instant she cleared the table. Lucius knelt

behind her, hidden by her body. He pushed her higher, ostensibly using her to block the Aurors' view of him. She stared across the lab and counted nine wands, all trained on her head.

Lucius snatched something from the floor, then circled his arms around her waist and her chest. He pulled her to her feet, and as they rose his intentions became all too clear. The shard of glass he had found felt sharper than any blade of steel...so sharp she didn't dare swallow when he pressed it against her throat.

All eyes watched his hand upon her neck.

"Lower your wands," he said.

No one moved.

The pressure increased. His wrist jerked, and warmth poured onto her shirt.

"All right, lads," Ustinov said and tucked his wand inside his robe. "Lower them."

The Aurors slowly pointed their wands at the floor.

"And you, Severus," Lucius said.

Snape hesitated, and again the shard moved. She tried to angle herself away from the glass, but it was impossible...Lucius might have been glued to her for all the room she had to manoeuvre. Snape's wand dropped to his side, but not before another trail of blood ran down her throat.

"Be reasonable, Mr Malfoy," Ustinov urged. He held up his empty hands and stepped closer. "Failure to surrender will not help at your trial."

"Nor will killing a hostage." The hand against her throat pressed so hard she could scarcely breathe. "Stand down, Gregor, or her death will be on your hands."

Ustinov froze. From the corner of her eye she saw Snape shift forward, a black ship amidst the sea of brown Auror robes. He looked murderous, but his movements were subtle. Lucius didn't appear to notice his approach, his attention still held by the Minister.

"Just release her, Mr Malfoy, and we shall negotiate the terms of your surrender," Ustinov said.

"And concede defeat?" he asked. "Never."

Although her position was arguably the worst it had been thus far, she felt less afraid than at any other point in the evening. The Minister now had all the proof he would ever need to send Lucius away. They were surrounded by Aurors, clearly outnumbered. Escape was futile.

Lucius turned slightly and spotted Snape. "Once a traitor, always a traitor," he spat.

"Let her go," Snape said. "She means nothing to you."

He snorted. "Nothing but a means to an end, now. She obviously meant the same to you."

They walked backwards, small, jerky steps that stabbed the glass into her neck. She couldn't understand what he hoped to accomplish. There were no doors behind them, no way he could escape. He was backing them into a corner. Unless ...

His arm wrapped tightly around her waist, just as it had when he'd used Side-Along Apparition to bring her here last. Panic choked her. She couldn't allow him to leave, couldn't allow him to take her from this room. Not when they were so close to ending the nightmare. She had to act, had to do something.

Her eyes found Snape, and she drew strength from his bleak expression. She willed the panic to change, to transform into something useful. Power sang through her limbs. Her wrists were still bound behind her, crushed between their bodies, but her fingertips tingled against his robes.

She breathed as deeply as she could and inhaled every drop of excess energy. Magic flowed across the room, into her body, and she sent it raging through her hands.

"*Relashio!*" she shouted.

A crack like gunfire split the air. The room shook. Lucius flew back while she stumbled forward and fell to her knees. Nine wands sent spells above her head. She heard Lucius crash into the wall behind her, heard his shrieks of protest echo through the lab long after they'd ceased. Her head swam with relief. She closed her eyes against a wave of dizziness that threatened to consume her.

It was over.

At long last, the nightmare was over.

The noise of the Aurors became distant, muffled. She should be jubilant, yet she could barely summon enough energy to open her eyes. A blur of black robes appeared before her. Snape. She forced herself to focus on his face, and when her vision cleared she knew something was wrong. His eyes held horror, not triumph.

She peered down at her shirt, certain it should be white. The fabric turned red before her eyes. Her shoulders fell. She'd had no choice but to risk the jagged glass slicing her throat when they split apart. The alternative would have been worse.

Keeping her eyes open proved difficult, as did kneeling. She sank to the floor, but strong arms cushioned her fall. The bindings fell from her wrists, and she summoned what little strength she had to open her eyes. Snape's face loomed above. There was so much she needed to tell him, but when she opened her mouth, words refused to form.

"Do not speak," he said.

She had never heard fear in his voice before. It didn't belong.

Bottles soared through the lab at a wave of his wand. He cradled her head and tipped the contents of a small blue tube into her mouth.

"Drink," he whispered.

She tried to obey, tried to work her throat and swallow. Her body wouldn't allow it. She choked, and the liquid spewed from her mouth. Each spluttering cough sent a wave of warmth from her neck. She barely registered the strangled cry that came from Snape. His fingers slid through the blood and pressed down hard. He Summoned more bottles and dripped unknown fluids into the wound. She felt a burning sensation, saw a puff of smoke, then everything went numb. He abandoned the bottles for his wand and hummed the same, strange song she'd first heard when he'd healed her hand so many months ago.

She closed her eyes and let the melody fill her, let peace settle into her limbs. If only his voice could chase away the cold. Her fingers had become icicles, as brittle as old bones. She didn't dare move them lest they shatter into a thousand pieces.

He stopped chanting, but it took several moments before she could force open her eyes. It took even longer to focus them. His face filled her vision, so familiar, and yet so different. She wanted to smooth the worry from his brow, to steal the torment from his eyes. He should never look so vulnerable. She tried to speak once more, but words

were wily, cunning things that taunted her with their complexity.

He placed the blue tube upon her lips again and urged her to swallow.

She held the liquid against her tongue for a moment. Then she closed her eyes and concentrated on moving it from her mouth, on working the muscles in her throat until she felt it slide lower. Victory washed over her, but she paid dearly for the effort. The simple task of breathing soon seemed monumental. Opening her eyes was out of the question. She was frozen. Exhausted. If only she could sleep for a few minutes, she was certain she'd wake up feeling refreshed and renewed.

"Do not go to sleep, Hermione." He sounded angry now. "Open your eyes."

She pouted. Surely she was allowed a small rest after everything that had happened tonight. Didn't he realise how very tired she was? If the way he shook her was any indication, he either did not know or did not care.

"Open your eyes!"

His voice had become frantic, so she thought she had best comply. But every time she tried to carry out his order, her eyelids remained stubbornly shut. It was such a simple task...she knew precisely what needed to be done, yet her body refused to follow her commands.

He shook her again, his fingers digging into her shoulders. Frantic was abandoned, and livid took its place. "Hermione, you must stay awake. Do you understand? Force yourself to stay awake. Do you hear me?"

Of course I hear you. I'm not deaf.

It was a pity he couldn't read her mind. If only they could have a nice, logical conversation, she was certain she could convince him how beneficial sleep would be.

He grabbed her chin and jerked her head from side to side.

Stop that.

"Hermione!" he shouted. "Open your eyes!" He slapped her cheeks, gently at first, but then with more force. "This was not supposed to happen," he growled. "You should not have been here...you should have slept until tomorrow!"

Perfect. I'll do that now.

His lips brushed her ear. "Why did you come here?" he asked. "Why didn't you stay at Hogwarts, you foolish, obstinate girl?"

She had no answer.

His voice cracked, and he whispered, "Don't leave me" into her ear, the plea so faint it took a moment to register.

"This cannot happen," he said. "You are far too stubborn to go without a fight."

But I'm so tired. And it's so cold.

"Hermione?"

Although her eyes had been closed for several minutes, the darkness somehow managed to grow darker. Night descended, folded her inside its crushing embrace until she could no longer fight its pull. She felt no fear, only release. Her pain vanished. Just seconds ago, she'd been so cold she wondered if she'd ever know heat again, but now she was cocooned within a safe, warm cloud.

There was nothing but light pressure when Snape's fist pounded against her chest.

"Dammit, Hermione, wake up!"

She heard him call to her from very far away.

"No! Don't do this!"

Then she heard nothing at all.

A/N: Many thanks to Karelia and Little Beloved for their beta skills, Melenka for alpha-reader suggestions, and my family for supporting me through this challenging, wibble-filled ride. It's taken 16+ months, but only two chapters and the epilogue remain. I may not meet the Halloween deadline I had set for myself, but it'll be close.

A small note to address some of the reviews I received for the last chapter: Yes, leaving Hogwarts wasn't the smartest thing to do. She took precautions (staff-trace, Apparition into an empty office), but they failed. Few people make wise choices when they are half-asleep or sick, and even fewer think straight when they are in pain or in love. I'm terribly sorry to have ruined your image of Genius!Hermione. Bygones!

Twenty-four for Dying

Chapter 31 of 33

To sleep: perchance to dream.

Chapter 31: Twenty-four for Dying

It was almost like floating, like the waves of the ocean were hers to command. The absence of sound was so complete the silence seemed filled with a noise of its own. She soared through the air, utterly weightless, free to glide among the birds.

She had always hated to fly.

Brooms, aeroplanes, Thestrals, Hippogriffs, dragons...she had tried it all. Nothing had ever pleased her as much as having her feet firmly planted upon the ground. But somehow, this was different. This took no effort. She couldn't see the ground, couldn't see anything but endless grey. Yet she had no fear for her safety. Maybe she didn't hate flying, after all...maybe it was just the thought of plunging to her death she disliked.

Hours passed while she floated through the empty mist.

Days.

Weeks.

Years, perhaps.

She could enjoy the bliss of this oblivion for an eternity if not for one little thought that nipped at her mind.

Severus Snape

The name rolled through her head, so lyrical and alliterative. She rode the waves on its sibilance alone for several moments. Then a pair of coal-black eyes appeared, angry and accusing. The comfort of peace began to fade.

Why was he angry with her? And why did thoughts of him make her feel less buoyant, as if she could no longer float across the sky?

I was supposed to stay at Hogwarts.

The thought pushed her down through the clouds, into a darker realm of grey. Surely, she had just as much reason to be angry as Snape. He had taken her memories. He had fed her a sleeping potion. He had acted without her, had crafted some plan that hadn't involved her when she'd had every right to be involved. He should have known she'd follow him. He *had* known, of course...had tried to stop her with a potion and house-elf guard. If only he had told her the Minister for Magic was somehow involved, perhaps she would have been content to stay behind.

Perhaps not.

She never would have allowed him to leave without her. Even if she had known the Aurors would be there...the Minister himself in attendance...she still would have found a way to travel to Arglist. It wasn't just the need to be involved, and it was more than a desire to protect her memories. How could she possibly stay behind while someone she loved was in danger? She'd had no choice but to follow him. Even if it had meant risking her neck. Literally.

Snape will blame himself for this. Just like Lily.

The mist became a fog, dark and blinding. She thought of the things he had said, the cruel statements meant for Lucius more than her. Each vile word he had uttered would haunt her if she left now. Their last conversation could not be filled with twisted remarks and layers of lies. She wouldn't allow it...she hadn't even had a chance to tell him why she'd followed him. He probably thought she hated him, thought she had believed his betrayal right to the very end.

He has to know the truth. I have to tell him.

Urgency filled her, made her too heavy to float. Gone was the weightless pillow that had cushioned her body. She fought against gravity, fought the darkness that pressed against her eyes. Her body tumbled through the sky, spiralled out of control. She couldn't stop spinning. The ground rushed up at her.

Too fast!

She was going to crash. There was nothing but cold, hard earth to break her fall. She had to slow her progress. The impact would kill her. She couldn't bear such pain, scrambled away from the very thought of it, but already it sliced through her. Her head pounded, throbbed. Pressure crushed her, made it impossible to see, impossible to breathe.

Help! Someone, please help me!

She plummeted through thick, black night. The ground was too close. And where had the air gone? She couldn't breathe. Giant fingers wrapped around her body, squeezed her chest until her lungs burned.

Her throat closed. Air! She had to have air. She fought for a breath, just one single breath, she just needed air.

Help me. I can't breathe. I need air.

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't...

"Breathe!" yelled Snape, and again his fist pounded against her heart.

She gasped. Her throat opened at last, and she took great, frantic breaths. Honey had never tasted so sweet as the air that filled her lungs. Fluorescent lights blinded her, haloed the dark face that had demanded her return. She found Snape's eyes and smiled.

"Hello," she whispered.

He didn't answer, just crushed her against his chest. She breathed him in, drew strength from the feel of his arms around her. Her eyes stung. She buried her face farther into his robes and wound shaky arms around his neck.

He moved so smoothly, she barely felt him lift her from the glass-strewn floor. He set her upon a stool, then stiffened when the Minister spoke.

"How is she?" Ustinov asked.

Every muscle in his body tensed. Rage seeped from his pores, scorched her skin. He released her and whirled on the Minister. "What the fuck just happened, Gregor?" he shouted.

"Now, Severus. Just calm down." Ustinov raised his hands, but Snape advanced. The Minister stumbled back from him. Two Aurors materialised at his side.

The appearance of the Aurors made her twist around and search for Lucius. She held the table and peered into the corner where he'd been blasted against the wall. His body was gone, but so were three of the Aurors. They must have already taken him to Azkaban.

Her shoulders relaxed, and her relief doubled when her hand encountered a familiar length of smooth wood. She plucked her wand from the table and watched Snape battle the Minister. The Aurors watched, as well, but they made no move to intervene. Yet.

"No one wanted Miss Granger to get hurt," Ustinov said. "She should not have been here."

"That is beside the point."

"That is entirely the point," Ustinov argued. "You were supposed to immobilise her."

"I had control over the situation."

"That isn't how it looked from my vantage."

"Then your vantage was skewed."

"I could not allow her arrival to ruin so many months of careful planning."

"Sod your careful planning!"

"I assessed the risk and took appropriate measures to..."

"Your appropriate measures nearly killed her!" He lunged forward, but before he could reach the Minister...and before the Aurors could reach him...Hermione pointed her wand and cast a full body bind on all four men.

"It's fine," she told the remaining Aurors who had rushed over to help. "Just let me speak to them."

She slid from her stool and strolled into the middle of the circle they had formed. This wasn't the return she had imagined when she'd hovered in the space between life and death. There had been so much she had wanted to tell Snape, but after witnessing his near-altercation with the Minister, questions overruled everything else.

"I'm going to release you now." She looked at each man in turn, and when she stopped at Snape, she said, "I expect everyone to behave." Then she tapped her wand against the Minister's chest and said, "And I expect many, many answers."

"Finite," she said.

They relaxed back onto their heels and were smart enough to look repentant.

Snape addressed her first. "We should get you to the hospital."

"Yes," Ustinov agreed.

"No one is going anywhere just yet," she said.

"You have lost a great deal of blood," Snape argued. "Your questions can wait until the Healers..."

"No," she interrupted. "I disagree."

He pushed his hair from his eyes. "Do not be foolish, Hermione. You almost died tonight. It is vital you go to St Mungo's at once."

"And yet, just moments ago, it was vital you attack the Minister," she said. "I believe I'm a better judge of what is and is not vital at the moment."

Behind him, Ustinov chuckled.

"Please be reasonable," Snape said.

"I've never been more reasonable in my life." She pointed her wand at him. "You can answer my questions, or St Mungo's can prepare two beds."

Ustinov's chuckle grew to a laugh. He clapped Snape on the back and said, "Oh, my, Severus. You two were made for each other."

He spun around. "Gregor, surely you can no longer deny my request."

Ustinov glanced at Hermione and appeared to consider. "We would need the Bonder."

"Then fetch the Bonder," Snape said through clenched teeth. "Miss Granger needs answers."

The Minister sighed and lifted his wand. "*Expecto patronum.*" An enormous silver crocodile swam through the room, twirled as if in a death roll, then glided through the laboratory doors.

Ustinov shoved a thick scroll of parchment at Hermione. "You can read these while we wait."

She shifted through pages of legal jargon and frowned. "A pardon?" she asked. "I don't understand."

Ustinov jerked his head at Snape. "Your friend is a highly skilled negotiator."

Snape leaned against the worktable, arms folded. He cast occasional glances at the door, as if anxious for the return of Ustinov's Patronus, but spoke when she raised her eyebrows. "In exchange for your cooperation with the case against Lucius, the Ministry has agreed to exempt you from any and all transgressions, regardless of culpability."

"I can assure you, Miss Granger," Ustinov said, "the Ministry has never granted anything like this before."

"I can well imagine." She closed the scroll and tapped it against her open palm. "You said this is the result of a negotiation, Minister." When Ustinov nodded, she turned to Snape. "What was offered in exchange for it?"

His jaw clenched, but all he said was, "Soon." He gazed at the doors once more. Within the crook of his arm, his fingers drummed a beat so impatient it looked like a frantic white spider had taken up residence.

She turned and watched the Aurors scoop her scattered memories into new phials. "Those should be destroyed," she told the Minister.

"They will be guarded at all times," he replied, "deep within the Department of Mysteries. After the trial, they will be returned. You may do whatever you wish with them at that point."

She nodded. At least Lucius would be kept far away from the memories, and she could destroy them the moment they were returned. She surveyed the laboratory and swallowed thick regret. Destroying the research the first time had done nothing but delay the inevitable. And in the interim, Lucius had ruined more lives than she had ever thought possible. Perhaps if she had trusted the Ministry five years ago, she could have prevented this. If she hadn't been so sure she was the only one who could solve the problem, perhaps she might have...

A soft pop announced the return of Ustinov's Patronus. The silver crocodile faded and Mildred Gibbons, the Minister's secretary, appeared in its stead. She wore a faded lilac dressing gown and foam rollers in her hair...she had obviously been summoned from bed.

"My goodness, dear!" she exclaimed when she spotted Hermione.

"It looks worse than it is," Hermione said. Blood was caked throughout her hair, and her shirt was stiff with it. She could only imagine what a sight she made.

"She refuses to go to the hospital," Snape told Millie, his tone accusing.

"He refuses to answer my questions," she shot back.

The Minister turned to Millie and said, "I trust you have your wand?"

Millie glanced back and forth between Snape and Ustinov, then clapped her hands together and raised her gaze to the ceiling. "Finally!" She pulled a short, ornately carved white wand from her dressing gown. "Grasp hands, please."

They did as instructed. Millie held her wand above their joined hands and nodded at the Minister.

Hermione held her breath when Ustinov spoke. "Severus Snape," he said, "did you agree to investigate the activities of Arglist Industries, Lucius Malfoy, and Hermione Granger on behalf of the Ministry of Magic?"

"I did," Snape replied.

"You have fulfilled your agreement. I release you from your vow."

Beneath Millie's wand, a rope of fire appeared around their wrists. It turned a deep shade of red, then flashed brilliant blue and uncoiled from their hands. Millie flicked her wrist. The rope rose into the air, then disappeared into the end of her wand.

"Did you agree to represent the goals and interests of the Ministry at all times during your investigation?" Ustinov asked.

"I did."

"You have fulfilled your agreement. I release you from your vow."

Another fiery rope glowed red, then faded to blue around their wrists. Millie pulled it into her wand the moment it floated from their hands.

"And did you agree to conceal the investigation from anyone not wholly and directly designated by the Minister for Magic?" Ustinov asked.

"I did." He spat the words as if they tasted foul.

"You have fulfilled your promise. I release you from your vow."

Millie lowered her wand, and a ribbon of fire twice as thick as the previous two flamed around their hands. The light was almost too bright to gaze upon, like staring straight into the sun. It bathed the room in a hot red glow, then faded to a blue as vibrant as a tropical sea. The ribbon slithered from their wrists at last and clung to the end of Millie's wand for several seconds before extinguishing with a loud whoosh.

"It is done," Millie said.

Snape rubbed his wrists and turned to Hermione. "Questions?"

She had many, but most were for the Minister. "Why was I under investigation?" she asked him.

"You have been monitored since your first report to Shackbolt, five years ago, along with Malfoy and the rest of Arglist Industries."

"Five years?" She gestured around the laboratory. "How did the Ministry allow this to progress so far if the situation has been monitored that long?"

"The inquiry wasn't official until last year," Ustinov replied. His gaze slid away from hers. "We had very little evidence to launch a formal investigation until ..."

"Until?" she prompted.

Snape answered for the Minister. "Until Lucius convinced the Ministry you were a jilted ex-lover, hell-bent on revenge."

"What?" She would have laughed, but he clearly hadn't meant it as a joke.

"Mr Malfoy visited me last summer and presented a very compelling case," Ustinov said. "He claimed regret for an affair he'd had with you during your tenure at Arglist...an affair he had tried to end when you demanded he leave his wife. He said you became unstable and destroyed the laboratory, as well as several million Galleon's worth of research."

"That's ... that's preposterous!" The very notion made her head spin. "Weren't you the least bit suspicious when he didn't demand my arrest?"

Ustinov shrugged. "He wished to spare his wife embarrassment, should certain details be made public."

She fisted her hands onto her hips. "How could you believe such nonsense?"

"His story appeared to be genuine. He provided letters you had written to him...very convincing letters in which you threatened to ruin his reputation."

"I wrote no such letters!" she protested. "They were obviously forged."

"Yes, I realise that now." His clipped tone spoke of impatience. "But at the time, the material seemed conclusive. Your subsequent accusations only lent more credibility to his story."

She shook her head. How very sly of Lucius to plant those seeds of doubt months before he had begun to threaten her. He was guaranteed to stand in a favourable light no matter what she had accused him of.

She turned to Snape. "You knew about this?"

He inclined his head.

"And this was your opinion of me upon returning to Hogwarts?" It explained so much about their early interactions, the way he'd reacted when he'd discovered her with Lucius at the Christmas Eve ball.

"I had no reason to believe otherwise," he said. "Fifteen years had passed since I'd last seen you...any number of incidents might have changed you. By the time I questioned the evidence, it was far too late."

"Too late?"

"The Ministry descended upon St Mungo's the moment I awoke. Our fates were sealed even before Minerva arrived."

"It was an ideal opportunity to further our investigation." Ustinov seemed eager to offer his opinion. "Severus had already requested a meeting with the Headmistress. What better way to monitor your activities than a return to his old post? There was even an empty room right in your living quarters; we couldn't have planned it better. He'd watch you whilst using his relationship with the Malfoys to discover more about Arglist."

She massaged her temples and tried to follow the logic. "Why would you need an Unbreakable Vow for that?"

"No one had spoken to Severus for fourteen years," he said. "It was impossible to know his true loyalties."

"That's a load of bollocks," she said. "He was loyal to the Order...everyone knows that."

"According to an old man's portrait and a teenaged boy."

"According to everyone present at the battle for Hogwarts," she retorted. "Your predecessor included."

"Yes, I read Shackbolt's report." His oversized lips curled into a sneer. "Pardon my cynicism, but far too many incidents have been excused for my level of comfort. Double agent does not exempt anyone from the law. I could hardly risk Severus serving his own interests above those of the Ministry."

"Yet you didn't hesitate to risk his life for your stupid investigation, did you?"

Snape placed his hand on her shoulder. "I could have refused to take the Vow," he said quietly.

"Why didn't you?" She whirled on him, shook off his hand. "I would have thought you'd taken enough Unbreakable Vows to last a lifetime."

"This one seemed rather simpler than the last." He shook his head. "I had been drifting in and out of consciousness for fourteen years, nothing but my thoughts and Longbottom's voice for company. Anything they offered would have appealed to me at that moment. An Unbreakable Vow should have been an effortless way to prove my allegiance...would have been, if not for you." His tone held accusation.

She frowned. This was where he would tell her how badly she had mucked up his plans. Considering the events of the evening, she probably deserved the lecture.

"I was supposed to investigate you," he explained, "not fall for you."

"Oh." His words washed the remaining questions from her mind. No doubt they would return when she wasn't so tired, when she'd had a chance to absorb everything she'd learned tonight. She reached for the table when the room swayed. Her motions did not go unnoticed.

"We can continue this discussion later," Snape said. "Now we must leave for St Mungo's."

"I don't need a Healer," she argued. "I just need sleep."

"You need a hospital."

"I need my bed."

"Hospital."

"Hogwarts."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Hospital wing at Hogwarts."

She nodded. "Hospital wing at Hogwarts."

She waved goodbye to Millie and sank into Snape's embrace. He Apparated them to Hogsmeade, and although she dreaded the walk ahead, she was just glad the spinning had stopped. Her head still pounded, and she wondered if she shouldn't have allowed him to take her to St Mungo's after all. She hadn't exactly broken any records for making good choices tonight.

Snape gazed down the path to Hogwarts and tilted his head. "What would you say to a spot of adventure?"

She laughed. She'd had enough adventure to last many years, but she answered honestly. "I trust you."

His arms tightened around her waist.

"Hold on," he said and leapt into the air with enough speed to make her squeal.

The wind whipped her hair, but she fought the desire to close her eyes. She watched the ground rush by, far below their feet. They soared through the night sky, high above the treetops and closer to the twinkling lights of the castle. She should feel frightened, but fear knew better than to make an appearance. The arms around her were sure and strong and safe, and it was strangely liberating to just let go, to relinquish control for once and simply enjoy the ride.

Too soon, their feet touched the grass. He seemed reluctant to release her, and she was more than content to stay in his arms. The moon peeked out from behind its blanket of clouds and bathed them in soft light.

She smiled at his smug expression. "Show off."

"I have not tried that in fifteen years," he admitted.

"What made you think you could manage it tonight?"

He searched her face. "I suppose Albus would credit love."

"And you?"

"I would be a fool to disagree." He bent his head and found her lips.

She kissed him until the moment was burned into her mind, one instance of purity to chase away all the other scenes from tonight. The ugliness would return soon enough. Tomorrow she could sort out all the pieces, ask the questions that had eluded her, and hear the answers too terrifying to contemplate right now. Tonight, she was just glad to be back where she belonged.

"Let's go home," she said.

He took her hand, and they entered the castle together.

Huge thanks to Karelia, Little Beloved, and Melenka for returning this chapter so quickly. I don't know what I ever did to deserve such lovely friends!

Then Finding Peace Again

Chapter 32 of 33

New answers, new visitors, and learning to move forward.

Chapter 32: Then Finding Peace Again

Hermione opened her eyes and stared at a vaulted stone ceiling. Not since she'd been roused from Petrification had she been so relieved to awaken in the hospital wing of Hogwarts. At some point, the blood had been washed away, and she had been dressed in fresh clothes. She recalled nothing but the startled look on Poppy Pomfrey's face, then blissful, dreamless sleep. Her mind danced away from events prior to that, the terror in Lucius's office and the mind-numbing revelations in the laboratory.

She turned her head. Snape sat sprawled in a chair beside her bed, his rumpled robes evidence of the vigil he must have kept while she had slept. A shock of black hair fell across his face, and she wondered what dreams furrowed his brow. She wanted to touch him but contented herself with watching him sleep.

You could have ruined everything.

She had feared the worst when he'd spoken those words after her first trip to Arglis, certain he'd been hiding something from her. And he had been: an Unbreakable Vow. The implications of his secret hit her so hard her hands shook. She closed her eyes, but the Vow's tricky phrasing taunted her.

How many times had she unwittingly endangered his life? One little mistake...the wrong word spoken to Lucius or an ill-advised trip to the Ministry...and he would have been lost to her forever. She curled her shaking hands into fists. His image swam before her, blurred by tears that pooled in her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

He chose that moment to awaken. The instant he saw her face, he jolted from his chair. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

Poppy appeared at the sound of his voice. She poked her head inside the privacy curtain, but Hermione couldn't stop the words tumbling from her mouth.

"I love you," she told Snape.

"You've had a nasty shock," he replied.

"I'll come back," Poppy said.

She smiled past the tears. "I've had several nasty shocks, actually, but they've done nothing to diminish my feelings."

He watched Poppy seal the privacy curtain, then took the hand Hermione offered and sat on the edge of her bed.

"Can you ever forgive me?" she asked.

His face contorted. "I drugged you and stole your memories," he said. "It is I who must beg forgiveness."

"But I could have killed you just by speaking to Lucius," she said. "Each trip I made to Arglis put you at further risk." He did not argue, and her eyes filled again. "How close was I to revealing your secret?"

"Close enough." He withdrew his hand and massaged his wrist. "But there is nothing you need seek forgiveness for...you could not have known the risk. I, on the other hand, knew precisely what those memories meant to you. I knew how reluctant you were to remove them. If there had been any other way ..."

She reached for his hand once more and studied their linked fingers. The fog began to lift from her mind, but new questions glistened in its wake. Once again, the Minister was at the heart of them.

"There were seven Aurors on standby last night. Why didn't the Minister use them to stop Lucius when he tried to ... when I was in his office?"

His eyes burned so hot she would have flinched if she thought the fire was meant for her.

"The Minister monitored everything through a channelling spell...he was only privy to the sights and sounds I witnessed. Lucius would not be in Azkaban, otherwise."

She shivered. His voice was so cold and yet so flat. Final. She wondered if Lucius realised he'd be dead if not for the Minister's presence last night.

"What about Remy?" she asked. "Does he even exist?"

"Yes, of course."

"So altering my memories wasn't just a ruse?"

He shook his head. "As of two days ago, altering your memories was a viable plan."

"What changed?"

"You will recall Pity delivered a message late Saturday morning, and I left the quarters before you emerged." He waited until she nodded. "I visited the library and Albus, as I told you, but I made another stop, as well."

"The Ministry?"

He nodded. "Gregor sent an urgent missive after one of Arglis's young wizard-scientists decided to pursue a hunch. We were lucky...the spy we had placed at Arglis was able to intercept him before he told Lucius of the breakthrough he'd made. But it was enough to scare Gregor."

"So the Minister decided we should forego the meeting with Remy."

"He was convinced it would take too long," he said. "When he learned you had already removed the memories, he insisted we act at once."

"And that's when you traded my unaltered memories for clemency?"

"Only after he refused my demands to debrief you on the investigation. He would not entertain any suggestion that required a reversal of the Unbreakable Vow...he seemed to think I would just take the Galleons and disappear. Gregor is not a trusting man."

"He certainly believed me capable of the worst." She rolled her eyes. "Spurned lover, indeed."

"Lucius was wise to invent such a tale." Regret flicked over his face. "Unfortunately, our involvement only confirmed Gregor's suspicions. By the time the Minister saw us together at the Christmas Eve ball, you had graduated from spurned lover to skilled enchantress."

She snorted at the notion. "Not bad for a witch with mediocre talent and average intelligence."

He winced. "One simple *Obliviate*, and I can erase yesterday from your mind."

She considered. It would be a relief to escape the inevitable nightmares her time in Lucius's office would bring. But she was tired of running away, tired of hiding bits of the truth to escape her mistakes. She shook her head. "I think I had best keep yesterday intact," she said.

"Are you certain?"

She nodded. "Perhaps it will serve as a reminder that I do not always know the best answer...or even the right answer. I've made a number of mistakes in my life, but I have never learned how to live with them. I suppose it's time I try."

He lifted her hand, brushed his lips across her knuckles. "Once you have mastered that, perhaps you can teach me."

"I shall." She smiled. "In the meantime, we should return to our quarters so I can continue to sully your bed."

"I'm afraid you shall not leave this wing until the nurse releases you."

He called for Poppy before she could protest. If the nurse found his presence throughout the examination odd, she refrained from commenting. Poppy removed the bandages from Hermione's neck and poured an assortment of potions down her throat. When her eyelids grew heavy, she refused to sleep until Snape promised to return to their quarters, eat, and attempt to sleep, as well. The moment he left, she closed her eyes and yielded to the insistent pull of somnolence.

A dreamless sleep potion kept the nightmares at bay. By the time Hermione awoke, darkness had fallen, and torches had been lighted throughout the hospital wing. She cried out when a pale face emerged from the shadows. Grey eyes watched her scramble for her wand, but his voice halted her movements.

"I didn't mean to startle you."

"Draco." She sank back into her pillow. "I thought you were ..."

The look on his face told her she needn't finish.

"I shouldn't have come." He backed away from her bed. "I'll go."

"No, please stay."

He frowned at the hand she'd reached out to stall his departure. Her fingers curled into a ball and sought refuge in her lap. She had dreaded this part. There was nothing she could say that wouldn't make matters worse...no excuse she could offer, no fresh perspective to bring comfort. Yet the unbearable silence had to be broken.

"I'm sorry," they said in unison.

She blinked. "Why are you sorry?"

"You have to ask?"

She raised her shoulders.

"I am sorry for everything he did," he said, "and for everything he tried to do. When I think what might have happened to you ..."

"But it didn't...I'm fine."

He looked unconvinced.

"I wish I could have found some way to tell you," she said. "I thought perhaps after the baby... But then there was the Ministry to contend with ..." Remembering the Unbreakable Vow, she was glad she had remained silent.

"I understand."

Somehow, that made her feel worse. "I'm so sorry for what this will do to your family," she said. "I hate to see you and your mother hurt again, and I'm sure this won't be easy for your children."

He sighed. "Those are things *he* should regret...not you." He pulled the chair closer to her bed and sat. "This is going to be difficult. I won't pretend otherwise, but I also won't have you blame yourself for his madness. From what Severus told us, you tried every way possible to stymie his efforts."

"You've spoken to Severus?"

He nodded. "He came to the Manor earlier today. The Ministry told us very little, but he filled in the missing pieces and answered our questions. I think it was important for Mother to hear the story from him firsthand."

It couldn't have been a comfortable discussion. How could Snape's involvement with the investigation be seen as anything but a betrayal? She wondered if Narcissa would be as understanding as Draco. Perhaps he favoured his mother more than his father.

"How is your mother?" she asked.

"Strong," he replied.

"Of course. And how is she coping?"

"With more grace and dignity than Father deserves. I believe she was appalled but not surprised. Luna and I suggested we move into the Manor for a time, and she seems eager to have us. She'll need someone to help run the estate, and Luna could always use a hand with the twins. It's a smart solution for both of them."

"No doubt the new baby will provide a distraction."

"Yes," he agreed, "it will be a far different situation than last time."

His gaze drifted away. So much had changed since Lucius's last stint in Azkaban. Unlike his previous incarcerations, it seemed unlikely he'd ever return to society this time. If only he'd cared more for his family than the blood of strangers.

When she realised Draco had been staring at her neck, she covered the scar with her hand. His eyes lifted to hers, as stark as a winter's plain.

"It's fine," she whispered.

He shook his head. The horror on his face spoke volumes.

She reached out again, and this time he did not frown at the gesture. He took her hand, then abandoned his chair and drew her into his arms. Her eyes stung, but before the tears could fall, a familiar voice spoke from outside the privacy curtain.

"I think she's talking to Draco." Even as a loudly hissed whisper, the voice was unmistakable. Harry.

"Just wait, then." And that was definitely Ginny. "We should let Madam Pomfrey know we're here first, anyway."

Draco released Hermione and rolled his eyes.

"Maybe we should just go in," Harry said.

"Maybe you should realise sound travels through fabric," Draco said and pulled the curtain aside.

"Hey, Draco," said Ginny. She kissed his cheek and hurried to the bed.

Hermione watched the men carefully. They had shed their enmity along with their youth, but old prejudices had a way of returning. She needn't have worried.

Harry shook Draco's hand. "How is she?"

Hermione huffed. "She is not an invalid, and she can answer questions for herself, thank you very much."

"See?" Harry pointed at Hermione but spoke to Ginny. "I told you she'd be fine."

Ginny squeezed Hermione's shoulder. "Dad is friends with some of the Aurors who were there, and they made it sound pretty bad. Everyone thought you had died." She glanced at Draco, as if unsure whether she had said too much.

"She might have, if Severus hadn't acted so quickly," Draco said.

The faces watching her were far too serious, so she smiled and said, "Saved by the prince, naturally. My life just continues to be one long fairy tale."

"Hey, speaking of fairy tales," said Harry, "is there any truth to the rumours about you and our resident Sleeping Beauty?"

Ginny hissed a warning, but Hermione just snorted. She supposed the Sleeping Beauty reference was appropriate, given Snape's fourteen-year slumber at St Mungo's. "The rumours *are* true, Harry."

He looked ill.

"Why is that so disturbing?" she asked.

"It's not." Ginny moved to stand beside her husband. "Harry is thrilled you've found someone who makes you happy. We both are." She jabbed her elbow into Harry's side. "Aren't we?"

"Absolutely." He swallowed so hard the sound echoed through the empty hospital wing. "Like Ginny said, whatever makes you happy. Even if it's, well ... Snape."

"*Professor* Snape," she reminded him.

As if summoned by the mere mention of his name, Snape appeared behind Harry and Ginny.

Hermione smiled. "But perhaps if you ask very nicely, he'll permit you to call him Severus," she told Harry.

Snape's jaw clenched. "Why not?" he said and seemed to enjoy the Potters' startled expressions as they whirled around. "I am told the name has become quite popular with certain parents."

It had been many years since Hermione had seen Harry turn so red. His greeting was almost painful to watch, but Ginny's was eloquent enough to make up for it. Before the conversation could grow awkward, Poppy appeared and clucked her tongue at the number of bodies clustered around the bed.

"Too many visitors!" she exclaimed. "This is far too much excitement. The patient needs her rest."

"She's right," Snape said when Hermione instantly protested.

Poppy made shooing motions with her hands, and Snape said, "Everyone, out."

"That goes for you, too, Severus," Poppy said.

He folded his arms. "I shall remain."

"She needs to sleep."

"I will see that she does."

"Alone!"

"Not tonight."

Poppy fisted her hands on her ample hips. "You cannot stay here."

"You cannot force me to leave."

"This is *my* hospital, Severus."

He pointed to Hermione. "And this is *my* ... my ..."

Hermione shrugged when he looked to her for help. The appropriate term seemed to elude him in the presence of so many onlookers.

"She is my ..."

"I'm his woman," Hermione offered, but it didn't appear to be the designation for which he'd been searching.

He drew himself up until he towered over the nurse. "I would not advise any attempts to dislodge me."

Poppy narrowed her eyes, but before she could respond, the headmistress's voice rang forth.

"Severus, please do not threaten the staff."

The headmistress ignored Snape's affronted protest and addressed the nurse. "Poppy, the hospital is empty save for Hermione...surely you can accommodate Severus tonight."

Poppy's disapproval was obvious in the way she folded her arms, but she offered no further remarks.

Minerva turned her attention to the others. "Potter, I need to see you in my office. You too, Ginny. And Draco, you..."

"I was just leaving." He held up his hands before she could bark an order at him. After a quick wink for Hermione and a promise to return soon, he bade the others farewell and departed.

The headmistress had watched their exchange closely and offered Hermione a nod of approval. "You've obviously had enough for today," she said. "I will return tomorrow to check on you."

"Thank you, Headmistress," she said.

"Come along, Mr and Mrs Potter." The headmistress strode from the room, and Harry and Ginny followed her after a hasty goodbye.

In the distance, the door to Poppy's office closed on her muttered protests, and all was quiet.

"Alone at last," Hermione said and patted the bed.

Snape pointed his wand at the mattress. It hummed beneath her, then stretched on each side to accommodate them both. He lay atop the bedcovers and pulled her into his arms.

"So, what new questions have you crafted in my absence?" he asked.

She had thought her mind would have been plagued by questions, but most of the answers were simple to work out, and the rest seemed unimportant. There was only one thing she wanted to know now. "Is it really over?"

He stroked her arm where it laid draped across his chest. "The trial will be difficult, but I think it is safe to assume the worst is over." He kissed the top of her head.

Just hearing him speak the words made them easier to believe. She drew air into her lungs and felt as if she could breathe deeply for the first time in months. Her limbs turned fluid, the muscles more than eager to relinquish their stiffness. She melted into his body and fought to keep her eyes open. Beneath her head, his chest rose and fell. She let the rhythm carry her, let the steady beat of his heart convince her peace was within their reach. Even if the world stopped spinning, there was nowhere she would rather be.

He whispered into the darkness, his voice so faint she strained to hear the words. "Promise you will never leave me."

Perhaps she'd already fallen asleep, and the command was nothing more than a dream. She didn't care. "I promise."

His arms tightened around her, and beneath her ear, his heart thudded louder.

"Now you," she said softly.

"I promise." For once, there was no hesitation in his reply.

Darkness nurtured hope, encouraged the tender dreams too fragile for the light of day. It wouldn't matter if she'd forgotten them all by morning. Within the shelter of his arms, she could hold fast to a world where anything seemed possible. Even fairy tales.

I am indebted to my darling betas, Karelia and Little Beloved, and to Melenka for alpha-reader suggestions.

Only the epilogue remains, and I will try to post that quickly, as I am already six days behind in my NaNoWriMo output. Can. Not. Multitask.

This story has been nominated for Favourite DH-Compliant Fic in the upcoming SS/HG Awards! I offer my tremendous thanks to everyone who took the time to submit a nomination for it. I cannot express how honoured I am by this recognition, especially given the competition. Wow seems inefficient, but yeah ... WOW!

Don't forget to vote for your favourite stories! Voting ends 5-Dec, 2009. http://community.livejournal.com/sshg_awards/30206.html#cutid1

Epilogue

Chapter 33 of 33

The anniversary event marks the end of term.

Epilogue

Despite three solid days of enforced rest, Hermione managed to oversee Potions exams and perform her duties as head of the anniversary event committee. She had

taken advantage of all who had visited her in the hospital wing, and no one had left without a task to perform or a role to fulfil. When the morning of the event finally dawned, even the weather dared not oppose her. She stood on the grounds outside the Great Hall and welcomed the midday sun that soaked through her robes to warm her skin. The battle monument had been positioned just outside the Great Hall windows, to be revealed after the final speech. She hid the statue with a Disillusionment Charm, then gazed skyward when a shadow blocked the light.

A pair of Thestrals flew overhead, so low their skeletal hooves skimmed the treetops.

Two for joy, she thought.

It had been a lone Thestral at the start of term that had reminded her of the magpie-counting poem she'd sung as a child. So much had transpired since the day she'd stood in the Great Hall and watched the solitary creature fly to the Forbidden Forest. In nine short months, she had found love and she had been pursued by hate; she had fought for life, and she had tasted death. The sun felt all the warmer for knowing how lucky she was to be bathed by its bright rays. She told herself it was the glare of the sun...not the mated pair of Thestrals...that made her eyes fill with moisture. She had no business getting weepy so early. It would be hard enough to keep her eyes dry once the afternoon's speeches commenced.

"Professor, thank goodness!"

Hermione blinked rapidly and turned to find Emilia Woodhouse, the Gryffindor first-year she'd taught before Snape's return, racing across the grounds.

"What is it?" she asked when the girl stopped before her.

"There's been an accident!" She pointed into the distance. "Behind Greenhouse Two. Come quickly!"

Hermione's heart pounded as she tried to keep pace with a pair of fast, twelve-year old legs. They both stopped short when they rounded the corner to Greenhouse Two. Hermione touched Emilia's shoulder, then said, "Shh."

Laughter floated across the soft grass. Neville sat across from Sandy Creevey, in the centre of what had once been an empty field. Overturned carts surrounded them, and hundreds of exploded plants littered the landscape.

"Are you sure you're not injured?" Neville asked Sandy.

"I'm fine." She shook her fingers through her cropped curls and chuckled when clumps of dirt and leaves showered her lap. "Are *you* alright?"

"Just a little singed," he said, "but that's nothing new." He stood and brushed debris from his robes, then held out his hands and helped Sandy to her feet.

The young woman smiled up at him, silent for several moments, and Hermione wondered if either realised they had yet to release each other's hands.

"I'm so sorry," Sandy said. "I'm not sure what happened. I haven't been able to do magic in years...not since I was a little girl."

Neville grinned. "You don't have to apologize. I've studied magic from the best witches and wizards in the world, and I *still* blow up the plants on occasion."

Hermione stifled her laughter and drew Emilia back around the corner of the greenhouse.

"Shouldn't we help them, Professor?"

"I think Professor Longbottom can handle this one," she said. *Finally*.

"If you say so." The girl shrugged and skipped back to the castle.

Hermione hugged herself tightly and smiled. Neville and Sandy had been covered in soil and roots and leaves, and yet both had seemed oblivious, as if they couldn't focus on anything but each other's eyes. It was a very good sign. Hermione resisted the urge to spy on them a bit longer. Instead, she congratulated herself for having assigned Neville the role of Muggle florist liaison, then she returned to the castle and her interminable task list.

A delegation from the Ministry arrived first. Hermione greeted Gregor Ustinov's pursed lips with a cool nod, relieved when the headmistress escorted him away. Election of a new Minister for Magic couldn't come soon enough. She just hoped the people were wise enough to reject Ustinov's bid for re-election.

The crowd swelled, and before long she found herself surrounded by a sea of bright red hair, consumed by the Weasleys. Molly and Arthur surprised her with a crushing hug while George and Angelina accused her of trying to best the scar on Snape's neck with one of her own. She had forgotten how much she'd missed being swallowed by this clan. Charlie, Bill, and Fleur shook her hand, then she met Percy's wife, Audrey, for the first time. Finally, she greeted Ron, who stood to the side with Harry and Ginny. She smiled when she spotted his fingers threaded through those of Penny, the purple-eyed witch.

"All prepared for your speech?" she asked Harry.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"I can't believe McGonagall talked you into this," Ron said.

Hermione grinned. "The headmistress can be very persuasive."

She'd been stunned when Harry had agreed to deliver the final speech, as well. Snape, of course, had tried to argue that his own presence at the podium was superfluous, given Harry's commitment, but the will of the headmistress had won out in the end.

Hermione glanced at her watch and searched for Snape. The headmistress's speech would begin soon, yet she hadn't seen him since breakfast. She excused herself from the Weasleys and headed towards the castle.

Very few empty seats remained by the time she finally located him, back on the grounds outside the Great Hall. Hushed whispers announced his arrival first, an excited hiss that rolled through the crowd like ripples in a pond. Considering he escorted Narcissa Malfoy, followed closely by Draco and Luna, she supposed some speculation was to be expected. Stories of Lucius's arrest had filled the newspapers for days...nothing captured the public's interest like the downfall of the rich and mighty. Hermione had not expected to see Narcissa in attendance, although the woman's bravery shouldn't have surprised her. Anyone strong enough to answer Voldemort's questions with calm lies was unlikely to be cowed by a bit of gossip.

Snape Conjured three new chairs at the end of a row for the Malfoys. Once they were seated, he leaned over and spoke in Narcissa's ear. She stiffened, then inclined her head and clasped her hands in her lap. Hermione started when he straightened and motioned her forward. She thought she'd been rather hidden, standing behind the many rows of white chairs, but he'd obviously known her exact location. After a brief hesitation, she ignored the curious glances from the crowd and joined them.

Greeting Narcissa wasn't nearly as awkward as she'd anticipated. Having Draco and Luna close proved a helpful distraction, and talk soon turned to the baby.

"Are you certain you're not carrying twins again?" Hermione eyed Luna's stomach.

"No," she answered. "Just one little boy who was supposed to be here three days ago." She frowned and shifted in her seat.

They grew silent as the headmistress spoke. Hermione kept her emotions in check, although it helped that she'd already read the headmistress's speech and knew what to expect. She noted many tear-streaked faces in the crowd that had obviously not been so fortunate.

The Minister took the stage next, but it was Draco's frantic voice she heard first.

"Now?" he said. "You're certain?"

"Oh, yes." Luna's face became a mask of pain, but after a few moments, she panted and said, "Right now."

Snape had already signalled for Poppy.

"The contractions started about three hours ago," Luna told the nurse.

"Luna!" The concern on Draco's face took the sting from his chastising tone.

"I wanted to hear Professor Snape's speech first," she explained. "And Harry's."

The nurse waved her wand over Luna's abdomen. "We must get her into a bed at once...this baby will not wait long."

"Have you any Ortus potion?" Snape asked.

"Of course not." Poppy seemed affronted. "Why would I keep labour and delivery potions at a school?"

He glanced at Luna. "I can make a small batch quickly."

"I'll prepare a bed and the instruments," Poppy said and hurried away.

Snape rose to leave, but Hermione stopped him.

"Your speech is next," she argued. "I can brew the potion."

"Have you prepared Ortus before?"

"No," she admitted. "But I watched it being made at university."

He pursed his lips.

Luna hunched forward in her seat, seized by another contraction.

"Right, just hurry," Hermione told Snape. She narrowed her eyes at his retreating back, not entirely sure he hadn't somehow arranged the situation to get out of his speech.

Through a series of Levitation Charms and frequent stops for contractions, Hermione, Draco, and Narcissa manoeuvred Luna inside the castle. They had paused at the base of the main staircase when Luna tugged on Draco's arm.

"I want to ask her now," she said.

Draco glanced at Hermione, then turned his furrowed brow to his wife. "It can wait, love. You're sort of in the middle of something right now."

"You asked Severus already." Luna's face became petulant. "I want to ask Hermione."

"Ask me what?"

Draco nodded at Luna, whose smile sparkled in her bright blue eyes.

"We were hoping you would consent to be the baby's godmother," Luna said to Hermione.

Hermione gasped and looked to Draco for confirmation. Given her role in having his father sent to prison, she was amazed he was willing to speak to her, much less share something so personal.

He grinned. "What do you think?"

Her eyes filled, yet she hesitated and turned to the last member of their quartet. Narcissa's face was impossible to read, although Hermione suspected if she were entirely opposed to the idea, her disapproval would have been evident. Narcissa's elegant features seemed to soften under Hermione's gaze.

"I would be honoured," Hermione said. She kissed Luna's cheek, then assisted her up the staircase to a waiting Poppy.

Not five minutes had passed when the sound of running footsteps heralded the arrival of Snape and the freshly brewed potion. Poppy ushered everyone but the Malfoys out of the infirmary. The large, double doors closed before them, and they were left to wait.

Hermione strolled to the open window and gazed down. The Minister's voice rode the warm summer breeze, a dull monotone that inspired repose rather than reflection. Her lips curled into a snarl. Snape's arms slid around her, and her mood improved at once. She should probably insist he return to the event and deliver his speech, but she indulged in a rare act of selfishness and relaxed into his embrace.

His journey from the dungeons had obviously been an arduous one. A growl accompanied his panting when she said, "You'd better catch your breath, *old man*."

He turned her around and arched one dark brow. "You have been warned against using such terms. If you persist, I shall be forced to remind you of the consequences."

The threat still held the power to stir her blood. "Old man, old man, old man," she taunted.

His lips covered hers. In an instant, she was pinned between the wall and his body. A few moments more, and he wasn't the only one panting.

He lifted his head and glanced down the deserted corridor. "Where is an alcove when you need one?"

She chuckled. "It's a good thing there aren't any about...I wouldn't want to miss my godson being born."

"Ah, they asked you."

"I was stunned."

"As was I, when they asked me."

She imagined Lucius's reaction to the news and tried not to shiver. "I suppose they know what they're doing."

"Let us hope they are smarter than they look."

She rolled her eyes. "You can't fool me: you adore them both."

"I will admit to enjoying their company, but I have a rule against deeming others adorable."

"Except me, of course."

"You?" He tilted his head and pondered the ceiling. "You manage to defy every carefully constructed rule I have. No, adorable is certainly not the first word that comes to mind when I consider you."

"Irresistible?" she asked.

"Frustrating," he answered. "Inordinately stubborn. Too much courage and not enough caution. Frequently vexing. In fact, you are probably the most exasperating person I have ever met..."

"Hey..."

"...although that observation only makes it more difficult to understand my need to have you near." He looked annoyed.

Given his insults, she didn't feel particularly inclined to care.

"Which is why you must marry me," he said.

"What?" She blinked.

"Marry me."

He couldn't be serious. And yet the longer she remained silent, the more nervous he looked.

"This isn't something to joke about," she warned.

"I appreciate that. Marry me."

Her heart raced. Her mind was less trusting. "You're teasing me, right?"

"I am not. Marry me."

"It's supposed to be a question, you realise. Not a demand ... or ... four."

He sighed. "Hermione Jane Granger, will you consent to be my wife?"

"Jean."

"Pardon me?"

"My middle name isn't Jane. It's Jean."

"Are you quite certain?"

"It's my name, I'm fairly certain I'd know it better than anyone."

"I would swear it was Jane."

She grinned. "Oh, alright. It was Jane for a time, but I had it changed to Jean."

"What?" His brows drew together. "When? And why?"

"After fifth-year, because of Umbridge. Because she's a toad, and I loathed the thought of having anything in common with her, even something as innocuous as a middle name."

"It might interest you to know the toad is in Azkaban."

"What? When?" She chuckled. "And why?"

"Yesterday, in fact. Lucius has been eager to reveal his accomplices. It seems Umbridge performed many Unforgivable Curses whilst in his employ."

"She worked at Arglist?"

He nodded. "She was instrumental in ensuring their control of the pharmaceuticals supply chain."

She whistled. "Justice, at last. This day just keeps improving."

One eyebrow crept higher onto his forehead. "Must I ask the question again, or will you deign to answer me now?"

"Touchy," she said. "Why do you want to marry me, anyway?"

"I'm beginning to wonder ..."

"We already promised we'd never leave one another. That's good enough for me."

"Not for me." He shook his head. "Not anymore."

"Why not?"

He glanced at her neck. "Because I cannot abide the thought of losing you again."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"This will help ensure you do not."

"You don't really suppose I'll be any more likely to do as I'm told once we're married, do you?"

"Once we're married?" he asked. "Are you granting your consent, then?"

"I might be."

"You had better be."

"Are you sure this is what you want?" It had to be his choice, she was certain of that. Not a sense of obligation or the belief it was what she wanted from a relationship. "I can be quite happy without marriage, you know. I do not require this."

"No, but *I* do." He pulled her closer. "I want to fall asleep beside you each night and awaken each morning to the smell of burnt toast."

"You think you can woo me with flippancy?"

"I could have simply told you I want to explore more uses for the Private Storeroom."

"I would have agreed to marry you much sooner if you had."

"Impertinent girl."

"Foolish girl," she corrected.

"Mm, we old men have a weakness for foolish girls."

Applause floated up from the grounds and signalled the end of Harry's speech. Hermione wanted to add her approval, but for entirely different reasons. She glanced out the window. The audience left their seats and slowly approached the battle monument. Given the number of onlookers, the statue would soon come alive with the images of lost souls.

Before she could decide whether she was relieved or disappointed to miss the spectacle, the double doors opened and Draco beamed at them. Behind him, Luna lay in bed and cradled a platinum-haloed bundle to her chest. Narcissa stood to the side and discreetly wiped her eyes.

"Come meet your godson," Draco said.

They turned from the window, from the sight of so much loss and grief, and welcomed the tiny new life. A different sort of crying replaced the soft sobs outside. Snape didn't even mock the women when they cooed over the squirming infant. The baby's wails began tremulous but grew louder, more insistent, and were soon filled with as much indignation as newborn lungs could muster. Hermione couldn't have imagined a sweeter sound.

Life would go on, a runaway train that didn't care where it was headed or who had yet to fasten their safety belts. And that was okay with her. She had her ticket in hand, and this time, she was determined to enjoy the ride.

The end.

I first encountered the term "fan-fiction" in June of 2008. A search for the movie release date sent me to MuggleNet, and an innocent looking menu link piqued my curiosity. At that point, I still believed shipping was strictly a nautical term and slash merely a button on my keyboard. In typical fashion, I read all of two stories and promptly decided to write my own. I had no idea what I was doing (still don't), but seven weeks and 154,000 words later, I finished "A Murder of Crows." Or so I had thought. Only in editing each chapter prior to posting (which has taken fourteen months) have I come to appreciate how much I still have to learn about writing. At some point, I shall revisit the first half of the story and correct the frequent mistakes of an amateur writer. But for now, there are new stories to write and that pesky little distraction called life.

I will never be able to adequately express my gratitude to those who have helped with this story. I am fortunate to have had such incredible friends throughout this sixteen-month endeavour.

My thanks to Karelia: for holding my hand when I wibbled; for being a mentor as well as a friend; for opening my eyes to a world of possibilities I had never before imagined; for welcoming me into her heart, her home, and her family; and for introducing me to so many wonderful folks in this fandom. Oh, yeah...and for exhibiting unsurpassed patience while taking me from 80+ errors in my first chapter to Validated Author status at all three moderated archives. She is amazing. Truly.

My thanks to Little Beloved: for writing "Denial," the first fan-fic I ever read (after saying "eieew" and clicking on the SS/HG link with nothing more than morbid curiosity); for reeling me into this ship; for remaining my beta when a million real-life distractions could have pulled her away; for offering the most hilarious, grounded, and perfect responses when mean reviews made me cry; for flying to London so we could play together; and for offering a wealth of support and encouragement. I am honoured by her friendship.

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Although they may not see this, my thanks to my husband and sister: for loving me so much they sacrificed their time and freedoms to provide me the opportunity to write this story. I am certain they believed I was wasting my efforts by working so hard on an un-publishable story, yet they never failed to encourage or support me. They did a thousand little things to make my life easier, just so I could focus on writing. They even read the story...if that's not love, I don't know what is!

Last, but certainly not least, my thanks to the readers: for having the forbearance to stay with this story through sixteen months of less-than-regular updates; for leaving reviews despite my horrid inconsistency with responding to them; for patience with a twisting, turning plot; for providing insight into characters I had only thought I knew well; and for making this fandom the best place to play. Ever.

Thank you, thank you, and thank you again.

Don't forget to vote for your favourite stories (including this one!) in the upcoming SS/HG awards. Voting ends 5-Dec, 2009.
http://community.livejournal.com/sshg_awards/30206.html