

In Time

by ladyofthemasque

A tale of fate versus self-determinism.

Chapter One

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CHAPTER ONE

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Hermione stared at the tiny, gilded hourglass, with its long, looping chain and glittering grains of not-quite-sand. How many years had it been since she last held one of these in her hands? *The end of third year, when I handed it back to the Ministry Unspeakable who came to fetch it from me...never knowing I had gone back in time by three hours to save Sirius Black.*

And finally, once again...it's mine.

This time, I'm going even farther back, three years back... Oh, Merlin, I hope I can get there in time!

She was tempted to just spin the thing right here, right now. But that would send her back three years in the wrong location; Time-Turners only worked to move a body through time. They didn't move a body through space. Not to mention she had a legal, legitimate task ahead of her, bona-fide and signed off by the Department...by the Minister himself, in fact. Admittedly, she had needed to take her plan to Kingsley to get pre-approval before running it past her superiors, but then she knew Kingsley would be more likely to approve of it than her superiors.

Nor did she want to try to sneak the Time-Turner out of the Department of Mysteries. That way lay madness, or at least the ruination of her three years of working her way up the ranks. There were too many anti-theft spells laid upon the objects found beyond the heavy, dark door on the tenth level of the Ministry. Three years, she had planned and worked hard, all for this moment. Getting her hands on a Time-Turner.

She was no longer an apprentice in the Department; she had gained full Unspeakable status. And a hefty pay rise. No, she would take this out of the Department by going through all the necessary channels. Including the filling out and filing of all seventy-two pieces of paperwork involved in the borrowing of a Time-Turner. Tedious...ungodly so...but necessary. She would do this by the book, no rushing, no misjudging.

Three hours later...much of the tedium was regretfully just memorable enough to speed her through the process...she walked out of the Ministry of Magic with a slender gold chain looped around her neck, its carefully enchanted pendant pooled beneath her shirt, nestled between her breasts. She smiled at Harry as he emerged from the lift next to hers, joining her and the other throngs headed for the Floo-connected hearths. Harry gave her a one-armed hug, but then was pulled away by someone wanting to talk to the Boy Who Lived Twice. Someone always wanted to talk to him, it seemed. He had achieved his goal of becoming an Auror, but there were whispers of the more political side of public service, particularly since he was still considered a personal friend of Minister Shacklebolt.

Ron came hurrying up from the side, a little flushed and breathless...he had chosen to take the stairs again, but that was understandable; he had signed on initially as a sports reporter for the Department of Magical Games and Sports, but had managed to get a third-string position for the Wimbourne Wasps just a couple months ago, and

wanted to ensure he would be physically fit for the day he might be called into action as the Wasps' relief for the relief Keeper. Given how hard the Wasps were trying to make it into the Quidditch Nationals, she figured he'd have his chance soon enough, what with team injuries and all. He nodded at Hermione, his expression serious. At least until he wrinkled his nose and rubbed at the back of his head.

"Flowers, you said?"

"Flowers. Tiger lilies would be nice," Hermione added. "Nothing plain or ordinary like a rose. And certainly nothing as cheap as a carnation!"

"No carnations. Got it. Um...dinner reservations are for five-thirty. It's a bit early, but it was all I could get," he added, worry creasing his freckled brow.

"That is a bit early. Have you got something planned for after the meal is over?"

Ron leered. Hermione suppressed a shudder. "Oh, yeah...oh! *That*," he amended, catching on to her meaning. "Well, there's that carnival thing, with the big Ferret Wheel. You said it has gorgeous views, plus there's all those Muggle games at the booths."

Hermione laughed. "*Ferris* wheel. Not ferret. And yes, the games will be a lot of fun. Just remember, no magic. You'll get a lot more respect if you try to win the non-magical way, you know."

"I know. Katie *is* half-Muggle. But this is important. This is our sixth-month anniversary. Girls put a lot of stock in such things. I want to show her a good time *outside* of the...the, well, you know," Ron hedged. "Tiger lilies, right?"

"That's what she said she liked," Hermione confirmed as they reached her turn in the queue for one of the many fireplaces. Clapping on him on the shoulder, she gave her ex-boyfriend an encouraging smile. "Go get 'er, tiger! Leaky Cauldron!"

Stepping into the roaring green flames, she whirled away. Relieved they were no longer dating. That had come as a bit of fallout after the war. No one had mentioned how much of a letdown the drudgery of every-day life would be...however welcome a change!...from the excitement of the war. Without danger constantly throwing them together, Hermione and Ron had both come to the conclusion that they just didn't have enough in common to date. To be best mates, yes; nothing like shared experiences to make friends out of even the most disparate of individuals. But after the umpteenth argument...or rather, outright yelling match...it was blindingly obvious to both of them that they just weren't meant to be anything closer than that.

Which was fine by Hermione. Ron wasn't particularly imaginative as a lover; he could and did pay some attention to his partner's needs, but...well, he just wasn't enough for her. Strong-willed enough to stand toe-to-toe with her in an argument, widely-read enough to keep up with her in a conversation... And she wasn't enough for him. Enough like his mother, enough like his groupies...well, if he had any; he'd only been third-string with the Wasps for two months. But it was only a matter of time. Ron in small doses, she could handle. Hermione in small doses, *he* could handle. But for a lifetime of married-ever-after? No.

Relieved to be away from him...particularly given what she carried...Hermione stumbled out of the hearth, dusted herself off, nodded politely to Old Tom, and headed for the back door. Pragmatism, the cornerstone of her plan, insisted that she visit Gringotts first. Where and when she was headed, she would obviously need funds for food and other such sundries. But more than that, she would need a disguise. The best sort of disguise would be a Muggle one: a change of hair colour, a different cut, and a new wardrobe. Nothing that could be unraveled by a spell.

Thankfully, the Minister had authorized a payment voucher for her expenses. Everything she was doing was perfectly legal...except for her motivations. Which weren't illegal *now*. And they were most likely apocryphal. But she still had to try. Plus there was the hair appointment for this evening...her brown, bushy tresses would be chopped short and dyed a caramel blonde...and a new set of clothes to purchase. Something totally unlike her normal self, yet practical enough for the conditions of her target location.

But it was worth the trouble, time, and expense. Even Minister Shacklebolt agreed on that point. Too many people had died in Voldemort's bloody war to let one more slip mysteriously through the cracks of time.

She *had* to find out what happened to Severus Snape, after she and Harry had been forced to leave his body behind, that night in the Shrieking Shack.

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--*Shitshitshitshit!* I'm too late! Frantically, Hermione grabbed for the Time-Turner knob. She wasn't *early* enough!

She had carefully chosen to twist the knob, or rather, knobs, outside the entrance to the Shrieking Shack. The year-knob was twisted three times. The month knob, seven times. The day knob, eighteen times. And the hour knob...four times.

But she forgot to account for *daylight savings time*...and arrived one hour too late. She had, in fact, arrived at the very hour Voldemort was leaving the Shack. And as she grabbed for the remarkably hot knobs...*any* of them, to get her out of the way in time...he turned, spotted her, and whipped out his wand, blasting a spell with a curt shout. Thankfully, it was a white blast of pure force, not a green jet of instant death. It smashed into her hand, flinging her fingers one way and the Time-Turner the other. The concussive force knocked her off her feet.

Time rippled and reversed around her, too much time; the seasons crawled backward, the days nothing more than an eye-twitching blur of blended day-night. She slammed into the ground arse-first in the middle of winter, her tailbone cushioned by a bit of snow; her spine and shoulders slapped down somewhere around the dry leaves of autumn, the thick grass of late summer. Her head cracked against a chunk of rock half-buried under the dewy wildflowers of spring...and snow whisked itself over her as her eyes fluttered and twitched shut, bringing a flash of pain and an unforgiving darkness.

An unknown while later, pain roused her from the depths of unconsciousness. Pain, heat, pressure, and a tingling that spread an increasingly cool numbness across her arm and her breast. A voice, deep, quiet, and oddly familiar, greeted her as soon as she drew a deep breath.

"Do not move; your injury is too severe. I must finish applying the salve, or you will be left with an unpleasant scar."

Biting her lip, Hermione held herself still. She felt his fingers brushing the salve with surprising gentleness over her skin, rubbing it carefully into her wound. Where it touched, the pain in her shoulder and chest faded. When the last ache had faded beneath a minty-cool tingling...though it smelled more like cinnamon and marigolds, with an unpleasant hint of cat-piddle...she felt him cupping the back of her short-curled head.

"This is a replenishing potion. Drink it down."

Trusting the man cradling her head, Hermione did as she was bade. The stuff tasted nasty, of celery and old sweat socks, with a salty-sweet tang hinting of gooseberries, which she had only tasted once as a young child, visiting her grandmother's cottage in the Cotswolds. It also reminded her of all the potions Madam Pomfrey had poured down her throat, back when she had received that purple hex of Dolohov's, many of which had been similar to this one. But it did what it was supposed to do, which was give her the strength to open her eyes.

Blinking against the light, she peered up at an unfortunately familiar face. Unfortunately, because it wasn't the one she had expected to see. Before she could censor her thoughts, Hermione heard herself gasp, "...How *old* are you?"

Severus Snape narrowed his deep, dark eyes and looked down the full length of his long and narrow nose. "Old enough to know my trade!"

"Now, now, Severus," an equally familiar, if unexpected voice chided the young man standing at her bedside. Albus Dumbledore...a slightly younger, less long-bearded,

and very much *alive* Albus Dumbledore...moved up beside the black-clad man. "You are the youngest Potions Master we've ever had in the history of Hogwarts. Many people are still surprised that I chose you to replace Horace, last year.

"Now, young lady...perhaps you could tell us your name, and why you were found unconscious outside?" Albus enquired lightly, though his blue eyes pinned her over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. "It may be a lovely late summer evening, but you clearly weren't there for a pleasure jaunt."

"Uh...what happened to me?" Hermione asked, not quite ready to sit up. It occurred to her a moment later that she was entirely topless. Flushing she shifted her uninjured, un-numbered arm up to cover her breasts, and winced when Snape caught her wrist before she could touch her right breast.

"Leave the salve alone, unless you wish for your tender anatomy to be permanently scarred," the Potions Master ordered her.

"Your maidenly modesty is unnecessary; we are merely your healers, as well as gentlemen," the Headmaster reassured her. "Unfortunately, you must leave the salve untouched and uncovered overnight...we would have the school nurse attend to you, and leave you to your modesty, but she has been delayed by family. You are lucky Professor Snape found you when he did; had he not removed the artifact from your flesh, it would have likely burnt itself a hole all the way to your lungs."

"...Artifact?" Hermione asked, blinking. "Uh...my pendant?"

"If by that, you mean the burning-hot object glowing over yonder, then yes," Albus told her, gesturing off to the side.

Carefully turning her head, Hermione caught sight of a bright speck of light, and a hint of the glittering chain suspending it from the lamp on Madam Pomfrey's duty desk. Next to it sat the backpack she had brought with her, enchanted into an extra-dimensional carrier for the two thousand Galleons that were meant to be her spending cash for the days she would have spent on her original task. Two thousand Galleons had seemed like a lot of money at the time. Now...it looked like she might be here a lot longer than anticipated. Two thousand Galleons might not be nearly enough for her new circumstances.

"Whatever it is, no spell that I've tried has been able to cool it down. How extraordinary. What is it, exactly?" Albus enquired politely.

Carefully shrouding her thoughts, Hermione mulled over her situation quickly. If this young Snape was literally only a year into his teaching career, she had gone too far back in time. The Time-Turner had felt hot in her hands after a journey of only three years, but this was too hot.

Chronomancy theory suggested that such a thing might happen, that the farther back in time one tried to travel, the more the weight of solidly unfolded history would resist the journey. It was already known that, for every full day one went back in time, it was considered a good idea to wait one hour before using the Time-Turner to go forward again, so as not to tax the magics involved. Three and a half years had been deemed an acceptable risk; she had known it meant spending roughly fifty-five days in the past before attempting her return, and had traveled with enough Galleons to cover the cost of her stay.

And it had to have been her to go back, since she had been there, had known where everyone would be, and was both trustworthy and experienced enough with Time-Turner usage to be careful about her temporal presence...if she hadn't botched things up by a single, wretched hour.

But she had botched things up, been struck by the Dark Lord's spell, and now it seemed as if the Time-Turner had cast her back to about twenty years before her natural point in time. She would have to enact her cover-story, immerse herself in the role of the identity she had prepared. Occlumency could not only be used to quiet the thoughts and memories roiling through one's mind; it could also be used to entrench a false sense of personality. It would help that most of what she said would be absolutely true, mixed thoroughly with the falsehoods.

Licking her dry lips, Hermione answered the Headmaster's question. "I'm afraid I cannot tell you what it is...other than a botched Artifact...because that information is Classified. And I would tell you who I really am...but that's Classified, too."

"Classified?" Snape challenged, arching a skeptical brow.

"I work for the Department of Mysteries...but they won't tell you who I am, either. There's a reason why we're called Unspeakables. I thank you for finding me, and for taking care of my injury. But I'll have to take my little...glowy-thingy...and be on my way in the morning." She had to limit how much she interacted with both of them. As much as Hermione longed to fling her arms around Albus, to hug him as she had longed to do back when he was still alive, but could no longer do so in her natural timeframe, she couldn't take that risk.

"Perhaps you should return to your laboratory, Severus, and clean up whatever preparations the salve required?" Albus suggested. "I'm sure that Miss...ah...Miss Jane Doe, here, realizes she has nothing to fear from me, if I should be the one to remain behind and keep an eye on her condition?"

Severus tightened his mouth, but turned and left. The Headmaster drew his wand, flicking it and Summoning a chair over to the side of the bed. Settling himself in his fetched seat, he crossed his legs, tucked his hands together in his blue-robed lap, and studied her face with a thoughtful look. Several seconds ticked by, stretching into minutes.

Finally, he spoke. "I am not stupid, Miss Doe. I know what that 'glowy-thing' is. It is a Time-Turner. One that, from the look of it, has been taxed beyond its normal operational capacity. *You* come from our future. And given your comment upon awakening and seeing Professor Snape...you come from several years into his future."

Oh, bugger... If there was anyone she could confide in, it would be Albus Dumbledore. But only by so much. Mindful of his mind-reading skills, she kept her thoughts occluded, and confessed part of the truth. "It is a Time-Turner, and I do come from the future. But it was an accident. I was only supposed to go back a few years. I emerged at the wrong moment, met the wrong person, and got hit by the wrong spell," she told him. "The blast hit my hand while it was touching the Time-Turner's knobs...and sent me spinning farther back in time than anticipated."

"I see. And your original mission? Presuming you can tell me of it, of course," he offered lightly.

Licking her lips, Hermione weighed her options. If three and a half years meant a fifty-five day cool down...twenty years meant closer to a full year's wait. *No, two thousand Galleons isn't going to cut it. Not if I'm to stay out of sight...unless...*

Tonks had once told her of a maxim the Aurors liked to use: Nothing was so well-hidden as something hidden out in plain sight. *If I'm going to be stuck here for roughly a year, waiting for that thing to temporally cool down, then I will have an entire year of either dodging everyone in existence...or an entire year of maybe, just maybe, convincing Severus Snape that he must find a way to live...and an entire year to find and invest in a way for him to hide, for the three and a half years between Nagini's attack and my botched plan to rescue him.*

A name flashed into her head, from the old school records she used to study. It occurred to her at that moment why the alias she had chosen for herself had sounded vaguely familiar. *If I'm gainfully employed, those two thousand Galleons could be used to set him up in his own little sanctuary for those three years. Goodness knows I can think of several possible, high lucrative investments that will be available in the next twenty years...*

"Tell me, Headmaster Dumbledore...and yes, I do know who you are; I will have gone to Hogwarts myself in the future," she admitted carefully. "Would there be any chance be an opening for a teacher here at Hogwarts? Just for one year?"

"...Just for one year?" he asked, brows lifting.

"Yes. If my calculations are correct, it will take almost a year for the Time-Turner to cool down enough for me to operate it again. In that time, I will need to eat, and have a place to sleep, and of course buy some more clothing to wear...and as an Unspeakable, I should think I'm qualified to teach any number of subjects," she reminded him.

"Well...there *is* a possible opening. Bethany Prudmore is supposed to be returning as our Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor, but she did send an owl this morning letting me know she's, well, in the family way. While this isn't the previous century, and such things in one's teaching staff aren't frowned upon anymore...it would still be very awkward for a pregnant woman to instruct such a class. Particularly as she is due roughly halfway between Christmas and the Easter holidays."

Hermione smiled. "Defence, I can *definitely* teach. And as I'm only going to be around for a year at most, the whole...um... Never mind."

Those blue eyes sharpened, gleaming with thought. "Since the position is...cursed?"

Hermione blushed. "I'm going to have to hold my tongue a bit better, aren't I?"

"Indeed. Well. I'm certain Bethany will be relieved to know she doesn't have to worry about teaching this year, though we'll keep her in mind for next year, since no one has held the Defence post for more than a year at a time. But if you are to be our substitute teacher, what shall we call you...and are you prepared to change the continuum if I do accept you for the post?"

"Cindy Miller. I am Cindy Miller," she added, silently activating the persona she had already embedded in her mind. Cindy...not Hermione anymore, but Cindy...smiled wryly. "I *do* remember a Professor Miller being listed as the Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor the year after Professor Prudmore held the job. Unless you know of another Cindy Miller...?"

"Welcome to Hogwarts, Professor Miller," Albus told her, clasping her uninjured hand. "As much as you'll have to watch your tongue over giving away the secrets of the future, I fear I shall have to watch over mine. There is so much about the future I *need* to know..."

"I would not be an Unspeakable, if I spoke of all that I know," Cindy warned him.

To her relief, he chuckled at her words. Patting her left hand, Albus rose from his chair. "I shall leave you to your privacy, young madam. Feel free to call me Albus, when we're not being formal and on the job."

"Remember, do not touch the salve, unless you wish all that delicate skin to be scarred. And try not to move too much, particularly your right arm and shoulder. I'll send in some house elves to feed you some soup in a little bit, and help you attend to your other needs. Let them know if you need either myself or Professor...Severus to come back and cast a warming charm. Until Madam Pomfrey...Poppy...reaches the school in three more days, I'm afraid you'll have to put up with Severus' ministrations. But he is competent, for all that he's roughly your age...unless you already know that?"

Albus gave her a speculative, inquisitive look.

"If you recommend him, then I'm certain he'll be adequate for my needs," she agreed, then smiled slyly. "But that's all I will say on the matter."

He left her alone, but she didn't relax back into being Hermione just yet. She would stay Cindy, so long as anyone was around her, and the Infirmary was too easily accessible by anyone for true privacy. It would be too exhausting to maintain this mental persona every single hour nonstop, but it would be manageable whenever she had a chance of company.

Chapter Two

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CHAPTER TWO

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"...And I want the remaining three hundred of those Galleons to be converted to Muggle funds and used to purchase shares in a little company called 'Microsoft'," Cindy instructed her broker.

"All three hundred?" the goblin, Snaphroat, inquired, arching the fuzz that passed for his eyebrow. "Micro...soft?"

"Yes. I realize it isn't easy for Gringotts to invest in all these Muggle companies, particularly ones that are overseas, but I'm willing to accept the risks involved," she said.

"You mean the fees," Snaphroat replied, grinning. A goblin grinning was a very toothy, unsettling sight.

"Professor Miller!"

She jumped, dislodging a couple of coals under her hands. Shaking off her startlement, Cindy nodded politely to the goblin broker. "Forgive me, duty calls. Remember, these stock shares are to be held for the four names on the list I gave you, and only those four names. And those names..."

"...Are to be held in strictest confidence. We *are* Gringotts, madam," the goblin stated with gravelly, if still toothy, dignity.

"And that's why I wouldn't entrust this task to anyone else," she agreed, smiling.

"Professor Miller! Stop wagging your...your *bum*," Severus Snape hissed from behind her, "and get out of that fireplace immediately! What if a student saw you?"

Rolling her eyes, Cindy deliberately wriggled her bum a bit extra as she backed out of the Floo call. As soon as she was free and could push to her feet, the roaring green fire flared and died back down to its usual low orange flames. Dusting herself off, she smiled at him. He wrinkled his lip, then pinched the bridge of his nose.

"...Do you realize how difficult it is for someone of our age to maintain *discipline* in the faces of those only a few years our junior? Do you not remember the disaster of being *nice* to them in your first two weeks?" her fellow instructor demanded.

Cindy winced at the memory. Her students had thought her a pushover, and had grown progressively less attentive, to the point where half of them...*half*...had laughed off her homework assignments. After a miserable weekend thinking she was a failure of a teacher, she had finally pulled Albus aside that Sunday evening to ask him how to

deal with the mess she was making. The Headmaster had suggested seeking out Severus for his own opinion on the matter.

She hadn't been all that keen on snapping and snarling at her students, threatening with lost House points and detentions with the younger but still unpleasant caretaker, Argus Filch...but then had received the brilliant idea of dueling with her students to get them to respect her and heed her instructions. She had announced that anyone who could best her in a duel...or best her two out of three for her advanced sixth and seventh form classes...could choose to ignore one homework assignment that week. But if anyone refused to do their homework, they had to face her in a duel.

Thanks to her experiences in the forthcoming war against Voldemort, facing off against his Death Eaters, and her training as an Unspeakable, which had included the offensive and defenses spells to help protect the secrets of the Department of Mysteries...none of them could best her, yet. It was an effective threat, for anyone who talked out of order or slacked off an assignment had to face her in a duel. All of them were doing their homework, and with quite a bit more respect in their eyes. In fact, the only person who dared challenge her openly was Filius Flitwick; the petit Charms Master was in his element as a duelist, now that he had a worthy opponent.

Severus studied her chastised look. "...I thought as much. *Do* remember the dignity of our position. Particularly if you expect me to assist you in the future."

Cindy's gaze dropped at those inadvertent words just as he turned to leave her office. To her surprise and distraction, a slight lump was visible at the center of his hips. *That's an...erection? Severus Snape has an erection? ...Severus Snape has an erection because he was staring at my bum?*

Her brain disengaged, much like a Muggle automobile clutch popping. That was the only possible explanation for why her jaw dropped and her lips and tongue moved, entirely of their own accord. "Well, at least you enjoyed the view!"

Snape whirled back to face her, his sallow cheeks flushing peach at her comment. She lifted her brown gaze to his black one, and lifted her chin slightly higher. Once said, it couldn't be taken back, but then he was the one with a stiffy. His mouth opened, shut, opened again, then compressed itself into a thin line.

And here comes my Gryffindor brashness and bravery..

"You are a man, and I am a woman, Severus. Provided you're not a poufter, it's perfectly natural for you to see my bum wriggling out of the fireplace, and react to that sight. I consider myself flattered that you *did* notice it wriggling...and as we are both adults," she added, pushing her bravery to its post-war limits, "should you ever wish to see it wriggling again, under any other circumstances...feel free to ask. But not when any of the students are around. Now, was there a specific reason why you came?"

His mouth opened and closed a few more times, his cheeks paled and flushed again, then he shook himself slightly, muttered, "...It can wait," and took himself out of her office.

It took her a few moments to realize just how her last question could have been reinterpreted. Cheeks heating, she turned away from the door, discreetly fanning her skin. *My, my...all those brains, and not nearly as sarky as he used to...er, will eventually become. Not to mention younger-looking... A pity he's still so deeply in love with Lily.*

Still, you know why you came back in time she reminded herself, staring up at the still-glowing pendant now preserved in a bell-jar she had placed on the mantle of her office hearth. She checked it every day to see if its heat had faded enough to touch, but after three months, it still glowed brightly, if with more of a yellowish cast than a white-hot one. *To save the life of Severus Snape. You may have developed a crush on him during your sixth year...and broken your heart over it when Harry said he killed poor Albus, and tried to bury your feelings in your affection for Ron in the months following...but you conceived of the plan to save Severus Snape from that night in the Shrieking Shack because you still care very much for him, and you know he got a rotten deal all these years.*

Even if he'll never love me, never know that I'm not just crushing over the idea of him...as if anyone could keep crushing on him after knowing his personality first-hand...I'm beginning to fall for the real man, this younger him. He deserves to live and be free in the future, and to have that chance to try and be happier again, post-Voldie. Even if he'll lose a lot of his humanity between now and then, I hope he regains it after I've rescued him. I hope he'll have a chance to regain it.

...But he did notice my butt, and enjoyed it to the point of an actual stiffy.

Smiling at that thought, she dusted off her clothes and pulled out the chair at her desk. A chair that one day both Remus Lupin and Severus Snape would occupy. That thought pleased her as well, until a horrid memory creased her brow. *Urgh, and Dolores Umbridge's horrid pink butt...and that fakery fop, Gilderoy Lockhart. I cannot believe I was such a gullible little twit as to have had a crush on him.*

Which reminds me, I must remember to go over the steps necessary to protect oneself from a basilisk with my fourth-year students...not that any of them will still be around when my second year comes to pass, but it never hurts to be prepared.

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A knock on the door of Severus' office was met by a grunt. Opening the panel, Cindy poked her curly blonde head inside. "...Are you not coming to Hogsmeade?"

Seeing that it was only her, Severus returned his forehead to his palm. "No."

"Why not?" Cindy asked, slipping inside. She shut the door behind her, enclosing them in privacy. "Don't you want to get out of here, away from the students? I'll buy you a drink..."

"I have a headache. And a stack of atrocities to grade. Why is it we can find it in the budget to teach Divinations...the most horrid piece of twaddle in existence...yet we cannot find enough money to invest in writing courses?" he demanded.

Moving closer, Cindy spotted a photograph resting on his desk. It lay on its back, the frame encapsulating a single laughing moment in the life, the shortened life, of a young, redheaded, green-eyed girl. Unfortunately, he noticed her noticing his wizarding picture, and snatched it off the desk, tucking it quickly into a drawer of his desk.

"Let me guess. You've lost someone you loved," Cindy found herself saying, lifting her chin at the desk-drawer he was shutting.

"It's none of your business who that was," he muttered, picking up and jabbing his quill into the red inkpot on his desk.

"You're not the only one who's lost someone they loved," she said quietly. "I lost a very brave and worthy man...to the Dark Lord."

Severus glanced up at that, his dark eyes flicking to her face. For one moment, his expression was startled, his appearance extra-youthful. Then he shuttered his gaze and returned it to his students' abysmal essays. "My condolences. But a lot of people lost their loved ones."

"And a lot more will lose their lives, in the years to come." She knew she was skirting the edge of temporal diarrhea, by saying even that much, but she couldn't quite stop herself. Not when he looked up at her again. She did try to turn it into a random scenario, though. "One should be prepared, don't you think? Yesterday, it was a Dark Lord. Tomorrow, it could be a...a rampaging mummy, awakened by accident from the depths of the Royal Museum. Love and loss are inevitable...but the good thing about love is, you can find it again. Or it can find you, if you remember to stop and let it back in again."

Lifting his chin, he gave her a firm look. "I have lost my love, in such a way that it will *never* come back. If you think..."

"...What of your friendship with Albus? He treats you as a mentor with a prize, if puzzling, pupil," she pointed out, interrupting his bitter retort.

Severus snorted. "He treats me as a fractious horse, offering the carrot in one hand and the whip in the other...why are you bothering to talk with me?"

"Because you are worthy. Of conversation," she added, remembering her earlier words. He slanted her a sharp-eyed look. "You are intelligent, mature, closer than the other instructors to my own age, witty on those occasions you choose to lighten up, and not unattractive to me. And I bother to talk with you because I was hoping to entice you out for a drink at the pub and a chat about anything that has *nothing* to do with this school. The sight of which annoys me."

He grunted, and flexed his shoulders. "I have a headache."

The subtle movement between his arms and neck wasn't wasted on her. Moving forward, around his desk, Cindy stopped behind him. He glanced over his shoulder, then started, sitting up when she dropped her fingers lightly onto his shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"Tension headache. I can see it in the way you hunch, and the stiffness of your neck. Relax; I'm quite good at this," she added, slowly circling the palms of her hands into his muscles. "I dated a man back when I was an apprentice who suffered from tension headaches. They're horrible, mood-destroying things, aren't they? But with just a little bit of care and attention, and a nice bit of massage...particularly up and down the tendons... There, is that feeling better?"

He grunted a little, but didn't deny her words. She continued to gently knead his muscles, stroking her thumbs along whatever skin she could reach, and over the top of his teaching robes wherever she couldn't. His hair was a little oily, just like it looked, but it was soft and sleek all the same. And though his demeanor was cold most of the time, his flesh was quite warm beneath her fingertips. Enjoying the thrill of not just touching him, but soothing away his pain, she carefully refrained from thinking of anything but what she was doing at that moment. Just in case his Legilimency had already been honed to the point of casual eavesdropping, though she guessed it was still quite early in his spying career.

When he was relaxed enough that his head was nodding, she cupped his shoulders in a gentle squeeze, and leaned down by his ear. "If you're feeling well enough to abandon your work and come down into town, I'll be at the Three Broomsticks until supper. My treat, if you choose to join me for a friendly drink. And nothing but a friendly drink."

Leaving him at his desk, she headed for the door. A glance over her shoulder showed him giving her a puzzled frown, but that was alright. If he was expecting her to go all heavy-handed and demand that they do more after all that sensual touching of his neck and shoulders...well, she had paid some attention to the way the other girls in her dorm had seduced and retained their boyfriends. Give him a taste of what she could offer, something to tease his senses, and then imply that she was only going to give him a fraction of that in the end. It would drive most men into seeking out more than that meager offering. Only time would tell if Severus Snape was like most men.

Not that you're here to seduce him away from the memory of Lily she reminded herself. Just to seduce him into trusting you, so that you can eventually explain your great escape plan to him, with the hope that he'll actually follow through with it, when that night comes around again. When said night comes close again. Because if the Time-Turner heated up one way, traveling so many years into the past...I'll have to hop forward in carefully gauged increments, with pauses in between to make up for the heating problem...which means I'll be stuck spending fifty days at a time waiting for the Time-Turner to cool down, if I leap three years forward at a time.

Hmm. Better talk with Snapthroat again to see how well my investments are doing, and how well they could be growing...and I should squirrel away more of my teaching paycheques each month, too. I certainly won't be able to get this particular job, again.

Oh, yes, and note to self, sneak out tomorrow to get your hair re-cut and re-dyed. Your roots are beginning to show again...

...

The alarms from her bell-jar wards sent Cindy stumbling from her bed down through the hidden stair to her office. Dressing gown clenched over her nightshift with one hand, the other with her wand at the ready, she found her would-be thief whirling to face her as soon as the stone panel swung open. His wand was lit with *lumos*, illuminating the room.

"...Severus?" Confused, she stepped fully into the room, wand lowered slightly, but only slightly. He *had* tried to get into the bell-jar; nothing else would have set off those wards, and no one else but a fellow teacher could have bypassed the wards on her office door without setting those off as well. "What are you doing in here?" Squinting at the clock on the wall by the door, she read the time. "It's almost one o'clock in the morning!"

He took a few steps toward her, his wand still gripped in his right hand, his left pointing unsteadily at the orange-glowing object in the jar. "*That* is a Time-Turner! I investigated it over the Christmas hols...something I should have done a lot sooner. You have a Time-Turner!"

Releasing her grip on her dressing robe, she flicked her wand to activate the chamber's lights, then planted her hands on her hips. Part of it was exasperation, and part of it was a move calculated to draw his attention, or at least distract him. Her nightshift was thin and thus ever so slightly translucent, and without her robe being sashed into place, she knew it would reveal a few pertinent shadows here and there. From the way his gaze wavered, then dipped, lingering first at her breasts, then at her hips, it was working.

"If it is one, why would that be of any importance to you?" she demanded.

"If it is one," he echoed her words, his voice tighter than hers, "then I can go *back*. I can *save* her!"

Cindy rolled her eyes. "Oh, please...you're half Muggle-born! Surely you've read Orwell's story? Severus," she enunciated, "*she is dead*. Irrevocably, unquestionably *dead*. The hero of the Time Machine story *could not* save his beloved *because* she died, prompting him to create the story's equivalent of a Time-Turner in the first place. Without her death, he would not have been impelled to create the machine, and thus could not go back and save her. And there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that Lily Evans Potter is dead!"

He blinked at her, face pale and wan. His mouth tightened, his nostrils flared, then he pointed his wand at her. "If I cannot go *back*, then why are *you* here? Why *here*? Why *now*?"

"It was an accident. I meant to go back only a certain, set distance...and got into a fight because I mistook the wrong bloody hour of my arrival. In that fight, I got tossed farther back. A lot farther. Even if you could break through my wards, you *couldn't* use it," she warned him. "It's literally still too hot to handle...or do you not remember *this*?"

Tugging sideways on the neckline of her nightgown, she showed him the slight scarring that remained from the hole the Time-Turner had tried to burn through her upper breast. She had made the mistake of absently scratching it when the salve had started to dry and itch, that first night. Giving him a good look at the swell of her breast as well as the thin pink line, she let go of her collar.

"How did you know her name?" he asked, his voice unsteady.

"What?" she asked.

"How did you know her name?" Severus demanded. "I never told you her name, I never spoke of her blighted marriage...and you certainly didn't attend Hogwarts with either of us!"

Oh, bugger... Rolling her eyes, she settled her shoulders. "If I am from the future, surely that means I would have ways of knowing such things? *And* an imperative to keep my mouth shut about them?...Look, your love for her is admirable. Your dedication is heroic. But there is *more* to live for than your memories. And there is *nothing* in the world that says you cannot open up your heart and learn to love someone else again! Or at least learn to love life again!"

He narrowed his eyes at that. Hoping she hadn't said too much, Cindy gestured at the bell-jar.

"Look, you're not going to get into it. If I am from the future, then you can bet I've used wards that haven't even been invented yet, let alone had any counters developed for them. Even if you *could* get into it, and the pendant cooled enough to be handled, you'd never be able to rescue her. She's *provably* dead. Paradox would prevent you from ever succeeding, so all you can do is go forward into the rest of your life."

"What kind of a life could I have without her?" he demanded. "What kind of a life do I have now?"

"A very important one! *If* things unfold as they should...and that is all I will say on the matter." Folding her arms under her breasts, she lifted them enough to hopefully distract him. Once again his gaze dropped to the thin cotton, and the faint dusky discs of her nipples beneath it.

Before she realized it, he had glided forward in that catlike, graceful way of his, and stopped when he was close enough for her to feel the heat of his body, though he didn't quite close the gap. Eyes flicking between her chest and face, he enquired, "So you think I'm important enough, you should flirt with me? Butter me up for whatever lies ahead? Gain secret insight into my life and my motivations? Or are all of your words merely a *ploy* to seduce me? You think I will forget her that easily?"

Shifting her hands back to her hips, she met his gaze steadily. "I *know* you won't. But you deserve a lot more than the misery you're putting yourself through. Some people cannot be saved, it's true. Others can. You think about that."

"Saved, for what? For you?" he challenged.

"Believe me, I know I have about as much a chance at having that kind of a relationship with you as a snowflake in hell, given what I know of you and your lost love," she admitted, doing her best to ignore the tightness of her throat. "But I'm still saying that there's more to your life than misery, repentance, and regret. A lot more."

He took a step forward, bringing their bodies together. He was warm, a wonderful contrast against the chill of her office even through the woolen layers of his robes. "Are you offering to *show* me all that I could have to live for?"

The offer was tempting, an unexpected opening...but the look in his eyes was shuttered. Closed. Cheeks heating, Cindy met Severus' gaze steadily. "Just like *you*, I will not be *used*. If you have an honest interest in me as a person, and not just a warm body, we can discuss this at that point. If all you want is a warm body...I suggest you try Knockturn Alley. But do see Poppy about contraceptive potions and the prophylaxis charm before you go. There are some nasty diseases lurking out there, and you'll not want to beget any bastards."

He stared at her a moment more, then stepped back, robbing her of his warmth. Without a word, he turned and strode out of her office. Cindy deflated her stern stance with a sigh, relieved he hadn't pressed the issue. Severus was the Half-Blood Prince; even at this young an age, he knew many more dangerous hexes than she did, and she had invested a good portion of her time in the Department in researching some of them, herself. Looking up at the bell-jar, she resolved to move it into her quarters and secure it behind some extra wards.

Just in case.

...

A lean, dark-haired, dark-clad body slumped into the seat next to hers. Cindy glanced at her sudden companion in curiosity. "What bring you out of the dreary depths of the dungeons, on such an equally dreary day? And into my company, of all possible people?"

He already had a drink, firewhiskey from the hue and steam rising out of his glass. Knocking back part of it, he stared across the table, not meeting her eyes. "What could I have to hope for?"

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, bemused by his strange turn of phrase.

"I dream only in nightmares, whenever I forgo a Dreamless Draught. *What* could I have to hope for?"

"Living." She couldn't tell him anything else.

He knocked back more of the drink, hissing through his teeth as it no doubt burned its way down his throat. "What's the point of living, without love?"

The question made her roll her eyes. "Oh, please... You make it sound like you'll only ever have one destined bride." The sharp look he gave her made her roll her eyes a second time. "I don't mean like *that*. I meant in the general sense. We are not given just one person to love. We start with a mother and a father...and for those who have them, brothers and/or sisters. Then come our best friends, our first crushes, and subsequent *amours*. A deep love is rarer than the love of a friend, but as you can love more than one parent, and love more than one sibling, and love more than one friend, you *can* love more than one woman. Nor will loving another shame your love for the one, just as it does not shame your love for your...for your best friend if you learn to love a new friend."

She had almost said his mother and father, but knew something of what his childhood had been like, and knew the analogy was the wrong one for that moment.

"The only failure in love is *failing* to love again, Severus. Refusing to love again is about as smart as locking yourself in a dungeon cell and tossing the key through the bars...and you have *never* struck me as a stupid man," she said.

"Never...?" he prodded, giving her a pointed look that pricked at the secrets he knew she held.

She met his gaze. "Never."

He sipped at his drink, taking more time with the fiery liqueur than before. A thoughtful grunt, a long pause, then he spoke again, changing the subject. "Your House points and detention for young Nott were excessive."

"I caught him with his hand up Melissa's skirt. You don't see Ermengarde complaining about the points I took from Hufflepuff for her inappropriate behavior, do you?" Cindy said, matching his calmness. "And you're not the Head of Slytherin."

"Yet."

He slanted her a look, no doubt wanting confirmation of his ambitions. She wasn't so easily lured. But she was secretly thrilled that he had sought her out. She might never have any relationship with him beyond this, a mild mix of the camaraderie and rivalry of fellow teachers, but it was enough that he had sought her out, and stayed for her company. Testing the waters, she asked, "So, staying over for the Easter hols?"

"They're over a month away...and yes, I am. I have nothing better to do."

"I was thinking of taking in a new musical down in London. I've snagged two tickets, and was going to offer one to Albus...but if you're on speaking terms with me, you could always come along in his stead."

"A musical? What musical?" Severus asked.

"Something about cats."

"Cats?" he repeated, skeptical.

"It's been getting some good reviews," she pointed out. "Besides, it's about as far from life at Hogwarts as one could get, and still be able to Apparate."

He grunted and sipped at the last of his drink.

"And if *you* go...I don't have to buy Albus any candy from the outrageously overpriced concession booth."

He snorted and shot her a veiled, ever so slightly amused look. "Just for that, I'll want *two* nougats."

She smiled. "Deal."

"...But this is *not* a date," he warned her.

Quickly lifting her hands, she negated that idea. "Absolutely not. Just two friends enjoying a trip to London. I'm well aware you wouldn't date me even if my life depended upon it."

He muttered something, at that.

"Beg your pardon?" Cindy asked, curious.

"I said, I'd date you if your life depended on it. But *only* if your life truly did."

Cindy sipped at her ginger tonic, hiding her smile. He really was quite witty, even if he didn't mean to be amusing.

...

"It's *theatre*!" Cindy protested, clinging to Severus' elbow as they walked through the streets of Muggle London together, looking for an appropriate dark alley to Apparate from. Her heels caught on a wonky bit of paving, and he quickly steadied her, keeping her from taking a header on the unforgiving, gritty cement. "Thank you."

"It's *absurd*," he countered. "And you're welcome. Yes, the singing was good, and the dancing athletic, and I'm never going to get that insipid tune about memories out of my head...but it was about *cats*!" He snorted. "It didn't even have much of a storyline to tie it together! Just a bundle of prancy little vignettes."

"That's because it's *entertainment*. More than that, it's entertainment for the television generation, people who are used to short segments of drama and plot interrupted by cheery commercial jingles. Though I'll concede your point about the tune," she confessed. "I'm not going to get that thing out of my head for a while, either."

"I suppose you'll say that makes it 'our song'," he scoffed. "Appropriate, in a way...given how it's persistently annoying. Just like you."

"Severus, *darling*," she drawled, mocking the endearment, "I should like to think I'd pick a much better song to encapsulate what the two of us feel toward each other."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know... 'Monster Mash'?" she suggested...and surprised herself by surprising a laugh out of him. He tried to choke it back, but it escaped anyway in a breathless guffaw, leaving her the one holding him upright for a long moment. He swung around to partially face her as he straightened. Their eyes met, and for a moment...more than their eyes met.

Inhaling deeply, both of them looked away at the same moment. Cindy blinked a few times, waiting for her heart to finish skipping. "Erm...I think there's a good alley up ahead, on the left."

"I was thinking the one on the right. We may have to cross the street, but it should give us a chance to get rid of our shadows."

She quirked one brow, then discreetly glanced over her shoulder, using the pretext of a brief snuggle. A dual-purpose pretext, for he smelled pleasantly of herbs and soap and a dash of cologne. "...Those three thugs in denim jackets? They shouldn't be any trouble. If nothing else, I am authorized to use Memory Charms."

"A handy thing, given your mysterious mission. What *is* it, anyway? Aside from doing your best to dent survival skills into the heads of unappreciative teenagers?" Severus enquired.

Biting her lower lip, she debated for a moment. If she was ever to gain his cooperation for what was to come, she would have to start laying the foundations of a trust between them. "There was someone who fell. Someone important. We...the people I was with...had to leave the scene behind. Including that person. I went back after our primary mission was over...but the body was gone. No one else would have gone there, so this person may have survived...yet the person never showed up again in the intervening years. No body, no trace...no clue as to their whereabouts."

"The Minister of the day agreed with me that this person was too important, too deeply honored by those in the know, to allow their fate to remain unknown. So I went back in time to the scene of the crime...and, as you know, I misjudged the moment and got knocked for a temporal loop. With the pendant cooling down, day by day, I should be able to head forward again after the end of the school year. I'll do it a few years at a time," Cindy said, "and so only spend a couple months at a time waiting for it to cool while I return to the correct hour...rather than the wrong one wherein I forgot to calculate daylight savings time correctly," she confessed wryly. "I made a simple mistake...and so here I am, paying for it by having to dent survival skills into the thick, pubescent skulls of a bunch of semi-hopeless dunderheads."

"And here I thought you were brilliant," Severus quipped, hurrying them so they could make the crossing light. "I should never have put you on a pedestal, if I'd known you had temporally clay feet."

Cindy stuck out her tongue at him. "It's correctable! *And* it allowed me to help out Hogwarts...and even to befriend you. I've quite enjoyed our friendship, actually." A sidelong glance showed the three thugs were now tracking a new set of victims, heading for the alley she had first suggested. It was just as well; simply by being here, they ran afoul of the potential for mucking up the timestreams. "I guess they weren't following us. Which is just as well. I don't want to muck around too much with fate."

"You just want to clarify a fate. So why play the charity-case with me? Mending my broken heart and all that rubbish?" he asked her. "Not that you *can*..."

"Because at the rate you're currently going, you'll likely turn increasingly bitter and isolated. Even you deserve to know that others still care about you. And no, that's not foretelling. That's merely a probability based on your current pattern of habits," she added tartly. "*Your* future is not set in stone, after all."

"Says the woman who traveled back in time? How much of a probability is that?" he asked sardonically.

"Reasonable enough for me to plant a few seeds of doubt and possibility in your path. And for *your* information, I earned very good grades back in Arithmancy class," she shot back.

They stepped into the alley, spotted a huge rubbish bin, and aimed for its other side. Once there, Severus crowded her back against the old brick wall next to the bin. "Just in case someone thinks to follow us...we should make this look good, like a happy couple *too* happy to wait for a hotel room."

Leaning in close, he brought his mouth down to hers. Cindy quickly lifted her hand, covering his mouth, preventing him from kissing her. She could feel the slight rasp of

his beard stubble, the warmth of his lips, the chilly tip of his nose. "No."

He pulled back, frowning at her. "No? ...Isn't this the classic setup for a tricked-into-it date? Convince me we're just friends, take me out, dine and wine and entertain me, and secretly expect to be groped at the end of the night?"

"No." As much as she wanted to be groped by him, this was completely the wrong moment for it. Cindy met his gaze firmly. "The only time I would ever want you to kiss me, Severus Snape, is if you *meant* it. You do not mean it, and you certainly do not want it. Or rather, you do not want *me*. I will not cheapen the memory of your affection for another woman by being a *warm body* to stand in her stead."

He stared at her for a long moment, his youthful face hardened with the concealing of his thoughts, echoing the older, more bitter man her younger self would one day know. Releasing her, he stepped back. "You are a very vexing woman, Cindy Miller. Or whoever you are. It would help if I knew *why* you pursue me."

"I pursue you...as a friend...because I admire you. Because you're intelligent enough to keep up with me, and you are not the least bit intimidated by my brilliance. Or offended by it. That's a rare quality in any man, and I thoroughly intend to enjoy it wherever I can find it," she admitted quietly. "I persuade you...again, as a friend...because I hate to see people wasting their potential. You have a lot of potential in you here and now. I'd like to see you keep that in mind as time progresses."

"Considering you've barely known me, what you know of me is what I will become in the future," he reminded her with a sort of smug bitterness. "And as you yourself pointed out so harshly, you *cannot change me*. What you knew, what prompted you to speak to me of these things, cannot be changed, else you will not be prompted to speak of them. George Orwell, *The Time Machine*. The hero cannot rescue his wife from her fated death, because it is her death that prompts him to try and rescue her."

"Yes, but there's a difference in your case," she said, giving him a tight smile. "You may be the same man you always were up until the moment of my temporal departure...but *after* that future point, when I return to my natural time...at *that* point, you *may* have the capacity to change."

His smugness faded, leaving only the bitterness in its place. "The only thing that could possibly change how I feel is for the woman I love to throw herself into my arms. Since *that* clearly will never happen...this conversation is over."

"Suit yourself. But, Severus," she told him, catching his elbow as he started to turn away from her. When he met her gaze, she gave him the truth. "The woman that I am, the woman I have become, I will *always* be your friend. As my grandmother once told me, 'Friends add up, but enemies multiply. You do the math.' When I leave at the end of the school year, I'll come back every few years...and I'd like to be able to drop in on you, say hello, and make sure you're still alright. As a friend."

"Because I'll have so very few friends?" he sneered, pulling back from her touch. "Is that what my future holds?"

"No, Severus. Because *I'll* have damned few."

That made him nonplussed. He blinked twice, frowned for a moment, then tightened his mouth. Not giving him a chance to respond, particularly if it was a negative, she stepped forward and looped her arm through his elbow.

"I'll Side-Along Apparate you as far as Carlisle, then you can manage the northern leg. Same as we did when we came down. Alright?" she asked.

"Fine." Squaring his shoulders, he braced himself visibly for the long squeeze of magic.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 8

A tale of fate versus self-determinism.

CHAPTER THREE

...

"...Professor Miller? Good...you haven't left yet."

Cindy turned in time to see the young professor smoothing down his robes, as if he had hurried up the stairs to her quarters, disarranging his garments in the process. She resumed tucking the small sundry items she had collected over the school year into her valise, though she did arch a brow at his choice of greeting. "Professor? The children have been seen safely to the train station. I would think you'd call me by my given name."

"If that *is* your given name," he reminded her, stepping into her quarters. Closing the door almost completely behind him, he approached her. He cast his gaze over the table in her sitting room, the little knickknacks given to her by the other teachers at Christmas, and choice presents from a couple of her more appreciative students. "Is it?"

"In the sense that I gave it to myself...perhaps. Perhaps it is a part of my real name. Or a name I wish I could have had." Making sure she had the key to her Gringotts vault tucked into her jeans pocket, she double-checked the presence of the chain slung around her neck.

"It's cold enough to touch, isn't it? I suppose you'll be leaving for...whenever," Severus said.

Facing him, she nodded. "Yes."

"Will you be leaving from here...or out where we found you?" he asked.

"Out there." She lifted her chin slightly, aiming at one of the windows. "I wouldn't want to interfere with the fate of the school by popping into existence at the wrong place and moment. Too many people walk these halls too many days of the year."

"But outside, you could find yourself emerging in a lightning storm, or a blizzard...or in a place where you shouldn't be found." Facing the table, he picked up a small figurine of a witch posed in a classic dueling stance. "The hair's too dark to be you. Unless you stopped dyeing your hair."

"I like it dyed. Blondes do have more fun," she quipped. "And I'll try to pick a spot that's out of the way. Someplace I can use repeatedly, since I do have to make my trip forward in several shorter, safer stages."

"I could suggest an alternate solution..." He glanced quickly at her, looking for her reaction.

Cindy didn't know what to make of that. "Go on."

"I have a house. It's untenanted most of the year. Protected under charm from Muggle intrusion. You could...spend your time there. And send word to me when you have arrived, if it isn't the summertime. The Headmaster says I have job-security, so long as he's Headmaster," he added, attempting a brief smile before losing it again. "There's a spare room; I hardly ever go in there. Or the attic, if you won't mind the low ceiling," he added. "I'm headed there this evening, via the Floo."

She weighed the potential troubles versus the possible advantages. Finally, she nodded. "I'd like that. And I appreciate the offer. But only up until a certain point, time-wise. Then I'll have to position myself more carefully."

"Understood. Seven o'clock, in front of the Headmaster's office," he told her, setting the figurine down. A last, inscrutable look, then he took himself out of her quarters.

Is this a good thing, that he came to me like this? Or is it only going to complicate things? Hermione nibbled on her lower lip. *No...I still need him to trust me. And I need to know what's going through his head. What will go through his head, on that night. Even if I have to plant those ideas personally...*

I will save you, Severus Snape, she thought, staring at the closed door of her suite. *I've spent a year getting to know you as a man, not just a teacher or a spy. I cannot get to know you, and to like the man you are, and not try.*

...

Three years and five days later, the rather warm-feeling Time-Turner stopped spinning. The dim, grey twilight of the attic at 42 Spinner's End brightened a little, picking up a dusty, golden glow from the tiny pair of west-facing windows. For Hermione, it had only been thirty-six minutes since she sat down in the chair Severus had provided for her. For him, it had been a lot longer than that.

Drawing her wand, she thought for a few moments, then pictured the happiest moment in her life, the defeat of Lord Voldemort, and Harry's survival. A whispered pair of words, and a silvery otter emerged from her wand. It blinked, craned its head up to peer at her, and awaited her orders.

"Find Severus and tell him I'm here."

Twisting, the otter dove down through the planks lining the attic floor. Hermione stretched, then stood, stooped both to clear the ceiling and to pick up her valise, and made her way to the trap door. Lowering it, she started down the steep steps it formed. No sooner had she reached the bottom than Severus appeared at the end of the short corridor, hurrying up the steps. He looked a little older, a little surer of himself.

"Cindy...I thought you were due two days ago," he admonished her, in lieu of greeting.

"Three years and five days was the easiest leap to calculate," she replied, allowing the ladderway to rise back up into the ceiling. Once again she was Cindy Miller, and not Hermione. Lifting the chain, Cindy indicated the Time-Turner. "It's a bit hot, but not unbearable."

"That's good. Um...how long will you have to wait before the next one?" he enquired.

"Based on my observations during the school year, and my calculations for my trip forward, I have about forty-five days to wait."

"I see..." He looked a little uncomfortable at that.

She took pity on him. "I'll go and rent a room at the Leaky Cauldron. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to stay here. But we will get together and chat, right?"

"Of course. You're still fresh from your year of teaching...you'll want to know all the latest school and staff gossip, no doubt. I was just about to start making supper, if you'd care to join me?" he offered.

That made her smile. "You fed me right before I left. It's only been just over half an hour for me."

A hint of peach tinted his sallow cheeks. "Oh..."

"I know it's been three years for you," she reassured him. "Don't worry about it. You can have your supper, and I'll have a cup of tea...oh, that salve you made for me," she added, gesturing at her right shoulder. "Do you suppose you could make up a pot of it for me? Just in case I should, oh...trip and accidentally spin too far one way or another through time again?"

Severus eyed her skeptically for a moment, but merely nodded and gestured at the stairs down into the rest of the small house. "Of course. Earl Gray with...a dollop of honey, was it?"

"Why, yes...you remembered!" she praised, giving him a smile.

"It may have been three years, but I haven't completely lost my wits in the interim. Even if I am still teaching pack after pack of increasingly dull-minded twits," he added under his breath.

"Oh, please. Surely it cannot be that bad?" Cindy challenged him.

He scoffed. "You haven't been there for the last three years. Let me tell you about a fumble-fingered first-year named Timothy Blake. The very first thing he did was lose his wand over the side of the boat! And then, he *sat* on his toad. Squashed it flat, the dunderhead. Of course, toads are too stupid to move out of the way; Albus is thinking of banning them from the list of acceptable pets. Even Minerva despaired up through the Christmas hols of ever teaching him anything more complicated than how to turn a matchstick ever so slightly metallic..."

...

Two years, ten months, and fifteen days after she sat down in the attic again, Hermione emerged, mentally turned herself back into Cindy, descended to the ground floor, and sat down to a supper-and-tea with a slightly older Severus Snape. He was barely beginning to hit his prime years, yet those years were weighing down upon him. Anyone who had spent the last three-ish years with him might not have noticed the changes, but to her, they were very fresh and very apparent.

When the last wry chuckles over student and faculty antics had died down, she poured herself another cup of tea, stirred in a dollop of honey, and sighed. "...It's been too long."

"Cindy, you have only been gone half an hour," he chided her.

"I meant, for you." She looked up at him, seated across the dinette table from her. "I feel like I should be there for you, instead of popping 'round at the start of every few summers. But...I can't be."

He looked down at his emptied plate, marred only by a few smears of gravy and a bit of broccoli stem. Lifting his napkin, he wiped his mouth, then set it down. "The sentiment is appreciated, but unnecessary. I am becoming the man I am fated to be. Teacher of dunderheads...and waiting to see if the future unfolds as I fear it might. I *want* to ask you so many questions, to ease so many of my doubts, one way or another..."

"...But I cannot do that," she reminded him. "And we both know why. Temporal paradox."

Lifting her cup, she blew on the hot liquid, then sipped carefully. It was a warm summer night, but she didn't mind. It gave her something to do. Severus surprised her in the next moment, drawing his wand. He flicked it, Summoning something from the front room.

A black leather portfolio flew into the kitchen. Catching it, he sent his dishes to the sink with another flick, and unzipped the case. "I've been saving articles of some interest. At least, of interest to me. I thought we could discuss them before you Floo to the Leaky Cauldron. If you do not mind, that is. I...don't know that many people who are interested in as many different subjects as you and I."

"I'd be more than delighted to discuss them with you," she agreed, smiling at him. "A man of your caliber, Severus Snape, is very difficult to find in *any* timeframe."

A hint of peach in his cheeks suggested a pleased flush, but he merely pulled out the first one, an article on the latest advances in defensive charms. Glancing through it quickly, he summarized its salient points for her.

...

"So...I will see you in another three years? Perfect as ever? Unaging?" Severus asked Cindy as they reached the spot in the upper hall where the trap door to the attic would come down. "Presuming that another three years of having that boy in my classroom doesn't drive me mad...in which case, sending a Patronus to find me might be a bit problematical, as I'll no doubt be in Azkaban."

She had done some calculating, and shook her head. "Actually? No. Things will start to get temporally uncomfortable, if I leap ahead a full three years. Instead...I plan to go only one year ahead."

He frowned at her. "Only one year?"

"Yes. I'll have a request for you, at that time. A difficult one. But...vital. A favor, for a friend."

"As if letting you stay up in my attic isn't favor enough," he retorted, though there was little rancor in his tone. "...What is it?"

"I'll tell you in a year, of course...you didn't think I'd lose my caution this close to my goal, did you?" she added.

A slight smile twisted his lips. "No. But one can always hope. Albus presses me for any possible thing you might have let slip during our conversations each time. Even the littlest of things."

"Well, the only thing you *can* tell him is that I'll be heartily glad to stop living in a perpetual English summer," she asserted. "It's pleasant to see so much sunshine, but it's also unnatural. I think I'm actually longing for winter."

"*That's* unnatural. So. Will it be one year from *now*, or roughly a week after the school term ends, as usual?" Severus wanted to know.

"...Roughly a week after the school term ends. And I won't send my Patronus further about than this house. If you're not actually here, I'll move on to the Leaky Cauldron and send an owl-post back here," she told him.

His dark eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You make that sound as if I *won't* be here."

She merely smiled, and pulled down the ladderway. "I'm merely being practical. I won't always be here, spinning my way through time in your home. But I'm sure that'll be something of a relief for you."

"Cindy." His fingers touched her elbow, halting her move to ascend into his attic. "I... Sometimes, in the summers and occasionally during the holidays...I go up there. I sit on the trunk across from your chair, and I talk to you. Not for long, and you probably have never noticed me up there, but...I *would* miss your presence, if you were not there. As a friend," he added quickly. "My heart..."

"Is still very much in love." She managed a smile. "Your constancy is your strength. That's admirable. Now, if you don't mind, I have to go play 'truant child' and sit in my corner for almost a year...hand me my valise when I'm at the top, will you? I'll see you in a year, I promise."

"In a year," he agreed, watching her climb back up the steep steps.

...

He had aged as much in a single year as she had ever seen him age in three. Guessing the reason was easy; Cedric Diggory was dead...and the Dark Lord was not. He hadn't been in his house, when she arrived. Apparating to the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione had taken a room under her assumed name of Cindy Miller, and sent a post-owl to his house with an innocuous note, the sort of thing an old acquaintance might send to a former colleague when in the area, an invitation to supper, or perhaps just tea.

When he finally wrote back, telling her of a day and time he could meet her, it was a full week after her arrival. Two evenings later, Cindy Miller escorted Severus Snape into her room at the Leaky Cauldron, along with a supper tray fixed up for two by the inn's cook. Closing the door behind him, she set the tray on the table, then quickly warding the whole room with an Impeturbable Charm.

Severus arched one brow, but didn't protest the security measure. Only when she had finished layering a couple of extra spells for good measure did he speak. "...I wish you had told me. I know why you did not, but you *could* have told me *he* was coming back."

"Well, now you know. And we both agree as to why I did not. Delicate times lie ahead," she warned him, pulling out one of the two chairs at the small table.

Severus echoed her movements, seating his increasingly middle-aged self with an economy of movement. "Indeed. What *can* you tell me? And what was this request you spoke of, a year ago?"

"Well, the Dark Lord has a certain snake," she started.

He winced. "Yes. I've met it."

"It has a particular venom. An anti-coagulant, as well as a poison. My request is that you get me an antivenin for it. A counter-agent of some kind." She smiled slightly at his narrowed, wary eyes. "I know your position, and have always known it. I know that you *will* have far more access to that snake than I."

Studying her silently for several seconds, he finally asked, "Is this why you have been cultivating my friendship all these years? For my potions expertise? And my position as a spy?"

"No...but your proficiency has inspired me to move beyond the parameters of my original mission." At the slight lift of his brows, Cindy explained tersely. "From merely finding, to hopefully rescuing. I know I will encounter that snake. At some point, somewhere, sometime, I will encounter it. My current self, that is, not my earlier self. Odds are, the snake will bite either me or someone near me. If I have the antivenin with me as a precaution, I should be able to complete my quest."

"Yes, your quest to save this valuable person whose disappearance you were sent to investigate," he agreed, his expression shuttered, wary. "To meddle with both time and fate. What makes you think you'll succeed?"

"It's more than that, Severus. I have been building up resources," she confessed. "Playing the stock market, investing in financially sound companies...I now have enough money accumulated to *help* this person disappear, should I find them in time to *assist* their mysterious disappearance."

"...Really."

"Yes, *really*," she retorted. "How else could this person have vanished without a trace, if not by a huge load of money? Where else could they have gone, if not to the house I will purchase in a distant place, and by using the identity I have carefully prepared for them over the last several years? I *think* that my accidental displacement by twenty whole years was *predestined* to happen that way, and happen *for* this very purpose."

"Saving the savior of wizard-kind!" he scoffed.

"Yes!"

His lip thinned, curling in a sneer. "*Potter!*"

"Yes...what? No!" she protested before she could stop herself.

"Do not lie to me!" Severus hissed. "I was *there*. I was the one who overheard Sybil's prophecy...and *I* was the one who *betrayed her!*"

She knew he didn't mean the flakey Divinations teacher. Rolling her eyes, she gave him an exasperated look. "...Contrary to popular belief, Severus, the world does *not* revolve around Harry James Potter! Yes, he's important to the future, but I was sent back to look after someone *else*. Someone every single bit as important as Potter!"

Severus paled as the implications hit. "Albus..."

Carefully keeping her expression neutral, Cindy leveled him with a look. "You know I cannot tell you *who* it is. Or when, or where."

"Other than that it takes place somewhere near the Shrieking Shack...since that's where we found you," he reminded her.

"If you're so smart, then don't forget to make some of that antidote *for yourself*," she shot back. "Just in case. My younger self didn't exactly know what you were going through all of the time, so there's no sense in not taking simple, logical precautions. After all, you'll come into contact with it far more often than I ever will."

Severus lifted his chin slightly. Arrogantly. "I had already considered that possibility for myself. But I cannot guarantee *when* I will get my hands on that serpent for a sample of her venom, let alone when I can brew a counteragent. Or when I could get it to you."

"That's alright," she allowed. "You can secure it in the Shrieking Shack. On the upstairs mantle, behind the old clock, there should be just enough room to hide a small bottle sealed with a stasis spell. When you have done this, send a letter to Gringotts, and ask that they hold it for Cindy Miller. I'll check for it when I come back again."

"Why not just wait until you reappear in my attic?" he enquired.

"I don't think it would be *safe* for me to reappear in your attic," she returned dryly. "Not when you consider all the uncertainties of what now lies ahead of us."

"Ahead of *me*, you mean. Very well. A letter to Gringotts...and for added security, I shall sign it in another name, with a Dicto Quill. What alias should I use? 'George Miller'?" Severus quipped.

That made her smile. "Actually, I've always been more partial to David. Use the name 'David Miller'. Gringotts already has that name on file, in case I ever needed to use Polyjuice to turn myself into a man for a good disguise, but I haven't actually needed to do so, yet."

He smiled faintly, a wry twist of his lips. "'David Miller' shall be my alias, then."

"Now, as Tom has acquired a decent cook this year, shall we eat our supper and discuss far simpler and more innocuous subjects? How has the school been, this last year?"

"I wouldn't call the unparalleled disaster of that Longbottom boy an innocuous subject," he told her. "He has a talent for Herbology, but that boy is a fumble-fingered fool when it comes to actually *using* what he grows."

"Oh, come now, Severus. I seem to remember you decrying these very same things when it was Timothy Blake," Cindy chided as she separated out the two plates on the tray. "Only with him, it was Potions versus Arithmancy."

Severus passed her a set of silverware and removed the covers on the plates, revealing steaming vegetables, brown-drizzled potatoes, and slices of pink-roasted beef. "Well, at least Blake always weighed out his proportions exactly, even when making a reduced or doubled batch, for all he could never get his actual brewing techniques right..."

...

The vial was exactly where it should be. Behind the old clock on the upstairs mantel. Not only had Severus placed it there, he had thoughtfully added a pair of stasis-sealed vials of blood replenisher, and a health restorative draught. Adding the jar of flesh-regenerating salve, Hermione turned around and examined the dusty, age-weathered rooms.

The events of that night were still vivid in her mind. She paced from room to room, remembering. There was the spot where Harry had fallen. There was where she had knelt in despair...and *there* was where Voldemort had captured Severus. Where Nagini had bitten him. Where she and Harry had been forced to leave his body in the dust.

And over there, in that corner...that was where she would wait. Nothing had happened over there. No one had come near it, no one had fired off a spell in its direction, and the snake hadn't slithered close. She would have to cast a scent-stopping ward, to make sure the vicious beast wasn't accidentally lured in her direction by the odour of another person in the room, just to be on the safe side. And she would disguise herself further, via not only a Disillusionment Charm, but with the aid of a very expensive Invisibility Cloak, purchased yesterday with some of the funds that she had been shrewdly investing over the last sixteen and a half years.

Mindful of her footprints, Hermione swirled her wand through the air, scattering and resettling the dust to hide the traces of her movements. She had arrived five days early, specifically to purchase what she would need, and especially to walk through these rooms, to pick out her hiding spot, to prepare the means necessary to save Severus Snape's life. With any luck, she would.

If she failed...well, practical to the last, she had bought a tiny estate up here in the wilds of Scotland. It was barely big enough to go camping upon, but it held plenty of room for burying a man with at least some dignity and honor, if quietly, in anonymity.

But I will not fail...

Much as she had done each time she wanted to succeed at a task or pass a difficult exam, Hermione mentally rehearsed what she would do. *I will stand over there. From there, I can silently Disillusion the first of the vials, and float it to his wound, to counteract the anti-coagulant. His head will lie facing in my direction, and if I move the vial slowly, no one else will notice it in the mess of the confrontation. Then the blood replenisher, floating the first one to his lips.*

But only one of them, and only some of the antivenin. He must continue to bleed for a bit, and thus look dead, or near to it. Even if it means risking his life, I cannot allow him to recover quickly enough to be noticed...else I'll never be impelled to come back here. It's the only way to avoid paradox.

And then, when my younger self and Harry are gone, when Lord Voldiebutt has fled the scene...knocking my middle self backward in time...I will come out of hiding and see if my efforts have saved Severus. As soon as I can, I'll Summon the remaining bottles, and Apparate both of us to...oh, gods, I've forgotten where we'll need to flee to first!

Oh, bugger... I can't take a room at the Three Broomsticks. It's too close to the confusion. I'll just have to make a long double-Apparation down to London and the Leaky Cauldron. Or...no, wait. If I pop down to Carlisle, I can rent a room at a hotel there. A Muggle hotel. No one will think to look for us there. The distance isn't taxing, and a quick Impeturbable Charm will ensure we're undisturbed while I do my best to heal his wounds...presuming I can.

There's the rub, as Shakespeare would say, she admitted, staring sightlessly at the dusty, cobweb-festooned contents of the Shack. From the moment my younger self leaves this place...nothing is guaranteed. Absolutely nothing.

But that's what makes this task worth attempting. Because nothing is guaranteed. Not even his death. Nodding to herself, Hermione checked the floor for stray footprints one last time, concentrated on the secluded park in Carlisle that she and Severus had used before, and Apparated away.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 8

A tale of fate versus self-determinism.

CHAPTER FOUR

...

...Fifty-eight...fifty-nine... Sixty! Thank God!

Breaking away from her corner of the Shack, Hermione hurried to the bloodied figure on the floor, lying next to the discarded Pensieve bowl. Slashing her wand through the air, she cleared away the obstacles in her path, all the way down to the excess blood on his collar and throat. That allowed her to see some of it still seeping out of the wound.

But is he alive?

Dropping to her knees, she wielded her wand, forcing her hand to move with confidence, rather than tremble. The diagnostic spell rose up from his body, but all of the colored lights were low and faint; he was near death. And yet...a second swish showed the potion she had covertly administered was working. His blood was clotting. With the wound in his neck and the poison in his veins his only damage, she carefully rolled him over.

Air escaped his lips, making her fear it was simply from being manhandled; he *looked* dead, still and pale...more so than normal. But no, his chest rose. A chest stained with a bit of liquid, and debris from a cracked vial. He *had* brought a vial of antivenin, though it looked like he hadn't had a chance to drink from it yet, as the cork was still in the fragmented neck on the floor. As she held him half on his side, he breathed again, a bit of glass clattering from his chest to the dusty boards.

He *was* alive. Profound relief washed over her, darkening her vision for a moment. Struggling to keep from passing out, Hermione grabbed for the illusion-cloaked vials she had set on the floor by his face. Dribbling some of the blood replenisher into his mouth, she waited for him to swallow it. He didn't move.

"Severus, it's Cindy. I've come to rescue you." No response. She couldn't massage his throat, not when it was so damaged she hardly knew where it would be the least painful to touch. "Come *on*, Severus...you're alive, *I know* you are!" she whispered fiercely, slashing her wand through the air. Catching the other potions, she tucked them into her pockets. "*Swallow!* Your life depends on it!"

His throat worked a little. The potion went down. It was enough to make her choke back a cheer. Flicking her wand, she floated him gently up off the floor. Rising, she dribbled more of the blood replenisher into his mouth; he worked his tongue and lips, encouraging her into offering more of the antivenin next. A check of the diagnostic spell showed he was regaining his strength, albeit very slowly. While he swallowed and rested, his breathing shallow, she quickly re-scattered dust over her footprints and knee marks, hiding her presence in the building. He needed to be in a far better place to recover than this.

A slight sound escaped him, and his eyelids fluttered. His fingers flexed slightly, as if grasping for something.

"It's all right...I'm still here," she reassured him, taking his nearest hand in her free one. The other Banished the remnants of the vial, which her younger self hadn't seen, she checked around her one last time. The future...*his* future...could be salvaged, but only if she got everything just right in the here and now. "Severus, I'm going to Apparate with you to a safer place. I'm going to take care of you. Just...just *live*, alright?"

She didn't add more. She wanted to say, *I've waited twenty years and too many summers to rescue you, so don't you dare die on me now*, but the important thing was focusing on the hotel room she had rented down on the Border. His fingers flexed again, tightening around her just enough to let her know he could hear. Closing her eyes, she firmly pictured both of them Apparating firmly and safely to Carlisle.

"Stay with me, now...because here we go."

...

Movement woke her, though she was very tired. Head snapping up from where her crossed arms had formed a pillow on the edge of the hotel bed, she had just enough time to snatch at his fingers, stopping Severus from touching the salve on his throat. "Don't scratch at it," she ordered quietly, slipping back into her Cindy persona. "You don't want to end up with a scar like mine."

His eyes had opened to slits. Those dark orbs studied her for a few moments in the dim light coming from the lamp over the bureau across from the bed. His mouth tightened for a moment, then he relaxed again, closing his eyes. "I was right. You came to rescue me."

His voice sounded rough, but then his throat was still injured. With those eyes shut, Cindy felt free to smile for a moment in her relief. She still held his hand, but allowed it to rest against his blanket-draped chest. Tending his wounds had required removing the upper half of his clothes; comfort required the removal of his shoes. But he was still clad in trousers and pants "Of course. How could I not?"

A crease formed in his middle-aged brow. "The war..."

"We've won. Or will have...I'm really not quite sure what day it is, let alone what hour," she added, trying to jest. She had ordered room service now and again since their arrival, but had been too nerve-wracked by his condition, to concerned about overseeing his recovery, to eat much of it. "Severus...you *cannot* go back. Not for the next three and a half years. Knowing the man you are, I know you'll want to, but you mustn't.

"Rest assured, the Dark Lord dies, just as was prophesied. His followers are stopped, and the wizarding world is freed from his tyranny." Her gaze shifted from his face to their hands, clasped lightly together. "Many good people will have died by the time this mess is all over, yes. But their ends were known. Yours never was. So I went to the Minister of Magic and got his blessing to track down what happened to you.

"But the other night, in the Shrieking Shack...or rather, *outside* the Shack, I materialized just as the Dark Lord emerged. He saw me, struck me with a spell...and I spent about a full year flying backwards as the Time-Turner spun, until I struck my head on a rock. The Time-Turner kept spinning, and the rest, you know."

"Naturally, you could not tell me that / was the one you had traveled to rescue, because of paradox," Severus half-rasped, half-muttered. "I had my suspicions...but you seemed sincere, so I let myself be convinced it was someone else." His fingers tightened around hers. "Until I fell.

"Then I prayed it was me."

"It was," Cindy agreed, smiling at him. "It was always you. You're my friend."

He made a scoffing noise, weak but still audible, and cracked opened his eyelids again for a moment. "You were my friend only when you inadvertently flew back in time. I know who my friends have been, these last few years. You weren't among their number, in my natural timeframe...friends whom I could barely have counted on the fingers of one hand, with multiples of enemies at my back."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to do without your other friends for at least the next three and a half years," she said with as much gentle sympathy as she thought he could manage. "I've arranged for a house, and an identity, and enough funds to see you safely settled for a number of years...but you will have to live far from England, and live as a Muggle."

"As a *Muggle*?" he scoffed, though there was a surprising amount of humor lurking in the bite-bruised raspings of his voice.

"Yes. No one in the wizarding world from this time to my natural time, for about three and a half years, will have heard so much as a whisper of your whereabouts. I'm even prepared to cast the Fidelis Charm and be your Secret Keeper, to further ensure your privacy. You'll be in the safest place in the world, because once you've recovered and been installed in your new home, I'll be busy traveling those last few years forward, into my natural time," Cindy reassured him.

His hand tightened around hers, startling her with the strength of his grip and his half-rasped shout. "No!" Dark eyes glittering, he glared at her for a moment, then spoke again, quieter but no less fierce for it. "No. Do not leave me."

"But..." She couldn't think of a reason why he should want her to stay, though she couldn't think of a reason to go, either. "Severus, this isn't my own time. I really shouldn't stay any longer than absolutely necessary. I was only flung so far back in time so that I would *have* the time to do all the things needed to save you. This, I have done. Once you're up and on your feet again, you won't need me anymore."

"But I *do*," he told her, holding her gaze as firmly as he held onto her hand. She shook her head, and he tightened his grip. "Listen to me...*listen!* When we were trapped in the Shack, when I realized what was about to happen to me, my suspicions came rushing back. And then that beast struck me, and all I could see as I fell was the face of the woman I loved."

She struggled not to flinch. "Well, once your Pensieve was examined by Harry and his friends, it became pretty obvious just who and what had motivated your true loyalties all these years." Nodding as graciously as she could, she added, "The Dark Lord was a fool to dismiss the impact of love. Your love for Lily Evans was what brought him down, in the end. It may have been...or will have been...bugger the time-traveling tense," she muttered as he frowned at her. "It was Harry's wand that struck the killing blow, yes, but he wouldn't have been there to use it, if it weren't for you.

"But there are plenty of people who care about you, and plenty...at least, by my time...who know the great service you gave for the whole of the wizarding world. Your love and your courage kept you there, the dagger hidden at the Dark Lord's back, the secret ear pressed to his fortress wall. And though Lily may not be alive, there are all those people who care about you," she repeated as the crease marring his forehead deepened. "I saved you so that you could finally know peace, and be free to live without fear.

"I realize you won't ever be completely free of your grief, but then the Weasleys won't ever be completely free of theirs. Yet they still go on; they still live, and they laugh, and they honor the lives of all who helped to give them the freedom to do all those things.... What?" she finally asked as he gave her a disgusted look.

"If you would cease your infernal babbling, I would *tell* you, woman. It wasn't *Lily's* face I saw as I fell," he growled, glaring at her. "It was *yours*."

She stared at him, taken aback.

"I saw *your* face as I fell," he repeated, voice rasping as much from the emotion gleaming in his obsidian eyes as from his slowly regenerating wounds. "You were the one who was there for me. Literally watching over me. Rescuing me."

"But...but the Pensieve," she offered. "All the memories in it, of you and her..."

"Put there deliberately, of course," he muttered. "You weren't the only one capable of careful misdirection and anti-paradoxical deception. Yes, her memory did motivate me for much of my life. But she abandoned me for Potter. *You* came back for me.

"You changed your original plans of just trying to find out what happened to me, you worked your way into my life, you prepared for this day, and you came specifically to rescue me. You have managed, in just sixteen years, one school term, and a handful of summers, to do what Lily Evans *never* did for me.

"I snapped at both of you, I snarled at you, I pushed you away, and *you* came back. You knew who I was, and what I had done...and you came back for me." He stared at her, a strange look on his face, almost as if he didn't quite know how to look at her. "She knew who I was and what sort of man I *could* have become...we talked about it often enough, our dreams of the future...but *she* left me. You already knew what I *had* become, yet you felt so strongly about my purported demise, *you had* to come back to save me. Not just to find out what had happened to my body, but to save *me*.

"You did it because you love me."

Bowing her head, she slowly nodded. She wouldn't lie. Neither would she allow him to think the wrong thing. "I didn't really *know* you before I was flung all that way back in time...but I admired you, and respected you, and cared deeply for you. And I knew you didn't deserve to be left on the floor like that, though the circumstances involved

hadn't allowed your rescue at that time. But it was enough to send me back looking for you. And then we spent a year arguing and talking as colleagues. I saw the man you once were, so close to the events that originally motivated you...and I liked that man. Choosing to stick with my original mission would have been like choosing to hold back the tide after that, because you *deserve* to live."

"Yes. I think I finally do," he agreed dryly. "And I deserve to live with the one woman who really *matters* to me."

"But...that's Lily," she repeated, still not quite able to grasp the shifting of his lifelong loyalties. "Everything you've done over these years, you've done for love of *her*."

His brows lifting, Severus gave her a half-pitying look. "For supposedly being the most brilliant girl of her age, you really are as thick as mud sometimes, Hermione."

She opened her mouth to argue, then flushed hard, realizing he had just said her name. *Her* name. "Er...you...know who I am?"

"I told you. I saw *your* face as I fell," Severus stated. "I did not speak in hyperbole. In specific, I saw the horror in your eyes. There were shadows of that same look every single time you, Cindy, talked of the person you had come back to rescue. And your voice...it annoyed me for the longest time because it sounded oddly familiar to me, particularly as you grew. Your excellent marks in Arithmancy, your previous familiarity with Time-Turners...and the fact that you would have had to know *exactly* what happened that night, and when, to have planned to travel back to it so successfully."

"You *had* to have been there...and you were. And you were horrified when you thought I had died," he reminded her. "Having had so few people in my life who cared about me that I could have counted them on one hand...in that moment, I knew I also had you. The different hair, the change in clothes, the confidence you projected...the fact that you're a woman full-grown all added to your mystique. Not to mention I hadn't met you yet, and when I did, you were still a little girl." He paused, licked his lips, then asked, "...Would it be possible to fetch a glass of water? My throat is dry, and my tongue still tastes of blood replenisher."

"You're the one who brewed it and put it there, so you're the only one to blame if it didn't taste good," Hermione retorted, drawing her wand. A few flicks, and a glass partially filled with water floated out of the bathroom. Catching it as it reached her, she conjured a drinking straw and held the glass for him, careful to avoid brushing the paste smeared over the jagged, pink holes slowly closing on his throat. "Let me know if you need a pain-reliever. I short-jumped and spent a few days brewing in a room at the Leaky Cauldron last week, before heading up to the Shack to survey the territory. I did get very good marks in your Potions classes, though I knew I wasn't capable of brewing the antivenin."

"Your grades were good enough to get you into the Department of Mysteries," he said when she took the straw away. "...Or was that another deception? For that matter, who will be the new Minister? I can hardly conceive of most people in the wizarding world agreeing that I, of all people, needed to be tracked down after what would have been an otherwise politically astute demise. Publically, I served the Dark Lord's regime. One Pensieve, however filled with memories, cannot erase that stain."

Hermione smiled. "Since you won't be around to vote for him, I think it's safe to tell you that your good friend and fellow Order-member, Kingsley Shacklebolt, becomes the new Minister. And he'll be considered a vastly popular one, at that. He knew everything you'd done, and gave me full sanction to find out what had happened to you...though my mission was supposed to remain reconnaissance, and not evolve into the carte blanche it's become. Somehow, though, I think he'll forgive me, when he's finally able to learn that you're alive."

His mouth twisted in a wry approximation of a smile, his eyelids drooping tiredly. "I would have called him friend openly, if I had been able. I am glad he'll be in charge. Until then...you are right. I must hide."

"Yes. As I said, I've arranged for a house for you, one thoroughly warded against scrying, and an identity. You'll be able to go about in anonymity, provided you refrain from casting any major magics when you go outside of your house. You'll not want anyone catching you by your magical signature, as the Death Eaters finally caught the Durmstrang headmaster."

"Our house."

She blinked at him. His eyes, which had closed, opened to slits once again and his fingers tightened around hers.

"*Our* house. I will not tolerate you leaving me again."

"But..." Again, she didn't know what to say. Of all the possible outcomes, this wasn't at all what she had imagined. It wasn't what she had braced herself for. Him being angry about being forced to survive, that she could deal with. Severus still being obsessed with Lily, that she had expected. But for him to say he *wanted* her to stay? And wanted *her* to stay, knowing she was Hermione Granger, former student and Gryffindorish know-it-all pain in his arse?

His fingers loosened their grip, his expression picking up traces of uncertainty. "...It's my age, isn't it?"

"What?" Hermione eyed him askance. "What has your age got to do with it?"

"When I first met you, we seemed to be near the same age...but now I'm old enough to have been your father, while you haven't aged more than a few summers at best," he reminded her. Then wrinkled his lip in a grimace. "Or is it because I was your teacher?"

"Severus, when I look at you, I don't see my teacher. I did, once," she confessed, "but I don't, anymore. Ever since that year when we worked together, all I see now is my colleague and my friend. I see the man I finished falling in love with over a school term trying to dent Defence skills into my students...and a handful of summers wherein I hated having to go and stay at the Leaky Cauldron. I hated having to wait days and even weeks between contacting you."

"I couldn't, dared not interrupt your mourning for Lily. Not when I thought she was the woman who motivated you. And I still cannot believe that I motivate you! I'm Hermione Granger," she reminded him, simultaneously ending her Cindy persona. "Know-it-all bane of the classroom, best friend of the boy you hated for being the son of your stolen love. How could I possibly have motivated you?"

He clasped her hand firmly under his, pressing it to his blanket-draped chest. "You *do*. The proof of it sits in my quarters at the school!"

That puzzled her into a frown. "It does? What proof?"

"The chair from my attic. I didn't dare keep anything that was actually yours, for fear of causing some sort of temporal paradox," he told her. "But that chair was already mine...and I once told you how I used to go up there, while you were spinning your way forward through time. I would go up there, stare at your chair, and talk to you."

"You never replied, of course, and I never actually saw you sitting there," Severus added dismissively. "But you were *there*. Until the summer you told me you knew the Dark Idiot had returned, and could no longer stay in my attic. That it was not safe for you, up there."

"I never realized how lonely I could be until I came back from yet another mission to re-insinuate myself into the Idiot's graces, started to pull down the ladder, and remembered you were no longer there. That you would never be *there* again. I never knew how much your unspoken presence had comforted me, even in the summers when I couldn't speak with you, only at you. Not until you weren't there. So you *will not* leave me. Not again," he asserted quietly. "Not if you love me, and not if I love you."

"But, the future..." Hermione reminded him, blushing at his words.

"...Sod the future!" he snapped, then coughed. She quickly lifted the cup to his lips, adjusting the conjured straw so that he wouldn't crane his neck too much and disrupt the salve repairing his flesh. Waving her off after a moment, he licked his lips. "Thank you. I'd kiss you, if I had the strength for it. As for the future, it can go buggery itself. You *aren't* needed by the future for three and a half more years, Hermione."

"Stay with me. Let me get to know the real you. Get to know the real me," he urged her. Then added so softly, she almost didn't hear it, "...Love me. Be mine."

Tears pricked at her eyes. He tightened his grip on her hand once more.

"I won't even have the presence of your chair to comfort me, if you leave me. I certainly cannot go back for it, according to you. *Don't* make me spend three and a half more years without you," he murmured, his thumb gently rubbing the back of her hand. "Be mine. Please. Stay with me. Do not go."

Sniffing, Hermione tried not to let herself cry. This wasn't a moment for crying; for being emotional, maybe, but not for tears. She managed a wobbly smile. "No...no, I won't do that to you. I suppose we *could* share the house. I made sure it had a well-stocked library, if nothing else."

His mouth twisted up in a smile. Then pulled down in a pinched frown. A faint peach flush stole over his face, making her worried.

"Severus? Is something wrong?"

He winced. "Yes. I have to...you know. Use the lavatory."

"Ah." That was reason enough to make such a proud man unhappy. She freed her hand and switched the glass to the nightstand so she could draw her wand. Standing, she pushed back the chair she had been using for her perch. "Well, let me levitate you onto your feet, first. And remember to keep your chin level, so you don't crease the paste and cause an odd-looking scar. I'd send a house elf to help you, but as I don't have any available, I'm afraid you'll just have to rely upon me."

"As you are eminently reliable, I have no qualms about doing so," he told her, smiling slightly. Then grimaced and blushed. "But...bugger it...hurry. I *really* have to wee."

Biting her lip, trying her very best not to laugh, Hermione cast a silent *Mobilicorpus* on her former teacher, her friend, and...wonder of wonders...the man who loved her. *That* would take some getting used to.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 8

A tale of fate versus self-determinism.

CHAPTER FIVE

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"...*Alaska*?" Severus demanded, dropping the last of his bags on the plush-carpeted floor of the living room.

At least he'd had the grace to wait until both doors of the entryway had shut behind the estate agent before making that demand. Having arranged for false Muggle identities, procuring them passports, plane tickets, and so forth, and stopping just long enough in Vancouver, British Columbia., to purchase sundry necessities and belongings, Hermione had led him onto yet another aeroplane, one bound for the city of Anchorage, Alaska. Severus apparently had thought it was merely a stopping point along their route. It wasn't, and he made his bewilderment clear the moment he was free to do so.

"Why in the sacred name of Merlin are we *in Alaska*, Hermione?" he demanded. "Why not somewhere warmer? No British citizen in their right mind chooses to go somewhere frigid and cold! We have winters in Scotland for that, if we want to freeze off our appendages! For that matter, why not Norway or Sweden, if you really wanted to go somewhere filled with snow?"

Dropping her own bags on the floor, Hermione turned to face him. "Severus, I chose Alaska because it has a very small wizarding presence compared to other places, and Anchorage in specific because it has a very large Muggle population. You'll have many of the same amenities you'd have while living up near Aberdeen in Scotland, but without the fear of running into anyone who knows you! Which you *would* have run into, had I picked Norway."

"We will have many of the same amenities, woman," he retorted, crossing the distance between them. Clasping her hips, he tugged her close enough to dip his head and rest his brow against hers. His throat looked as good as new, but there were dark circles under his eyes from having traveled almost half the world the Muggle way, and he still hadn't completely regained his strength from all that lost blood, despite spending a week in Carlisle, convalescing. "I am tired, I am irritated, and I am in *Alaska*. What could this place possibly have to offer that a warmer climate couldn't, besides your presence at my side? Which is the only possible tolerable thing it could possess..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "As I said, the wizarding population is low. At least, in Anchorage. The locals who do cast magic live in remote villages...the Muggles out here will forgive most eccentricities, or so I've heard, but the locals take pride in being strange. That means they pay attention to *how* a person is strange," she explained. "It's actually harder to get away with using magic up here than it is in, say, Seattle, but the odds of running into someone either of us might know would be considerably greater almost anywhere else that's civilized...and I *wasn't* about to abandon you in the middle of a true wilderness. I wanted to make sure you still had access to a decent bookstore or three, even if they're strictly Muggle ones."

"I should point out that the wizarding population is also low in Pago Pago, which is a lot warmer than *this* place will ever be," he countered.

"Then how about your comment that no British soul in their right mind would be caught in a place this cold?...Though I'll remind you it's actually not all that cold outside at the moment," she told him. "I picked Anchorage because when I made up my list of places to send you, *this* one was well below the top fifty on the list. No one would ever picture *you* as the outdoorsy type, and Alaska is known for its outdoorsy populace."

"That's because it's winter for more than half the year, up here, and the inhabitants are all insane," he grumbled.

"It's only winter for *half* the year," she reminded him, hands going to her hips.

"Yes, and they cram the other three seasons into the other half of it," he retorted. "And then short-sheet it by a few degrees Centigrade."

Pulling away, she picked up her suitcases. They had already taken a tour of the house, and put away their groceries in the nicely appointed kitchen. "We're here, Severus.

Get used to it. We'll have enough money to live here comfortably for ten years, maybe even fifteen if needed. But if we try to relocate immediately, that'll cut our funds in half, given the costs of setting up house. And if we *have* to move in the next three and a half years, for whatever reason, it would be far better to hold that extra money in reserve for when it's really necessary."

"Not good enough. Almost," he conceded, picking up his own things and following her, "but not enough."

"Fine," she called back over her shoulder as she started up the stairs. "Then how about the thought of long winter nights, with you and I curled up by the fire, books in our laps, having all the time in the world to read and debate and enjoy the peace and quiet without any of the illiterati interrupting our reading time with their petulant, pesky requests? Winter nights are *very* long, up here in Alaska."

"Hermione, even I can only read so many books in an evening. We may have stopped in Sasquatch Square down in Seattle to select and purchase a new wand for myself," he added, "but there is also only so much spell-research and potions-crafting a person can tolerate!"

She gave him a pointed look, though there was almost as much smirking as pointing in her gaze.

"Fine. I'll concede your point," he stated, nudging her with one of his suitcases so that she went straight instead of turning into one of the spare bedrooms.

"What's that?" Hermione asked, mock-cupping a hand to her ear. "Are you saying I'm actually right?"

He gave her a pointed look of his own, though there was almost as much leering as pointing in his own gaze. "Long winter nights are *also* suitable for lovemaking...or so I've heard."

Blushing, she allowed herself to be herded into the master bedroom. Downstairs, everything was furnished, with a living room, kitchen, dining room, water closet, and a sort of rec-room-cum-study that she had ordered converted into a library. There were three bedrooms upstairs, the master suite with its own private bath, two spare bedrooms, and a bath to service them. The spares were empty, standing ready to be remodeled into a potions lab or a study, or whatever he preferred, but with her inclusion, Hermione had come prepared to transfigure herself a bed until she could find time to purchase one.

Severus seemed to have other ideas. As soon as he had herded her into the master suite, he nudged the door shut behind him, dropped his things, removed her bags from her hands, and scooped her up. Hermione choked on a shriek, grabbing for his shoulders.

"Severus! You're still ill! Put me down!"

"As usual, you are acting the sufferable know-it-all. But if you carry your logic to its rightful conclusion, it is obvious even to a ninny that what I require now is bed rest." Dropping her on the bed, pre-made by the estate agent who had bought all of the house's furnishings at Hermione's long-distance request, Severus settled himself next to her. His nose, long and thin, bumped against her shorter one, his lank black hair swing down over her cheeks as he leaned over her. "*Lots* of bed rest."

"Somehow, I don't think you have 'rest' in mind," she quipped, smiling.

"I do. Eventually." Closing the gap between them, he pressed his thin lips to her fuller ones.

It wasn't a hurried kiss, despite his commentary. It was soft, it was nice, and when he pulled back slightly, Hermione decided she wanted more. Even if his nose did get in the way a little bit.

Lifting her hands, she slid them into his hair. It was softer than expected, if about as oily as it looked. Resolving in the back of her mind to coax him into sharing a shower with her and scrubbing him from head to toe in her choice of bathroom products, she lifted her head up off the fluffy, feather-stuffed pillows, catching and nipping at his mouth.

He sighed in pleasure, helping her deepen their kiss. They were languid kisses, too, a slow sort of passion that burned nonetheless. She sighed with her own contentment when he left her mouth, slowly working his way toward her ear. Anticipation became agony, until he breathed hotly on the whorls before suckling on her lobe. Her fingers clenched in his hair; not wanting to hurt him, she shifted them to his back, urging him more fully over her. Nuzzling his way down to her neck, he pressed languid lips to her skin, pausing to inhale her scent now and again.

Slowly, his movements stilled. His weight increased. Hermione blinked, wondering what he was doing...or rather, not doing. A few moments later, just as she was wondering if she should jiggle him...he snored. It was very quiet, and sort of cute, but very distinctly a snore.

She jiggled him firmly. "Wake up, Severus! No falling asleep on me. Not literally; you're a bit too heavy."

"...I am *not* sleeping. I am resting my eyes," he mumbled. But he did oblige her by rolling onto his side. Rubbing at his eyes, he grimaced slightly. "I've been up for far too long, crossed too many time zones, and carried too much baggage the Muggle way. To *Alaska*, no less."

Twisting onto her side, Hermione propped herself up on one elbow and leaned in close enough to press a kiss to his forehead. "You're still not fully recovered from your ordeal. A nap would not be amiss."

For a moment, he looked like he would protest. Then he sighed and fixed her with a firm look. "Fine. But you will join me." He paused, then frowned thoughtfully at her. "...How *did* you do it?"

He had lost her. "Erm, do what?"

"Hide your true self. I attempted a stealthy form of Legilimency upon you two or three times over the years. But all I got was that you believed yourself to be Cindy Miller, with snippets of the Department, your most current, temporally stranded memories...and no real hints of your past," he told her. "And yet just now, I can sense your history, the young girl you were. How did you do that?"

Hermione smirked. "They *do* call it the Department of Mysteries, you know."

He narrowed his eyes, but didn't press the point. Sighing, he rolled himself upright and headed for the en-suite bathroom, detouring just long enough to pick up one of the suitcases. Hermione rolled off the other side of the four-poster bed and began pulling down the thick, roller-style shades over the two windows in the room, forcing her to cross back to the nightstand to turn on one of the lamps. Then she pulled the cord for the heavy drapes, further darkening the room.

This was Alaska in early May, after all. The winter nights might be long, but the summer days would be just as lengthy. The locals had a habit of furnishing their houses in a way that would either retain heat or block out light, depending on the time of year. Hermione had made certain the house was outfitted properly with blinds and a woodstove, a portable generator and so forth; every possible need Severus could have had in this place, she had tried to anticipate...except for the fact that he also apparently needed her.

Not that she was going to complain...far from it.

Returning to the bed, she debated turning down the covers, or just using the lap-throw draped at the foot of the bed by the thoughtful agent she had hired. Hermione suddenly realized her mouth felt a bit fuzzy, and snagged her own suitcase, the one with her toiletry kit. Retreating to the other bath, she scrubbed her teeth, washed her face, and used the facilities. When she returned, she was met by the unexpected sight of Severus Snape in a dressing gown, turning back the bedcovers.

Hearing her enter, he turned to face her. The dressing gown was a deep, velvety black, and it only served to frame the pallor of his chest, exposed in just enough of a vee

to make her aware of the light thatching of black hairs scattered across his sternum. Her gaze drifted down, all the way to his muscled, lightly haired calves, his skinny ankles, and his bony feet. Between her ministrations a few days ago in Carlisle and this moment now, she wondered if this was the most anyone had ever seen of Severus' skin ever since he became an adult, outside of maybe Poppy Pomfrey.

Severus lifted his chin slightly, as if daring her to comment. Not one to back down when a question needed answering, Hermione asked, "Erm...you're going to nap in that? I mean, you got undressed?"

"Of course. Aren't you going to?" He waited for her answer. His chin was still lifted slightly, as if bracing himself for her answer.

It occurred to Hermione that he might actually be *afraid* of her answer. His comment about his advancing age, having grown old while she stayed virtually the same, came back to her. Her mouth curved into a smile; she didn't quite know why, but that brave-but-hiding-it look pleased her somehow. Lifting the bag dangling from her hand, she said, "I'll just slip into my own robe, then, and join you."

He didn't lower his chin, but his dark gaze did soften a little. Still smiling, she retreated to the suite bathroom with her bag. There was something...not amusing, but more...heart-warming about a slightly anxious Severus Snape. Anxious over *her* reactions. He was such a tough nut to crack, constantly hiding his emotions and scrutinizing everyone else's motives, thanks to far too many years as a spy. It was fascinating to see these new aspects to his personality, and flattering to be allowed to see them.

Catching sight of her face in the mirror, with its happy...nay, pleased...grin, Hermione suddenly wondered what she was doing. *I'm here, in the bathroom of the house I bought for him, a house I'll most likely be staying in for the next three and a half years, living with him for those three and a half years...and I'm about to get undressed, don a nightgown, and go out to join him in his...our...bed to sleep. Just sleep.*

She quirked her brow at her reflection, which stayed Muggle-normal, merely quirking its eyebrow back at her.

...This is completely wrong. And there's only one way to make it right.

Turning on her heel, she left her bag of clothes in the bedroom. She would give Severus a strip-tease, and then...

He was asleep.

Pale and wan-looking, his face lax and his muscles limp, arms bared as they rested above the covers...he looked vulnerable. Cuddle-able. Human.

He even snored slightly. Cutely, though she knew he would deny the cute part as fiercely as he'd denied the wrongdoings of his Slytherin students over the years. Sighing, Hermione stripped off her clothes with disappointed efficiency, tossed them in the corner...she would have to buy a clothes hamper at some point, as she hadn't quite anticipated *every* possible need...and padded over to the bed.

She half expected him to snap awake, hand snatching for his wand, ready to hex anything that might be trying to attack him as he slept. But he just slept. In fact, the only movement he did was after she had settled next to him under the covers. He mumbled something, turned his head in her direction, inhaled deeply, mumbled again on an exhale...this time it sounded like her name...and rolled onto his side, spooning up against her. Twisting to put her back to his chest, Hermione wriggled just enough to get comfortable, then let her own jet-lag catch up to her.

Seduction would have to wait until they both had a little more energy. One thought did comfort her, despite her disappointment. *Severus Snape is still alive. That's worth all the delays and disappointments, and all the deceptions and disguises in the world.*

He is alive...and he is mine.

...

She woke with a strange, ambivalent feeling, of having enjoyed the most relaxing sleep in an age, yet also tense with instinctive wariness. Cracking her eyelids open in narrow slits, she snuck a cautious look at her surroundings. Fluffy, feather-stuffed pillows, high thread-count, white sheets...and a dark-haired, dark-eyed, nightshirt-clad man staring at her with unnerving intensity. But he was not glaring at her, and he was very much alive.

Those dark eyes registered her wakefulness, and his expression softened further. He almost-smiled, in fact...until several heartbeats passed. His almost-smile faded, pinching into a frown. "You aren't stuck in time, anymore. You *can* move," he pointed out, voice gravelly from sleep. When she didn't, he frowned with impatience. "...Well?"

I think he's afraid I am still stuck in time. Hermione realized, amused and touched at the same time. She was also more than a little embarrassed to be naked in bed with her former colleague and ex-teacher. But, obedient to his emotional needs, she stretched out her limbs, twisting to lie more fully on her stomach as she arched her back. That felt good enough, she did it a second time and let out a humming sigh of contentment as she relaxed.

And then realized she had to piddle. That meant getting out of bed...naked...and padding across to the en suite bathroom. Flushing a little, she silently acknowledged it was only fair. *I saw him naked while he was healing, back in Carlisle.*

He reached for her just as she moved away. Catching sight of his frown, she quickly reassured him. "I'll be right back; I have to go...you know."

Severus grunted, but she could tell he was reassured she wasn't rejecting him. Slipping from beneath the covers, she padded into the bathroom, knowing he was undoubtedly watching her entire backside. Grabbing her toothbrush, she scrubbed her teeth while she used the facilities. From the clock on the counter, it was the middle of the night locally, though it felt more like mid-morning to her Scotland-attuned body. Washing up, she braced herself for the trip back into the bedroom and opened the door.

Severus was right there. His sallow cheeks flushed a little, and he lifted his chin, dignified and defensive, his gaze firmly fixed on a point somewhere over her head. "My turn..."

Her own gaze struggled not to dip, though she could see he was definitely virile at the lower edge of her vision. Bemused, Hermione stepped around him, giving him room to enter the bathroom. She wondered what that avoidance awkwardness was. *It wasn't just me, it was him as well. Am I not attractive enough? No, that can't be it. He had a stiffy. Or is he remembering that I was his student? That might embarrass him in spite of an erection...*

She heard a sharp-sounding oath and crept back to the bathroom door. Straining her ears, she heard a very strange mutter. It resolved itself into, "...*dirty cauldrons think about dirty cauldrons think about manky, nasty, first-years' cauldrons...*"

Cauldrons? Why would he be wanting to think about something as nasty as...ohhh. Her face heated in realization as she heard him relax enough to use the facilities. *Of course! He has a morning stiffy, and he can't have a wee until it goes down!*

Grinning, Hermione quietly hustled back into their bed. Fluffing and piling the pillows behind her back, she thought about drawing the covers up to her breasts, then changed her mind, kicking them to the foot of the mattress. With her left hand tucked behind her head and her right hand tucked between her thighs, right knee drawn up and out so that it splayed to the side, she waited for his return. Contraceptives weren't a problem; she'd been on the potion for years now, and her next dose wasn't due for another two months. That left nothing to worry about but how well they might be able to please each other.

Failing all else, we are teachers. We can always instruct each other on what we like. And we're also researchers, which means we can always experiment, too.

Moments later, she had the pleasure of watching Severus Snape choke and stumble to a stop just a few steps into the bedroom. Eyes riveted on the subtle movements of her fingers, he slowly approached the bed, still trying to clear his throat of mis-inhaled saliva. He looked stunned, like a fish being reeled into netting range, two seconds from gasping his life away.

Hermione grinned at him. "Sorry, but I, erm, seem to have started without you."

"You will not finish without me," he told her...ordered, rather, as he climbed into the bed. His flesh hardened visibly. The needs of his morning wee now set aside, he clearly found the sight of her attractive enough to resume what they hadn't gotten around to doing last night. Alluring enough to lower his head to her knee, his shoulder-length locks of hair sliding over her skin in ticklish contrast to the gentle kisses he pressed against her flesh. His palm stroked up the inside of her left thigh in small circles, making her muscles tremble at the soft, soothing caresses.

Soft and Snape were not words she would have associated together, but Hermione allowed herself to be proven wrong. Quite wrong, for by the time he had kissed and caressed his way to the apex of her thighs, both knees were splayed, her fingers were working rapidly, and her breath was panting unsteadily. Gently tugging at her wrist, he captured her fingers in his suckling lips. Hermione moaned, feeling his tongue swirl around her fingertips. Her other hand came down, finding and guiding his head closer to her groin, tugging on his locks when he didn't comply quickly enough.

The same razor-witted tongue that had cut her and her friends to the bone as students now proved it was as soft as velvet. He flicked it over her netherlips, tasting her skin in short, teasing strokes along one side of the sensitive seam, then the other. He stirred her clitoris with the tip of it, swirling around and around...then scrambled up her body with a groan, slotting his erection against her flesh.

Not just against, but into, for one, two, three thrusts not only seated him fully in her moistened depths, they ended in a full-body shudder and a drawn-out, not quite tortured, masculine groan. The thought that she had excited him so much that he couldn't wait any longer exited Hermione in turn...but he stopped thrusting within moments, leaving her hovering on the edge between satiation and disappointment. Sagging over her, he rested on her heavily for a few panting breaths, then shifted more of his weight onto his elbows.

Cupping her skull, fingers buried in her sleep-mussed curls, Severus tilted her head into a decent, mouth-plundering angle. His kiss was thorough as well as passionate; he claimed her, tongue and lips and teeth, letting her know that he wasn't finished making love to her, however precipitous his urge to couple had been. Being devoured like that, being *wanted* like that, revived her flagging arousal. Hermione lifted her knees and clenched her inner muscles, instinctively needing more of his flesh.

The way he groaned into her mouth and attacked her with greater fervor let her know she was on the right track. Squeezing again and again, Hermione ran her hands through his sleep-tangled hair, then scraped her nails lightly over his shoulders. Hardness returning, he pushed into her in slow, deep strokes. Limbs twining around his body, she clung to him, devoured him as he braced himself on his elbows and resumed the stroking she desperately needed, staring down at her with that same intense look.

Words poured out of her as his vigor increased. "Oh yes...oh, yes, oh God! Oh God, yes! Severus...more, there...oh, there!" A squirm of her hips and a hitch of his knees put all the pressure on just the right spot. "Oh God, yes!"

Ron had never found that spot. The two men she had dated while working for the Department of Mysteries...well, one of them had found it twice, but that had been by accident, and he hadn't been good enough at experimenting to find it again. But this...the man in her arms, thrusting into her body, not only found that beautiful spot, he kept finding it, over and over. Hermione wasn't even conscious of screaming with her pleasure until he muffled it with his lips. Then her ears stopped hurting, while her lungs started aching with the need for more air.

She scratched at his ribs, writhing under him. Severus released her mouth, choosing instead to nip at her neck. The thought of him maybe actually being a vampire...though she knew he wasn't...rocked through her nerves. Nipping at his own shoulder, Hermione snarled at him, overwrought with passion. "More! More!"

"Come for me!" he growled in her ear. "Come for me! Now!"

Head thumping into the pillow, spine arching beneath his weight, inner muscles clenching hard and tight, she came. Eyelids straining, lights exploding behind them, she lost sense of everything but the feel of him straining into her and the mind-blowing pleasure their union created. She didn't even feel the pain of his mouth clamping onto the muscle next to her throat, until he released it and himself with a shuddering groan.

Panting, both of them relaxed into the bedding. Severus shifted so that he only covered half of Hermione, a warm, sweaty weight against her right side. That slid their flesh apart, but he made up for it, stroking her hair and pressing soft kisses to her lips and cheek. His touch was more tender than she expected. It prompted her into stroking and kissing him back.

Finally he sighed and slumped back from her. Voice gravelly, eyes closed Severus stated blandly, "If this turns out to be merely a delusional dream...I will viciously hex whoever is responsible."

Amused and unable to help herself, Hermione smiled and said, "Get in line, Severus. If this *is* a dream, I get the first spellcast. You can have whatever's left, *if* I leave anything."

That cracked open his dark eyes. "You will *not* hex them to death with the first stroke! Such a great tragedy would demand an equally great vengeance. We will draw out their torture. Together."

She winced at that. She didn't have much of a scar anymore...the Healers at St. Mungo's had done wonders with the wounds inflicted on her during her capture and torment by the Death Eaters both a handful of days and several years ago, depending on one's perspective in time, but the word 'torture' carried unpleasant connotations even now, years later. And years earlier. It was worse because she knew her younger self was still suffering from her injuries and nightmares right now, albeit on another continent.

He noted her subtle flinch. Shifting his hand, Severus cupped her cheek. "You never told me. What happened, after I fell? What is happening right now, over there? What did those bastards do...and how did it end?"

She had told a few people some of the details...the Healers had to know what was done to her, and they *had* sent for the wizarding equivalent of a counselor to help her...but she hadn't allowed herself to dwell too much on what happened. Eventually, the nightmares had eased, and time had allowed her a certain distance from her memories. Carefully worded politeness had allowed her to sidestep casual inquiries in the post-war celebrations, too. But of all the people who deserved to know, as well as needed to, Severus deserved to be told.

So she told him, in quiet words that had accepted the pain and trauma long ago.

Her physical scars had long since healed, but it was his quiet fury against her captors, mixing with his subtle but tangible worry for her well-being, his concern that she was still haunted by the final hours of that last battle, which soothed her lingering mental aches. As did the way he gathered her close. Not saying anything, but showing her with his protective, enfolding embrace that he never wanted her to suffer like that again.

The smallest hours of the night waxed larger. With it came an ungodly early dawn. Light glowed around the edges of the blinds and the blackout curtains both, adding to the bedside lamp that neither had remembered to turn off. Someone's stomach rumbled, making Severus snort in wry humor.

"...I don't suppose you remembered to stock some food in this place, even if it's only a tin or two?"

"I had the housing agent lay in a good supply of staples, tins, and seasonings. The tea will be baggy," Hermione warned him, "since I couldn't quite bring myself to trust her to pick out a good enough loose-leaf, being American. But I did specify Twinings, so at least it'll be a consistent quality baggy tea."

"I suppose it will have to do...one question," he added, catching her shoulder as she started to roll away from. "Why 'Cindy', for a name?"

"Well, my middle name would've been too obvious, and, well...I always liked the name." She shrugged. "It worked out well, since I vaguely remembered a Professor Miller from the school records, and ended up needing to be her."

"You realize I may slip up and call you 'Cindy' from time to time," he said, following her as she rose from the bed. "Certainly, with your hair styled like that, you do not look like yourself. Your younger self."

"I like the shorter length, though getting it bleached every month or so was a bit trying," she admitted.

"You look like a mop." At her affronted look, Severus lifted his brows. "What, do you expect me to lie to you? Your hair curls too much when it's this short. It needs to be longer, to form softer waves. The length will drag some of the bushiness out of the curls."

Hermione wasn't about to let him bully and walk all over her. As far as she was concerned, theirs was an arrangement of equals, and he was going to know it. She planted one hand on her naked hip and used the other to poke him in the chest. "*You* need to wash your own hair far more often! Actually, if we're going to be honest, you yourself would look a whole lot better with straighter teeth, a healthy tan, and some highlights in your hair."

"...*Highlights?* Hermione, I am a *man*, not a nancy ponce!" he sputtered. "My hair is black, just as God meant it to be!"

"Well, if I'm supposed to grow mine out and return it to its natural colour...when *like* being a blonde...*you* can suffer plenty of sun, exercise, good food...today's tins and baggy teas notwithstanding...and a little more in the way of style and verve to your hair than, oh, I don't know, looking like you washed it with a *floor soap*? Assuming you've washed it at all," she added tartly. "I figured you had to play the part of the greasy git to get everyone to hate you and leave you alone, reducing the chance someone would figure out you were a double agent, but if I *am* going to stay here with you, then *you* have to stop being a bastard!"

He gaped at her for a moment, then poked one of his long, pale fingers at her face. "You may have been my colleague for a year, and my friend off and on for more, but I will *not* be disrespected like that!"

Folding her arms under her breasts, heedless of their naked state, she lifted her chin. "And what, precisely, can you do about it? If you haven't noticed, *this* isn't Hogwarts, and *you* cannot give me a detention anymore!"

Spinning on her heel, she flounced toward the bathroom, intending to tidy up from their lovemaking. Before she could flounce through the doorway, his arm hooked around her waist, hauling her back across the floor. Stumbling, Hermione found herself hauled over his knees as he dropped to the side of the bed. One hand braced on the edge of the mattress, she twisted to glare up at him.

His hand slid down over her curves, halting her protest. That felt...good. She should have been sated from their lovemaking, should have been too hungry for food to be swayed by a different sort of need, but that felt really goo...*SWACK!*

A yelp escaped her. She struggled to get up, but he planted his free arm between her shoulder-blades, and caressed her stinging rump in soothing, exploratory strokes. *SWACK!* Another yelp, and she struggled again. He bent over her, making shushing noises, and spoke in almost a whisper. "Do you know how much I've fantasized about doing this to my misbehaving pupils? Not naked, of course; I've never been interested in children...but to combine it with a full-grown, beautiful woman, both of us naked..."

A shift of his hips allowed him to gently prod her side with his erection. Hermione stilled, conflicted feelings crashing around in her. On the one hand, she would not tolerate such humiliation. On the other hand...it was kinky, and exciting, and very arousing. Licking her lips, she chose her words carefully.

"If you continue with this, Severus, you will have to understand that *demand* a relationship of equals. Which means I *will* bend you over *my* knee at some point in the future, and spank *you*."

Most of his body stilled...but not his penis. It twitched and prodded her harder, bobbing with excitement. Moving his hand after a long moment, Severus slid it from her rump. Hermione braced herself in preparation for standing.

SWACK! SWACK! SWACK!

Her limbs buckled. Her yelps came out as a strangled, choked sound, thanks to the stinging, unexpected blows. And when his fingers dipped between her buttocks, exploring the seam of her nether-regions, she nearly choked again on the sudden rush of air returning to her lungs. Another *SWACK*, more sting than thud, and he circled the tip of her clitoris, tipping her into a shuddering, unbelievable orgasm...but only a minor one, the kind that primed her for wanting more.

Bending over her trembling torso again, he murmured carefully, distinctively near her ear, "Tea can wait."

Hermione nodded fervently.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 8

A tale of fate versus self-determinism.

CHAPTER SIX

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SWACK! SWACK! SWACK! SWACK!

The hand that set down the hairbrush returned to its target, delivering soothing strokes instead of stinging smacks across the rounded, reddened, naked flesh.

"And *that's* for complaining in the lobby, of all places. You *will* cooperate with the purpose of this trip, got that?" Hermione shifted her thigh, refusing to let him rock his erection against her flesh. A whinge-like sound huffed from Severus' lungs. He was strong enough to overpower her, but he *had* put up an unpleasant fuss about coming to this place. Trailing her fingertips around his testes, she slid one up to the bud of his anus, rimming it gently with the tip of her nail. "I *said*, you will learn to ski, and *like* it. Got that?"

"Yes, Mistress!" he gasped. A droplet of pre-cum dripped onto her calf.

She smiled. She hadn't ever actually asked him to call her 'Mistress', but since he did it of his own volition...and insisted that she call him 'Professor' when their roles were reversed...it pleased her whenever he did. "Good. Now, get up here and fuck me. Skiing can wait."

He rose from her legs, allowing her to turn around in order to scramble further onto their hotel bed. Before she could turn back again, she felt his hands grabbing her thighs, parting and spreading them widely. In the next moment, his hands left her flesh, only to *SWACK* down in a double-blow, one palm per upturned nether-cheek. "*Oy!* Severus...!"

"*What* have I told you about using vulgarities to describe what we do when we're in bed?" he demanded. He swatted her again when she didn't respond, and a third, even harder time. Pausing, he waited for her to say something, but she remained stubbornly silent. He smacked her bottom again, increasing his strength in a stinging, bottom-bouncing whallop.

"...We make love, we don't fuck! We make love, we don't fuck!" she gasped at the fifth set of double-blows. "Oh, God...make love to me, Severus!"

He scrambled to comply, twisting her onto the mattress and climbing up behind her, but someone banged on the wall behind the bed. "*Hey! Keep your kinky shit to yourselves!*"

Severus, about to mount her from behind, collapsed with almost helpless laughter. He managed to land next to her, rather than on top of her, and received an armful of equally giggling Hermione. She squirmed around enough to face him and kissed him. Then rubbed their nose-tips together. At his uncertain frown, she grinned. "When in Alaska, do as the Athabascans do...right?"

"I am *not* making love in an igloo. And you *were* rather loud, just now," he stated.

"You stung my bum rather hard, just now. Are you going to soothe it?" she challenged him.

"Ask nicely."

"Severus, sweetie, would you pretty please make love to me, hard enough to make our neighbor bang on the wall again?" she managed to ask with a mostly straight face, before dissolving into laughter again.

Pushing her over onto her belly again, Severus mounted her from behind. Nudging her knees apart with his thighs, he lowered himself into prodding range, then slowly sunk inside her slick flesh. Contrary to her teasing claim, Hermione grabbed the quilted bedding, stuffing it into her mouth so she wouldn't moan too loud. It didn't stop noises from escaping her as he set up a slow, deep-thrusting rhythm, but it did muffle the sounds. It just felt so good to be with him, even after half a year of loving and fighting and making up together, she didn't want to share it with anyone else.

"You forgot to do something, earlier, *Cindy*," he told her, leaning down so that he could inhale the flowery scent of her hair. At her wordless noise of inquiry, he said, "You forgot to correct the desk-clerk when he called us *Mr. and Mrs. Miller*. One must wonder at the way you gave both of us the same surname. Or rather, at the hidden reason for doing so...considering we're not married, yet."

Her heart thumped in her chest. Freeing her lips from the duvet, she asked, "Is, erm, that a proposal?"

He stilled, sunk halfway into her. Several seconds passed as he considered her enquiry. Finally, he sunk all the way inside, lowering his body to rest on top of hers, pinning her gently to the bedding. "Yes. Since *you* acted so sneakily...arranging the thought of it ages ago with the similarity in our assumed last names. I think I'm rather proud of having managed to corrupt you."

"You're not head of Slytherin anymore...and I am not a Gryffindor. That means I'm free to corrupt *you*, you realize," she retorted. As always in their relationship, at least since the night she had rescued him, she spoke her mind honestly, not wanting misunderstandings to lead to any more lies between them. "I do want to marry you. I *also* would like children someday...but I'd like to hold off for several more years before having any. Two and a half years from now, we're going to run out of the past, catch up with the present, and start heading into the unknowns of the future.

"That means we'll have to be careful with how we acquire our money, what jobs we might take, positions we'd hold, research we'd do...and the people we'll meet. Eventually, we'll be back in our rightful time...and I do miss my parents."

Sighing, he pulled out, rolling onto his side. Propping his head on his palm, he studied her. "I *have* given that some thought. I miss teaching...do not give me that look, not when your hairbrush is still within reach," he warned her. "I had to be nasty to maintain discipline, as a young man...and then I had to be nasty to ensure no one got close to me...and I kept myself miserable and unapproachable because I wanted to punish myself for all my mistakes in life.

"But if I can be more like Minerva or you were...well, I did hear something about a 'Sasquatch High' when we were passing through the wizarding district in Seattle. I *am* competent at not only Potions and Defence, but also Charms and Arithmancy. All categories in which you could also succeed, 'Professor Miller'. They might even have an opening for a teacher or two, and it wouldn't hurt to enquire at the end of our doubled time."

"Sasquatch High?" Hermione asked. "Not Hogwarts?"

He shook his head. "I cannot go back there. And I should not. Even if all the memories didn't threaten to haunt me, I'd never get rid of the suspicions that would be dogging my heels...yes, everyone thinks of me as a war-hero. A *martyred* war-hero," he reminded her. "A living one would have to face repercussions, old resentments, questions and suspicions that a presumed death has automatically absolved for me...and I find I am *tired* of the war. Tired of having been Severus Snape, greasy bane of every young British witch and wizard's existence. I would rather start over as a new man."

"As 'David Miller', for real?" she asked. He nodded. Hermione chewed on her lower lip, considering his words.

"I will not deny you the right to stop being Cindy and resume being Hermione," he told her quietly, tucking a stray curl of her growing blonde-brown hair behind her ear. "But I have no reason worth returning to the U.K. and all the troubles that would ensue. Particularly if your friend, Mr. Potter, still believes I'm in love with his mum." His long, thin nose wrinkled in distaste. "I do not think he would take well to the additional information that I not only lusted after his mum, I now lust after *you*...and worse...from his perspective...that I wish to marry you."

"Er, no. I don't think Harry would take that at all well. Nor would Ron," she agreed. "I do have to return long enough to tell Kingsley *something* about my mission...but what should I tell him?"

This time, it was his turn to bite his lower lip, grimacing in thought. Finally, he spoke. "...Tell him the truth, but swear him to secrecy about it. Convince him that a dead Snape is an asset to the new regime, but that a live one would only stir too many political pots, threatening to make them boil over with old grievances. And...get used to

calling me 'David'. In private, as well as in public. It's not a bad name. I have no ill memories associated with it, unlike my own."

"We'll fix your identity so that you're David Severus Miller," she told him, and smiled wryly. "I'm not sure I could enjoy shouting 'David' nearly as much as I enjoy shouting 'Severus' when in the throes of lust, however much our neighbors might object."

"Cheeky swot! Where's that hairbrush?" he mock-demanded.

"Watch it, or I'll make you go skiing without having finished what we just started," she teased.

"I am *not* going to risk breaking my 'third leg', never mind either of the other two," he countered, climbing back over her. Nuzzling her shoulders with his nose, he added, "I don't care if this is a Muggle resort. I'm casting a tumble-triggered Cushioning Charm on both our clothes, just in case. You do *not* want to break me before you've finished binding me as your husband, do you?"

"Well, no...but I'd better cast the spells, so that your magic isn't traceable. Speaking of marriage, we'll still have to wait until time resumes its normal course before getting married," she told him. At his wary look, Hermione explained. "...Shortly after the war ended, I dated Ron for a while...oh, stop grimacing, we gave up for good after months of nonstop arguing...and then I dated a couple of other men. I'd really rather not cuckold you, even if it's only temporally. I respect you too much."

"Good. You *will* be faithful to me," he stated, slotting their flesh together. "As I will be faithful to *you*."

A thrust of his flesh drove his point home.

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"Hermione! The tiger lilies worked!"

Startled, Hermione barely had time to brace herself before Ron swept her into a rib-aching hug. The redhead laughed and swung her around, then set her on her feet, grinning.

"Dinner was wonderful, the flowers were wonderful, the Ferris Wheel was wonderful, and *she* was wonderful...!"

Katie Bell. That's right. Remembering what...for her...had happened five years ago, she managed a smile. "I'm glad you and Katie had a great time, Ron."

He grinned back and nodded, then blinked and eyed her. "You look different, somehow...facial? I know...new haircut!"

Hermione self-consciously touched her curls. She had grown out her hair over the last three-plus years, trimming off the bleached bits until it was more or less like her old hairstyle. Severus had grumbled a bit about her returning to looking "like a school girl", but had admitted he preferred longer hair on women. The compromise would be that, after her meeting with Kingsley, she would get her locks streaked with highlights, since he said that sort of "outdoorsy" colouring suited her better than plain brown.

Considering he himself had agreed to trimming his hair stylishly short and growing a goatee, Hermione knew she could put up with the tangled mess it made if she forgot to braid it at night.

"Yeah, you got a haircut," Ron asserted, eyeing her speculatively. "And you look like you've lost some weight, too. You're looking real good, Herm."

"Thank you, Ron," she said, smiling.

He puffed up his chest a little. "That's right; I'm a modern bloke! I *notice* these things, these days...you would've liked Katie's dress last night. All blue and flowery, and it clung in all the right..."

Hermione laughed and cut him off, raising her hands. "...I'm sure it was lovely, Ron, but I have an appointment to see the Minister this morning...and then I'll be off on an assignment overseas, if everything goes right."

"Overseas?" her best friend asked, frowning in puzzlement.

"I'll tell you about it later!" she promised, backing up toward the lifts. Waving, she turned and made her escape.

A short time later, the Minister's secretary escorted her into the highest office in wizarding England. Hermione waited until the door shut behind the other woman, then waited further while Kingsley swept his wand through the air, casting Impeturbable Charms on the walls, ceiling, and floor. He gestured at the padded chairs in the conversation corner of his office, and joined her in taking a seat.

"...Well? You look a little different, so I presume you went back?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "I went back. I created my disguise, set the Time Turner...and misjudged the moment of my entry back into the world. I was attacked by Lord Voldemort...I thought he was leaving the Shack at the time, but now I wonder if he wasn't actually going to the Shack...and in the attack, my hand struck the Time Turner's dials. I was flung back in time to just before the start of Severus' second year as a teacher at Hogwarts. The Time Turner was blazing hot at that point, utterly unusable...and being temporally stranded for roughly a year, I managed to convince Albus into hiring me as 'Professor Cindy Miller' in the Defence Against the Dark Arts post."

"Understandable. And cleverly done. You taught my cousin, Weston Alderpot, but I'd just left school the year before," Kingsley told her. "I remember him raving about how good Professor Miller was."

"I knew I'd be raising a generation that would have to face the Death Eaters all over again, so I wanted to do a good job," she admitted.

"Of course, you were very careful about not contaminating anyone with knowledge of the future, right?" the Minister of Magic dryly asked her.

"Of course. I did make a friendship of sorts with Severus," she confessed. "But I realized that, if I was so far back in time, I had the opportunity to not just see what had happened to him, but to possibly save him, if I could. And, well...I succeeded. I gained his trust, I cycled forward in time in modest increments, and I managed to get him the antivenin for Nagini's poison, and a blood-replenisher, and I Apparated him to a safe location to recover...and then took him to a safe-house to wait out the intervening years."

Kingsley eyed her hair. "If you followed through on your plan to cut and colour your hair...shouldn't it still be different?"

Hermione blushed. "Erm...no. Because I managed to make up a friendship with Severus, and the friendship has since become, well, a bit more than friendship."

"*Hermione*..." Kingsley eyed her askance, but in a gossiping sort of way, not an affronted one. Then he wrinkled his dark nose. "With *Severus*?"

"He's since taken on a new identity, and a new personality, now that he's free of the war...and free of all the suspicions and expectations and hatreds. He has a request to make, in fact," she stated, bracing herself for Kingsley's reaction. "He wants to remain dead, as Severus Snape. He doesn't want to come back, he doesn't want anyone but you and I to know he's still alive, and he requests, in the name of all that he has done for the wizarding world, that you do everything in your considerable power as Minister to ensure that Severus Snape stays dead to the world."

Kingsley Shacklebolt was not a hasty man. He sat in silence for a long minute, absorbing her words. "...What about his career? Hogwarts? How is he making his money?"

She blushed again. "Well, erm...being stuck in the past as I was, I made a few prudent investments in the Muggle realm. But he's since accepted a good job and is making a good salary. As am I. And, erm...I'd like to be let go from the Department of Mysteries, because I like my new job a whole lot more...and because we plan to get married."

Choking at that, Kingsley coughed and wheezed, struggling for breath. Hermione leaned forward and whacked him on the back a few times until he recovered. He blinked at her, cleared his throat a couple of times, then asked, "Are you *sure* we're talking about the same Severus Snape, the man who has been obsessed with Lily Evans Potter for most of his grown life?"

"People change. And before you ask if I'm hexed or dosed with a potion, I'm not. I've also been living with the same man, Severus Snape, for over three years," she added tartly. "Trust me, I have no illusions about him. I have to nag him to brush his teeth more than once a day, and he always snores like the Hogwarts Express when he's had anything with caffeine in it after seven o'clock at night. Let me tell you, that puts a real dampener on any attempt to have chocolate for dessert unless I make him a different sort of pudding just for himself.

"And trust me, I *never* want that man to get another head cold, ever," she swore, cutting her hands between them. "He wasn't just cranky and snarly, he was *whingy*! He was worse to deal with than a spoilt third-year! I almost *left* him, at that."

Kingsley eyed her. "So...why didn't you?"

She smirked. "I'd tell you, but then you'd beg me to Oblivate you, and I'm sure there's a law somewhere against doing that to the Minister of Magic. Besides, I *can* give as good as I get. After his ears stopped ringing when he finally snapped my patience and realized how snotty he'd been, he was very sweet about making it up to me."

"I can hardly picture the word 'sweet' being used in conjunction with 'Severus Snape'," the Minister muttered. At her stern look, he sighed and raised his hands. "Alright. He's a changed man, you're not under any undue influence, and he doesn't want to come back to life. So...erm...when is the wedding? I'd go myself, but that would probably draw too much attention to him."

"Well, first I have to break it to my parents that I'm seeing an older man. And that I'm quitting the Department. And that I'm moving overseas, and that I'm going to become a teacher. *And* I have to break all of this to Ron and Harry and the Weasleys," she said. "I have four weeks set aside to settle all my affairs on this side of the pond before I have to go back to work...I'm paying for a substitute, and that's all I can afford before dipping into our savings. Once all of that is settled, the wedding is set for next summer, when we're both off work."

Kingsley asked, "Defence again? And is he teaching, then?"

"He got that one. I'm teaching Charms," she confessed.

"Someone would actually hire him? With his classroom attitude?" he joked dryly.

Hermione leveled him a look. "He no longer has to shove people away, he's free of the stress of maintaining a cover as a spy, and he's actually a lot more like Minerva in his teaching style these days. *I* have a reputation as the worse teacher, right now. Mountains of homework, and woe betide anyone who spells a word wrong. He just bleeds red ink all over their assignments and abuses them verbally in front of their peers. *I* actually make the little blighters do their homework all over again."

Kingsley chuckled at that. "Well, if anyone needs a recommendation for either of you on your past work...I'll set up vouchers for the two of you. That is, I presume Severus is now operating under a new name? Do I get to know what it is?"

"David Severus Miller. But keep that to yourself, and if you absolutely must mention him, then just call him David Miller." She wrinkled her nose. "I hate the thought of lying to my family and friends...but as far as they're to know, I met David during my days in the Department of Mysteries...which in its own way is true enough...and then we fell in love and I decided to follow him to, well, where we're living now. Only I'll supposedly be going to live with him *now*, instead of having been living with him for a few years already. That's the biggest lying part.

"If I could, I'd lie to *you*, to keep him safe...but you put your trust in me to save him, and I owe you for the chance that let me do so," she said.

"I appreciate your honesty. And...I can understand why he'd want a new life, free from the shadows of the old one," Kingsley agreed. "If I weren't in public office and thus in the public eye so much, I'd be there to raise a toast to the both of you next summer. Let him know that I do understand his choice to 'remain dead', and that I'll respect it and keep it a secret. As for letting you go from the Department...that's harder for me to do. I'd like to be able to keep you on retainer, if I may. Your department head says you're quite talented at figuring out certain puzzles...and if we send one or two your way from time to time...well, I know *David* likes solving puzzles, too. So I'd get two brilliant minds for the price of one, yes?"

"Only if you paid me at least one and a half times the usual rate for each puzzle," Hermione retorted. "If not double the going rate. Remember, I have all those re-done homework papers to grade."

He laughed again, then stood and helped her up, clasping her hand. "I'll have your department wade through the paperwork for your new 'consultant' position by the end of the week...you *are* going to turn in the Time-Turner, right?"

Hermione patted the golden chain that disappeared below the neckline of her blouse, then extracted a spell-shrunk packet of papers from her pocket. "I have a report on the side-effects of excessive temporal displacement, carefully worded to avoid all mention of *what* I was doing while traveling through time. All it requires is your authorizing signature, and I can hand it in to the head of the Chronomancy sub-department."

Unshrinking it, she handed over the packet, reseating herself as he sat down and skimmed through her report. When he was through, he rose, crossed to his desk, and scrawled his authorization on the appropriate lines. "...There. Authorized. If you think of anything else that might be helpful for your situation, let me know. Or if I do, I'll let you know, since you'll still be around for a few more weeks...

"Take care of yourself, Hermione. And do take care of him, too. He deserves whatever life he wants," Kingsley told her. "At least, so long as it's a happy one. And if he is happy with you..."

"Absolutely," Hermione swore. "Even if he gets whingy again, I'll make sure he's happy. *After* his tantrums are through," she promised, though she mock-wrinkled her nose at the thought. "I'm not about to reward any ill-behavior. I learnt that lesson as a teacher."

Laughing, Kingsley hugged her.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 8

A tale of fate versus self-determinism.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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"AAAAAUGH! Your NOSE!!" Bags dropping at her feet, Hermione stared at Severus' face in dismayed shock. "What did you *do* to your nose?!"

"Shhh!" Grimacing, Severus shrunk and pocketed her bags, visibly trying not to draw any further attention from the other travelers in Sasquatch Square's North American Portkey Station. "We can talk about it *after* we get you home."

Hermione didn't care. "David S. Miller, you will *tell* me what in Merlin's greasy green undershorts you were thinking, to have *messed with your nose!*"

Grabbing her around the waist, Severus hauled her out of the Portkey Arrivals Platform and over to the Apparations Zone, giving her no further chance to protest. Thankfully, the wizarding population here in the States was a lot more laid-back about shrieking foreign nationals, for he managed to hustle her into the Zone and Side-Apparate her from their view, and any possible chance for eavesdropping.

Arriving with a *bamphf* in their front hall, Hermione elbowed him in the ribs. His grunt of pain made her feel guilt for hurting him, and satisfaction that her point had been made. Released from his grip, she rounded on him in the entryway of the house they had bought in the forest-shrouded suburbs of the Greater Seattle Area.

Sasquatch High wasn't run like an English boarding school, where its students lived on campus; these American pupils wore Portkey class rings that popped them to the school and back home again each day. To serve a detention, the teacher assigning it had to 'interrupt' the return-spell on the rings, delaying it for a specific span of time. The beauty of the system was that the teachers were not obligated to live at the school, either, granting them a private life...though Severus and Hermione both missed the pre-made breakfasts and suppers they used to enjoy back at Hogwarts.

It was her private life that had her so upset right now. "Severus, *why* did you mess with your nose?" Hermione demanded. "It doesn't look at *all* like it should!"

"That is *precisely* my point. I didn't know whether or not anyone would follow you...so I scheduled a visit with a perma-transfigurations Healer while you were gone, and had my nose resized," he explained, rubbing the broadened, blunted tip of his proboscis with a finger. "The shape of it has been one of the defining feature of my face since I was a child. With my nose redone...and some of my skin tightened, to make me look younger...I *don't* look like myself," Severus asserted. He shifted his fingers to his thumb-length, stylishly cut locks. "It is simply another measure to bury my old identity, the same as with my haircut, and the *colour* of my clothes."

"But..." His logic was impeccable...*drat him!*...but she still had to protest. "But your nose was *perfect!*"

He looked down the length his now aquiline nose at her. "Hermione, you are the *only* person in this entire world who has ever thought that...and you *neversaid* it, until now. How could it possibly have been perfect?"

Cheeks heating, Hermione muttered and prevaricated, then caved under the weight of his dark, pointed stare. "...Because it mashed against my clitoris perfectly, whenever you ate me. And now you've *ruined* it! I don't know if this new nose is even going to *reach* my clit, let alone rub it in all the right ways! We're going to have to change everything, particularly some of the suggestions in the Jar!"

Rolling his eyes, Severus gave her a pained look. "Hermione, even if I had a *stub* of a nose, I would *still* know how to use it on you...a fact which I will demonstrate shortly. But *first*, you will tell me how the interview with Shackbolt went."

"Oh. Right."

"Oh, right," he mocked. "As if my whole future doesn't depend on Kingsley's word!"

"Relax, *David*. Your secret is safe with him. In *fact*..." Drawing a bundle of papers out of her coat pocket, she handed them over. "These are your official papers, listing David S. Miller as a former employee of the Department of Mysteries. You will note, of course, just how much of all your 'official' work has been magically blackened out so that it cannot be read...and with the official black-out ink, too, so no spell or solvent can lift it from the paper without the proper command-spell to authorize reading it."

Flicking through the pages, Severus frowned at the pages of line after line of text-broad black lines, completely obscuring the contents. Only a few words here and there escaped the official black-out ink, most being words along the lines of "the", "of", and "and"...plus a few more along the lines of "indisputable hero", "nation's gratitude", and "highest esteem".

Glancing up at him, Hermione found his dark eyes glittering. A moment later, he released one hand from the sheaf so that he could rub at the edges of his lids. Carefully keeping her mouth shut...she knew he hated being thought of as sentimental...she let him master his emotions at his own pace.

"He couldn't acknowledge it openly, but he still wanted to thank me..."

Hermione smiled at his muttered words, glad her beloved was able to accept the indirect praise so well. "I thought it was wonderful. And it'll make a nice replacement for those forged papers we initially submitted to the school board. Of course, in my defence, I *was* authorized to deputize anyone suitable in the course of my work, so what I wrote about you was perfectly legitimate, from a certain point of view."

"You would hardly have been my superior, woman, had I truly worked for the Department of Mysteries," he retorted, setting the papers on the entryway table. "My years of spying would have granted me instant seniority over most of the Department."

"Ha! You wish," she teased. Then tugged him close. "I need you to kiss me. It's been too long, and I've missed you too much."

"And I, you."

Cupping her face in his palms, Severus brushed his lips against hers for just a moment, before deepening the kiss to the point of plundering. His nose no longer pushed awkwardly against her cheek...and in a strange way, she missed that...but this was still her Severus, kissing her as he'd always kissed her. With a mixture of passion, tenderness, intensity, and love.

It did feel odd without the point of his nose pressing into her flesh, bumping against hers as he shifted to nip at the other corner of her mouth...but it also felt good. Less distracting. Melting into his embrace, Hermione tugged at the buttons of his blue shirt. Her shock over his nose had prevented her from greeting him as she had wanted to, with a deep, loving kiss, but this was better. They were at home, alone, with the rest of the weekend to enjoy their reunion.

Four weeks was three weeks and six days too long to be apart. He might not have wanted to be parted from her because of his memories of her sitting in his attic, speeding through time, but she hadn't had to endure anything longer than a few hours of separation over the last few years. She needed to feel his olive-tanned skin under her hands, to reassure herself not just that he was alive, but that he was still hers. Particularly now that time had resumed its natural course.

That was one worry that continued to lurk under the surface of her thoughts. Now that their time together had caught up with the timeline they should have been inhabiting all along, would he still want to be with her? Would he still want to spend his days conversing with her in intellectual discourse, and his nights convulsing with her in physical intercourse? Would he...pull her down with him to the runner carpet, tug impatiently at her clothes, and finally whisk them away with a snap of his hastily drawn wand so that he could devour her from breasts to bottom with his eyes, his hands, his lips?

That's why they...ohhh, yesss...call them rhetorical questions...ohhh, God, yes!

The feel of his fingers delving through her folds brought back so many good memories of how good a lover he was. Twisting his hand, he curled his first two fingers upward and fluttered. Hermione convulsed with pleasure, clutching at him. Wet warmth trickled out of her depths, slicked her flesh, coated his fingers to the knuckles.

He had rendered himself naked at the same time as her; his body was no longer pale, save for the span of skin from waist to knee where his shorts covered the pertinent, fallow-pale portions of his flesh. Now his nude, exercise-strengthened limbs curled and flexed, slotting his hips between them. Extracting his hand, he sucked her juices from his fingers even as he prodded at her folds with a different, much thicker bit of flesh.

Sinking home...and it did feel like he was coming home, to Hermione...Severus cradled her head in his palms. He didn't move from the waist down, just from the neck up. Twisting his head this way and that, he devoured her mouth from every succulent angle he could find. This, too, was familiar; they had learnt through trial and error that if he moved too much, too soon, it was usually over too fast.

Carefully, she spread her thighs. Lifting her knees, she tilted her pelvis up into him in slow, abdomen-clenching degrees, until he sank just that little bit deeper. Perfection. Knees hitched high on his sides, Hermione crossed her ankles behind his rump. That straightened out her lower back, taking some of the pressure off her spine. It also ground her clitoris into his pubic mound.

Releasing her mouth, he nipped at her right ear. Hermione clutched at him, heels pressing lightly to encourage him to move. But he didn't; not yet. Words rasped from him, rough with emotion as well as passion.

"I was very, very good, while you were gone," Severus told her. "I wanted to follow you, desperately wanted to join you, to spy on you, to keep you safe, and keep you away from that freckled twit you used to date. Just in case he changed his mind about you, and tried to change yours...but I didn't. I stayed here. I had faith in you. I *do* have faith in you, that you're mine and that you *want* to be mine... I was very, very good."

"Yes, you were," Hermione praised him, twisting so that she could kiss the corner of his mouth, the part she could reach.

"It was unbearable, for you weren't even sitting in my attic, this time...but I trusted you would return. The pain of having my nose reshaped was nothing compared to the pain of waiting for you."

"At least you had some practice in waiting," she muttered, licking her way to his ear. "I hadn't been apart from you since I rescued you. But...it was a good visit. And I packed up my old life, sold off everything I didn't want... Crooks was rather mad when I got back to him; he's half-Kneazle, and somehow knew I'd been gone a long time. He's still going to be mad, because he's sitting at Wizarding Customs, waiting to go through his quarantine weeks. I had to keep myself furiously busy with everything, just to keep from missing you too much."

"And the freckled twit?" Severus asked quietly, pulling back so he could search her face intensely. "Did you miss him? Were you happy to see him?"

She chuckled, amused and flattered by his carefully contained jealousy. "Only somewhat. He was still bubbling over some date with Katie Bell that I'd forgotten he was having. It only made me think of you, and the things we've done. I missed *you* terribly. I told him about corresponding with a David Miller, and how I planned to 'move out here', and he tried to go all heavy-handed-thug on me, wanting to know all about you and what your intentions were."

A small smile curled the corner of his mouth, not quite shy but not quite smug, either. "Strictly honourable. Summer needs to hurry...did you keep the Time-Turner, or did you hand it in?"

She laughed outright at that. "You know I had to turn it in! Besides, I can only turn it as far forward as I myself have lived."

Closing his eyes, he groaned softly. "God...laugh like that again."

Hermione chuckled, amused at the temerity of being ordered to laugh. She realized after a moment that he meant the way her stomach muscles tightened, and deliberately squeezed the flesh impaling her. Growling, Severus gripped her hair and devoured her mouth, finally galvanized into moving within her.

As wonderful as it was to talk with each other, to actually communicate whilst making love, they were both too passionate by nature to stick with mere words forever. He picked up speed faster than she expected, however; pounding into her, Severus rapidly brought himself to climax, stiffening and groaning over her. A few last, fast thrusts, and he pulled back, wriggling free of her clutching, disappointed grasp.

"Severus...dammit, I was *so close*!" she whined. She struggled up onto one elbow, trying to grab him to pull him back up into her, but he moved too far down. Then his hands pressed on her knees, parting her thighs, and she thumped back onto the runner-carpet with the realization of his goal: the application of his lips, his teeth, his tongue, and most especially his altered nose to her nether-parts.

His nose wasn't quite so pointy anymore, true. That meant it didn't quite have the same narrow surface to work with. But it *was* large enough to still get the job done, and done well enough to pleasure her. Relieved her lover hadn't changed *that* much in the intervening weeks, Hermione relaxed into his passion-driven care. Her only non-pleasure thought was that they had better retire to the bedroom for round two, later, if they didn't want to end up with rug-burns in awkward-to-explain-away locations.

After all, Monday was a school-day, and both of them had to teach.

If he allowed her to catch her breath.

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"Damn, I forgot the raspberries." Twisting and stretching, Hermione set the bowl in her hand on the nightstand. Returning to her lover, she stooped over Severus, planting a kiss on his forehead. Her naked breast pressed against his equally bare shoulder, but she didn't give him enough time to shift his hand close enough for a caress. "I'll be right back."

"You're not going to decorate me with the clotted cream, first?" he enquired, giving her a lazy, admiring smile as she rose from their bed.

"I like my cream fresh," she joked.

Glancing down the length of his naked body, Severus smirked. "It will be, if you hurry...."

For a middle-aged man who had just endured yet another horrid Friday in the ongoing struggle to stuff knowledge into the minds of unappreciative teenagers, her husband-to-be was remarkably randy, today. Then again, he *did* like "edible art day," particularly when he was her canvas.

Rather than risk gradually taking each other for granted, Severus had proposed in their first year together that they write down a whole slough of fantasies, from the simplest and most publically acceptable ones, to the ones so salacious that they still made her blush to contemplate. Once a week, each of them drew one of the scraps of paper out of a blackened jar, or the Jar for short. If it was something simple, such as bringing their partner a bouquet of flowers or buying them a new book, they just did it whenever and surprised the other. If it was something lengthy or involved...such as today's "edible art" experiment...they checked their schedules and planned for it in advance.

There was something to be said for spontaneity, yes, but there was nothing quite like anticipation, either.

Snagging his shirt from the floor, she pulled it over her head. She wasn't petite, but he was tall; the cuffs drooped over her knuckles and the scooped hemline fell halfway to her knees. It was also still slightly warm from his body, and it smelled of him. Cupping the collar points, she sniffed at the fabric appreciatively, turning her head first one way, then the other as she padded out of the bedroom.

Happy, she skipped down the steps to the ground floor, enjoying the plush new carpet covering them. The colour was a lovely tawny cream, making her wonder if she should grab a bottle of bubbly to drizzle over her lover, or if that would simply dilute the clotted cream, hazelnut-chocolate spread, and candied orange peels she already had waiting on the nightstand. Just as she passed the archway leading to the sitting room, however, a flare of greenish light from within the room startled her.

Whipping around, Hermione pressed herself flat against the archway, groping at the back of her head for her wand...which was on the nightstand upstairs, not stuck in her knotted-up curls. Teeth bared in a grimace, she peered cautiously into the living room. Two wizards finished stepping out of the fireplace, shaking soot from their clothes. One had messy black hair which had never been fully tamed in his life, while the other had carrot-red hair cropped stylishly shorter than she last remembered it. Green and blue eyes looked up, glanced around, and caught sight of her peering into the front room.

"Hey! Hermione!" Harry grinned at her and spread his hands, indicating his presence in her living room. "Look who's come for a visit!"

Acutely aware of her nearly naked state...sans undergarments and wearing a shirt that suddenly seemed far too small for decency, for all its true owner was larger than her by several inches...Hermione weakly smiled back at them. Her face felt like it was burning up, though she tried to act nonchalant. "Erm...Ron, Harry. It's, er, good to see you."

Ruffling his locks to get the last of the soot off his scalp, Ron eyed her askance. "Oy, that's a bit lower-key than I'd expected. Aren't you happy to see us?"

"Yeah, we came all the way out from England just to visit with you," Harry added, moving forward.

Ron frowned as Hermione shrank back a little from the edge of the archway. "What's wrong?"

"Erm...you caught me at a very awkward moment. If you'd just, you know...turn your backs for three seconds, I'll dash upstairs, get myself presentable, and be right back down for a proper greeting. Promise," she added.

That familiar, freckled brow wrinkled further, then cleared with wide-eyed comprehension. Blushing, Ron quickly turned his back. He nudged Harry with his elbow, until the other wizard blushed, realizing what Hermione meant. With both of her old friends muttering something that sounded like, "...scrub the brain...scrub the brain..." she dashed for the stairs.

Severus lurked at the top, trousers hastily donned and wand ready in his hand. Slowing as she reached the top, Hermione glanced briefly down the steps, addressing him in a whisper. "They don't know you're here. If you cast a *Muffliato* and then Apparated..."

Wrinkling his reshaped nose, looking very reluctant, Severus shook his head. "No," he muttered back. "I have to face them at some point. They were pains in my neck...but they *are* a part of your life. Just...give me a few minutes to get into character, as it were. *And* to get dressed. I trust you will be doing the same?"

Hermione shuddered. "Trust me, I want to be fully clothed. I cannot *believe* I used to want to date Ron. Great friend, absolutely. Great lover...not a chance. I won't settle for anything less, now that I've had the best."

Smiling softly at the compliment, Severus escorted her back into their bedroom. As she found and redonned her work clothes, a tasteful skirt-suit in a lovely shade of dark blue, he dug out a pair of faded bluejeans and a pale blue t-shirt bearing the logo of the local wizarding wireless station. He added a white-and-tan plaid shirt on top of it for an impromptu, unbuttoned jacket. Slipping his sockless feet into brown leather boat shoes, he checked his appearance in the broad mirror covering the sliding door of their closet.

Hermione eyed him askance, before realizing he had worn a navy blue suit for teaching today. Navy blue was too close to black, and a suit was too close to formal teaching robes. *That makes more sense, changing into something utterly unlike Professor Snape.*

Quickly stripping off her outer clothes, she grabbed a pair of jeans for herself, dithered a moment, then redonned his white shirt, tucking the long ends into the stonewashed denim waistband. Severus pulled her close for a quick kiss, then breathed deeply and calmly, visibly rewriting himself from being at-home-Severus to in-public-David. Much like she used to do whenever she had turned herself into Cindy, back before rescuing him.

Mindful of the food still waiting for them on the dresser, Hermione fetched her wand and cast a preserving charm on the clotted cream. Knowing Severus, or rather, David would follow her when he was ready, she took herself back downstairs, padding over the carpet once more. This time, the only reddish object waiting for her was the youngest male Weasley, and not one of those small, plastic crates of raspberries.

"So...erm... David will be down in just a moment or two," Hermione offered, gesturing vaguely behind her before tucking her fingers into her back pockets. "How is Ginny doing? And the others?"

"Everyone's fine," Harry reassured her. "They're all waiting to finally meet him, of course, but Ron and I thought we'd be the advance scouts, so to speak. That, and Ginny couldn't get off until Sunday, since she's working an odd shift at St. Mungo's right now. We all miss you...Teddy's grown another two inches since you've been gone. Or so it seems."

"You'd think he was eating his nana out of house and home, from the way Mrs. Tonks carries on," Ron joked. "Speaking of eating...got any tea? I'm a bit parched from the Floo. I think I got some soot in my lungs somewhere near the chimneys of Nebraska or something."

"Nebraska, gentlemen, is two thousand miles away, give or take."

The voice that drew their attention to the hallway didn't have the familiar hiss and mutter. Instead, though it was a little dry, it was warm...and Americanized. David Miller flashed the Boy Who Lived and his best friend a tooth-straightened grin. "But I'll admit the air in Montana chimneys is a little dry. You have the red hair, so you must be Ron Weasley."

Ron nodded, briefly clasping David's hand. "Yeah, I am. You're, um, Daniel, right?"

"David. David Miller. And you have the glasses, so you must be Harry Potter." He held out his hand to the younger man.

Harry accepted it with a lopsided smile. "Well, that's a refreshing change from 'you have the scar', I'll admit."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm very grateful for what you did, regarding the Dark Lord," David admitted candidly. "But Hermione told me how she used to repair your glasses, and that's what stuck out in my mind...the fact that you're her friend."

Harry grinned and shook the older wizard's hand with more enthusiasm. "Thank you...I really couldn't have done anything without her and Ron's help. And I miss her. As a best friend. I hope you're taking good care of her, for us."

"I'd like to know how she ended up with an older man, myself," Ron muttered. Harry shot him an annoyed look, following it up with a jab of his elbow. Ron grunted and frowned. "What? I'm just looking out for her! I might not want to date her anymore, but that doesn't mean I don't care...speaking of which, you'd better treat her right. We took down the Dark Lord, so we can take down any unwanted ex-boyfriends, too."

"Ronald Bilius Weasley!" Hermione snapped from the doorway to the dining room and the kitchen that lay beyond. "Stop threatening my fiance this instant!"

David grinned and tipped his head toward her. "Yeah, stop threatening me. That's *her* job."

Both younger wizards stared at him a moment, then choked on their snickers. Harry rolled his eyes, and Ron muttered under his breath, "*No* comment..."

"Behave, or I'll make you wash up the tea things. Which will be ready in a few more minutes. David, if you think you can entertain these two louts, I'll dig out some biscuits to go with the tea," Hermione stated, catching his eye. Her words were banal, light and friendly, and she tried to match her expression, but she needed his reassurance that he could keep up the pretence of being David Millar.

He nodded, holding her gaze. "Oh, I think I can keep them entertained. Don't use up all the raspberries, if you bring out any fruit with those cookies."

Relieved he was holding her own...and amused her two friends were such thickies...Hermione headed back into the kitchen. The success of his disguise was a relief. The old Severus Snape her friends remembered was so far removed from the David Miller he had become, she doubted they would ever catch on. *Which is utterly fine by me*, she thought, searching for the tea biscuits and a tray to serve them. *He's earned his anonymity. Even more than Harry, he's earned the right to be free from all those old reputations.*

I'm definitely going to have to reward him for getting along with my friends...ooh, an unopened bottle of toffee sauce! I forgot that was in this cupboard. I do believe I know how I'll thank him, after the boys have gone home again...

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 8

A tale of fate versus self-determinism.

CHAPTER EIGHT

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Hearing the sound of her husband investigating the pots and pans in the kitchen, Hermione struggled to control her unsteady breath. It was too cold to stay out here on the patio for long, but she forced herself to stare at the brightly hued leaves of the ornamental maples lining their back yard. To absorb their colours, and inhale nothing but the musty-crisp scents of autumn...but the sliding glass door opened and the scent of cooking sausage wafted out.

She doubled over, gagging and struggling with the convulsive need to vomit. Within moments, he was with her, first clutching her arms in concern, then scooping her hair out of her way as he brought with him the unholy, greasy stench of bangers and mash. Gagging switched to hurling; she had the presence of mind to aim into the grass beyond the wooden steps of the back patio. At least she didn't spew her guts onto the little bronze marker that was Crookshanks' gravestone; that would've added indignity to her misery.

Deft fingers wove her curls into a temporary braid, then she heard the patio door sliding again, and more sounds of pots and lids, and a couple of faint clicks. At least he had the presence of mind to turn off the burners, but that didn't prevent her stomach from heaving again when he came back, still reeking of fatty, half-cooked pork.

The night was cold and crisp, but there was a slight breeze, enough to clear the air after a few more minutes. That allowed the urge to gag to subside. Grateful for his presence, afraid of what he might say, Hermione let Severus guide her over to one of the wrought-iron chairs that comprised their patio furnishings. There weren't any cushions to soften the hard, cold seats, having been put away for the coming winter, but at least the air out here was sausage-free.

Crouching in front of her, he stroked a few wisps of her hair back from her face, his dark gaze studying her in narrow-eyed, calculating silence. Finally, he spoke. "Feeling better?"

She nodded.

"Good. We're going to St. Sincere."

Hermione flushed, upset that she hadn't been able to hide her illness from him.. "I don't *need* to go to St. Sincere. It's just a little tummy-illness."

"Hermione, you have been off your food for a week. I will *not* have you wasting away from some undiagnosed complaint," he told her. The tenderness with which he cradled her hands in his contrasted with the steel behind his quiet words. "We may have a marriage of equals, and as such, I do not put my foot down in a didactic manner very often, but I *am* putting it down for this. Given your condition, taking the Floo is out. We will Apparate there."

"I *don't* need to go to St. Sincere," she repeated, flushing again with discomfort. "I already..."

He paled. Some of his summer tan had started to fade with the progression of the school year...an easy thing to achieve in this corner of the world, given how the sun only really came out in force during the summer...but he paled further. "You...you have already been to the hospital? The Healers know what is wrong?"

She nodded, arms folded over her tenderized stomach. The wild look in his dark eyes startled her, as did the abrupt way he clutched at the armrests, almost rocking the chair beneath her.

"You're dying! Oh, God..."

"...What? No! Absolutely not!" Hermione emphatically repeated herself, wanting to get *that* notion out of his head; she knew he loved her too deeply for such a fear to be allowed to take root. "Severus, I am *not* going to die. I'm just...I just... I didn't know how to tell you. I didn't know how you'd take it."

His fingers tightened on the wrought iron. "Take *what*? Tell me, Hermione. *Tell* me."

"I'm... I know we've been putting it off. Content with our careers, happy with our life together...and I know you brewed it yourself, but after so many years, even a high-quality draught can lose its efficacy with overuse..."

He rolled his eyes, impatient with her fumbblings. "*Get* to the *point*, Mrs. Miller!"

"I'm pregnant!"

There. She had blurted it out. From the way he blinked, the news had taken him aback. She flushed, then paled, feeling about as miserable as if she were still in the kitchen attempting to cook a batch of bangers and mash.

"...I know you're not ready for it. *I'm* not exactly ready, either. I wasn't even sure if *I* could come to grips with it," she muttered. "Let alone deal with how you might feel. Which is why I hadn't said anything, yet, because I didn't know *how* to say it. I mean, we've had several very happy years together, and it just never seemed to be on my mind to even think about having kids, and it certainly was never on your tongue. More like both of us were always complaining about this and that, what with our students being colonial-sized pains half the time..."

She was babbling. She knew that he knew it when he lifted two fingers to her lips, silencing her. Subsiding, Hermione waited for the blow to fall. This was it; he was going to blame her, and rail at her, and...

He didn't. Dark eyes boring into hers, he asked her a question instead. "Hermione...do you want to have this child?"

She blinked at him. "Well... Yes? I think so...I mean, if we're ever going to be ready, now would be as good a time as any..." Daring a little bit more, she asked, "Do you, erm, want it? Because if you don't..."

Releasing the arms of the chair, he picked up her hands again. Both were cold from the iron and the chilly night air, but he cradled them together and lifted them to his lips for a slow, gentle kiss. "What I want is for you to *never* scare me like that again. And you *will* go to St. Sincere, to have a midwife Healer check you over. If we are going to have a child, you will take the best care possible...because I do not want to lose you. Not even to childbirth. *Your* health comes first." He kissed her fingers again. "After that, the health of our child, and in third place, my own health. No arguments. Go get your coat."

"I can't exactly go back in there," she pointed out, deeply relieved he wasn't fussing about her getting knocked up in spite of their on-going precautions. At his frown, she reminded him why. "I don't seem to be getting morning sickness, exactly, but I do suffer from the smell of cooking meat. I can *eat* it; I just can't be in the same air-space while it's being cooked. Particularly fatty beef and pork. And I *told* you, I'm fine! I *don't* need to be rushed off to the hospital, because this isn't an emergency."

"I just can't *cook*, right now. That's all. It's *not* an emergency."

A last kiss to her fingers and he straightened from his crouch. "Then I will fetch you your coat, and a blanket. I will finish the cooking, and air out the kitchen...and schedule a check-up for you for tomorrow." Pausing, he dropped to one knee and gently covered her jumper-clad stomach with one strong, scarred hand. "A child... *Our* child..."

She smiled. "Yes, *our* child."

Glancing up, he shot her a firm look. "For the record, we are *not* naming him after any of your friends. I saw that letter from Mrs. Potter nee Weasley...'Albus Severus', my arse! That's the most ungodly mouthful of names ever put upon a baby-name list, let alone the thought of inflicting it upon someone!"

Hermione laughed, amused and relieved. If he was already planning on names, then she had nothing to fear about his acceptance of their offspring. "*He* just might be a *she*, love. And we are *not* naming her 'Hermione'. I'm putting my foot down on that one, right now."

"Nor 'Severus'," he agreed. "I'll check the gift-shop while you're visiting the Healers, and see if they have any baby-name books. We will draw up a list, pick out several choices, and come to a mutual agreement...and we are *not* naming them after anyone we know. And you *will* take better care of yourself."

She grinned. "And you say you never put your foot down."

"Being logical and methodical is *not* putting my foot down. Now, wait here while I fetch you something warmer to wear," he ordered her.

Deeply relieved her awkward news had gone over so well, Hermione just chuckled to herself.

...

"*Muuuum!* Daddy's being a big *meanie!* He's ruining *everything!*"

Setting down the pan she was drying, Hermione eyed the whinging, pouting girl storming into the kitchen.

"*Ruining?*" he challenged. "I caught you *kissing* a *boy!* You aren't allowed to kiss *any* boy until you are eighteen! As you will be *grounded* until you are eighteen..."

"...David Severus Miller!" That pulled him up short, as she intended. Tossing down the dishtowel, Hermione planted her hands on her hips. "I caught *Hugo* kissing a girl, earlier today."

"...You did? At the age of five?" His brows lifted, but not in outrage, more like in speculation. And maybe a hint of admiration for their son's precociousness.

She saw red. "Actually, I did *not*. I *lied* just now, purely to test a theorem...a test which *you* have just failed."

He flinched, then scowled, defending himself. "I was merely surprised that a boy of his age would even be interested in such things, but as he is only five, it is only natural that he is too young to know that such behavior is inappropriate. Rose, on the other hand, *is* old enough to know better!"

"I do not put my foot down very often in this marriage," she stated firmly, only to earn a snort of disbelief. Setting her jaw, Hermione continued. "Be that as it may, I *will not* tolerate sexist nonsense in this family! She will *not* be grounded until she is eighteen."

"*Yesss!*" Rose hissed, throwing her arms around Hermione's hips in a hug. Dropping her gaze, Hermione gave her daughter a firm look.

"But as she *is* old enough to know better, she will be grounded for a full week. No telly, no phone, no computer, and *no* going out of the house without our permission."

"*Aww!*" Stomping her foot, Rose glared at her mother.

"You heard your mother," Severus asserted. "You are grounded for a *full* week. To the minute."

He released the handle of the pan and pointed at the clock on the kitchen wall.

"...Of to your room, Rose. Go do your homework," Hermione ordered. She aimed a gentle swat at Rose's backside when the girl dawdled.

Rose growled and folded her arms across her slim, flat chest, stomping out of the room. The pan on the counter went flying; Severus snatched it out of the air before it could bash into anything. Holding the copper-bottomed pan, he exchanged a silent, deep look with his wife.

Keeping silent until he was sure their eldest was out of earshot, Severus joined Hermione at the sink, picking up the dishtowel she had dropped. "...We'll have to register her for school. At least I'll be able to keep a firm eye on her each day, so she *will not* be getting into further trouble with unsuitable young boys."

"Severus...I meant it." Hands resting on the counter, she glanced up at her husband and lover of nearly twenty years. "You are a wonderful, caring, loving man...but you are *too* protective."

"*Too* protective!" he scoffed.

"Oh, really? What will happen if she gets into trouble, and doesn't have the knowledge and the *confidence* to handle it?"

"She will *not* get into trouble, because she will be grounded until she's eighteen! Secretly grounded," he muttered at her exasperated sigh. "I told you, I'll keep an eye on her!"

"I'm talking about when she's twenty-five, not fifteen! And that is my very point. Learning how to care for yourself is something that *has* to be learnt when one is young. She will not *learn* how to take care of herself if her dad is constantly hovering her over her shoulder, staving off even the smallest, slightest danger," she told him. "Yes, we can *tell* her all about the dangers she'll face, from boys who have just one thing on their minds to the rise of some new Dark-Lord-wanna-be, but unless she *learns* to handle trouble through personal experience, all the theory in the world will not help her."

"Hermione..."

"...Dolores Umbridge!" Hermione hissed, struggling to keep her words quiet so as not to alarm their children. "Case in point, and a very damning one! Theory is fine and good, but it *must* be coupled with actual practice. You *are* a very protective father. You're too passionate to be otherwise. Good intentions or not, you *know* you would end up interfering with her social development. You're still the most intimidating of professors, wherever and whatever you teach. I will *not* have you stalking around, looming all over, and interfering with her maturation. Or with Hugo's."

Gritting his teeth, Severus dried the pan, and its lid. With careful, deliberate movements, he dried the rest of the pans and utensils she had just watched, placing each one in its assigned cabinet or drawer. When the task was done and the drainer tucked below the counter again, he folded the drying cloth and hung it on the oven rail.

"...How do I *not* watch over my children? How do I not worry over them? You saw what she did! She's bound for Sasquatch High, with that little display. She cannot stay in a Muggle school."

"Not a Muggle school, no," Hermione agreed quietly. "But not at Sasquatch High, either. And not just because of you. *I'd* be tempted to lurk too close to her as she grows up...and I dread the day she comes home in tears from some broken heart, because I just know I'd hex the boy who was responsible six ways from Sunday, and get into trouble with the Department of Magic...just because we defeated one very Dark Lord doesn't mean another won't attempt to rise up in the future...and if one does, our children need to grow up strong, confident, and experienced enough at dealing with the smaller troubles in life to be able to handle the bigger ones."

"There's only one place either of them can do that, a place that we can trust as parents, and that's Hogwarts," she said. "We turned out well...and now that the Defence position isn't cursed, they've a very good curriculum going these days under that Norwegian witch Minerva told me about in her last letter, Professor Frejne. Harry wrote that she's even been guest-lecturing for the Aurors, and impressing everyone. If they go to Hogwarts...they'll have an excellent education, they'll be closer to Mum and Dad, they'll be able to connect to *our* past and come to appreciate it...and they'll grow up strong, and healthy, and capable of taking on the world. But, most importantly, they will *grow up*."

"We cannot keep them as our babies forever," she finished, as unhappy with her own logic as a parent could be when forced to face that fact. "They have to grow up."

Sighing roughly, Severus wrapped his arms around her. "I don't want to give up our babies. I *don't* want to be so far away from them..."

She cuddled him back, comforting him. "Neither do I. But you *would* smother both of them, and you know it."

He stilled at that, considering her words. "Hermione...do I smother *you*?"

Hidden by the way she had tucked her face into his chest, beneath his chin, Hermione smiled. Mastering it, she pulled back enough to look up at him without smirking too much. "Yes, you do. But I allow you to because I am *strong* enough to stand toe to toe with you, when needed."

Snorting, he said, "Like just now? Any more strength, and I'd..." Again, he paused, a thoughtful look pinching his brow. It changed to a sly, calculating one. "If Rose goes to Hogwarts, and Hugo, magic willing, follows her a few years later...that would make five years of just you and I from autumn to spring. Alone again...lonely without them, but we'd be alone together..."

It didn't take her more than a heartbeat or two to follow his line of thought. "Mm, yes. We could do so many of the things that got set aside when we became a mum and a dad."

Severus smirked. "I could dust off my paddle, and remind you just which one of us wears the pants in this family."

"While I could dust off my corset and remind you just who is your mistress," she mock-growled, nipping at his jaw-line.

Pulling their bodies closely together from thigh to chest, he nipped back, taking over so that he could devour her in a kiss.

"*Ewww*, gross!"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione broke away from her husband. She peered over his shoulder at their daughter, frowning. "I thought I banished you to your bedroom, young lady!"

"Hugo's in there!" Rose whinged. "He's playing with my things, and he won't leave!"

Dropping his head to Hermione's temple, Severus muttered quietly in her ear, "I realize I will have more than three years to get used to the idea of you-know-what...and to get her used to it, too, since I think she'll protest a bit...but somehow, I think I *will* adjust."

Releasing her with a brief, platonic embrace, he headed for the kitchen door, shoos their daughter ahead of him. Torn between a wistful smile and a smirk, Hermione finished wiping down the counter now that the dishes were done. A moment later, she hurried to the doorway and leaned out of the kitchen.

"Don't forget, we're having the Halversons over for dinner tomorrow night, and they're bringing the new Care of Magical Creatures teacher! Rose, Hugo, I want you both to tidy up downstairs and put all your toys into their bins!"

"Aww, mum!" Rose whinged.

"Is the new teacher bringing a fancy creature for us to pet, mummy?" Hugo called out, skipping down the steps from the upper floor.

"That will depend on how nice and polite you are. Get a start on your toys now, so you'll have less to do tomorrow," she instructed. Hermione corralled him with an arm just long enough to kiss the top of his dark brown head, then nudged him toward the living room.

...

"*David Severus Snape Miller!*"

Ears ringing from her own roar, Hermione charged up out of the basement. Her knees creaked a bit as she did so, but she didn't stop, just kept going up the steps, through the hall, and up the next set of stairs. Her husband popped out of their bedroom door, soap suds trickling down his naked hide, but he had his wand in his hand, ready to mend or defend. The tiny part of her that wasn't upset with her husband of twenty-two years admired his protective reflexes...which only made her mad all over again.

"...Hermione? What's wrong?" Dark eyes darting down the stairwell, looking for the cause of her alarm, he eyed her askance. "Why are you shouting?"

The words, the accusations, the anger all bottled up inside of her, reddening her face, scrunching her brows into a frown, and choking her with pure, concentrated ire. Somehow, she distilled it into two words, and flung them at his head. "...*Wizarding Portrait!*"

His eyes widened in shock while his cheeks, framed by his neatly trimmed, grey-streaked beard, paled and flushed, giving him a blotchy look. But he didn't cower; he never cowered. Straightening his shoulders, he looked down the length of his altered nose at her and arched a single, grey-salted brow. "So?"

"You *swore* you wouldn't interfere in their lives! And now I find you've had a *wizarding portrait* in the basement all this time? Don't tell me it's not for what I think it is...*all* wizarding portrait subjects can go and visit themselves in other paintings, no matter how far apart they may be! You have been in *contact* with your Headmaster portrait! Don't you deny it!"

Folding his arms across his chest, unheeding of the suds still trickling their way down his ribs and thighs, Severus leaned on the door-jamb, the very picture of studied carelessness. "Of course, I did. But my instructions to both portraits were to observe and report, and to remain *discreet* whilst doing so. They're *portraits*. They cannot interfere directly."

"But they *can* be noticed skulking about the castle, lurking in the wrong picture-frames!" Hermione argued.

"My images have a better sense of discretion than that!" he snapped back. "They *both* know that if they acted up too much, they'd draw attention to the fact that I actually do still exist. Which I am not supposed to. Credit me with *some* intelligence when directing a spying operation! Headmistress Isolde Marsh-Leighton is the one who is actually keeping tabs on our daughter, not Headmaster Severus Snape. He merely collates her information."

"Headmistress who?" she asked.

"Isolde Marsh-Leighton. She was headmistress from 1828 to 1843. As a female, she can go into the girls' dorms. Dexter Fortescue, 1844 to 1876, is the one keeping an eye on Hugo. As fellow former heads of Hogwarts, they are sworn to cooperate with any headmasters that follow them...even portrait ones. They have been sworn to secrecy on why they are spying, and to whom they report. They're *also* Ravenclaws," he added tartly. "They have every right to visit their former House and converse with its members."

"I have taken every care to minimize 'interference' in their social lives...but *need* the reassurance that they're both alright," he said. "And they are...though I cannot say I approve of our daughter mooning over 'Teddy Lupin, Quidditch Star'. According to Isolde, wizarding photos of him are plastered all over her dorm room...*all* of the fifth year girls are acting like lunatics over him."

"She's a teenage girl, Severus. She'll moon over anyone who looks cute. I was in fourth year when Viktor Krum was all the rage in the girls' dorms," Hermione reminded him, "and Viktor's poster was all over the place back then. The only difference between them is that Teddy is English, and thus a lot more accessible for daydreaming."

"She can daydream about someone else!" Severus protested.

"Like young Albus?" Hermione asked sweetly. Severus narrowed his eyes. She smiled smugly at him. "I have my own pipeline of information into Hogwarts."

"Hypocrite!" he accused her. "You dare to yell at me, when you're doing it yourself?"

Hands shifting to her hips, Hermione glared at him. "I merely read her latest *letter*, husband. Her first kiss was with Albus Severus Potter, in the greenhouse, while they were cleaning up some broken pots. She got five points off Ravenclaw for it, too. But she wanted to ask me, her mum, some questions about how to handle boys."

His frown had slid into something closer to a pout. "She could have asked *me*. I can tell her quite readily what goes through a young man's mind at that age."

No longer angry with her husband, Hermione let her gaze slide down the length of his frame. Most of the soap bubbles had popped, leaving him slightly damp and entirely exposed. Since she was no longer quite so upset, she let other thoughts wander into prominence.

"Believe me, I can guess what goes through a teenaged boy's mind, as can our daughter...but tell me, what goes through a full-grown wizard's mind? Particularly when he's standing naked in front of his wife?"

"Easy," he snorted.

She lifted her gaze, arching a brow in silent enquiry.

His arm shifted, wand slashing through the air. "*Sartorlagen. Mobilicorpus.*"

In just two words, he had her stripped naked and floating at wand-point toward the bathroom door, where water could still be heard splattering in the shower stall. Pausing her mid-air, he cupped her short-cropped curls and kissed her thoroughly, bumping her floating body against his own. It wasn't easy, fighting the pull of the spell keeping her aloft, but she managed to twin her arms and legs around him, reciprocating with enthusiasm.

He allowed her to cling, moving both of them forward. Water splashed down over her right shoulder, dripping off her knee, ankle, and hip. It didn't interfere with their kiss,

though she did suck in a sharp breath when he pressed her back into the cool tiles of the shower stall. But his lips and his hands were hot enough to compensate, scattering her wits even as his expert touch focused her senses.

Ever since Hugo had been shipped off for his first year at Hogwarts, joining her sister as she entered her third, the two of them had relearned the joys of living alone together. This was one of them, as was the joy of sleeping in on weekends and not having to worry about tripping over toys underfoot. They still fought occasionally, but their fights always ended quickly, and preferably in favor of lovemaking. Both of them were too passionate by nature, and still too deeply in love with each other, to act any other way.

When he finally did enter her, it wasn't the feel of his hardened flesh that tipped her over the edge of her desire. It wasn't the way he tilted her hips into his, nor the freedom from gravity provided by the levitation charm. It wasn't the way he stroked up into her g-spot, though that did help. Nor was it his lips, his tongue, his teeth, nor even the possessive clutching his fingertips.

It was his voice, quiet but fierce as he growled a single, impassioned word into her ear, echoing her equally impassioned thoughts.

Mine!

{THE END}