

Secret Recipe

by ClayPotter

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The Letter

Chapter 1 of 35

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All characters you recognize are the creations of the brilliant J. K. Rowling from her Harry Potter book series. I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story.

I would like to thank my loyal betas, **JENGINEORGE** and **NervousAboutAngels**, for sticking with me through yet another novel-length yarn.

There is one scene where I quote directly from the Epilogue in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. This dialog is shown in italics.

Chapter 1

The Letter

Hermione walked mechanically, almost instinctively, as she tried to concentrate on Harry's words. He was describing his latest Pensieve dive, the one which would later become famous, the one in which he learned the truth about Severus Snape and where his loyalties really had been placed. She listened intently through the fog of exhaustion that encased her mind; surely the human body was not designed to go so long without sleep. She marveled at Harry's recall of such minute details as the fear in Snape's eyes and the tremble in his voice as he faced Dumbledore on a windswept hilltop and confessed that he had revealed the prophecy about Harry to his master. She felt tears roll down her face as he described Snape's remorse and subsequent emotional breakdown in Dumbledore's office upon learning of Lily's death and the resolute calm and determination with which he took up the task of spy to atone for his sins.

As Harry continued to reveal all that Snape's memories had to offer, Hermione didn't feel at all surprised. Instead, a strange wave of what could only be called satisfaction washed over her. Hadn't she known all along that there was so much more to this stern, austere man than everyone else had thought? Even when he would insult her and ignore all of her hard work, didn't she feel just a hint of pride radiating from him as he glanced quickly into her simmering cauldron and reassured himself that she had, once again, produced a perfect potion? More tears washed the dirt from her face as Harry's story continued, and she realized beyond doubt the extent to which Snape had risked his life, over and over, for their cause, to keep Harry safe, and to see the downfall of Voldemort. All so that Lily could rest in peace. But he didn't even live to see it come to fruition. The revelation that Snape had almost made it, that he had come so close to a chance to live a normal life almost broke her heart. At that moment, she would have given just about anything to bring him back, to give him the decent life he so deserved.

Her thoughts were rudely interrupted by Ron's arm as he snaked it around her shoulders in a feeble attempt to comfort her. "Aw, come on, Hermione. I can't believe you're crying over that greasy git!"

"He's a hero, Ron," she blurted out as she shrugged his arm off her. "I don't ever want to hear you speak badly of him again!" She marched ahead in a huff, as anger replaced her sorrow. She had a feeling that because of the part he was forced to play and the actions he was forced to take, much of the wizarding world would write

Snape off, just as Ron had. She took an internal vow to make sure that did not happen.

The trio made their way slowly up the spiral staircase to the Headmaster's office where congratulations were bestowed upon Harry by all of the portraits there, but as Hermione glanced around the room, she noticed that Headmaster Snape's portrait was significantly absent. As the three friends headed up to Gryffindor tower for some food and much-needed rest, Hermione asked Harry why he thought Snape's portrait hadn't appeared.

"Dunno." He shrugged. "Maybe the school assumed that when he flew away he was abandoning his post. Maybe the school thinks he doesn't deserve one.

"But that's not fair!" Hermione insisted. "He chose to run so he wouldn't have to hurt anyone. You know how powerful he was. He could have taken down everybody in that corridor, and you know it."

"Can't we worry about this some other time, Hermione?" begged Ron. "Merlin, you are still defending him. He would do something cruel and heartless to you in class, and ten minutes later you'd be defending him."

Hermione opened her mouth to retort, but Harry cut her off. "I'll see to it that the truth is known and that he gets his portrait, Hermione. Don't worry."

"Thanks, Harry," she said, glaring at Ron out of the corner of her eye. "From everything you've told us from what you saw in his memories, he deserves that and so much more."

The boys had gone to bed, but just as Hermione slipped under the covers, she thought of her Potions master lying dead in the Shrieking Shack. He was a hero. He deserved better. Fighting fatigue that seemed almost overwhelming, she pulled her jeans and trainers back on and headed down through the Gryffindor common room and out of the portrait hole in silence. She didn't need the boys' help with this. She could Levitate his body back by herself. Wand at the ready in case she found any straggling Death Eaters, she marched down the path to what was left of the front gates of the once-stately Hogwarts Castle. She carefully maneuvered around the loose stones and twisted wrought iron, then found herself running the rest of the way to the Shrieking Shack. She didn't know why she felt the need to run or where she had found the energy, but she couldn't stop herself.

Once she reached the Shack, she navigated the rooms to the place where she remembered they had left him on the floor. She rushed to his side and knelt down. His eyes were still open but without focus, staring blankly into space. "Oh, Professor Snape," she whispered as she gently placed a trembling hand over his chest, "I'm so sorry. I understand why you couldn't tell anyone, but still... All these years... If we had only known..." Tears began to gather in the wells of her eyes. Why should she cry over this angry, greasy-haired, harsh man who had never spared a decent word for her? Was it because she finally knew the truth: that he had had to at least *act* as if he hated Muggle-borns? And if that was it, how did he really feel about her and all of her hard work in his classes? It was too late now. She would never know. Perhaps that was the worst thing of all, to never know what was really in the man's mind or in his heart.

She tried to push his eyelids closed, but they wouldn't budge. "It's only skin," she whispered to herself. "Rigor mortis shouldn't affect it." She noticed that there wasn't nearly as much blood on the floor around his neck as she imagined there would be. And what was there had assumed a jelly-like state. "That's odd." She touched it and then touched the wound at his neck. The blood at the wound had not dried and hardened, only turned to jelly like the blood on the floor. She laid her ear to his chest, but no sound was forthcoming. His skin felt like ice, to be sure, but the grayish white veil of death had not been cast upon his harsh features. He seemed preserved somehow. Perhaps Nagini's venom had done this. Snakes preferred live prey. Perhaps the venom wasn't designed to kill, only to render the victim immobile until it could be eaten, a sort of suspended animation. After all, there was no portrait of him in the Headmaster's office.

Hermione's heart started to pound hard in her chest. Her adrenal glands shifted into overdrive. Suddenly she was wide awake and focused. If there was even the faintest chance... One thing she knew for sure, if Snape was still alive, her little bag of tricks would not produce the cure. She had to get him to St. Mungo's. With a flick of her wand, she Levitated him upright, then she wiped away her tears, wrapped her arms tightly around him, and with a ray of hope in her heart, they spun.

September first, 19 years later...

The Potters and the Weasleys stood with their youngest kids beside the gleaming scarlet Hogwarts Express as they said their goodbyes to their school-bound older children.

"What if I'm in Slythern?" whispered Albus Potter worriedly, so only his father could hear.

"Albus Severus," Harry spoke in low tones to keep the answer from all except perhaps his wife Ginny's ears, *"you were named for two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them was a Slytherin and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew."*

The worries and questions continued until little Albus either had to board the train or be left behind. As he clamored aboard and hunted for a window to hang out of, Ginny sidled up beside Harry. "Why do you always talk about Snape as if he's already dead?"

Harry knitted his brow and glared down at her for a fleeting moment, then turned his attention back up to the train. "He may as well be, for all anyone has seen or heard from him since he got out of Azkaban."

"Well, how would *you* have reacted if the world you almost died to protect threw you into prison as a 'thank you'?"

"I did all I could for him, everything I knew how," he insisted. "You're as bad as Hermione," he mumbled under his breath just as Albus' face appeared next to Hermione and Ron's daughter, Rose, in a nearby window.

"Why are they all staring?" demanded Albus as he and Rose craned around to look at the other students.

"Don't let it worry you," said Ron. *"It's me. I'm extremely famous."*

The kids laughed, but Hermione simply rolled her eyes and shook her head, with outward amusement that was inwardly mixed with just a touch of disgust. *One down, one to go,* she thought. *Then I can free myself of the "famous" Mr. Weasley.*

February fourteenth, five months later...

Severus Snape awoke at 3 p.m. as usual and began his "morning" routine. He showered, shaved, got dressed, and marched downstairs to where Winky had the latest *Daily Prophet* and his breakfast waiting on the kitchen table, just the way he liked it. Some days there was oatmeal, some days he found porridge. If it was a hot day in summer, and there were fresh berries in season to go with it, he could even be surprised by corn flakes. But always, always, no matter the weather, two fried eggs, sunny side up, two pieces of bacon cooked almost to blackness, and one piece of burnt toast. Carbon, after all, was a known carcinogen. He had never felt the desire to smoke cigarettes. He considered it a vile habit that interfered with his sense of smell, the most important of all a Potion master's senses, but since he was biding his time on this earth until Merlin or whoever was in charge of the big picture decided to take him, he knew of various other carcinogens with which to contaminate his system and hopefully shorten his life. He couldn't quite bring himself to commit suicide, even though that particularly nasty potion he had brewed for self-consumption just after his release from Azkaban still sat collecting dust in his store closet. Over 18 years' worth of dust.

Winky was not allowed in his store closet.

Winky. What a godsend. She had become his faithful house-elf at Hogwarts during his short time as Headmaster there. Since she was free and both Dobby and Dumbledore were dead, she saw no loyalty to the school. But Snape was a kind and generous master, so it was with great joy that she popped into his house on Spinner's End the first time he wistfully called her name during a feeble attempt at making dinner for himself. There she had stayed for the next 19 years, cooking, cleaning, keeping his clothes fresh and his bed made. If she had finished her chores for him he gave her free time to do whatever she liked, go visit other elves, etc. The only condition was

that she kept his secrets, which she would have done anyway. And although she refused to accept payment for her services, she would gladly take spending money when she had free time to go somewhere of her own choosing.

Azkaban. Six months he had spent in that godforsaken place. At least, by the time he was sent there, there were no dementors anymore, although he ruefully imagined many times during his stay that they would have found him uninteresting, since he had so few happy memories for them to feed upon. Before Azkaban came his trial, if one could call it that. What a fiasco that turned out to be... Potter on the stand pleading for his freedom, trying to convince all those stuffed talking heads of what a hero he was, and that he had killed Dumbledore on Dumbledore's own orders... And all the while, Hermione Granger sat in the top row, watching and waiting... and crying. He could see her silent tears, he could smell her fear, her sorrow when the stuffed shirts wouldn't listen. At one point she stood up and shouted at them all for being cold-hearted, cowardly, stupid fools.

Well he couldn't argue with her on that point.

But it didn't help. They still blamed him for the death of Albus Dumbledore, but since Potter produced so much evidence proving his loyalty to be on the side of good, they didn't stick him with a murder charge. "Manslaughter," they called it. He was sentenced to two years, but would be eligible for parole in six months if he behaved himself. They wanted to make an example of him, even after all he had done for them.

"This is what happens to people who stand by and do nothing while atrocities take place before their very eyes." Those were the words that the stuffed dickhead read aloud at his sentencing. How many of them were guilty of that very charge, of doing nothing? Why wasn't former Minister of Magic Fudge in the cell right next to him after knowing for a *whole year* that Voldemort had returned, and yet did *nothing*? NOTHING! Potter tried to argue on his behalf that the last thing they could possibly accuse him of was doing nothing, but the more Death Eaters that ended up in prison after the war, the better the Ministry looked to the general public. Snape knew that Potter had done his best, but the only person who could have possibly saved his reputation or kept his butt out of Azkaban was the only man he had ever killed.

Before the two month long trial began, Snape suffered untold pain and humiliation at the hands of St. Mungo's finest! For three long months he decayed on that lumpy cot in that crowded ward... Blood Thinning Potions and Blood Replenishing Potions didn't work... Dittany was a joke on the cursed wound, and antivenin... well... Nagini proved to be a one-of-a-kind snake. No antivenin existed that could counteract her poison, and the only person who could possibly come up with one, if he had a sample from the snake herself, was lying helplessly on the bed, completely immobile. He couldn't even tell someone else what to do. He couldn't so much as blink his eyes for six days while they poked and prodded every nook and cranny of his body. Humiliation didn't even begin to describe it. Someone had to come by every five minutes to put drops in his eyes so they wouldn't dry out. He felt so helpless, laid open for inspection for all the staff to see. And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

After testing the blood of the three most famous war heroes and anyone else who gave a rat's arse about saving him, it was determined that Hermione Granger, of all people, was the best match for blood replacement. And so the slow process began. It took over a week. She lay in the bed beside his, dutifully taking her Blood Replenishing Potion so her body could manufacture enough of the precious stuff to replace his entire store. She jabbered on incessantly. He thought he would go insane if she didn't stop. She kept apologizing for not coming back to find him sooner, and recounting his heroics to anyone else in the ward who would listen. She reminisced about things he had done or said in the classroom or in the corridors at Hogwarts that she had found amusing. Well, at least *that* was a short oratory.

But when, towards the end of the sixth day, she began to speak to him in low tones about his innermost secrets, about Lily and James and Dumbledore, he finally found the strength and mobility to do something about it. He still couldn't attempt speech, but he could finally blink again and the muscles in his face had just started to work slightly. Since Miss Granger was stuck there for a week, she had taken to giving him his eye drops every few minutes during the day, to save the healers the trouble. She grabbed the drops and sat on the cot by his side, her soft warm bum nestled in against his slim waist.

"You must have loved her so very much, Professor. Even after she scorned you and pushed you away, you were willing to die for her... for her son." Her words cut into him worse than Nagini's fangs. *She knew*. How could Potter have dared to tell her? To tell *anyone*? The fact that he had thought Snape was dead at the time was no excuse.

The dropper hovered over his left eye and wept a single drop. "Surely no truer love has ever been given," she whispered as tears began to well up into her own eyes, and she moved the dropper to his right.

With the refreshing wetness in both eyes, he blinked. She gasped with joy at the first sign of movement in six days. But her joy soon faded as his eyes met hers and she saw in them more hatred and contempt than he had ever showed her before. Her face fell as she watched him mouth the words, "Shut up."

He wanted to say, "Get out of my sight," but he was afraid her lip reading skills were lacking and he didn't want his meaning to be misconstrued. Unfortunately, the transfusion was not yet complete so she lay in the cot beside him for two more days, but she had understood him and remained silent. And when she was no longer needed for his treatment, she left without ceremony, just a simple nod of the bushy head and "Goodbye, Professor." He didn't see her again until the trial.

Thank Merlin.

But why did he hate her so much? He had asked himself that question so many times over the years. It wasn't her fault that Potter had told her all of his deepest secrets. And a certain amount of it would have come out in the trial anyway. That is, if he didn't want to spend the rest of his life in Azkaban. And since the trial he thought of her more often than he thought of anyone else, even Lily. Lily never cried over him, that's for sure. Miss Granger cried over what she had thought to be his dead body. She cried over him at the hospital, and she had cried at his trial. One misstep and Lily had washed her hands of him. As horrible as he had always been to Miss Granger, how could she possibly give a damn about him at all?

But she did give a damn. About a week after his first day in Azkaban, and every month thereafter, an owl arrived for him. Prisoners were allowed owl post, although the guards gained great amusement from reading it first. Thank Merlin she had the discretion and common sense to realize that someone else's eyes would rake it over before it got to him. She promised in her letter that she had made Harry and Ron swear to keep their mouths shut about "things," as she put it, and that he should not worry. Although this was some consolation, it still didn't change the fact that *she knew*, and that it was still *her fault* that he lived to *find out* that she knew. His heart was capable of giving, a sure sign of weakness as far as he was concerned. He was capable of deep love and devotion, or at least he had been at one time. Severus Snape... Who'd have thought? To Hermione Granger, the mystique was now exposed and rendered useless. And he had been nothing all his life, if not mysterious. She knew what tenderness he was capable of, and he hated her for it. Didn't he? Shouldn't he hate anyone who could see through his walls, shouldn't he try even harder to keep her out? Her, of all people, the *insufferable* know it all. Now she really did... *know it all*... Well, *almost* all.

But the real reason he hated her was because she stirred something deep inside of him, something he didn't want to admit existed, the very thing that made him so vulnerable in the first place, all those years ago. She was smart, attractive, and a very talented witch. She was full of life and capable of deep love and compassion... And she was Muggle-born, just like Lily. Perhaps that was the reason: she reminded him of Lily and all the pain and heartbreak of his younger years. How dare she make him feel again! How dare she set him up for another fall! Yes, anyone who could pull at his heartstrings like that deserved his wrath.

The monthly letters continued to torture him even after Azkaban, though he didn't bother to write back. They never again mentioned the secrets from the Pensieve. They contained mostly mundane information of mild interest, such as the goings-on at Hogwarts during her seventh year there, how she performed on her NEWTs (Outstanding in all subjects, of course, he would have expected nothing less of her), gossip she had heard at the Ministry (once she graduated and got a job there...a waste of her talent as far as he was concerned), or tidbits that Potter and Weasley had found out in their Auror jobs that involved someone he used to know. She never even mentioned her engagement to the wooden-headed Mr. Weasley. How odd, after nearly five years of monthly correspondence, to find himself staring at their wedding announcement in the Daily Prophet!

He remembered reading the caption under her photo and feeling his stomach churn. How disgusting! What could a bright, talented, powerful witch like her want with a dunderhead like Weasley? One of his brothers, perhaps, the one whose ear Snape accidentally cut off that fateful night that Mad Eye Moody went down. At least the remaining twin had some creativity and imagination. But this one... *this one* was a *complete* waste of her time. He knew in his heart that she deserved better, and that the marriage would never last. "I give it six months to a year," he remembered announcing to the kitchen at large, as he threw the paper into the fire without reading the rest of it.

After the wedding announcement appeared in the paper, the letters stopped. *Just as well*, he remembered thinking to himself after reality finally set in three months later. But the empty pang in his heart and soul did not dissipate with time. It only became stronger. And he only hated her more for it... Or so he kept telling himself.

So what was left for a no longer mysterious convicted felon to whom no one would give a job, least of all a teaching job? It was worse than being a werewolf. Luckily for Snape, he had had the wisdom and foresight for all those years to squirrel away his meager teacher's salary for a rainy day. And he diversified, some with Muggle mutual funds, some with wizarding firms that showed some promise, no matter the political climate. He was not a wealthy man, at least not by Malfoy's standards, but he could pay the Muggle taxes on his father's Muggle house and still have plenty left for things like utilities and paying the neighbor's kid to cut his grass. He could have done it with magic, of course, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself, and it seemed the thing to do for a single man approaching sixty.

And with the wizarding investment returns, he could keep himself in potion ingredients and clothing, with plenty of Galleons left for food, which Winky purchased in Diagon Alley. His Anti-Apparation charms didn't apply to her, so she could Disapparate directly from his kitchen with a list and come back when she was finished.

And so his peaceful little routine continued week after month after year, sleeping all day and coming out at dusk like the bat everyone used to accuse him of being.... Until this afternoon on Valentine's Day, when he received an owl with a small package that contained nine beautifully displayed and decorated chocolate truffles. Inside each lay hidden treasure in the form of liquor laced dark chocolate ganache. There was no magic involved. These were not from Honeydukes. Some Muggle manufacturer named "Godiva" had embossed the box top with gold letters. She had bought these in a muggle store, away from the prying eyes of the wizarding world. *Interesting.*

And inside this beautifully ornate box full of treasures rested a pale peach colored envelope with his name written in her elegant scrawl. But after thirteen years of marriage to that wart Weasley, Snape couldn't imagine what she possibly had to say that would interest him. He had read the birth announcements in the Prophet. He already knew she had had two brats and Potter had three. Old news. He tossed the letter towards the fire, but it spun off to the left and landed in the dirt at the base of a potted plant. He immediately pushed it out of his mind, and sampled one of the delectable chocolates. Not everything that was good in life had to do with magic. And the fact that *she* had sent it... *on Valentine's Day*... He just couldn't bring himself to think about that right now.

Winky picked up the envelope. "Master Severus should read this," she informed him. "Winky thinks it might be from Miss Granger."

"I believe you mean *Mrs. Weasley*," he replied dryly with a touch of venom in his smooth voice, "and no thank you."

"Then Winky will put it with the others in case Master changes his mind."

Snape raised an eyebrow and watched her shuffle off to the front hall closet where a shoe box sat on a shelf above the cloak rail. She carefully Levitated the peach colored envelope up, and as the box lid rose, the envelope slipped in front of a long, tightly packed line of folded parchments, some in envelopes, some not.

Out of sight, out of mind, he reassured himself. But this was not to be the case.

The Book

Chapter 2 of 35

Snape breaks down and finally reads Hermione's letter. But its contents spur him to take action.

All characters you recognize are the creations of the brilliant J. K. Rowling from her Harry Potter book series. I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story.

I would like to thank my wonderful betas, **JENGEOGE** and **NervousAboutAngels**, once again, for all of their hard work. They really helped to make this a better story with their suggestions.

Chapter 2

The Book

Nine days after receiving the letter from Hermione Granger-Weasley, after a particularly delicious dinner in his modest dining room, Snape opened the little gold box and realized that he was down to his last Godiva chocolate truffle. He savored each tiny bite with a sip of his finest cognac and Mozart playing softly in the background, just as he had done the previous eight nights, then he let out a heavy sigh. The only way to draw out this pleasant experience any longer was to read the letter. He pushed his chair out with resolute determination.

"Stay there, Master Severus. Winky will get it." She had almost become a mind reader over the years, and he would have probably ended up in the long term psycho ward at St. Mungo's if he had not had her to talk to. With a knowing smile, Winky handed Snape the envelope.

"Thank you, Winky," he smirked as he gingerly opened the flap, trying not to tear it. His long, slender fingers withdrew the parchment and lifted it to his waiting nostrils. Thirteen long years he had hoped for another letter and hated himself for it. All of the old ones no longer smelled of her skin and perfume, as he had discovered on special occasions when he would take them out and read them over and over again. After all these years, they only smelled of must and dust.

He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. She had changed perfumes. This one smelled of some chemical concoction, not nearly as appealing as her previous choice. The old letters had held the aroma of chamomile and rose hips. It had had a soothing affect on him. At least her skin's scent had not changed. He could still detect it beneath the new perfume if one could call it that... Probably a gift from her *insignificant* other.

He opened his eyes and realized that Winky was staring at him with a content "I told you so" look on her face.

"Don't you have something to do in the kitchen?" he suggested gently. He had learned a long time ago to treat Winky with respect and kindness. She always had his best interests at heart, after all. But this letter was a private matter, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Winky gladly retreated into the kitchen because she knew now that he planned to give the letter his full and undivided attention. He carefully unfolded the delicate pages and slowly raked his eyes over her graceful handwriting.

Dear Professor Snape,

I hope this letter finds you well and happy, and that you can forgive me for not writing for so long. Circumstances tied my hands in the matter, but now certain recent changes have precipitated the necessity to continue our correspondence. I would have started writing again anyway, but a problem has arisen that I believe only you can

help me with.

As I am sure you already know, I married Ron Weasley over thirteen years ago, and the union has produced two children. Our oldest child, Rose, will soon turn twelve and started at Hogwarts last September. Her keen intellect, outgoing personality and strong determination ("Don't you mean stubbornness?" Snape quipped) will serve her well, and I am proud to announce that she ended up in Gryffindor. (Snape snorted loudly.) Although she loves to read, she's not a chatterbox as I used to be. You might even like her!

My concern is my nine-year-old son, Hugo. Since the age of three his health has been slowly declining. He shows symptoms of many different types of minor ailments in different combinations and degrees. Some days he has simply refused to get out of bed with no outward symptoms at all. The Healers at St. Mungo's have examined him and run every imaginable test. They can't find anything wrong with him ("Well, that's nothing new...idiots!"), so they have concluded that the symptoms are psychosomatic. But how can they be when I have felt his fever and watched him throw up? He's thin and pale and sickly. I'm afraid if we can't find an answer to his problem, he will not be allowed to attend Hogwarts when his time comes. That would be a crushing blow to all of us, but especially to him, since he is already counting the days until he gets on the train for the first time.

I've read every book I can find that might yield an answer("Of that, I have no doubt.")I've tried every potion I can think of to calm his nerves. Nothing works. He's a sweet, compassionate, sensitive boy, and from what we can already tell, he has quite a lot of magical ability. He's quiet, a bit of a loner, and also loves to read. He would rather curl up beside me on the couch with a good book than do anything else. I guess it runs in the family.

Is there anything you can think of that might help him? Should I send a blood or hair sample?

I know you received my previous letters because I put a spell on them to notify me if they were refused, undeliverable, or were immediately destroyed upon arrival. The spell wore off after a week, so for all I know they were each sent directly to the nearest rubbish bin unopened, but something in my heart tells me that's not the case. I only hope and pray that, after all these years of suffering my neglect, you can find it in your heart to read this and come to my rescue.

You probably feel that I am rude and brazen beyond words to ask a favor after all these years. Perhaps you are right, but I am also a mother who loves her children and would do anything to help them. You know what it means to love someone so deeply you would sacrifice anything for them, so I know you can relate to my predicament.

Please, I beg you, Professor Snape. I have no one else to turn to. I will be forever in your debt.

I am as always,

Most Sincerely Yours,

Hermione Granger-Weasley

P.S. If you do reply, please send the owl during regular business hours. I would rather suffer prying eyes at work than at home.

Snape sat back in his chair and stared at the pages in disbelief. He took another sip of cognac and ran his fingers along the edges of the parchment. He reread it twice more, committing it to memory, and finally folded it back into its envelope.

"Shall Winky put the letter away for Master Severus?" she asked from the kitchen's entrance.

"No, Winky. I'll keep this one with me for a while. It has, after all, been a very long time." He knew that Winky could see into his soul, so an attempt at deception was a waste of time and energy.

"Master looks troubled. Can Winky help?"

"No... but perhaps I can."

With the first letter from Miss Granger (as he still liked to think of her) in over thirteen years nestled into his left breast pocket, Snape stalked his extensive library in search of a book he had not referred to for decades. He was quite familiar with her son's symptoms, having suffered them himself as a child. In describing Hugo's health problems, Miss Granger may as well have flat out confessed that her marriage to the wilting Mr. Weasley had deteriorated, perhaps to the point of no return. Did they actually have the lack of sensitivity to argue and fight in front of their children? Or did their private altercations leave behind such negative residue that a sensitive soul like Hugo could still feel its effects? Whatever the case, somewhere in the mass of pages lay hidden an ancient recipe that his mother had used on him. And although it wasn't a cure, it would help relieve the symptoms somewhat.

In his own case, as with many young children who fall victim to a failing marriage, he had begun to blame himself for his parents' hatred of each other. He even ran away from home once, thinking it would make them happy to be rid of him. It was at that point, finally, that his mother began to administer the potion. His feelings of guilt dissipated and with them many of his other physical symptoms. Their constant arguing with the occasional knock down drag out still had a horrible affect on his self-esteem, however. He couldn't understand why his mother stayed with such an abusive, idiotic Muggle. "A boy needs his father as much as his mother," she told him once. But he would have much preferred two separate but happier parents, even if it meant being ferried back and forth between them. He wondered if Miss Granger had ever asked Hugo his opinion.

On the bottom shelf behind the desk, in an inconveniently tight spot, he found what he had been searching for: his mother's special handwritten diary of sorts, full of potion recipes handed down from generation to generation. It broke free of the confines of the tightly packed bookcase and floated into his hands. He carefully turned its deteriorating pages to find what he was searching for. At last, about halfway through, faded, worn, and full of stains, he found the potion recipe. From the looks of the page, it had probably been referred to more than any of the others. Apparently, the Princes had a history of rocky couplings.

Snape strode back through the dining room, into the kitchen, and to the storage closet where he kept his potion ingredients. He had long ago ordered Winky never to enter and knew she would not disobey him. Ever the paranoid spy, the excessive wards and locking charms he placed on the door were meant for possible intruders. He entered with recipe in hand and flicked on the electric light. Electricity was less expensive than oil, and he needed it to play his CDs, along with various other Muggle gadgets and goodies he had become reacquainted with after his release from Azkaban. Muggles did quite a good job coping without magic, and since he had been cast out from wizarding society, he decided to learn more about the Muggle half of his blood line. He did live in a Muggle neighborhood after all. They did not know he had been to prison. They did not look down their noses at him, not that he cared one way or the other.

Snape had even gone so far as to purchase a computer some years earlier. He could see the neighbors' son playing and doing research for school on one through his bedroom window and became intrigued. Since that same boy had been employed to cut his lawn, he felt free to ask him about it. The young man helped him with his purchase and high-speed internet hook up. He even walked Snape through the steps to set up an e-mail account. To Snape's delight, with a Muggle credit card and an e-mail address, he could buy just about any Muggle item he could possibly need or want and never leave the house.

When the first computer became outdated, he ordered a new one over the web and read the tutorials and on-line help to set it up himself. The boy next door would be off to university soon, so Snape felt an urgent need to become self-sufficient in that regard. The boy's younger brother could take over lawn duty, but he would trust no one else with his computer.

Snape had found the computer to be an invaluable tool on so many levels. He had charmed the keyboard to respond to his voice, so there was no need to learn to type. And he had decided, if for no other reason than to keep busy, he would re-write all three Potions textbooks that were currently used at Hogwarts. His talent and intuition had helped him to improve almost every recipe during his time as a student, and his skills had only increased with age and experience. Snape figured that if he published the

series under a pseudonym, it stood a good chance of becoming the new standard.

His kitchen had been divided in half, so Winky still had room to cook. But she knew better than to touch anything Snape left lying around, and since some potions took over a month to mature, there were usually several cauldrons going at once on his side of the room.

He tested, changed, tweaked and retested every recipe and even added some new ones that he long ago thought should have been included in the curriculum. And when he was finally satisfied, he would enter it into the computer, printing a hard copy and backing up his work on CD, just in case.

Severus Snape was nothing, if not thorough.

This blustery shivering day in February was no exception. He could have simply copied the ancient recipe onto a piece of parchment and sent Winky to the owl Post in Diagon Alley, but he had never actually brewed this potion before. Here was the perfect opportunity to tweak and make improvements and test his results on Hugo. He gathered the necessary ingredients and read the instructions. After brewing was completed it needed to sit for at least eight hours. Good. He could brew the basic recipe, then get some sleep, then send it off the next afternoon. It was 7:00 a.m. when he finished and headed for bed.

"I'll be getting up a bit earlier this afternoon, Winky. Have my breakfast ready at 2:00 p.m., would you? Then I may have you run an errand for me."

"An errand concerning Miss Granger, sir?"

"Yes, Winky," he murmured with a smirk, "Miss Granger." He let the words dance on his tongue as if he could still taste the last delectable chocolate truffle.

Snape climbed the stairs and readied himself for bed. He placed the precious peach-colored envelope on his night stand, and after his wand flicked the light out, he brought the envelope to his anxious nose and drew another deep breath.

That new perfume simply had to go.

Hermione wrapped one hand in the other and squeezed. She wrung them together over and over, as if she were churning cream into butter. It had been ten days since she sent that owl to Snape. She hadn't exaggerated when she stated that she had no one else to turn to. Had he read it? Her charm told her that he hadn't destroyed it at least. But this waiting was driving her crazy. Perhaps she should try to find him. When he was on trial, she had looked up his personal information to see if there was anything Harry could use in his defense. In the course of her investigation she had learned that he owned a house on Spinner's End in what was once a horrid section of the London suburbs that was attempting a feeble renaissance of late. Did he still live there? Could she find the place? Perhaps she could pick up a map at a petrol station and find its location that way. If that didn't work she could ask one of her Muggle cousins to look it up on his computer. If Snape didn't respond to her letter, there simply *must* be a way to track him down.

After her parents had been killed two years ago in an auto accident, she had tried out of curiosity to use their computer, but was hopelessly inept. So she had gathered up all of their computer books and took them home to read, but without a computer in front of her to practice the tutorials, the books were useless. She would stop by there after work once every two weeks to check on the house and open the windows to air it out. All of the furniture was still there, but covered in sheets to keep the dust off. She had warded it against mice, insects, and human intruders, but she had all of the food removed and donated to charity shortly after they died.

It was so depressing to go there. Why did she keep it? She had thought about selling the house after her parents' deaths, but something deep inside told her to hold on to it, because someday she would need a place to get away, perhaps permanently. The house was paid for, so she turned off the utilities and only had to worry about paying the Muggle taxes. Her salary at the Ministry gave her plenty to spare, so the taxes were not a problem.

The Ministry. After graduating Hogwarts she had been offered a job at the Ministry in the Intelligent Magical Creatures Liaison department. She had made it her quest to fight for the rights of other intelligent magical creatures such as house-elves and centaurs. She had even tried to get better treatment for the giants. But old prejudices die hard, and even with all of her fighting and research for precedents set over the centuries, she only managed to get vacation time for house-elves and a larger section of the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts Castle preserved for the centaurs. It seemed that the wizarding world was not willing to concede anything to the giants, since they had fought on Voldemort's side during the war. The Bureaucratic backward attitudes irritated her to no end since, had the giants been treated fairly from the beginning, they would have most likely fought for the side of good.

At this point in her career, Hermione had done just about all she could do in her current job, and she was becoming restless and unsatisfied as the days went by. There had to be more to life than a lousy, boring job and a selfish, grumpy husband whose ego had grown to unmanageable proportions since he had become a war hero. He rested on his laurels so much at work that Harry had even complained to her several times over the years. It was a good thing that the war was over and the Auror department didn't have that many dark wizards to chase down any more. But if Ron hadn't been Harry's best friend, he might have fired him anyway.

Well, she still had her children. Rose was her pride and joy... so smart and beautiful. She looked just like Hermione except that her bushy hair was ginger colored like Ron's. Other than that, you couldn't tell that Ron was related to her at all. And except for the pale pallor of his skin, Hugo looked almost exactly like George, Ron's older brother. She had never cheated on Ron, but she had a feeling that, once it became obvious that their marriage was under strain, some of the family had their suspicions. It was only after George started to make jokes about it and flirted endlessly with Hermione over the fuss and insinuation, that the extended Weasley family finally gave it a rest. But she was never comfortable around her in-laws after that, especially Molly. Arthur was genial enough, but Molly radiated suspicion and contempt, especially after Hermione announced on Hugo's third birthday that she was satisfied with only two children. They had one of each, no need to procreate further.

Was that really the beginning of the end? When Hermione went against her husband's wishes to raise a huge passel of red-haired rug rats? Perhaps that was the outward perception, but Hermione knew better. After the war, when she finished up her final year at Hogwarts, she should have known that Ron was not really her type when he decided to take the Auror job without finishing his education. Harry deserved it after all he had been through, but Ron was riding on his friend's coattails. Strangely enough, he somehow always seemed to know just the right thing to say or do to sway her in his direction. He had gone from insensitive teaspoon to kind and attentive in less than a year. She couldn't quite put her finger on why or how he had changed, but he certainly managed to sweep her off her feet...

...Until right after Hugo was born. She was home on maternity leave and cleaning out all of the dressers and wardrobes in their bedroom for something to do between breast feedings when she came across a well-hidden and well-used book: *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*. In their first four years together as husband and wife, Ron's true colors had begun to show through. But whenever he really wanted something from her, he could still turn on the charm. Now she knew why. Although the book offered a lot of good advice on how to be more sensitive to a woman's needs, it was also filled with subtle spells to help sway a witch into the right frame of mind. They didn't act like a Love Potion, but instead, almost seemed to be a very mild form of the Imperius Curse! How could the publishers get away with such rubbish? It wasn't just immoral, it should have been illegal! Hermione became more and more incensed as she perused the book and realized how she had been used and manipulated over the years. But rather than throw it in the fire, she copied the spells covertly over the course of her maternity leave and set about researching counter-curses for each one.

Ron never pulled the wool over her eyes again.

But now that she was no longer under Ron's spell, it seemed that all they did was argue. For the sake of the children, they kept their disagreements behind closed doors, but their outward attitudes towards each other had definitely changed for the worse. Sometimes the tension in the air was so thick she could have almost sliced it with a knife. And although Rose didn't seem fazed by it all, Hermione couldn't help but wonder if little Hugo could sense the anger and sadness that now permeated the house. He was such a perceptive child and so sensitive. His feelings were easily hurt; something his older sister took great pleasure in doing no matter how she was punished for it. Hermione had hoped the situation would improve when Rose went off to school, and it did at first. But soon, as her relationship with Ron continued to deteriorate, her son's health followed.

With her parents gone and her best friend married to her husband's sister, she had no one she could confide in. She had never made any real friends at the Ministry. They all seemed so petty, caught up in their little lives. Although they did what she asked of them to help the house-elves and centaurs, they never showed any enthusiasm for the tasks she assigned. And St. Mungo's was no help at all. Once she had exhausted all of her research on Hugo's behalf, she was left with no one else to ask and

nowhere else to turn. And so she turned to Snape.

Please, please, Merlin, she thought to herself. *He simply must help me.*

That Alluring Scent

Chapter 3 of 35

Snape risks a trip to Diagon Alley to find a gift for Miss Granger.

All characters you recognize are the creations of the brilliant J. K. Rowling from her Harry Potter book series. I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story.

I would like to thank my hardworking betas, **JENGINEORGE** and **NervousAboutAngels**, as always, for their hard work and diligence. They really helped to make this a better story.

Chapter 3

That Alluring Scent

The following afternoon, Snape made his way downstairs to find oatmeal with his usual breakfast, 2:00 p.m. on the dot. "Good afternoon, Winky," he announced as he settled himself at the kitchen table. "It looks delectable as always."

"Thank you, Master Severus. Will Winky still be going to town this afternoon then?"

"You may do as you please this afternoon, Winky. I wish to purchase something of a personal nature to add to the box, so I will owl it myself later."

Winky seemed even more pleased and excited that Snape felt the need to attend to Miss Granger's request personally. This was a good sign, a very good sign indeed. She hadn't seen her master this enthusiastic about life for quite some time.

He downed his food quickly, then ladled enough of the Calming draught into a phial for one week's worth of consumption and tightly corked the top. Then he put quill to papyrus and scrawled out the dosing instructions and arranged the phial and note, along with the packing material, into a box big enough to hold something else. He wasn't sure how big the item he needed to purchase would be, but he could always shrink or enlarge the box to fit appropriately.

"Have a good afternoon, Winky. Don't wait up for me!" he quipped as he donned his heavy winter traveling cloak, pulled the hood up so as to hide his face, and headed out the front door towards the river, which no longer reeked of pollution or dead fish. Yes, the environmentalists and the community had really worked hard to clean it up. It was actually a pleasant place to enjoy now, weather permitting. The neighborhood had really changed since his childhood. The inhabitants were not rich, to be sure, but they were good, decent, hard-working Muggles that always had a friendly word to say and kept the area clean and inviting.

His eyes scanned the riverbank for signs of intelligent life. Finding none, he spun on the spot and immediately felt the pressure of Apparition bearing down on him. It had been so long he had forgotten just how uncomfortable the experience could be. Just when he thought he would never take another breath, and his eyes were about to pop out of their sockets, he arrived in the deserted side street next to the Leaky Cauldron, behind which could be found the secret entrance to Diagon Alley.

In hope of not being recognized, Snape pulled the hood even farther over his face and quietly stalked through the pub. Since shady characters were not uncommon there, no one gave him a second glance. He eased out the back door, touched his wand to the proper sequence of bricks in the alley wall, and entered his destination. By this time the sun was low in the winter sky. The Owl Post Office would close soon. He had to find the right perfume and get over there quickly if he wanted this package to go out today.

The girl at the cosmetic counter in Madam Malkin's was so young, by Snape's estimation, that she had never been his student, and therefore, she would not have a clue who he was. So he pulled his hood back enough to show his face to the girl, but to no one else in the shop.

"Good afternoon, sir." She smiled broadly at him with flirtatious dark blue eyes. "May I help you?" Her long, straight, dirty-blond hair had obviously been artificially highlighted with a lighter shade of blond and hideous streaks of magenta, purple and teal blue. She might have been almost attractive if it weren't for the atrocious extra colors. But when she spoke, Snape noticed that, to top it off, she had something stuck into the center of her tongue. Silver in color with a loop and bead attached. He didn't know what it was, but it distracted him to the point of fascination. He almost forgot what he had come for.

"Sir? Are you OK?"

Suddenly, his eyes broke away from her mouth and looked at the fragrances on the shelf behind her. "Yes, sorry," he stammered with a touch of embarrassment and then gestured towards the shelf. "I'm trying to find a fragrance for an acquaintance. May I sample some of those?"

"Oh, yes, sir. We have quite an assortment to fit every need and pocket book. Would you want the economy brand?" she asked as she sprayed the air in front of him with the cheapest of the lot.

He coughed and took a step back, waving his hands to clear away the offensive odor. "Warn me before you do that again, will you?" He glared at her as he added silently, *little twit!* The instant the perfume hit the air Snape recognized it as Miss Granger's new perfume. *Economy brand, eh? Leave it to the Witless Wonder to be a big spender.*

"Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to imply..."

"One with a bit more subtlety, if you don't mind," he cut her off.

She reached back to the shelf and chose the gaudiest bottle in view, popping the lid off as she turned back towards him. This time he took a quick step back just as she squirted the offensive concoction into the space between them.

"I said subtle!" he growled between coughs and wheezes as he turned his head to the side in search of uncontaminated air. When he turned back to face her, his irritation was unmistakable.

"Not to your liking, sir?" she asked, cowering slightly under his stern authoritarian gaze.

His silence spoke volumes.

"I guess not," she concluded meekly.

This was getting him nowhere and time was short. With almost ten bottles left on the shelf he had to narrow down the choices. "Do you have anything with chamomile and rose hips?"

"Oh, yes, sir." The sales girl brightened up immediately. "That would be our top of the line item, 'Secret Recipe' from Paris, France. They say a Veela invented it centuries ago to win over the only man who didn't instantly fall in love with her."

Snape raised his eyebrows. As she reached for the bottle and turned to face him, he gently reached up and surrounded both her hand and the bottle she had retrieved in his long slender fingers. Her eyes met his with a startled look as she became immediately mesmerized by the endless depths of their blackness. He doubted that any of her thoughts or memories would be of interest to him, except... that thing in her mouth... It had been so long since he had cast the spell, he figured, *what the hell, I could use the practice. Legilimens...* He sifted quickly through the chaotic impressions of her mundane twisted life: defying her parents by listening to horrid sounds she seemed to consider music, unnaturally coloring her hair, getting a Hungarian Horntail tattooed across her left shoulder, and finally, the last straw that had prompted them to throw her out of the house, this... this tongue ring. *So that's what it's called. How bizarre!* With great relief, he quickly withdrew from the unfocused mayhem that was her mind.

"Allow me," he crooned in a silky deep voice and gracefully eased the precious bottle from her hand. Such a sophisticated substance didn't need a spray delivery system. He removed the stopper and passed it quickly under his nose. This was it. Even after thirteen years he would know that scent anywhere. "I'll take it. Only I want a new one, unopened, untouched... unspoiled."

"Of course, sir," she replied with wide eyes. She crouched under the counter and mumbled a charm under her breath to unlock the cabinet. Then she reached in and retrieved a rather dusty bottle, still sealed. "Sorry about the dust, sir. We don't sell many of these because they are so expensive." She blew violently on the bottle in an attempt to rid it of its unwanted decoration. Luckily, Snape saw what she was about to do and took a couple of steps back, or the dust as well as her questionable breath would have accosted his sensitive nostrils. "Shall I gift wrap it for you?"

"No, thank you, that won't be necessary."

"That'll be fifty galleons then, sir," she informed him as she slid the outwardly unimpressive bottle into a small paper bag.

Snape had no idea what the price of an average perfume bottle should cost because until yesterday he had never in his life even contemplated purchasing one. But he had come prepared and casually laid the necessary coins on the counter as if it were an everyday occurrence. Then, before she could thank him, he had pulled his hood back over his face, grabbed the bag, and swept from the shop.

Once outside he found a bench that was away from the main flow of foot traffic and sat down. He then retrieved the box with the potion, slipped the perfume in beside it, and added a couple of lines to the papyrus with an explanation about his gift. Satisfied that all was ready, he stood and headed for the Owl Post Office.

Only a couple of blocks from the bench he had sat on, the Owl Post Office stood next to Ollivander's, the Wand Maker. It was nice to know the old man was still in business after all the Dark Lord had put him through. Snape entered the Owl Post Office and glanced around. Three clerks stood at an expansive counter ready to help customers, and each had quite a long line waiting. Two of the three he thought he recognized as former students, so he picked the third young man. Again, like the girl from Madam Malkin's, he looked too young to have attended Hogwarts while Snape was a teacher there.

The line he was in slowly dwindled down until finally there was only one person in front of him. As that witch finished up, the young clerk pulled out his cash drawer and looked up with a smile at a much older gentleman coming up with his own cash drawer in his hands. "Break time, Larry," said Stan Shunpike.

"About time!" the young man replied as they switched out the drawers.

Snape was mortified. He has spent the entire afternoon in Diagon Alley without being recognized, but he knew that would come to an abrupt end as soon as Stan looked up and heard his voice. *Damn!*

"What can I do for you, sir?" asked Stan.

Snape took a deep breath and steeled himself for the inevitable. Although the hood still successfully hid his face from plain view, his unmistakable voice would surely give him away. He removed the box from his pocket and pushed it towards Stan. Could he get away without speaking? It was worth a try.

"Mailing a package, then?"

Snape nodded.

Stan put the package on the scale. "Eight ounces. Where's it goin'?"

He would have to speak. It was unavoidable. "Local."

That one word was all it took. Stan's eyes grew wide as he bent his head slightly and tried to get a better look at Snape's face. "Severus Snape, I don't believe it."

"Then *don't*. How much do I owe?" Snape asked tersely, hoping not to draw attention to himself.

"Five knuts. Where've you been? Nobody's seen you for ages. People were beginning to spread rumors that you were dead!"

"And you needn't inform them otherwise. I am dead as far as the wizarding world is concerned," Snape replied bitterly. "I did my time. I just want to be left alone." He was beginning to regret coming. Why had he let sentimentality grip his heart? She had made him vulnerable again, *damn her!* And now he would pay for it. He couldn't let his appearance here become a spectacle. If he was going to correspond regularly with Miss Granger there had to be another way.

Suddenly a solution came to him. He retrieved the package that was still sitting on the scale and stormed out of the Owl Post Office, leaving Stan standing there with his eyes buggy and stammering to the next wizard in line. "That was Severus Snape did you see him? Severus Snape!"

Snape knew he was cutting it short if this package was to make it to Miss Granger before she left her office for the day. He headed straight for Eeylops Owl Emporium, where he got away with simply pointing and paying without uttering a word and headed outside with a beautiful barn owl perched on his shoulder. He didn't believe in cages, having spent six months in one himself. Perhaps she could find a mate and they could nest in the eaves of his house. He often thought it would be a perfect location for a barn owl nest.

But there was one other thing he wanted to add to the letter, the brilliant revelation that had come to him in his haste to escape Stan Shunpike. He sat with his new owl by his side on the very same bench that had served his needs earlier, scribbled one last line on the parchment, then placed it back in the box and tied it to the bird's leg with the string he transfigured from a dead leaf that happened to be floating by. "Come back to my house on Spinner's End once you deliver this." He spoke to the bird as if speaking to a human, and she seemed to understand, as she rubbed her face affectionately against his outstretched hand. He gently scratched the back of her head in return. "Off you go, then. You may hunt on your way home if you like," he added as she flew off.

Snape stood and quickly retreated back through the Leaky Cauldron to a quiet side street where he hastily made his exit before Stan Shunpike alerted the wizarding world to his continued existence.

A few minutes later, Snape's beautiful barn owl was tapping on the glass beside Hermione's desk. With a quick intake of breath and a wildly beating heart, she opened the window and welcomed the bird inside. With trembling hands, she untied the package. In an instant, the bird had disappeared through the open window. As cold as it was outside, Hermione didn't stop to close it again. She cut through the string with her wand and eagerly opened the box.

"Whatcha got there, Mrs. Weasley?" asked Agnes Garmand, one of her coworkers.

"Oh, just a potion I ordered to try and calm Hugo's nerves," she answered.

"Poor little bloke," commented Agnes. "Hope it helps."

"So do I," Hermione answered truthfully.

She lifted the note and temporarily put it aside but picked it back up immediately when she realized that there were two containers inside the box, one homemade, and one store-bought that looked vaguely familiar. Where had she seen that little perfume bottle before? Then it hit her. Viktor Krum had given her a heavenly bottle of perfume upon her graduation from Hogwarts. She remembered how soothing its aroma had always been. It had been her favorite, and since she had used it very sparingly, it had lasted for over five years. But when they got married, Ron insisted that she throw away the empty bottle. He didn't want any reminders of Viktor Krum in his house. Could this be the same perfume? Was this package from Viktor, not Snape? She anxiously began to read.

Miss Granger,

I am sending this remedy to you with a condition attached. This potion is one I have never attempted to make, but don't worry. There is nothing in it that could cause your son any harm. I will send you a different version of the potion each week, and you will keep copious notes on his symptoms, something I know you are quite capable of doing.

Two tablespoons mixed with any beverage, morning and bedtime.

Inform me of any changes in his condition.

The additional contents of this package are for your own personal enjoyment. I believe you will find it much more compatible with your body chemistry than what you are currently wearing.

By the way, thank you for the chocolates. They were most enjoyable.

Your Humble Servant,

SS

P.S. Do you have access to e-mail? If so it could solve the other problem you spoke of. You may reach me at HalfBloodPrince@yahoo.co.uk

Hermione stared in disbelief at the note in her hand. Snape's tight anal scrawl had not evolved in the slightest since his time at Hogwarts, although she was glad to read that he had enjoyed the chocolates. But that was only the beginning. The note had been written on the finest 100% papyrus, a paper that was quite difficult to find at all and exorbitantly expensive when available. In addition, he didn't provide her with a recipe to help Hugo, he provided her with the *finished product*. Was he actually being thoughtful? Severus Snape? And as if this were not enough, he would be sending her a different potion each week, and he expected, in fact *required*, a reply with the results from her so he could modify the potion accordingly. Finally, after all these years, the correspondence would go both ways.

And what truly flummoxed her was the addition of the Secret Recipe fragrance, one of the finest and most expensive perfumes on the market. Never mind the money he must have spent. Had he actually remembered what it smelled like from her previous letters after all those many years? And if so, what did that mean other than that he had actually read them? How could he have detected the trace of scent on those letters much less known which perfume it was?

And he had signed it, "Your Humble Servant." Well, obviously he was serving her needs by fulfilling her request, but what an elegant way to sign the letter. No man had ever said such a thing to her much less put it in writing.

But what the bloody hell was Snape doing with an e-mail address?!

She remembered reading about them in the computer books from her parents' house. If he had an e-mail address, that must mean he had a computer. Her mind began to race. Perhaps one of her Muggle cousins could help her get that old computer at her parents' house up and running, and she could set up an e-mail address. That would require electricity. And if she was going to start spending time there, she may as well have the water turned back on... and some food in the place and...

Suddenly, for the first time in years, Hermione was excited and happy about her future prospects. And, finally, she had someone on her side again. Thank Merlin. Severus Snape... Who'd have thought?

It was time to leave work behind for another day. Little Hugo would be OK at his grandmother's house for just a little longer. Hermione quickly sent off her patronus with a message to Molly letting her know that she needed to stop by her parents' house to check on things. It had been over two weeks; no one would think anything of it. Then she sent another off to Ron, asking him to stop by and pick up Hugo. She gathered up her new box and the treasures it contained, and then she headed for one of the fireplaces in the lobby. Her parents' fireplace was still part of the Floo network. She could Floo home from there.

Once at her parents' house, she began to go through all of their old utility bills to retrieve the necessary phone numbers and have things turned back on. It was too late to deal with it all today, but she could find a pay phone at lunch tomorrow and make the necessary calls. Once that was done, she could spend her lunch hours at the house and learn about the computer and, if necessary, employ her cousin's help to set up an e-mail account.

Later that night, as Hermione snuck two tablespoons of the precious potion into Hugo's warm milk, she felt a warm wave wash over her. Did the warm wave make her think of Snape? Or did thinking of him cause the warm wave? Was Snape at home right now thinking about her? She hoped so as she watched her son down the full glass.

"Sleep well, love," she said as she caressed his sweet face with one hand and took the empty glass away with the other.

"Night, Mum," came his drowsy reply.

Yes, she thought as she quietly closed Hugo's door, *things are definitely looking up.*

Back in the Headlines

Chapter 4 of 35

Snape wakes up to find his name on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*.

I would like to thank J. K. Rowling for inventing the wonderful world of Harry Potter. Her amazing imagination has made this story possible. All of the characters and locations are hers. I make no money from the writing or sharing of this story.

I would also like to thank my diligent betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels. They help me in so many ways.

Chapter 4

Back in the Headlines

Snape forced himself to get up at 1:30 p.m. this afternoon. He had decided after he got home the evening before that he would need to slowly go back to sleeping at night if he was going to be corresponding with Miss Granger. So he planned to wake up a half hour earlier each day until his routine became what most people considered "normal." But he found it hard to get out of bed since he had lain awake for hours that morning thinking of Miss Granger, and probably only managed about four hours of sleep.

He wondered what she looked like now after bearing two children and sitting at a desk most of the day for the past eighteen years. Was that lovely young woman's figure only a memory? He couldn't imagine her to be the kind to let herself go, but people do strange things when they are stuck in a miserable situation. Some people lose their appetite when they suffer stress, others can't stop eating. He had almost starved himself to death the many years he had spent as a spy. The horrors he was forced to witness stole his appetite on many occasions. But in spite of the fact that Winky had fed him well for many years now, his profile had barely changed. No middle age spread had expanded his girth, thank Merlin, and he was especially pleased that he had not lost his hair as his father had by this age. His hairline had receded only slightly, and there were hints of salt scattered evenly throughout his shoulder length silky black mane. Winky had managed to add enough meat to his bones so he no longer looked starved, but his metabolism was such that he automatically burned off the excess calories with little effort. The greenhouse he had added to his backyard had been a great source of pleasure and rare potion ingredients over the years, and he got enough exercise working in it to keep trim.

So it was with a groggy mind and a short temper that he made his way down to the kitchen for coffee and the usual breakfast. But what he found on the front page ripped away his appetite.

Snape SPOTTED IN DIAGON ALLEY!

By Rita Skeeter

Yesterday afternoon it was reported that none other than Severus Snape, convicted felon and former Voldemort Spy, was spotted at several locations in Diagon Alley, putting to rest the recent rumors of his demise. After years of living underground, witnesses stated that they had seen him lurking about in several locations up and down the street.

"I think he came in here," admitted Eva Millinter, sales girl at Madam Malkin's cosmetic counter. "I think he bewitched me when he came in or I would have called for help or something. He bewitched me, he did. I'm not sure what he bought or even if he paid for it when he left." ("Oh for the love of Merlin," Snape said with a sigh, "Now they'll throw me into Azkaban for stealing!")

"He came in here wanting to owl a package and threatened to hex me to kingdom come if I told anyone that I recognized him," Stan Shunpike, mail clerk at the Owl Post Office, informed this reporter yesterday evening. ("I did no such thing!" Snape exclaimed out loud.) "He got right in my face all mean and nasty. But I ain't afraid of the likes of him!" ("You will be," Snape growled. "You will be.")

"He still makes an impressive figure," remarked Mr. Ollivander, wand-maker "I saw him walk by my shop several times this afternoon. "It was as if he couldn't make up his mind where he wanted to go." ("Wonderful." Snape shook his head and let out a sigh. "Now everyone will believe that I suffer from dementia.")

Several others also thought they may have seen Snape, but didn't want their names revealed, either because they could not be certain, or they still feared the dark wizard and what he might do to them if they spoke up. "One thing is for sure, if Snape wants to start terrorizing our customers, he's got another thing coming! We won't stand for it," insisted one of the shop keepers who wished to remain nameless.

Some speculate that, if Snape has not resurfaced to put forth his own evil plans, he may be working for someone else with the same thing in mind. The Ministry of Magic has been alerted to the sighting, and Ronald Weasley, a spokesman for the Auror Department, informed this reporter that they were aware of his presence ("Liar!" Snape grumbled), he was being watched ("Like hell!"), and no one was ever in any danger. He also asked that if there were any further sightings of the dark wizard that they should be notified immediately.

It was a good thing that Snape's stomach was already empty because the front page headline would surely have brought it all back up again. Winky had already known not to prepare his food as soon as she saw the headline. She also knew better than to try and hide the paper from him. He always managed to find it, and her desire to protect him from the pain only made him angry with her. And as if the story itself wasn't bad enough, that embarrassingly horrid photo of him sneering at the camera in prison attire was plastered just under the headline from nineteen years earlier.

All the joy and excitement of the previous day immediately evaporated the moment Snape saw the headline. By the time he had read the entire article, his energy was totally drained. He felt like crying, yelling, cursing, breaking something... He felt like marching into the store closet and downing that nasty lethal potion he had brewed for himself all those years ago.

Then his thoughts turned to Miss Granger... and his blood began to boil. This was all her fault. She had asked for his help, and he plunged headlong into all of her problems, making them his own. With one lousy letter she had brought his heart back to life, given him a purpose, given him someone to help, to protect. He finally felt needed, wanted, and appreciated for the first time in nineteen and a half years. And all because she wrote him a letter. *Damn her!* Or should he damn himself for turning soft in his middle age? Oh, who was he kidding? He had always harbored a soft spot in his heart for someone... his mother, Lily, Lily's son; although when he showed up at school with James' swagger and arrogance, that soft spot hardened quite a bit. And now (and perhaps long before now) the soft spot belonged to Miss Granger.

He rose, walked the short distance to his study, and poured himself a snifter of fine cognac. He threw it back, then, with all his might, he heaved the glass into the fireplace. Then he took a deep breath to calm himself and withdrew his wand from his robe's pocket. It was his favorite glass, after all. With a flick, the snifter was restored to its former finery, then the process was started all over again. He filled, emptied and crashed the glass against the fireplace thrice more before he had finally quelled his nerves enough to climb the staircase and escape into his computer.

He had his own owl now, and Winky could be sent to make purchases for him. He need never set foot in Diagon Alley again. He need never leave his house if he didn't

want to. The more he thought of becoming a complete and true hermit the more the idea appealed to him. *Let them have their laugh, the fools*, he thought to himself.

He clicked to open his e-mail account. He usually had a few junk mails and sometimes a notice or two from a utility, or some sales notice from a company he had purchased merchandise from in the past. And he was not disappointed. But if the paper had been a horribly unpleasant surprise, the e-mail held just the opposite. A sender's address that he didn't recognize had "Sorry" typed into the subject line. He opened it first.

Dear Professor Snape,

I can't imagine how horrified you were to read the paper this morning. I was appalled at what I saw, especially knowing that it was my fault you were there in the first place. Please accept my deepest apology.

The fact that you have suffered so much at the hands of a society that you risked your life for over and over again is simply inexcusable. I promise that I will restore your good name if it's the last thing I do.

I am writing this from my cousin's computer. We have both skived off the day, and he said he will help me with the old one at my parent's house and get me set up with e-mail before the day is through. So my next letter will come from a different address.

This was a great idea, by the way. I can spend my lunch hour at their house and send you updates on Hugo's condition every day.

Until tomorrow,

I am Yours Most Sincerely,

Hermione Granger-Weasley

Snape closed his eyes and sighed. It was faster and undeniably more convenient, but there was no parchment to smell her skin mixed with that... that... He should never have bought that for her. Merlin only knew what she might believe his intentions were. It was totally inappropriate. And after all that effort and the trouble it had caused him, she didn't even mention it.

He let out another sigh and began opening the rest of his e-mail. Junk, junk and more junk, as usual. An interesting ad for an I-Pod came up. He had been contemplating a future purchase of one, but wasn't sure if he would really use it that much. His CD player held ten CDs, and he only had to change them out once per day. He actually found choosing from his extensive collection one of the finer pleasures of life. So why eliminate such an enjoyable chore?

Just at that moment there came a tapping at the window next to his desk. It was a little screech owl! He opened the window and untied the note, then let the little fellow back out the way he came. To Snape's pleasant surprise, the peach envelope was adorned with Miss Grangers lovely scrawl, but even better, the scent of her soft skin mingling with chamomile and rose hips. He took a deep breath and smiled. Yes, this is what he wanted. This even made up for that ridiculous Prophet article. He would deal with Stan Shunpike and that disgusting Skeeter woman later. Nothing was going to ruin this. He carefully opened the envelope with a broad smile as an even stronger heavenly aroma escaped into the air.

My Dear Professor Snape,

Words cannot express my gratitude for the kindness you have extended to me and my son with your most generous gifts. I can already see a change for the better in Hugo's behavior, and Secret Recipe is my most favorite of all perfumes. I simply don't know what to say except that I am forever in your debt.

I hope someday, when you are ready, you will meet me at a place of your choosing and let me buy you lunch or tea or something. I would love to see you again.

Although the e-mail idea does solve the privacy issue, I felt that a proper hand written thank you note was the very least I could do under the circumstances.

Thanks again for everything and especially the most precious gift of all, your help. It means the world to me.

Yours Most Truly,

Hermione Granger-Weasley

Snape stared at the parchment in his hand. He didn't need to read it again. It was already stored word for word in his brain and his heart. Her graceful handwriting made it seem almost a work of art to behold. And the words felt like Mozart's music to his ears as he imagined her voice saying them. All angry feelings towards her melted away as he savored the meaning in each statement. She had expressed gratitude for his kindness. When was the last time anyone had referred to Snape as kind? Secret Recipe turned out to be her favorite fragrance. That was no surprise to Snape. It suited her body chemistry perfectly. And Hugo had already shown signs of improvement. Perfect! But the most precious gift of all, she wrote, was his help... When was the last time he had helped anyone? He thought back and decided it had been over nineteen long years ago, the night he kept silent as to his true loyalties and felt Nagini's teeth sink into his neck as a reward. He had not lifted a finger to help another soul since then, unless one could consider Winky's spending money "help."

And she had signed it, "Yours Most Truly."

A wave of what could only be called "joy" lifted his heart. When was the last time he felt this way? Once again his mind sifted through the years and finally found the previous moment of joy. It was his fifth year at Hogwarts. Lily had admitted that James Potter was a useless toe rag. Yes, that was it. That was the last time. He wasn't sure if he should be elated that joy had finally come back into his life or depressed because it had been decades since he had felt it. He finally decided that there was no use in lamenting over the past. He only hoped that this Muggle-born didn't crush his heart into grains of sand like Lily had done. Well, if her past behavior was any indication, Miss Granger would not abandon him in spite of the occasional cruel remark or unwise decision. After everything he had already said and done to her, she kept coming back for more. Yes, he felt in his heart that he could count on her friendship at least. And if she could someday shed the waning Mr. Weasley...

A quick glance at her e-mail told Snape that Miss Granger had sent it hours ago, so he needn't bother to write back. He would wait for the next one, hopefully from a new, private address. He turned off the computer and headed back down stairs. He decided to spend the rest of his day working on potions. Perhaps, if his new textbooks were successful, he would next work on a new Healer's Potion Handbook. He could even include a few of the recipes from his mother's family recipe book. It was full of potions he had never seen anywhere else, and if they proved as affective as the one he made for Hugo, the book could revolutionize the Healing profession.

The next day Snape rose at noon and went straight to his computer before even taking a shower. There it was, just as he had hoped, a new e-mail from MuggleBornWitch@yahoo.co.uk. He noticed that she had sent it the night before, so he concluded that she and her cousin must have stayed and worked until their task had been completed. The subject line simply said "Hello." He anxiously clicked open the letter.

Dear Professor Snape,

With my cousin's help I am set up with a working computer and e-mail address. This was a great idea. But please forgive the brevity of my letters. I don't know how to type yet. My cousin tells me I'll get the hang of it after a month or two.

It is late and I am expected back home. I will write more tomorrow on my lunch hour. I will update you to Hugo's progress then.

Yours truly,

Hermione

He shook his head. Typing was so unnecessary. "Hit reply," he commanded the computer. The mouse obeyed, finding the spot on the screen most effectively and clicking as required. The reply screen came up and Snape began to dictate his response as he paced the room.

"Miss Granger (comma, return),

"I trust you have not forgotten that you are indeed a witch of some skill (comma) and that you can charm the keyboard to type as you speak (comma) so there is no need for you to learn such Muggle drudgery (period, return).

"I await your report on Hugo's progress (period, return).

"Sincerely (comma, return),

"S S"

After reviewing the screen for a moment, he finished with, "Hit send," and headed for the shower, leaving the computer on in hopes of a waiting reply when he was finished. It was lunch time at the Ministry, and he hoped she would send her reply with an update on Hugo in short order.

He was not disappointed. A letter with "Hugo" in the subject line had appeared in his absence. He clicked to open it.

Dear Professor Snape,

I will try your keyboard charm idea later this evening when I have more time. Thanks for reminding me. Sometimes, when I am dealing with Muggle technology, I forget that I can still use magic to my advantage.

Since I have been administering your potion, Hugo's condition has improved dramatically. He wakes up refreshed and ready for Muggle school, and he hasn't had any magical mishaps there all week. I have had to Oblivate his entire class on several occasions because someone would do or say something cruel and he would lose his temper. But now he has more of a sense of humor when children tease him. He can still be hurt, but usually he just shrugs it off. And he has not complained of an upset stomach since yesterday morning. That in itself is truly amazing!

You previously stated that you would modify the potion for improvements, but I honestly don't see how it could get any better.

I would very much like to thank you in person. Would you consider meeting me at my parent's house for lunch one day soon, perhaps next week?

Always yours,

Hermione

Snape considered the e-mail carefully. He knew with some time and trial and error, Miss Granger would do a fine job with charming her keyboard. Charms had been her strongest subject in school. He was pleased to read that Hugo was responding positively to his treatment, but in spite of her high praise, he already had several ideas he wished to try that might render it more effective.

But the lunch invitation... He wasn't comfortable with that idea. For one thing, she was still married which made the idea of lunch alone with her unthinkable. And besides that, what would her parents think of him? Or would they be at work? Surely they were retired by now. Would they be joining them for the meal? If so, that would solve the issue of appropriateness. But he still wasn't comfortable with the idea.

After some serious thought, he finally dictated a reply.

Hermione sat at her computer, eating the sandwich she had made for herself, as she anxiously awaited Snape's reply. The last few days had set so many things in motion she found herself being pulled in several directions at once. She had begun a quiet crusade at work, doing research into the Grindelwald and Voldemort Wars and all of the judgments and subsequent sentences that were handed down through the courts to those convicted. She was observing Hugo every possible minute and asking his teacher and Molly to also watch him closely. And she kept a notebook on his behavior and any changes they observed. She Floo'd to her parents' house every day at lunch to make it more hospitable, removing the sheet covers from the furniture and restocking the pantry and refrigerator. And, of course, the computer was the most exciting addition to her daily routine. She was still perfecting the keyboard charm, but she was very close to working out the kinks. Most people would have been exhausted from all of the hard work, but Hermione felt energized. She wasn't sure where all of this would take her, but she knew one thing, it was leading her away from her lousy husband and her miserable life.

Severus Snape. How she longed to see him again. Out of curiosity, she wondered what he would look like now... Had he gained weight? Did he go bald? Was his hair grey? Or had he retained some semblance of the long, lean, rugged yet handsome man he once had been? She looked at herself in the mirror every morning after her shower and felt pretty good about what she saw. She was about ten pounds heavier than she had been when she graduated school. After bearing two children, she didn't feel that was too bad. And besides, she felt confident that the extra weight had settled in all of the right places, turning her from a skinny girl to a voluptuous woman. Ginny had also successfully regained her figure after her third child, but many of their acquaintances from school had not been so determined to take or keep the weight off as the years went by. Padma and Pavarti were plump, to be sure, and Pansy Parkinson had become quite heavy after bearing five children! But Hermione could hardly fault her for that. Lavender Brown was still trim, but after two kids and three ex-husbands, she was on the prowl again. Hermione wasn't sure, but she had a feeling that Lavender had set her sights on Ron. One thing was for sure, Ron liked the extra attention.

So why was she so nervous at the idea of seeing Snape again? Was she afraid he would turn down her lunch invitation? Or was she more afraid he would accept it? After all these years she wondered what he thought of her. Did he pity her and her child's plight? Did he offer assistance out of some sense of obligation because she had saved his life all those years ago? Or was his interest purely scientific? He was using her son as a Guinea Pig to perfect his potion, after all. Or was there some remote chance that, after all those letters and these many years, he had actually grown to care for her?

What a ridiculous notion, Hermione thought. He lives in a Muggle neighborhood. He owns a Muggle computer. For all I know he probably married a Muggle, has six kids and he's got a belly and bald head like Slughorn's, and is as mean as ever!

Just then, a new e-mail popped up in her In Box. She immediately clicked to open it.

Dear Miss Granger,

Thank you for the information on Hugo. I am pleased that he has shown improvement, and I look forward to your continued updates.

As for your lunch invitation, I regretfully decline. I feel that, convicted felon that I am, dining alone with you would compromise your reputation. Or at best, your parents wouldn't quite know what to make of me. Either way, it is best to avoid the situation all together.

Thank you for your thoughtfulness. To see you again would not be objectionable. Perhaps at a later date, and under different circumstances, we can arrange something.

Sincerely,

SS

Hermione stared at the screen in amazement. Then it hit her: since her parents were Muggles, their untimely deaths had not been listed in the *Prophet* Obituaries. He didn't know.

It was time to try out her Keyboard charm in earnest. She quickly dictated a letter back to Snape.

The moment the e-mail notice popped up on screen, Snape clicked open the letter. Its contents left him speechless and embarrassed.

Dear Professor Snape,

If we dine at my parents' house, you could Apparate directly here. No one would know the meeting took place except the two of us. And under my current circumstances, I couldn't care less what affect our meal has on my reputation.

By the way, you needn't worry about what my parents would make of you. They were killed in an auto accident over two years ago.

I beg you to please reconsider.

Yours truly,

Hermione

After he regained his composure, Snape sent a reply.

My Dear Miss Granger,

Please accept my heartfelt apology for the most callous remark about your parents. I had no idea they had passed on. I deeply regret my ignorance in the matter and sincerely hope that it has not caused you any pain.

As for your gracious invitation, perhaps I could hand deliver Hugo's next potion sample on Monday at noon, if that is convenient for you as well. If you will be so kind as to provide me with the address, I will handle it from there.

Sincerely,

SS

He didn't have to wait long for her reply.

Monday at noon is perfect. My parents' address is 1453 Scatterloaf Lane, Knottingly.

I can hardly wait to see you again.

Hermione

Well, now he had done it. After all these years would she shatter his illusions? Would he leave after lunch, ruining the day he accepted her invitation? Would she talk his ear off and ask him a million nosy and intimate questions that he had no desire to answer? Would she still be the ridiculous school girl that he loved to hate?

Merlin's monocle, what have I done?

Hermione was so excited she could hardly contain herself. Severus Snape was coming here in just a few days! Looking back, she realized that she had never once been alone with the man. Not in his class room, not in the hospital, not even in his office. The only time she suffered one of his detentions, both Harry and Ron had been with her. But even then she could sense something so deep lying beneath his austere surface. Her woman's intuition could feel the presence of so much more than he ever let show. And even though he had hurt her so many times with his words or just a venomous glance, her spirit felt a kinship to him.

Was it the fact that Snape was the only person she knew whose intellect surpassed her own? Or was it because of the information about his past that Harry had shared the night of the final battle before they knew he was still alive? No, she decided that it was something more, something she couldn't put into words. For reasons that she didn't even understand, her spirit told her to reach out to this man, and that if she invested even a little bit more time in him, he would give back more than her wildest dreams had ever dared to show her.

A Birthday Suggestion

Chapter 5 of 35

Hermione and Ron have a fight at his birthday party, and she takes Hugo to her parents' house for a couple of days.

All of the characters and their world belong to the amazing J. K. Rowling. I make no money from this endeavor.

Many thanks go to my wonderful betas, **JENGEORGE** and **NervousAboutAngels**, who help to keep me in line.

A/N: Some of my friends felt that Arthur Weasley acted a bit out of character in this chapter, but I blame it on the excessive alcohol. How many of us are guilty of doing or saying things while under the influence that we regret later?

Chapter 5

A Birthday Suggestion

The remainder of the week crawled by for both Hermione and Snape. Their e-mails kept strictly to the subject of Hugo's health, almost as if they both felt that to mention the luncheon would jinx it somehow.

On Friday, after conveying what little new information she had on Hugo, Hermione informed Snape that she would not be able to correspond with him over the weekend due to family obligations.

His only response was: **Then I'll see you Monday at noon.**

Saturday happened to be Ron's birthday. As usual, his mother baked him a huge cake, and the immediate family all descended on the elder Weasley household. Harry and Ginny were there, of course, along with little Lily. She was Hugo's age, and they happily ran out into the garden to chase gnomes and talk excitedly about Hogwarts. "Keep Lizzy out of the mud, please," Hermione called after him, referring to the stuffed toy lizard which had lately become his constant companion.

When it came time for Ron to open his gifts, they all seemed very predictable to Hermione. His parents gave him a pair of khaki slacks, a white collared shirt, and dark blue robes for the office. George gave him one of his latest inventions, a blanket he could throw over himself that would take on the colors of his surroundings. Although it didn't work as well as Harry's Invisibility Cloak, they all decided that it would make great camouflage for covert Auror operations. Harry and Ginny renewed Ron's subscription to Quidditch Weekly, and Hermione gave him a Muggle electronic organizer, something Ron desperately needed but which Arthur quickly snatched up with a desire to have a "closer look." Hermione sighed. She knew the device would never make it home and would probably end up in pieces on Arthur's workbench.

After cake and ice cream, the liquor began to flow freely, but Hermione had only one drink and nursed it slowly. She knew how these things always went, and she had to stay sober if she was to keep her wits about her. She noticed that Harry wasn't drinking much either, and hoped that, if things got out of hand, she would find an ally in him.

Eventually, Molly brought up the notion that Ron and Hermione should consider expanding their family. "What if something were to happen to one of them?" she asked. "Hugo's health is improving, thank Merlin, but one never knows what the future might bring."

"I've tried, Mum," Ron professed. "But her career is more important than children." His condescending glare was almost more than Hermione could endure.

Ginny put a reassuring hand on Hermione's shoulder and proceeded to come to her rescue. "Oh, give it a rest both of you! Kids are a huge responsibility, Mum. You, of all people, should know that! She wants a career, so what? Let her be!"

"But it's her duty to have more children," Arthur joined the fray. "Our numbers were decimated during the War. The wizarding world still hasn't fully recovered. We need to repopulate."

"The government should require each couple to have at least four," Molly insisted. "Arthur, can't you introduce legislation?"

Arthur nodded. "Great idea, Molly. I'll take care of it first thing Monday morning."

Hermione looked at them all in disbelief. Harry and George remained silent. They could see the storm brewing in her eyes but didn't want to get stuck in the middle of it all. Ron's face grew smug at the thought of the government forcing them to have two more children. She would have to stay at home then, and he would have the upper hand again, once and for all.

Finally Hermione could take no more. "Fleur and Bill only have one child," she blurted out. "Now I know why they moved to Egypt. They couldn't stand listening to YOU LOT!"

As she stormed out the back door, Molly turned to Ron. "Don't just stand there, go after her and set her straight!" Then Molly stood and retreated into the kitchen with a growl. Ginny followed her in the hopes of calming her down.

Ron moved forward to obey his mother's order, but Harry stepped in his path. "Let her go, Ron. She needs to cool off."

Ron's face produced a scowl, but he sat back down on the couch. He knew Harry was right.

Only the men remained in the room. After a long and heavy silence, George's curiosity got the best of him and he asked, "What happened to you two anyway? Did you lose that book Fred and I gave you just before Bill and Fleur's wedding?"

"I didn't lose it," Ron said, a bit puzzled. "The charms just stopped working on her. I don't know why. I know I was doing them right. They had worked great for years."

"Is the sex still decent at any rate?"

"George!" Arthur glared at his son's inappropriate question.

"Sex? What sex? I haven't gotten any for months."

Arthur seemed even more alarmed at this confession than the question that produced it. "Sounds like it's time you took a little something on the side then, son."

Ron, George and Harry all stared incredulously at Arthur. "Dad!" Ron and George said together.

"All the purebloods do it," he confessed with a shrug.

"You mean to say that you cheated on Mum?" George whispered.

"Oh, Merlin, no. For one thing I value my life." He chuckled briefly. "But I never made enough money to keep a witch on the side. Too many mouths to feed."

"Hey, bro," added George philosophically, "if she's not putting out, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"You know," Ron admitted, "she's gone to her parents' empty house every lunch hour this week. For all I know, she's shagging some bloody bloke on the side already!"

Harry remained silent as he stared in disbelief at the male contingent of the Weasley clan. Would Ron actually cheat on Hermione? Was Hermione already cheating on him? The thought turned his stomach. Even if she was holding out on him, he felt that cheating was not the answer. Perhaps, with some counseling, they could get back on track. He would try to talk some sense into Ron at work on Monday.

After Hermione had stormed out the back door of the elder Weasley house, she grabbed Hugo by the hand and marched past the non-Apparation perimeter to Apparate home. "Wait!" cried Hugo. He broke free of his mum's grasp and ran back to the garden to retrieve Lizzy, then returned to her side.

But no sooner had they arrived at their house than Hermione realized that this place no longer felt like home. She quickly gathered Hugo's potion, some toiletries, and a few days worth of clothes for the two of them. Then, with Hugo and his favorite stuffed toy lizard in tow, she Apparated straight to her parents' home.

As they materialized at their new location, she let out a huge sigh of relief. This was where she belonged. This was home now. She realized then that, from now on, she would find it very difficult to live under the same roof with Ron, and that their continued cohabitation would only be for Hugo's sake.

About two hours later, a very drunk Ron came stumbling out of her fireplace demanding to know what she had done with his son. Seconds later, a sober Harry appeared and tried to calm him down. Hermione tried to keep her voice steady and choose her words carefully. Thank Merlin Harry was there to help her.

"I just needed some space, that's all," she tried to reassure them.

"Where's my son?" Ron bellowed.

"Our son is upstairs getting ready for bed."

"Wha' you thin' you're spendin' the night here?"

"The next two nights, actually," she stated defiantly. "I'll see to it that Hugo gets to school Monday before I go to work, and I'll pick him up at Molly's after work as usual. Then we can talk at home Monday night when you have a better chance of *remembering the conversation*."

"What'd ya mean by tha'? I'm perfectly calp... cab... caffable to remember..."

"Come on, Ron, let's get you home." Harry led him gently by the arm back to the fireplace.

As he looked over his shoulder to give Hermione a reassuring glance, she mouthed the words, "Come back."

Harry nodded discretely, then pushed Ron into the fire and quickly followed.

A few minutes later, Harry returned through the Floo and gave Hermione a much needed hug.

After Harry swore an oath not to tell anyone, not even Ginny, they had a long discussion about the book she had found in Ron's dresser, and what she had done to counteract its spells, and the many doubts she had had about Ron over the years. She ended her tale by voicing her inner doubts about how much longer the marriage could last under the strain. Harry was disappointed but not surprised and admitted that he always felt they were mismatched. He did not admit that Ron had given him a copy shortly after the twins had given him one, but he also silently thanked Merlin that he had never felt the need to use the spells it contained on Ginny.

Harry passed the notion of counseling by her but somehow knew that the idea had fallen on deaf ears. So he screwed up his courage to ask the next question and hoped he didn't get slapped in the face for his trouble.

"Are you cheating on Ron?"

"WHAT??" Hermione was obviously shocked at the question. "What would possibly give you that idea?"

"Ron thinks you might be. He says you've been coming over here at lunch every day... alone."

"Oh, *please!* Harry, you know me better than that. I'm sure if I'm ever free of him, I'll see other people, but I would never cheat on my husband." Her demeanor became indignant. "I can't believe you would think such a thing."

"I didn't. But Ron seemed convinced, so I figured the best way to find out was just to ask. Sorry."

"It's OK. I'm sorry you're stuck in the middle again. I know you feel like you've spent half your life as peacemaker or go-between for us."

There was a slight lull in the conversation; then Harry decided to focus on something more cheerful. "What a change for the better in Hugo, eh?"

"Yes, he's doing much better. If he continues to improve, I think there'll be no problem with him going off to Hogwarts in a couple of years."

"Ron told me you're trying a new potion on him. Where on earth did you finally find something that worked?"

Hermione hesitated. In a way she was dying to tell someone about Snape; on the other hand, she wanted to keep him all to herself. "I found a new supplier."

"New supplier? In Britain? Anyone I know?"

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. If she couldn't trust Harry, who could she trust? "Yes, but if I tell you, you must promise not to tell a soul. If Ron ever finds out, he'll make me stop, in spite of the fact that it's obviously working brilliantly."

"My, my, you are full of secrets tonight, aren't you?"

"Swear you won't tell."

"Alright, alright, I swear I won't tell a soul."

"Think about it," she giggled like a school girl. "St. Mungo's was no help, and I read every book I could get my hands on, but nothing worked."

"Yeah, Ron told me how hard you had been searching to find something to help the little guy. So who is it?"

"Can't you guess? Who's the best Potions master in all of Great Britain?"

Harry's eyes narrowed as reality set in. "You can't mean Snape?"

"Professor Snape," she corrected him.

"Merlin's beard, you're joking?!" Harry's look of surprise was mixed with amazement.

Hermione beamed at him. She was really enjoying this.

"So when he was spotted in Diagon Alley last week that had to do with you?"

"Yes," she laughed. "He was trying to owl me the first version of Hugo's potion."

"Poor bloke, he's actually trying to help someone and Rita Skeeter turns it into a scandal."

"You know what they say, 'No good deed goes unpunished.'" She and Harry both laughed out loud.

"I sent old Rita a Howler over that article, reminding her that he was a War Hero, and that the Ministry should have been hung up by their toenails for sticking him with that Manslaughter charge," Harry said. "I also wrote a letter to the Editor of the *Prophet* reminding everyone of Snape's sacrifices during the War, but they chose not to publish it."

"That's a shame, but not a surprise... I've been toying with the idea of sending her a cursed box of chocolates. She would suspect the chocolates to be laced with something, and would most likely toss them into the nearest rubbish bin, but by removing the box from the owl's leg, she would activate the curse when she touched the box."

Harry was intrigued at this point. "And what would it do, exactly?"

"Every time she publishes a story containing gross exaggerations or falsehoods she would break out in hives for a week. And the curse would last a whole year!"

"Oh, that's brilliant! You should do it!"

Hermione started laughing.

"I'm serious! I'll even help you. I'll pick up the box of chocolates tomorrow and we can meet here on Monday at lunch to work out the curse. I've got loads of books from the restricted archives at work that we can use to come up with something really dreadful."

She shook her head, still laughing. "I'm sorry I can't, at least not on Monday. I'm having lunch with Professor Snape. He's bringing me the next version of Hugo's potion. Besides, if we do something right away, she'll suspect us. We need to wait at least a month, so the fuss you made about it will be long forgotten. That way she'll figure it could have been sent by any number of people."

Harry nodded his head in agreement, but then his eyes grew wide with anticipation and he grinned. "So what's he like now? The *Prophet* article didn't describe him. Did he ever get married? Is his hair even greasier? Or did it all fall out like old Slughorn's?"

"I have no idea. I haven't seen him since his trial almost twenty years ago. I don't know what to expect, really."

"Well, I expect a full report. Let's plan to meet here on Tuesday to see what we can come up with for our dear Miss Skeeter. You can tell me all about it then."

"I'll probably be dying to tell someone about him, so sure. Sounds like a plan."

They both laughed again as Harry got out of his chair. "It's getting late. I don't want to worry Ginny."

Hermione's tone grew somber. "Thank her for me. She stood up to her family for me. You guys are real friends. And I need all the friends I can get."

"I know it may not be easy with a scary Monday looming large, but try to have a nice Sunday."

Hermione gave Harry an impish grin. "Monday won't be scary. I'll be reacquainting myself with Severus Snape. Monday will be wonderful!"

With a bewildered look, Harry gave his old friend a warm hug and disappeared into her fireplace. He wasn't sure how anyone could use the word "wonderful" to describe an encounter with Severus Snape.

Soup for Two

Chapter 6 of 35

Snape meets Miss Granger for lunch.

Chapter 6

Soup for Two

Sunday seemed to crawl by at a snail's pace, even with Ginny's company. She had Floo'd over with Lily in the afternoon to give Hugo someone to play with besides that stuffed lizard that he insisted on taking everywhere. Hermione could only assume that Harry had gone to placate Ron. Hermione was glad for the company, but she would have been happier to sit at the computer and send e-mails back and forth to Snape. Ginny's freckled face and red hair simply reminded her of the difficult situation she had put herself in.

Ginny spent most of the afternoon apologizing for the things that her parents had said and tried to blame their behavior on the alcohol, but Hermione wasn't convinced. She promised Ginny that she wouldn't make any rash decisions, however, as they departed late that afternoon.

Monday morning at work was agonizing. Hermione left at 11:00, claiming a Healer's check-up for Hugo and Floo'd to her parents' house to get ready for her very special guest. She knew Snape would arrive at 12:00 noon on the dot, if not just a touch earlier, and she was determined to be ready.

She prepared a fresh green salad and got some soup going on the stove. She had two knives chopping at once and really had to concentrate to be sure that the salad ingredients didn't end up in the soup pot! Once the salad was done and the soup had begun to simmer, she popped the rolls into the oven and checked the time. They would take twenty minutes to bake, but he wouldn't be there for another thirty. So she set the table in the dining room and walked around the house tidying up. It had not taken long yesterday for the two nine-year-olds to wreck the place.

At 11:40 she turned on the oven and stirred the soup. At 11:55 she put a pot of water on to boil for some tea and stirred the soup again.

At 12:00 noon, on the dot, the doorbell rang. The noise took Hermione completely by surprise because she had expected Snape to Floo in or Apparate, certainly not ring the doorbell. But when she peaked out the living room window, she couldn't see anyone. She became even more puzzled, and a bit apprehensive, as she cautiously opened the door. Her unobstructed view of the street made her wonder if Ron wasn't trying to play a trick on her. But, as she scoured the landscape with her eyes, she still saw no one. She let out a sigh and glanced at her watch: 12:02. He should have been there by now.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me in?"

Hermione almost jumped out of her skin since the voice had come from only two feet away. She stared, wide-eyed, at its source, but all that met her eyes was the camellia shrub next to the sidewalk. But that voice was unmistakable. That silky, smooth, deep voice. Her heart began to thump loudly in her chest. She immediately became dreadfully nervous. She came to the quick conclusion that he had Disillusioned himself and tried desperately to regain her composure so as not to make a shambles of the afternoon before it even started.

She opened the door wide and stood off to the side, staring into the space she thought he occupied. With a sweep of her arm, she smiled at nothing in particular and said, "After you." She sensed his presence as he brushed past her, and she quietly closed the door.

Slowly, as if the spell's effect was trickling off of him like water, Snape came into view. Hermione was pleased beyond measure to see his long black hair had not disappeared, but had grown even longer. It didn't seem nearly as greasy and now had a smattering of gray throughout. His long nose had always suited his face, as far as she was concerned, but he no longer looked gaunt. The deep black pools that were his eyes appeared to be well rested instead of sunken, and they were drilling into her

soul at this very moment. Just the hint of a smirk danced across his lips as the spell slowly dripped off and revealed the rest of his fine physique. He had filled out a bit, but Hermione was ecstatic to see that he was still slim and trim. If anything, his looks had improved with age.

Snape drank in the sight of Hermione like a hopeless derelict lost in the desert. Her figure had filled out in all the right places without adding unnecessary weight, in his estimation. Her long, bushy mane had been tamed into a French braid with a few stray locks to frame her lovely face. Her warm brown eyes filled his heart with pure joy as they glittered and sparkled at him. Best of all, he didn't need Legilimency to know that she was genuinely happy to see him.

As she offered her hand to shake, he took it in his and, with a slight bow, brought it up to meet his lips, never taking his eyes from her face. Her obvious delight amused him. He took a deep breath as he bestowed a kiss on the upper digits of her fingers. Yes, it was there... Secret Recipe. He hadn't been sure outside because a breeze prevented him from making an accurate assessment. But now it was unmistakable. He could tell that she not only had dabbed it on her wrists but on her neck as well. An image flashed through his mind of bestowing a gentle kiss where her neck met her shoulder just to get a whiff. It would smell slightly different from her wrist. The thought made his heart race, but he immediately willed himself to calm. *Not today.*

"Professor Snape," Hermione said warmly, "so good of you to come."

"Miss Granger." He tilted his head with respect. "So good of you to invite me."

"Please come in, sit down." She led him to an ornate brocade couch in the sitting room. "Let me take your traveling cloak. Can I get you some tea? I have hot water on the stove. I think I hear it whistling at me."

"Tea would be lovely." He handed her the heavy cloak and sat in the proffered seat.

Hermione hastily hung his cloak on a hook beside the front door and retreated to the kitchen. She returned shortly with a tray laden with two saucer-ed cups, the pot filled with hot water, and an assortment of tea bags with napkins and little cakes on the side. She placed the tray in front of him on a small coffee table and sat in the chair to his left.

"I wasn't sure what you might like, so I bought an assortment."

"Earl Grey is always my first choice," he admitted as he raised an eyebrow at the tea bags. Winky had indeed spoiled him with the traditional method of preparing loose tea in the pot. This method seemed so... American. But he understood that Miss Granger's situation necessitated cutting back on certain luxuries, so he politely bit back the many snide remarks that began to dance in his head.

"Help yourself then," she said as she pushed the bowl containing a variety of tea bags towards him on the tray.

"Nice perfume," he offered as they each poured the hot water over their chosen tea bags.

"Yes, the gentleman who gave it to me obviously has excellent taste," she replied as a slight touch of pink decorated her cheeks. His eyes glittered like polished onyx in response to her comment. *Did I just flirt with Severus Snape?* Hermione asked herself.

They sipped their tea in silence for a moment, but then Hermione gasped suddenly and stood up. "I forgot the milk and sugar." She gave him a worried look as if her slight had offended him.

Snape sipped his tea calmly and glanced up at her. "Relax, Miss Granger. I take mine black." He watched her closely as she settled herself back into her chair. *Do I still make her that nervous? After all of these years?*

"I hope you like chicken soup," she said with a bit of apprehension. "I also have rolls and a salad. Nothing fancy, I'm afraid. I came from work and didn't have a lot of time to prepare anything elaborate."

"It sounds delightful," he reassured her as he continued to sip his tea.

The room went silent again, but Hermione suddenly jumped up out of her seat, startling Snape to the point that he almost spilled his tea. "I forgot to put some music on. What kind do you like?"

He would never get through the meal if she continued on like this. He had to calm her down, but he wasn't quite sure how to put her mind at ease. Then an idea came to him. "Perhaps, if you show me your collection, I could pick something appropriate while you serve our meal," he suggested as he stood with teacup in hand.

"That's a great idea." She smiled broadly at him and led him to the family room and the Muggle stereo. The setup was similar to the one he had at home, but there was very little classical or baroque music to choose from. He finally found a CD of Bach's greatest hits by the London Symphony Orchestra and placed it in the player then managed to turn it on without assistance. He then adjusted the volume to an unobtrusive level and surveyed the rest of the room.

Sitting on a nearby desk was her outdated computer. It was turned on, and the pink and blue words "Rose" and "Hugo" bounced around on the black screen. With the sounds of a Bach concerto signaling Snape's success, Hermione popped in from the kitchen.

"This thing is a dinosaur," Snape informed her. "How do you tolerate it? It must be slower than a snail who's been given a Blood Thickening Potion."

Hermione laughed nervously. "My cousin said that I really should invest in a new one, but the only thing I use it for is to e-mail you."

"Well, I suppose, if it does the job, that's all that matters."

"Do you, by chance, have a Muggle telephone?" she asked hopefully. "They really are quite an efficient way to communicate over distances."

"My parents had one while I was growing up," he admitted. "But my neighbors complain about receiving unsolicited sales calls at all hours of the day, and I simply refuse to subject myself to such intrusions. Besides, I have no desire to converse with Muggles." Snape jiggled the mouse absent-mindedly to bring the screen back into view.

"I just thought it would be a good way for us to carry on a conversation."

"Not with *this* wizard." He shook his head as he gestured for her to sit in the desk chair. "But I can show you the next best thing."

She sat obediently and brought up her e-mail screen.

"Click here," he instructed as he put one hand on the back of her chair, and pointed at the "Buddy List" icon with the other. She opened it, but there were no names listed. "I believe that if you type my screen name in here, and I have yours on mine, we can do what is referred to as 'instant messaging.'"

"Fascinating. When you get home maybe we can try it."

"If I am on-line it will show you here." He leaned over again to point at a spot on the screen. "Then you click this button, dictate what you want to say, and hit 'send.'" He rested his pointing hand on the desk which positioned his face just above and to the right of hers. He took a deep breath and held it for a moment, relishing the perfectly blended aroma of her skin and perfume.

"Well, it won't be as enjoyable as hearing your voice, but it will be faster than regular e-mail."

So, she enjoyed the sound of his voice. What a pleasant surprise. Sirius Black had once told Snape that he sounded as if he were speaking from the far end of a sewer pipe! Snape was especially thankful that Miss Granger didn't share that opinion.

"Perhaps we can try it at lunchtime tomorrow."

"Harry will be having lunch with me tomorrow, so I probably won't have much time, but we can at least see if it works."

"Quite the social butterfly, aren't you?"

Hermione smirked as she stood up to continue her work in the kitchen. "If you must know, you are my very first lunch guest. He will be the second."

"Putting Snape before Potter?" He sneered as he followed her into the kitchen. "What's the world coming to?"

"It's not a social visit. We're plotting revenge on your behalf, actually."

"On my behalf?" Snape was genuinely surprised. "Don't do me any favors. I'm in enough trouble already."

She fluttered her eyelids innocently. "I'll tell you about it over the soup."

As Hermione was reaching up to retrieve the soup bowls from a high shelf in the cabinet, Snape came up very close behind her in hopes of getting another whiff of the perfume on her neck. The heat from the stove, in addition to her nervousness, had produced just the hint of a shine on her skin. She couldn't quite reach the bowls by hand, and as she turned to grab her wand which she had left lying on the kitchen table, she bumped right into Snape's chest. It was more than he could possibly have hoped for as she clumsily tangled herself in his arms so she wouldn't fall on the floor and make a complete fool of herself. He grabbed her waist with both hands and gently guided her to the side as his lungs took in the scent of her sweet skin, the hint of salt in her perspiration, and Secret Recipe all at once. He could tell that she was deeply embarrassed, but as his eyes bore into hers, he tried to convey a sense of peace to her. She was safe with him. No cruel comments would escape his lips today, at least none aimed at her.

"Allow me," he suggested graciously as he stepped up to the cabinet and easily reached the bowls. "Just the two of us, correct?"

"Yes." Hermione's voice quivered slightly. Being that close to Severus Snape had almost turned her knees to jelly. His hands felt strong around her waist as he eased her out of the way. And when his hot breath caressed her neck, she found herself wishing he would not let go. *You're a married woman, Hermione. Shame on you* she thought to herself as she watched him reach for the bowls.

"I'll get the tea tray," Snape offered, "while you ladle the soup." He noticed that she seemed much calmer when he kept busy. By the time he returned to the kitchen with the tea tray, she had filled both soup bowls and was about to take them to the dining room. He reached into the refrigerator and found the salad, then he grabbed the bread basket and followed her.

"Thank you," said Hermione. "It's nice to know you're not one of those people who sits around and expects to be waited on."

"Actually," Snape admitted as he pushed her chair in for her, "it's a nice change of pace. My house-elf never lets me do anything."

"You have a house-elf?" Hermione asked in disbelief. "I thought only the older pure blood families had house-elves."

"My house-elf is free. She chose to serve me after the last of the family she was bound to met an unfortunate fate."

"Were they Death Eaters?"

"Only the son, Barty Crouch, Jr."

Hermione raced back through her memories. She had met the Crouch house-elf many years ago, the night of the Quidditch World Cup. What was her name... "Winky?"

"Yes," Snape nodded, obviously impressed. "Winky. She became my personal servant while I was Headmaster and continued after I was released from Azkaban."

Hermione's face grew grim. "I can't believe they had the audacity to put you in that horrid place, even if it was only for six months."

"Miss Granger, I..."

"It was a travesty of justice!"

"I appreciate your concern, but..."

"You're brave and noble. You went through Hell for all of us."

"It doesn't matter."

"It DOES matter," she insisted. She had worked herself into a tizzy. "They ruined your good name and your honorable reputation. You didn't deserve that. They should have awarded you the 'Order of Merlin, First Class'! Instead, you can't even get a job. It's ludicrous. They should be strung up by their toe-nails."

Snape sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. He hoped that, if he let her babble on, she would get it out of her system so the conversation could turn elsewhere. He certainly didn't need her to remind him of the twisted irony of his situation.

"It's all water under the bridge, Miss Granger," he said calmly but with a touch of impatience in his voice. "I've moved on. Perhaps you should do the same so that we might enjoy our soup before it gets cold."

Hermione sighed heavily. A hint of pink began to shade her cheeks. "I'm sorry." She fiddled with her napkin, and then picked up her soup spoon. "Please eat." She took a taste and decided that it had not cooled off too much. "Care for a roll?" She passed him the bread basket.

"Don't mind if I do," he replied as just a trace of a smile danced across his lips. "The soup is delicious," he admitted as he buttered his roll.

Hermione found herself staring at his hands as his long, slender fingers tore a little piece from the roll and spread it with butter. She watched with fascination as those strong graceful fingers carried the bread up to his supple lips, where it disappeared into his mouth. After watching him chew for just a moment, her eyes flickered up to his, and she was startled to find him staring at her.

As their eyes locked, he raised his eyebrows. "Well, aren't you going to eat?"

She quickly looked down at her soup. "Sorry," she said as she brought the spoon to her lips. She felt like crawling into one of the kitchen cabinets to hide from her embarrassment, but she didn't think she would fit.

"There's no need to keep apologizing, Miss Granger," Snape convinced her with his smooth, silky voice. "I assure you, I'm quite pleased to be here."

The meal continued for several minutes with only the Bach concerto playing in the background. By the time they were almost finished with the soup, Snape was relieved to see her finally begin to relax.

"So what is this revenge you and Potter are plotting on my behalf?" Snape asked as Hermione handed him the salad bowl.

"Harry was so appalled at that travesty of Rita Skeeter's in the *Prophet* that he sent her a Howler!"

Snape snorted. "I imagine that she has received so many Howlers over the years that she is immune to them"

"Well, she won't be immune to the cursed box of chocolates that we'll send anonymously," Hermione said with a sly grin.

"Cursed chocolates?" He eyed her with mock suspicion. "Should I worry about any latent effects from your Valentines Day gift, by chance?"

"Oh, no," she exclaimed adamantly. "For one thing, I'm sure you are a wizard of such skill that you would have immediately detected any spell I may have cast." She stopped for a moment and gazed into his eyes with an intensity he had never seen from her before. "Besides," she confessed, her voice almost a whisper, "I would never do that to you."

He dropped his eyes to his salad plate and hesitated a few moments before he replied. "As cruel as I was to you at Hogwarts," he said quietly, "you would have every right to try."

An awkward silence passed between them as they ate their salad. Hermione felt almost shocked that he would make such a statement. Of course he had hurt her feelings many, many times. But until now he never showed even a hint of regret for doing so. Was this the new and improved Severus Snape?

Snape realized as soon as he said it that, at the time she had been his student, he hadn't felt the least bit guilty for hurting her. And yet, she had saved his miserable life and reached out to him over the years like no one else. Through much quiet reflection, he had come to the conclusion that this woman was a treasure, a rare and precious jewel. And she didn't even realize it. Weasley obviously didn't know what he had.

Finally, after Hermione had cleaned her plate, she broke the lull. "I feel I should compensate you for providing this potion to Hugo. Would you prefer Galleons or Muggle money?"

Snape scowled at her, obviously insulted. "I did not come here to negotiate a deal, Miss Granger!"

She immediately realized the severity of her slight. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to offend you in any way. It's just that... I know you can't get work. It must be difficult to make ends meet. At least let me reimburse you for your ingredients."

Snape began to relax his defensive posture as he realized that she was only trying to be fair to him. His look and his tone both softened as he gave her his answer. "Miss Granger, I appreciate your generosity, but you needn't worry. Almost everything I put into Hugo's potion costs me nothing, because I can grow it in my greenhouse. Secondly, having wisely invested most of my teacher's salary for over 16 years, I am not forced to live below the poverty line." Snape stopped and stared at her for a moment, unsure if it was wise to continue, but he had thought about this last statement for a very long time. For all he knew, it could be 19 more years before he saw her again, if ever, and he wanted very much to tell her this in person. "But lastly, and most importantly, no one in my entire life, including my own mother, has shown me the respect and kindness that you have. Even when I was cruel to you, I never once heard of any incident when you spoke ill of me behind my back."

Hermione blushed deeply. She couldn't believe what she was hearing... Kind words of deep praise from Severus Snape! She had hoped that he would mellow with age, but she had no idea he could be this warm and gracious.

"This doesn't even include the fact that I owe you my life, not once, but twice."

"Twice?"

"You came back for me and took me to St. Mungo's, but you also provided the blood."

Her heart began to race. Did he actually want to talk about this?

"I have your blood running through my veins. Would your parents have expected payment when they worked on your teeth?"

"Of course not. That's absurd!" she stated matter-of-factly.

"Then don't insult me with such notions again, please."

"No, sir." Hermione was almost moved to tears. She shook her head.

Just as they smiled at each other and nodded in agreement, a loud noise from the sitting room made them both jump. Someone had Floo'd into her fireplace. In a flash, Snape moved from his seat to a concealed spot just behind the door, with his wand drawn and ready.

"Hermione!" yelled Ron. "Where are you? I'm gonna get to the bottom of this!"

Just then another loud crash indicated a second arrival. "Ron, there is NOTHING going on," insisted Harry. "Now will you leave her alone? I told you, it's not what you think!"

"Hermione!" Ron bellowed. "I'm not leaving here until I get some answers!"

Hermione was mortified. What in Merlin's name would Snape think of all this? She looked at him with pleading eyes. His return gaze was inscrutable. She mouthed the words, "Please stay," knowing that he could Disapparate out at any moment. She hoped she could rid herself of her unwanted guests quickly and salvage something of their meal together.

"I'm here, Ron," she announced as she walked past Snape and into the sitting room.

Snape remained silently hidden behind the door, not sure if or when he should reveal his presence.

"Alright, where is he?"

"Ronald, will you calm down?" Hermione asked sternly.

"Well, looky there," Ron commented as his eyes wandered to the dining room table. "A cozy romantic meal for two with a good shag for dessert?"

Snape could take no more of this nonsense and stepped unceremoniously into the doorway. "There has been no *shagging* here," he announced with unmistakable disgust in his voice. "Nor was there going to be, Mr. Weasley. I assure you that my intentions towards your wife are strictly honorable."

Ron was dumbstruck. Snape was the last person on the planet that he had expected to see. But Harry had known, of course, and stepped forward with a welcoming hand.

"Professor Snape. It's been too long."

"Not, so it seems, for Mr. Weasley," Snape replied icily as he shook Harry's hand. Ron did not extend the same courtesy, but no one in the room seemed surprised.

"You're looking well."

"As are you, Mr. Potter."

Ron finally fell out of his stupor and turned to Hermione, incensed. "What the bloody hell is this greasy git doing here?"

"RON!" Hermione replied furiously. "Professor Snape is my guest. I will not have you speak about him like that in my house. You can apologize, or you can leave!"

"I'm not going anywhere," Ron replied belligerently.

"Then it seems I have overstayed my welcome, Miss Granger," Snape concluded.

"That's 'Mrs. Weasley' to you...you slimy bastard." Ron took a step forward and reached for his wand, a foolish move since Snape's wand was already drawn. Without so much as a blink from his former Potions professor, Ron's wand turned red hot, and he dropped it. Then he instantly grabbed one hand in the other and let out an agonizing scream.

"I would advise you to be careful, Mr. Weasley. If you recall, I was the Dark Lord's right hand man, as well as Albus Dumbledore's. I may have a few tricks up my sleeve that neither you nor the dunderheads you chase around these days are aware of."

Snape then turned his attention back to Miss Granger as he strode over towards the front door and grabbed his traveling cloak. "By the way, here is Hugo's potion," he said as he pulled it from a concealed pocket. "Same dosage. Inform me of any changes."

Hermione reached for his outstretched hand and engulfed it in both of hers as their eyes met. The look on her face was almost heartbreaking. "Please stay," she whispered.

Ron was too busy nursing his hand to react to her plea, save the suspicious look he gave her.

Snape couldn't help but notice. "I appreciate your desire to be a good hostess," he said as he withdrew his hand from hers, depositing Hugo's potion, "but my presence here is only exacerbating the current situation. Besides, I do not wish to be caught up in the middle of something that is... none of my business."

"You're damn right it's none of your business!" Ron spat viciously.

Snape turned on his heel and glared menacingly at Ron through narrowed lids. *Give me a reason*, he thought silently. Ron's slight cower reassured Snape that he still excelled in the art of intimidation.

He turned back to Miss Granger. "May I Disapparate from inside the house?"

"Yes. I lowered the wards when I got here."

"Good. Then I will take my leave of you all. Mr. Potter," he said with a respectful nod.

"Professor," Harry responded with a nod and a smile.

"Mr. Weasley." He merely gave Ron a dirty look. Ron remained silent, but returned his look in kind.

"Miss Granger," he smirked, knowing that to refer to her this way would only anger Ron more. Then he gave her a sincere but penetrating look. "Thank you... for everything." He then gave her a wink that the boys couldn't see, and silently spun out of sight.

The Perfect Hex

Chapter 7 of 35

Harry and Hermione research the perfect hex to use on Rita Skeeter.

Chapter 7

The Perfect Hex

Hermione stood motionless, flustered and confused. *Did Severus Snape just wink at me?* The notion would have been unimaginable only hours before. But he had seemed so different during their brief time alone together this afternoon... and yet still very much the same. The man was an enigma.

She was brutally pulled out of her reverie by Ron's harsh voice.

"So how long have you been having lunch with that greasy git? Is there something going on that you might want to tell me, like how you are paying him for that potion?"

Hermione's open palm hit the side of Ron's face so hard that it left a perfect imprint. Harry hastily put a Shield Charm up between them just as she shouted, "HOW DARE YOU!"

"Will you two please calm down?" insisted Harry, "or I'll put you both in a Body Bind curse."

"Just don't bind us *together*," she said with a sneer that Snape would have been proud of.

"Deep breaths, everyone." Harry's tone hinted at urgency. "In through the nose and out through the mouth... That's it... Gooooood. Now, Hermione, if you could calmly explain to Ron why Snape was here, maybe we can all go back to work."

Hermione first glanced gratefully at Harry then accusingly at Ron. "I wrote to him out of desperation about Hugo's condition. I haven't seen or heard from him in almost 20 years, so I wasn't sure if he would even write back. But he did, and he sent a week's worth of the potion with dosing instructions, and I have been giving it to Hugo. He said in his letter that he wanted to make subtle changes to the recipe and see how Hugo reacted..."

"WHAT!? He's using MY SON as a GUINEA PIG? NO WAY!"

"Calm down, Ron; she's not finished yet," Harry insisted. "When she's done, you can have a go."

"Professor Snape promised me that there was nothing in the potion that would harm him, and that the changes he made would either enhance its effectiveness or do nothing. He asked me to take copious notes on Hugo's progress and keep him informed so he would know what was working and what wasn't." She stopped to take a deep breath and assess Ron's reaction. He seemed a bit more open to the whole idea, so she relaxed her defensive posture a bit. "I invited him here to give him lunch and try to pay him for his time and trouble with galleons!" she added hastily as Ron's face began to redden in a jealous rage again.

She tried to dispel his anger with a lighthearted comment. "Besides, I was a bit curious as to what he might look like after all these years."

Harry joined in to help with some humor, "I figured he'd look like Slughorn. Can you imagine him bald as a cue ball with one of those walrus mustaches?"

With this, all three of them started laughing. "Or a long beard and silver hair like Dumbledore?" added Ron.

Harry finally felt that it was safe to let down the Shield Charm.

"You know, if you two haven't eaten, I have plenty of soup left," Hermione offered.

"Sounds good, I'm starved," Ron replied. Then a scowl crossed his face. "This still doesn't explain why you've been coming here for lunch every day."

"I come for the computer," she said matter-of-factly. "Professor Snape lives in a Muggle neighborhood, and he has one. We both figured that e-mail would be a more efficient way to communicate. We can write back and forth instantly, almost like carrying on a conversation. So he can ask me about Hugo's symptoms and give me advice much faster than with owl post."

"These Muggles are amazing," admitted Ron. "No wonder Dad is so fascinated with them and all their gadgets."

Ron's ruffled feathers were summarily smoothed over as they continued to talk about Hugo's health improvements over soup, rolls and salad. Then the conversation turned to the whole issue of Ron's birthday party and the things that were said. He tried to convince her that he understood her feelings about wanting a career (advice straight out of that damn book!), but with his mother a convenient and willing babysitter, he just didn't understand why they couldn't at least try to have just one more child.

Hermione flat-out refused, reminding Ron that he had barely lifted a finger to help her with the first two children, and without a house-elf at home, it was just simply too much to expect for her to work all day and come home to do all the cleaning, the cooking, help Hugo with his homework, and take care of a baby too.

Just as the conversation was about to escalate into a shouting match again, Harry suggested that he and Ron get back to the office, leaving Hermione to clean up after lunch. Usually Harry would have been the first one to pitch in and help, but this time he knew from her pleading glances that he could best assist her by getting Ron out of her face. And he was absolutely right.

Finally, Hermione was alone. She heaved a heavy sigh and levitated the lot of dirty dishes to the kitchen sink where she used magic to set the water and dish rag in motion. There were no leftovers because the boys had eaten everything. As she kept her eye on the sink, she retrieved a pint of rum raisin ice cream from the freezer and began to eat it right out of the container. This was supposed to have been dessert for her and Professor Snape, but...

Professor Snape... Merlin knows what he would think of her after witnessing such a fiasco. But now that the cat was out of the bag, would that change their relationship? Would he sense how desperately she needed a friend with a more objective viewpoint? He seemed to have enjoyed his time with her today. She certainly hoped that he had. Well, at least until they had been so rudely interrupted.

Her thoughts turned to that speech he had given her about how she had always been kind to him, and that her blood was running through his veins. He had seemed very sincere when he said it. Then her mind flashed back to that day in St. Mungo's when his angry eyes blinked for the first time in six days, and he silently told her to "shut up." He had seemed equally sincere then. A wave of guilt washed over her. Had she been that irritating to him then? Had she changed so much over the years that he could actually enjoy her company now? Or had he changed? Perhaps it was a bit of both.

But more curious than anything else was the fact that he had winked at her. Until that moment, she wasn't sure that Severus Snape would be capable of such a thing. What should she make of it? Was he flirting? Was he trying to reassure her that they would see each other again soon? Was he just trying to let her know that he had not taken offense from the incident? She could only guess.

One thing she knew for certain, she had enjoyed his company immensely and hoped with all her heart that he would become a permanent fixture in her life. She desperately needed the intellectual interaction, and he offered a level of sophistication that Ron obviously lacked. Ron was amusing to a ten-year-old, but anyone much older tended to tire of him quickly. They had been married for over thirteen years. She was beyond tired of him, and Snape only reminded her of what she had given up to be with him. Yes, the idea of spending the rest of her life with Ron was fast becoming less and less palatable. She had resolved to divorce him after Hugo entered Hogwarts, but with that event almost a year and a half away, she wasn't sure she could bear to wait that long.

Severus Snape climbed the river bank and made his way back to Spinner's End. Having conducted himself in a civilized manner, he had nothing to be ashamed of. He could have hexed Weasley "to kingdom come," as Stan Shunpike had so eloquently put it, but he managed to hold his temper. He could easily see why Weasley and Miss Granger were having problems. When an intelligent, talented witch marries a moron, there are bound to be problems. He simply couldn't understand how she had ever made such a mistake in the first place.

He wondered how she had handled the situation after he left. He was glad that Potter was there to keep the Witless Wonder under control. He hoped, for Hugo's sake, that Weasley would still allow her to administer the potion. But Snape assumed that even a dunderhead like Weasley could see how much it was helping the boy.

He wondered if either of them had figured out that their rocky relationship was the actual cause of Hugo's symptoms. Now that the cat was out of the bag, perhaps he could discuss the problem outright with Miss Granger. After all, the potion treated the symptoms but didn't cure the disease. Only a healthy marriage or an amicable break up could cure it. Unfortunately, most marriages didn't end pleasantly, and if Weasley's performance this afternoon was any indication, this one would go down in flames.

Miss Granger... Although she had been so nervous at first, when she finally relaxed she became grace and beauty personified. She had grown from an insufferable, blabbering, know-it-all into an enjoyable companion. He had long known of her high intelligence and talent, but her grace under pressure was also revealed this afternoon upon the arrival of her unwelcome guests.

He found it most amusing that she and Potter were plotting revenge against the Skeeter woman on his behalf. When was the last time anyone had done anything on his behalf besides Winky? Of course, the answer was almost twenty years ago, and the perpetrators had been, once again, the same two people.

After the war and his short stint in Azkaban, Snape had found himself friendless. Lucius Malfoy had managed to buy his way out of any jail time, even though he had cast Unforgivable curses left and right throughout the entire war. And since Snape was now a convicted felon, and Lucius' place in high society was precarious at best, he wouldn't even accept owl post from Snape. All of the other former Death Eaters were either in jail or didn't trust him, which suited Snape just fine since he detested and distrusted the lot of them anyway. And all of the people who had fought for the side of good were either afraid of him or didn't quite swallow Potter's testimony at his trial. This also didn't break Snape's heart since most of them turned out to be sniveling cowards, fools, or pompous asses that Snape could only bear for a few moments.

Even though Miss Granger had continued to write to him for the first five years, he hadn't considered her a friend back then because he had felt that she was writing to him out of pity or some sense of obligation. Besides, the last thing he wanted was the company of a constantly chattering young woman. It would have been equivalent to rubbing salt into an open wound. So, save Winky, he was left without a friend in the world, although he never lost a minute of sleep over it.

But now he felt quite differently about Miss Granger. She had matured considerably since he had last seen her. Although still lacking in self-confidence just a bit, she had

learned the value of remaining silent, she had shown a sense of humor, and her eyes held deep emotions and beauty. Her hands felt warm to the touch, and that look on her face as he had winked was priceless. He wasn't even sure why he did it. Perhaps he just wanted her to know that even though he was leaving, he wasn't abandoning her.

And oh, how he relished the scent of her skin dabbed with Secret Recipe.

Snape wasn't sure how, but he knew that their futures would now be forever intertwined. And he looked forward to the moment when he would see her again.

When he entered the front door, he immediately called Winky.

"Yes, Master Severus, how did the luncheon go?"

"Very entertaining, Winky. I'll tell you about it later. But right now, I wish to speak with you about my breakfast."

"Master's breakfast? But Winky thought that Master just had lunch with Miss Granger."

"I'm speaking of tomorrow's breakfast, Winky. I would prefer, from now on, that you only brown my toast, and that the bacon is cooked to a crispy consistency but not charred almost to blackness." Why shorten what might possibly develop into an interesting, if not enjoyable, life?

With a deep sense of apprehension, Hermione picked up Hugo and his ever-present stuffed lizard at her mother-in-law's house that afternoon and Floo'd home to start dinner for Ron. Some emergency had come up, or so he had said in his Patronus message, and he had to work late. Quite often she would find out later that he had stopped off at a pub for a pint or two (or three or four) on the way home, and work had nothing to do with it. This also made him much more difficult to reason with by the time he arrived, not to mention the fact that she would become angry the minute she smelled mead on his breath and realized she had been lied to. Tonight was no exception. She had half-way expected him to do this to her after the incident at lunch. So she fed Hugo and gave him his potion with his meal so she could send him to bed shortly after Ron arrived. Hugo didn't need to see the fireworks between them.

Just as she had suspected, Ron arrived barely able to stand on his own two feet. He gave Hugo a sloppy kiss goodnight, and the boy glanced forlornly at his mother as he ascended the staircase. She knew how perceptive Hugo was. He knew what was coming as surely as she did. Then a thought suddenly occurred to her. Was their rocky marriage causing his sickness? Was the stress in the house affecting him to the point that it caused his physical pain? Could he be that emotionally sensitive and empathetic?

As Ron sat at the table waiting to be served, Hermione's mind began to race. Hadn't Harry told her that, from the memories he had viewed, Snape's parents had also fought all the time? Is that why Snape knew exactly what to give Hugo? Because his own mother had brewed it for him? He said he had never actually brewed this particular potion before, but his confidence in its effectiveness proved that he was familiar with it just the same. It was the most logical conclusion she could come up with. Snape knew what to do because he had lived through the same thing himself.

Would Hugo grow up to be a cruel, angry adult who put up emotional walls so high that it would take a Hippogriff to get over them? And if so, would it be the result of his parents' failed marriage or the after-effects of the potion? She could not be sure of the answer. She doubted that he would have an answer, even if she had the nerve to ask Snape that very question. He would probably never speak to her again if she asked, so she put the possibility out of her mind. But one thing was certain, the only explanation for Hugo's health problems was the stress caused by his parents' failing marriage. For the sake of her son, she had to make peace with Ron, at least until Hugo went off to Hogwarts. She would continue to administer his potion just in case of the occasional flair up. But, if only for Hugo's sake, she would suck it up and put up with Ron and his family.

But she would absolutely, positively, not have any more children.

There was only one advantage to Ron coming home drunk. He would go upstairs to bed and pass out without groping and grabbing at her in the hopes of a sexual encounter. She knew that to keep him happy she would have to succumb at least once in a while, and the thought didn't please her. But she resolved that it was for Hugo's sake, and she could keep Muggle birth-control pills hidden somewhere to prevent pregnancy. If Ron found them by accident, he wouldn't even know what they were.

The following morning, Hermione had Hugo packed and ready for Muggle school and was about to go out the door to deliver him when Ron staggered sleepily downstairs.

"Why didn't you wake me? I'll be late for work now. Harry'll kill me."

You should have thought about that before you went out last night and tied one on Hermione thought silently. But she smiled at him sweetly and said, "I know you had a long hard night working late. Surely Harry won't mind you sleeping in. You looked exhausted when you got home. Tell him it was all my fault, and if he doesn't believe you, I'll tell him myself. I've invited him for lunch at Mum and Dad's house."

Ron looked puzzled. Not only was she being non-combative, she was actually being nice for once! "Lunching alone to gossip about me, I suppose?"

"No, actually, we're doing a bit of research on the perfect hex for a box of chocolates to send to Rita Skeeter."

Ron snorted and began to laugh. "Over that article about Snape?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," she said with just a touch of mischief in her voice. "Would you like to help us?"

"Will Snape be there?"

"No. He wanted nothing to do with it. He said he was in enough trouble already." She tried to stifle a giggle as she remembered Snape's reaction to her and Harry's plan.

"No," said Ron thoughtfully, "you two have your fun. I've got better things to do on my lunch break."

"Have it your way, then." She leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Breakfast is on the table, but you might need to use a Warming Charm on it. We've got to go or Hugo will be late for school."

Hermione left for lunch only fifteen minutes early today. She got to her parents' house in time to make a couple of sandwiches and dump some chips from a bag into a bowl. About that time Harry appeared in her fireplace with a crash. He brushed himself off and siphoned off the rest of the ashes with his wand, then joined her in the kitchen with a couple of dark spell books from work in his hand and a huge grin on his face.

"Oh, you didn't have to go to any trouble for me," he said as he jumped in and helped to set the table. "We'll be in here, right? Not the dining room?"

"Sorry," Hermione admitted with a coy smile. "I don't need to impress you like I did him yesterday."

"He looked good, didn't he?"

Hermione sighed dreamily as she pictured him coming into view as the Disillusionment Charm's effects dripped off of his body. "Yeah," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "He looked better than ever."

Harry gave her a puzzled look. Even though he now had deep and abiding respect for the man, how any woman could imagine Snape as sexy was beyond his comprehension.

"Oh, that reminds me, I need to send him an instant message on the computer to see if it works." She walked briskly into the family room and turned on the computer. Due to its age, it took a while for the screen to come up, so she went back to the kitchen to retrieve a store-bought dip from the fridge.

"Here," he pushed one of the heavy books at her as he opened up the other. They both sat and began eating unceremoniously. "I was looking over some of these spells last night after dinner. I found this one... It looks promising."

Hermione glanced over the hex as she chewed a mouthful of her tuna salad sandwich. "Not vile enough," she finally insisted. "I want the woman to be miserable!"

Harry laughed as he turned to the next marked page. "How about this? Boils *and* a rash."

"Yes, but it says here that they only show up on her thighs. She could still go out in public with this affliction. I want her to hide from the world so she will be forced to contemplate her fate and what may have precipitated it."

"Yeah, I guess the whole exercise is pointless if she doesn't learn her lesson."

Hermione perused the book Harry had pushed to her side of the table. She found the section on boils and rashes and began to read in earnest. Finally, as she took the last bite of her sandwich, she sat back, nodding her head and pointing to one of the hexes in the book. "This is it. This is perfect!"

She pushed the book at Harry. As he read it, a smirk erupted.

"This is perfect. Her face *and* her *arm pits*." He started laughing but stopped abruptly as he continued down the page. "O-oh. Did ya see this? Says here we'd need something with her DNA in it, so it would work only on her and no one else who might touch the box."

"Let me handle that," Hermione said with an evil glint in her eyes.

"Remember, she wears a wig, so trying for a lock of her hair is out."

"I know."

"And I truly doubt if those claws that she calls fingernails are really hers either. She claims that she uses a Growing Charm on them to get them that long, but I really--"

"Don't worry, Harry. I was thinking more along the line of a skin and blood sample."

"What?" Harry glared suspiciously at her. "Dare I ask how you plan to pull that off?"

"Easy, Crookshanks will help me. He *is* my attack cat, after all."

"That damn cat is twenty-five years old, if not older. And he hasn't aged a day since you got him. I'd swear he's an animagus."

"No, Harry, I told you that I used the same charm that Remus and Sirius used on Wormtail that night in the Shrieking Shack, and he didn't transform. But you're right that he is definitely not a normal everyday cat. That's why I know I can count on him to help me."

Hermione proceeded to copy down the hex on a piece of parchment which she folded up and put in her purse. Then she and Harry cleaned up after themselves as they discussed where she might hide with Crookshanks to get Rita one night. They had both noticed that after regular business hours she frequented one of the high society clubs in Diagon Alley, no doubt to keep up on the local gossip in hope it would lead to a story. Perhaps, if Harry would let her use his Invisibility Cloak, she and the cat could hide outside the door and wait. The only other problem to surmount was the fact that, in her middle age, Skeeter had taken to wearing slacks instead of skirts, and Hermione didn't want to take the chance of Crookshanks' claws getting snagged in the fabric. Now and then she still appeared donning something that revealed her legs, but usually only during the warmer months. It was still early March. Hermione and Harry resigned themselves to the fact that their plan would be delayed a while.

"You remember Lisa Turpin?" Hermione inquired. "Same year as us but in Ravenclaw?"

"Vaguely. Didn't she marry Marcus Belby?"

"You mean that skinny nervous kid who now works as an Unspeakable?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"I only mention Lisa because she covers the Ministry for the *Prophet*. We got to know each other again when I put forth all those reforms for the house-elves. I still keep in touch with her now and then. Perhaps I can enlist her help to notify me on the days Rita wears a skirt.

After Harry finished helping Hermione clean up the lunch dishes, he Floo'd back to the office to give her time on her computer. She sat down and opened her e-mail window. An instant message sat there waiting.

HalfBloodPrince: You're late!

She positioned her cursor in the box and began to dictate her apologies and explanation.

MuggleBornWitch: So sorry. Harry and I were researching which really nasty hex we wanted to use on Rita Skeeter. We found a really good one, but it needs a DNA sample. I'll take care of that later.

She clicked the send button then figured she had better also apologize for the dreadful events of the previous day. She discovered that if he didn't respond right away, she could dictate more and send it.

MuggleBornWitch: About yesterday... Please accept my deepest apologies for the way my husband acted. He was insulting and cruel and I am truly ashamed of his behavior. Please don't let his foolishness deter you from spending time with me in the future. I greatly enjoyed your company yesterday afternoon. You have more grace and poise than he ever will.

She didn't have long to wait for his reply.

HalfBloodPrince: No need to apologize for something that was beyond your control. No offense taken. If I had a beautiful wife and she was meeting in secret with another man, I would have probably reacted in a similar, although less crass, manner.

Hermione gasped! *He thinks I'm beautiful?* Before she could send a reply, another line appeared.

HalfBloodPrince: How is Hugo reacting to the new potion?

MuggleBornWitch: Everything seems fine. He did get the hiccups several times last night, though. He almost never gets hiccups. Could your changes be causing this?

HalfBloodPrince: Perhaps, but the new formula should also get rid of his sinus problems, something the previous version did not help. Let me know tomorrow if you see any change in his sinuses.

MuggleBornWitch: Well, time is short. I must get back to the office. I'm glad this works so well. I like the instant messaging.

HalfBloodPrince: Call it "IM" for short.

MuggleBornWitch: OK, gotta go.

HalfBloodPrince: Tomorrow then.

Lovely Lavender

Chapter 8 of 35

Hermione follows Ron to find out if he is cheating on her.

As always, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for helping me to make this a better story. My grammar is dreadful, and they have to work overtime to keep me in line.

An additional long overdue thank you goes out to the admins here at TPP. They edit with surgical precision. I bow at their feet.

And, of course, the great and talented J. K. Rowling is responsible for the characters and their world. I make no money from the writing or sharing of this story.

Chapter 8

Lovely Lavender

As the days progressed, the correspondence between Hermione and Snape became detached and professional. No more was said about the luncheon or its dramatic ending. This disappointed Hermione since she so desperately wanted someone to confide in, but she was afraid to push her private hopes and fears on someone who had been so secretive all his life. She didn't want to scare him away and erase all the good feelings between them that had surfaced at the luncheon. No, she had to approach him with extreme caution.

Snape had felt the necessity to back off a bit as well. His statement about not wanting to be caught up in something that was none of his business had been very true. He had enjoyed Miss Granger's company greatly, and he hoped to see more of her, but he could sense her neediness and didn't want misplaced affection for him to act as a catalyst for their divorce. He had to be completely out of that whole picture. If she ever did leave Ron, her reasons must have nothing to do with him. That way he couldn't be blamed if things went badly for her down the road.

Hermione was pleased to IM Snape that Hugo's sinuses had indeed cleared considerably. The following week's potion was delivered via Snape's barn owl to Hermione's home during evening hours. Since everything was now out in the open, there was no longer a need to send it to her office. After reading the note, she handed it to Ron out of courtesy and pulled the stopper from the phial to measure some out for Hugo.

Dear Miss Granger,

Same dosage as usual. This should get rid of the hiccups. Let me know what else happens as a result of my changes.

Sincerely,

S.S.

Ron snorted at the salutation. "Git," was his only comment.

Hermione pretended to ignore him as she handed Hugo his pumpkin juice and watched with amusement as he pretended to feed the first sip to his stuffed toy, Lizzy. She had tried hard all week to be less combative with Ron, but at times he made it difficult for her to hold her tongue. But she sucked it up and continued to be amiable, at least until bedtime. His rude comments and vulgarities that were supposed to pass for humor repulsed her, however, and she could never quite bring herself to warm up to his advances. Night after night, Ron would try to put her in the mood, first with flirtation, then with wandering hands, and finally she could feel the effects of one or more of those spells from that stupid book which she quickly countered with a wordless spell of her own. Nothing worked. Ron would always be Ron. And she could not imagine ever being turned on by him again.

And so the weeks progressed and the weather finally got warmer. In hopes of catching Rita Skeeter in a dress or skirt, Hermione owled Lisa Turpin-Belby and suggested they meet for drinks after work. Lisa, like most of the other reporters at the *Prophet*, detested Rita and was happy to help Hermione with her little prank. Hermione was careful not to fill Lisa in on the details. She only said that she wanted to play a little trick on Rita, and she needed to know what her wardrobe was like. And since she didn't have access to Rita's closet, what better way than to get a daily report about what she was wearing then to ask Lisa?

From that day on, Lisa would send Hermione an owl every afternoon describing Rita's outfit. Finally in mid May, a tiny pigmy owl arrived with good news from Lisa. Rita was wearing a white and teal pin-striped skirt and blazer, with a daisy floral-patterned blouse. Her cloak, handbag and high heels perfectly matched the teal in her skirt, and her silk pantyhose had just arrived from Paris the night before. This was the day Hermione had been waiting for.

That night, Hermione went to collect Hugo and take him home to make dinner and wait for Ron. After she explained her plan, he was happy to let her go since he hated Rita Skeeter almost as much as he hated Snape. She and the cat made their way to Diagon Alley where they sat peacefully across the street from the Silver Spoon, eating their ice cream as they watched Rita walk up the stately steps to the club. They continued to observe her through the window without leaving their seats as she socialized with the upper crust of wizarding society. She could tell that most of the clientele would have preferred that Rita be removed from the premises, but she had apparently purchased a membership, so they had no right to do so.

After about an hour of watching the wretched woman make many of the customers nervous and uncomfortable, Hermione finally saw her head for the cloak hooks by the door. This was it! She gathered Crookshanks up into her arms, threw the Invisibility Cloak over both of them, and headed across the street to the alley by the Club. Crookshanks silently ran out from under the cloak as soon as Rita's legs came into view. He then dug his claws in deeply and pulled with all his might as she shrieked loud enough to raise the dead. But before she knew what had caused her pain, he ran back to the safety of the cloak, and she was left standing in the street with a bleeding leg

and no one to hex, but worst of all, her brand new pair of silk pantyhose from France were now ruined!

Hermione and Crookshanks remained hidden as the commotion caused quite a crowd to gather. Then she and the cat slipped silently and invisibly through the throng of people and headed towards the back alley of the Leaky Cauldron and home.

Later that night she was feeling so pleased with herself after she had collected the skin and blood from Crookshank's claws that she even tolerated Ron's advances. For the first time in months, they made love. He seemed to enjoy himself, but she merely went through the motions for Hugo's sake. It didn't last very long, thank Merlin. Ron had even less staying power than usual because it had been so many months since their last encounter.

Snape's potion helped to get rid of Hugo's sinus problems and upset stomach. He also slept much better and woke well rested. He never tried to stay in bed all day anymore. But it took three weeks to get rid of the hiccups, and when they finally disappeared, they were replaced by headaches. Snape was so distressed that his new potion was causing Hugo pain that he sent a replacement after only two days instead of the usual week. The headaches went away, but now his joints and muscles seemed to stiffen up overnight, as if he were one hundred years old instead of only one week away from his tenth birthday.

Hugo had become Snape's top priority, almost his obsession. He wanted the boy to enjoy his childhood in a way that he, Snape, had never been able to. And so he would send his latest potion, wait anxiously for Hermione's IMs on the following day, and go straight to the kitchen to start the next batch. But deep down inside, he knew the potion would never be enough. The boy needed a happy and secure environment in order to thrive. If Snape really wanted to help the boy, he would need to speak to Hermione about her situation. He would need to get involved on a personal level. Did she already know that he had lived through this himself as a child? She had been the brightest witch in her class by far. She was bound to have put two and two together by now.

This would be a delicate matter, perhaps best discussed in person over lunch. A public Muggle establishment would be acceptable, but with the personal nature of their discussion, perhaps not conducive to openness. Any place in Diagon Alley was completely out of the question. Then the solution occurred to him. They could dine here. His was a modest home, but Winky kept it clean and neat, and she was a fabulous cook. Snape was sure that Winky would love the idea, so he made up his mind to invite Miss Granger sometime in the near future. He would need to be discreet about the invitation, and he felt that an IM would be inappropriate.

The next morning, Hermione asked Ron to tell Harry to meet her at her parents' house for lunch again, and that he was welcome to join them. Again he declined, saying that he had better things to do. So she stuffed the DNA sample, the chocolates she had purchased the night before in Diagon Alley, and the hex instructions back into her purse and headed out the door with Hugo.

This time she and Harry arrived together at her parents' house, but lunch was not on the agenda. He went straight to the kitchen table, and she joined him after turning on the computer. She retrieved the necessary items from her purse as Harry opened the box of chocolates. She carefully opened the phial that contained the DNA and used a cotton swab to scoop out the blood and skin, smearing it along the seam on the inside box top. Then finally Harry placed it back over the chocolates.

"She won't even need to open the box. All she has to do is touch it," Hermione said with a devilish smile.

The hex had been invented in such a way that the caster could substitute the needed conditions, timing and longevity of its effects into the wording. Harry let Hermione do the honors, knowing full well that she would be better at it than he would.

Then they decided that they would need to send it from the public Owl Post Office. Either of their family owls would be too easily recognized, and the Ministry Owls were too easy to trace. Harry could accompany her under the Invisibility cloak and Obliviate the clerk so he would forget that she was ever there, but she would create a disguise just in case anyone else might recognize her.

Once that was decided, Harry Floo'd back to the Ministry to wait for her, and she sat down at her computer to send Snape a quick message before transforming herself and leaving.

MuggleBornWitch: Hugo's dizzy spells seem to have dissipated, but he still has the nightmares. I can't talk now, must send a package to our favorite reporter.

HalfBloodPrince: Best of luck in your endeavor.

MuggleBornWitch: Thanks. Tomorrow then.

HalfBloodPrince: Tomorrow.

When Hermione appeared in the fourth fireplace to the left in the lobby of the Ministry of Magic, Harry didn't even recognize her. She had to walk up and introduce herself to him. Her hair was short, grey and curly, she carried almost forty extra pounds around her waist and hips, and her face had aged to match her hair. She had conjured a cane for good measure, and she carried the inconspicuous box in the other hand. Harry was nothing short of amazed.

"You don't even need me!" he exclaimed.

"You're my insurance policy," she explained. "Please, I don't want to take any chances."

Harry shrugged. "OK, if it will make you feel better. Let's get this over with. I've got to get back to work."

Harry hid behind a large statue in the lobby and threw the Invisibility cloak over himself, and the two of them left the building side by side. Sometimes Harry had to side-step quickly because someone would walk by a bit too closely, but he always managed to get out of the way undetected.

They made their way across the street and up two blocks to the Owl Post Office. As Hermione asked the young clerk to send the package to Rita Skeeter at the *Daily Prophet*, Harry cast the necessary memory charm to immediately make him forget her face and the box's destination. Perfect.

They turned silently and headed out the door, but just as they emerged into the street, Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. There was Ron, in front of Salicia's Diner, holding hands with Lavender Brown. They walked with fingers interlaced to the Ministry's entrance. Hermione knew they were old friends, and that Lavender had always been a bit flirtatious, so she tried not to make a big deal out of it, but when they reached the entrance to the building, he pulled her close and kissed her. The kiss appeared unmistakably intimate, a promise of things to come.

Was Ron already cheating on her? If his performance the previous night was any indication, the answer was probably "no." But the intent was there, just the same. Her feelings became confused. Part of her felt jealousy, part felt relief. If Lavender kept him occupied (even satisfied), so she could see as little of him as possible until Hugo left for Hogwarts, that suited her just fine. But something inside her still began to seethe at the idea of his possible infidelity. She had always been faithful to him, even when they were at their worst. But sex had been out of their lives for quite some time before last night. Should she ultimately blame herself for his behavior? Had she driven him into Lavender's arms?

Hermione stood stunned in the middle of Diagon Alley. She almost didn't notice Harry's invisible hand as it encased hers and squeezed. He had seen the kiss too, and he knew exactly what it had meant.

Hermione cast a downward glance as tears began to well up in her eyes. "I should have seen this coming," she whispered to Harry. "It's my fault. It's ~~all~~ my fault." Instead of following Ron into the building, she led Harry down a narrow side street as the tears began to flow in earnest.

They ducked into a stairwell that led to a basement entrance, and he took his cloak off as she began to undo the enchantments that created her disguise. As bad as Harry felt for his friend, words escaped him. So when she looked like herself again, he simply pulled her in for a long and tight hug.

"Look on the bright side," he finally tried to cheer her up. "At least he won't be pestering you to have kids any more!"

After attempting a half-hearted smile, Hermione stared directly into his eyes with no suspicion or malice, but she had to ask the question that was burning in her mind. "Did you know about this?"

He stared back with equal intensity, because he wanted her to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was telling the truth when he answered. "No, but I had a feeling that something like this would happen eventually, ever since his birthday party."

"You know, it occurred to me a while ago that our fighting might be the cause of Hugo's health problems."

"What?" Harry looked skeptical.

"Think about it," she tried to convince him. "His health began to decline shortly after his third birthday when I announced to Ron's family that we were finished having children. Since then Ron and I have not been getting along at all. I had known about that stupid book about charming witches long before that, of course. But the real trouble started after Hugo's party. That's when Molly became aware of my intentions, and she's been interfering and causing extra friction between us ever since."

Harry's mind drifted back and he nodded thoughtfully. "It could just be a coincidence. You don't argue in front of him, do you?"

"No, of course not. But kids are very perceptive. They don't need it played out in front of them to tell when something's wrong."

She proceeded to tell Harry about her conclusion that Snape could also see the warning signs because he had lived through it himself. Harry had to admit then that Ron and Hermione's rocky relationship could very well be the cause. She confessed that she had resolved to get along with Ron for Hugo's sake, but after witnessing this noonday spectacle, she couldn't bring herself to proceed with the charade.

"If he's going to be an adulterer, I should just take Hugo and leave," she began to rant angrily. "What a horrible example he would make for his son! I won't stand for it!"

"Hermione," Harry tried to calm her down, "You don't even know if he's done anything wrong yet."

"Oh, *please!* You saw that kiss! If he hasn't already it's only a matter of time, and you know it!"

Harry had no retort. He knew that she was right. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Don't even tell him what we saw. I'll just take a few days to get Mum and Dad's house ready for the two of us, and then Hugo and I will just live there. By the way, know any good divorce lawyers?"

"Blaise Zabini, I hear he's pretty cut-throat."

"I don't want to take Ron for all he's worth. It wouldn't be *worth* it!" she finally began to giggle.

"You'd probably end up owing Zabini more money than you'd get from Ron!"

"He's such a big spender. A diner how romantic!" They were both laughing now.

"Their first shag 'll probably be in the backseat of that sorry Muggle car of his because he's too cheap to spring for a hotel room!"

They continued to make jokes at Ron's expense for a few more minutes and then slipped into the basement entrance when they realized that they were ten minutes late getting back from lunch.

After work, Hermione picked up Hugo from Molly and Arthur's, as usual, and Floo'd home. After much thought, she had finally decided to continue being nice to Ron as if she knew nothing. Harry was right; perhaps he had not actually slept with Lavender... yet. Until she could prove it, she would give him the benefit of the doubt. But she would get everything ready at her parents' house as soon as possible, so when the time came, she could take Hugo and go live in Knottingly. He could see Hugo on weekends if he wanted to. He never spent any quality time with the little guy during the week anyway.

But she would burn in Hell before she would have sex with the bastard again!

She didn't have long to wait. Ron was late getting home that night, but instead of mead on his breath, the distinct aroma of cheap perfume mingled with his usual cologne, along with one long brown hair that clung to his cloak as she helped him off with it and hung it on the hook by the door. Hermione feigned ignorance as she served his dinner, but inside she was boiling mad. Hugo apparently could feel her anger because he held tighter than usual to Lizzy and kept steeling glances at her with a worried look on his face as if he expected her to blow up at any moment.

But she kept her cool. She wanted to see if Ron would make a pass at her that night when they went to bed, and knew that if she was nice to him it was more likely that he would try something. Even Ron wouldn't be crass enough to have sex with her just after cheating. When he seemed uninterested she even slipped into a sexy negligee and made advances of her own. But he only complained of fatigue and fell asleep almost the instant his head hit the pillow. His energies had obviously been spent elsewhere.

In a way, she was relieved. She didn't really want to make love to him. Perhaps he did work late, and the tell-tale signs of stray hair and perfume were only leftovers from lunch. She would have to ask Harry tomorrow.

For the next several days, however, Harry wasn't around to ask. An emergency had come up in a remote town in Ireland, and he had been called away. Ron was left in charge of the department, and there was no one else she really trusted to ask if Ron actually needed to work late. Her only course of action was to follow him and see where he went.

When lunch time came, she Floo'd to her parents' house, IM'd Snape to quickly give him an update on Hugo, then excused herself from further correspondence for the day. She then transformed herself the same way she had done the day before and Floo'd back to the Ministry lobby to head out the door in search of Ron. After finding him in none of the usual lunch hangouts, she decided to inspect some of the more expensive restaurants. Perhaps Lavender was playing hard to get, and she was going to make him part with a few galleons after all!

When further searching yielding nothing new, she began to worry. Lunch time would soon be over. Where could he be? Surely they didn't get a hotel room on their lunch hour! She knew Ron would never pay so much money for only one hour. Then a thought occurred to her that was almost more preposterous than she could imagine. Down Nocturne Alley was a sleazy hotel that rented rooms by the hour. The thought of her husband actually being intimate with someone in a flea-bitten place like that turned her stomach. But it was the only other idea she had, so she made her way over there and found a bench across the street. Shortly after she had seated herself, her heart felt a stab of pain as she witnessed Ron and Lavender emerging from the building, his arm over her shoulder and hers around his waist. She stopped him and tidied his tousled hair, then kissed his cheek. They both seemed a bit disheveled, but glowing.

Suddenly, Hermione felt as old as she had transformed herself to appear. She stood with great effort, leaning heavily on the cane she had conjured, and followed them out

of Nocturne Alley and over to the Ministry's entrance. Hermione continued to hobble by, intent on hearing their parting words as she made her way to the same basement entrance she and Harry had used the day before.

"After work, then?" Ron asked Lavender hopefully.

"Won't Hermione get suspicious... two days in a row?"

"Nah. I'll just tell her I'm working late again. Harry's out of town, so there's no one to tell her otherwise."

"Anything for you, Won-won."

If Hermione hadn't felt so horrible, she would have laughed out loud. But as she made her way to the side stairwell, she became more and more depressed. Wasn't this exactly what she wanted, an excuse to leave him sooner rather than later? Perhaps it was simply the reality of her situation finally sinking in. It was easy to plan to leave, even to fantasize about leaving, but the actual act of leaving was a different matter.

Her heart churned and tied itself into knots at the prospect of actually going through with it. She had made a life with this man. He was the father of her children. To finally admit that they had failed to keep the sacred promises of marriage was more emotionally difficult than she had ever imagined. If she moved out and hired a lawyer, there would be no turning back, and her children would be forever emotionally scarred by a broken home. But was that any worse than living under the same roof with undercurrents of emotional upheaval? Would Hugo be better off with two separate but happy parents? Or would he blame himself for the breakup as sensitive young children so often do? Perhaps Snape's potion would help ease Hugo's misplaced guilt, no matter what their marital status... Perhaps. Only time would tell.

She thought about Snape and the fact that he had lived through watching his parents fight and grow to hate each other while he still lived at home. She hesitated to ask his advice about something so personal, but since both her parents and Ron's had always stayed together, she had no experience in such matters and didn't know where else to turn. Would she lose her new found friend for broaching such a private subject? After much deliberation, she decided that, for Hugo's sake, she would take the risk.

Bad News Blaise

Chapter 9 of 35

Hermione lines up an appointment with a divorce lawyer.

Once again, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGINE and NervousAboutAngels, for helping me to make this a better story. And big Kudos goes out to the admins here at TPP. Their editing skills are legend.

And, of course, the great and talented J. K. Rowling is responsible for the characters and their world. I make no money from the writing or sharing of this story.

Chapter 9

Bad News Blaise

That night, Ron's Patronus announcing his late arrival was no surprise, so Hermione put Hugo to bed early and prepared to meet the problem of her wayward husband head on when Ron got home. He looked quite full of himself as he stepped through their front door. But if looks could kill, he would have fallen on the spot. He didn't need Legilimency to realize that Hermione was seething.

"Did you already eat, then?" he asked casually. "Any leftovers I could heat up?"

When she sarcastically replied, "Anything for you, *Won-won*," his eyes betrayed a touch of panic.

There was no mistake. Hermione knew. When she flicked her wand at the refrigerator to retrieve the remnants of dinner, sparks flew out of its tip. The food slammed onto the surface of the table with such force that one of the plates shattered just as their marriage was about to do. Ron winced with each noise and cowered with each twitch of her wand.

When she attempted to re-heat his food by using her wand like a flame-thrower, the kitchen table almost caught on fire!

"Alright, Hermione, that's enough!"

"How DARE you parade yourself around Diagon Alley with that *harlot* for the entire wizarding world to see?" Her wand emitted a baseball sized sphere of fire that shot towards his feet. He frantically jumped out of the way.

"HERMIONE! You wanna catch the house on fire?" He quickly stomped on the flames to put them out.

"You've brought shame and embarrassment to our family," she screeched as a burst of sharp tacks shot out of the tip of her wand.

His Shield Charm went up just in time.

"I would NEVER cheat on you, Ronald. If you're so unhappy with me, let's just get a divorce. Then maybe Lavender will give you about eight more children and be the stay-at-home wife that you've always wanted." She began to flick her wand at empty space, and a vampire bat appeared in each spot. With another flick, they flew at Ron with reckless abandon but couldn't penetrate his Shield Charm.

"Divorce? I don't want a divorce," he insisted over the frantic flutter of bat wings. "I don't give a rat's arse about her, really. But you never make love to me any more. It's like you expect me to lead a monk's life or something. I'm a flesh and blood MAN, Hermione. I have NEEDS!"

"And what do you call two nights ago?" she heard herself ask in a voice so shrill it rivaled a Mandrake's.

"Can you get these things off of me?"

She ignored his plea and raised her wand again but stopped short to hear his reply.

"Six months it had been...SIX months! For all I knew it would be six more months before I got another shag from you. Besides, all the purebloods do it. It's no big deal!"

That turned out to be the wrong thing to say. The rage within her burst forth as a sonic boom. Even with his Shield Charm still in place, she sent him, the bats, and all of the tacks flying across the room where they violently hit the wall. The bats dissolved like smoke. The tacks stuck firmly to the wall like little daggers. Ron sat in a daze. He looked up at his wife with fear in his eyes. He hadn't counted on her finding out so soon, much less reacting like this.

"No big deal? NO BIG DEAL?! If your father had shagged anyone on the side and your mum had found out, she would have killed him," Hermione howled.

"Alright." He stood and straightened his clothes. "You want a bloody divorce, you can have one," he barked, resentment dripping from every word. "Only I keep the kids. Go on. Get out. I don't need you, anyway." Ron stalked past her and sat at the table. He cast a Warming Charm on his food, Levitated some silverware from the drawer, and began to noisily eat, all the while casting suspicious glances at his wife just in case she decided to hex him again behind his back.

But Hermione stormed upstairs and headed directly to their bedroom and began to pack her clothing. She couldn't just leave and have Hugo with no mum when he woke up in the morning. She would sleep in Rose's bed tonight and try to explain things to Hugo on the way to school tomorrow.

But if Ron believed that she would leave behind her children, he was delusional.

The next morning, Hermione woke Hugo very early and got him quietly dressed, packed, and ready for school. Her goal was to avoid another confrontation with Ron in front of Hugo, so she shrank the two suitcases to fit inside of her purse. Then they headed out the door without incident.

Since the school wouldn't open for over an hour, Hermione took Hugo back to her parents' house and helped him settle into what used to be her room. They made a game out of redecorating, so it would reflect the young boy wizard who would occupy it. By the time they were finished, the navy blue ceiling was strewn with stars that glowed in the dark, there were Quidditch posters on the wall from all over the world, and the paint had changed from a peach and teal theme to light gray-blue and dark burgundy. The rug, curtains and bed covers were transformed as well, to match the Quidditch theme.

All of this delighted Hugo to no end, but the hour flew by, and it was time to take the little guy to school. Hermione felt a bit more at ease with her decision since he seemed happy with her in his new home. So she took him to school then headed off to work in hopes that she would not run into Ron first thing in the morning. She knew he would be hopping mad when he woke up and found them both missing.

At lunch time, Hermione ventured down to the third level to the Marriage office and had them draw up the papers to set their divorce into motion. When the witch behind the counter was finished writing them up, she handed the parchment to Hermione. "It becomes a legal document once both parties have signed it," explained the woman. "After six months of legal separation, the Marriage Vow charm becomes null and void, and the divorce becomes official."

It was cut and dried. Hermione wanted none of Ron's personal items. He could have the house and everything in it. She had packed all of her things and taken them with her the night before. She only wanted joint custody of their children. She saw no reason for Ron to object especially since, in her opinion, she had every right to take him to the cleaners after the way he had carried on with Lavender.

Her lunch break wasn't anywhere near over, but Hermione returned to work anyway so she could justify leaving early to pick Hugo up from school herself. When 3:00 came around, she signed the divorce papers and sent them to Ron through the intra office memo system. Then she sent Molly her Patronus to let her know that she didn't need to pick up Hugo and headed out the door.

She reached Hugo's school just as it was letting out and scooped him up into her arms. She felt suddenly elated as she realized that now she could finally enjoy Hugo without the friction that Ron's presence caused in her life.

They walked down the street, hand in hand, until they came to a quiet side street where they could Disapparate undetected. But as soon as they Apparated into her kitchen, they found themselves surrounded by Aurors! "What is the meaning of this?" Hermione demanded as a touch of fear crept into her voice.

Ron stepped forward from the crowd as he took charge of the situation. "Harriet, you take my son upstairs and help him pack his things. The rest of you, watch her carefully. She's a tricky one. She's liable to try just about anything when she's cornered."

"What do you think you're doing? Hugo is not going anywhere with you. He's perfectly happy here with me."

"But you have no right to keep him," Ron's voice dripped with venom. "You see, the moment you signed those divorce papers, you gave up your right to have any access to your children."

"No I didn't. It was right there on page two. I asked for joint custody JOINT custody. I have *every* right to my children."

"But it's not up to you, little Miss Know-it-all. I scratched through that part of the contract before I signed it, so that part is no longer valid."

"But I have to agree to any changes, and I do NOT agree that you get full custody."

Ron glanced at Harriet and jerked his head towards the staircase. Then he looked sternly at Hugo and said simply, "Go."

The boy didn't think twice. Before Hermione could reach for him, he had headed up the stairs with tears streaming down his face.

Her heart began to break as tears welled up in her own eyes. "Ron, you can't do this."

"Wrong again. I said last night that *you* could leave, but I keep the kids."

"He needs his mother, Ron. You can have him on weekends. Here lately you've been *working late* so much," her tone dripped with sarcasm, "you wouldn't have the time to spend with him anyway."

"He stays with me, and that's final. My mum can keep him if I happen to *work late*." Ron peered at her through narrowed lids as he looked down his nose. "You'd better mind your place, Hermione, or I won't let you see him at all him or Rose."

Ron would not have stood a chance against her in a fair fight, but his wand was already drawn, as were the wands of the three remaining Aurors. "May I at least have a moment alone with my son when he comes back downstairs?"

Even though she was severely outnumbered, Ron still knew the kind of damage she could do when she was angry. So he silently nodded his head and motioned for them to go to the sitting room. "Don't try anything. I'll be watching."

Hermione pushed past Ron and waited for Hugo on the couch. When he finally returned, with the shrunken suitcase in one hand and Lizzy clutched tightly in the other, she motioned for him to come sit beside her. Then she cast the Muffliato charm at the doorway. They sat side by side and she looked the boy in the face and discovered that he was still crying.

"Oh, Hugo, sweetheart... It wasn't supposed to happen this way. You should never have been exposed to this ugliness."

Hugo held tightly to Lizzy and cried even harder. "Are you and Dad gonna get a divorce?"

"I'm afraid so, love. But this is *not* your fault. I want you to know that. We just don't get along any more."

"One of the kids at school, his parents split up last Christmas. He used to be mean all the time. I think it was because he watched them fighting, and he thought that that's just what people are supposed to do. But now he's just sad all the time. He lives with his mum, and he says she cries a lot. Are you going to cry a lot?"

Hermione had known that this conversation would be difficult, but she had no idea just how hard it would be until this moment. "I don't know. Perhaps, in the beginning. But I know that this is the best thing for everyone in the long run, even you."

"How is it better for me?"

"Doesn't it hurt you to see your father and me angry all the time?"

Hugo nodded.

"Well, I'll be much happier without him, and I know he'll be very happy without me."

Hugo's gaze fell to the floor as the tears began to fall again. "So you'll be happier without me?"

"Oh *no*, love." Hermione felt her heart begin to break again. "Hugo, I've stayed this long because I wanted to be with you. I want to keep you with me now, but your dad won't let me. You see, we both love you *so much*, we're willing to fight over you."

"But Dad said that he won't let you see me or Roseever *again*!"

"He can't keep me away from you for long." Hermione's loving eyes pierced Hugo's soul. "Don't you worry. We'll see each other again soon. I promise."

Hugo nodded again, and she pulled him in for a tight hug.

"You can't deny me my children," she told Ron after she had lifted the Muffliato spell.

"I can, and I will."

Hermione kissed Hugo's cheek as Ron gripped his hand and pulled him away from her. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer," she threatened.

"You can hire the most expensive lawyer in all of Great Britain, and it won't matter."

"We'll see about that!" she said defiantly as she watched Hugo hold his lizard toy even tighter.

Ron shook his head. "Always have to have the last word, don't you, *you insufferable* know-it-all!"

Didn't Snape call her that once? Perhaps more than once? Snape that reminded her... "Wait! Hugo's potion!"

"He won't need the damn potion anymore. *You'll* be out of his life!"

"He needs to be at school at 8:15 a.m. sharp!"

"I KNOW!" screamed Ron as he pulled Hugo in tightly and spun. Then the others followed, and, after a series of deafening cracks, Hermione stood alone and lost in her own kitchen.

After a minute or two of stunned silence, she realized that she needed to make an appointment with Blaise Zabini as soon as possible, but since she had no owl at her disposal, she would have to go back to Diagon Alley, and to the Owl Post Office, to send it. The clock had not yet struck 4:15 p.m. There was still time. She ran into the family room, pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill, and hastily scribbled her request for an appointment. Then she stuffed it in an envelope and ran to the fireplace. She Floo'd back to the Ministry lobby, ran out the front door and to the Owl Post Office just down the street. With only a few people in line, she didn't have long to wait.

After sending the owl, Hermione felt exhausted. She dragged herself back out amid the shops and stores and found a bench to relax on. At this point, all she could do was wait... and hope.

Since Blaise's office was also in London, she didn't have to sit there for very long. A different owl landed on the bench arm beside her and stuck out his leg. As she read the note he sat patiently preening his tail feathers. She was pleased to see that Blaise answered the note personally, since she had known him in school, and she still held some notoriety as a war hero, even after all these years. He could skip lunch and squeeze her in at noon tomorrow if that was OK with her. She replied in the affirmative at the bottom of his note and reattached it to the bird's leg. Then off he flew.

A wave of relief swept over her. Blaise was the best in the business. He would help her sort this out. He would help her come up with a plan. She would have Hugo back in her arms in no time.

As soon as she Floo'd back to her house she turned on the computer and then raided the fridge while she waited for the screen to come up. Snape was already on line, thank Merlin. After her nightmarish day, the promise of a friendly exchange warmed her heart.

HalfBloodPrince: Well, better late than never. Mission accomplished, I trust?

Hermione stared at the screen, puzzled. Then it hit her Rita Skeeter's chocolates. She hadn't mentioned it to him yesterday because she was so set on following Ron, and so much had happened since then, that she had forgotten all about it.

MuggleBornWitch: Yes, mission accomplished. I didn't get a chance to read the *Prophet* this morning. Anything in it that might cause our favorite reporter to break out in a rash?

HalfBloodPrince: You may want to check out page two, the article on Flitwick's retirement.

MuggleBornWitch: Flitwick is retiring?

HalfBloodPrince: Apparently. Skeeter claims he is being forced to retire due to Alzheimer's symptoms. I happen to know that wizards who have even a small portion of Goblin blood running through their veins are immune to the disease, so her claims are false.

MuggleBornWitch: I'll ask my source at the paper if she sees Rita for the next week. Then we'll know if my little plan worked!

HalfBloodPrince: How is Hugo this evening?

Hermione's heart instantly filled with lead. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The poor boy had done nothing but cry most of the afternoon. She didn't have a chance to assess his health. The subtle changes that Snape needed to know about had escaped her notice amid the horrors of the afternoon's events. What could she tell him? She would no longer be able to give him reports. She didn't even know if Ron would give Hugo the potion. And she was certain that he would never agree to correspond with Snape to keep him updated. Would Snape stop communicating with her if Hugo was out of the picture? Would he try to help her with a solution? Or would he cut her off because he didn't want to be involved in something that was none of his business?

Her anxiety continued to build as she could only bring herself to stare at the screen.

HalfBloodPrince: Earth to Miss Granger.

Since there was no graceful way to avoid the question, she decided that being truthful was always the best course of action.

MuggleBornWitch: Sorry. Hugo is not well, but it has nothing to do with your potion. Ron and I split up.

There was no response for a very long time. She was beginning to think that he had left the room and hadn't seen her reply when something finally came up on the screen.

HalfBloodPrince: Your idea or his?

MuggleBornWitch: I caught him cheating on me, but I would have probably left soon anyway. We have not been happy for a very long time, but I have a feeling that you already figured that out.

HalfBloodPrince: How perceptive of you. Is the weasel willing to administer the potion?

MuggleBornWitch: I don't know, but I doubt it. He says, with me out of the house, Hugo will no longer need your potion.

HalfBloodPrince: This is a grave mistake. The boy will suffer greatly with anxiety over the break-up if his potion is interrupted. I advise you to urge the witless wonder to continue the regimen. If he won't listen, get Molly involved. She'll see to it.

MuggleBornWitch: I'm afraid she's the last person who would listen to me. But Hugo's birthday party is this coming weekend. Perhaps, if I am permitted to attend, I can persuade her.

HalfBloodPrince: Let us hope that you succeed, for Hugo's sake.

MuggleBornWitch: I'll do my best.

Snape thought about the lunch idea again. He knew that, with this new turn of events, Miss Granger must desperately need someone to confide in. She had actually left the moron finally! And her reasons had nothing to do with him. Now was as good a time as any.

HalfBloodPrince: Winky has been asking about you. She is insisting that I invite you to lunch to return the favor. So, rather than be driven to the brink of insanity by my house-elf, I would be honored if you would grace us with your presence at my humble home for lunch tomorrow.

Hermione sat in shocked silence. She had truly expected him to shrink from her, to run away and hide at the first hint of a divorce. But instead, the hand of friendship came reaching out from the computer screen, even if the invitation seemed a bit back-handed in its wording. But tomorrow was out. She had to see Blaise as soon as possible. With high hopes, she dictated her reply.

MuggleBornWitch: I can't tomorrow. I have an appointment with a divorce lawyer. Saturday is Hugo's party. How about Sunday?

Snape pondered thoughtfully for a moment. Sunday would not lend itself to a short lunch. Miss Granger would be off from work. She was now free of the obligations of family life. He might be stuck with her for hours. He wasn't sure if he could stomach that. She seemed congenial enough the last time they had shared a meal, but it was mercifully cut short. He knew that his tolerance for other humans had always been lacking, and it had only grown worse with age. No, weekends were definitely out, at least for now.

HalfBloodPrince: Sunday's out. How does Monday look for you?

MuggleBornWitch: Monday's perfect. But how do I get there?

HalfBloodPrince: Go to your parents' house and turn on your computer. When I see that you are on-line, I can come get you and bring you back here by side-along Apparation.

MuggleBornWitch: Sounds great. I'll see you on Monday, then. Wish me luck with the Weasley clan on Saturday.

HalfBloodPrince: Good luck. Monday, then.

Later that night, as Hermione readied herself for bed, her mind turned to Hugo as it had done off and on all evening. What if Ron couldn't be persuaded to give him the potion? What effect would this divorce have on his overall health? She lay awake for hours, staring at the ceiling, worrying herself sick. Could she bring herself to crawl back to Ron for Hugo's sake? The thought turned her stomach. She could only hope that Blaise could help her come up with a way to get joint custody of her children. Didn't the courts always side with the mother as long as she was deemed competent? Ron had absolutely no proof that she was incompetent. She had always been an attentive, loving mother. In her mind, he didn't have a case against her. She was bound to get her children back.

As her mind slowly worked through the logic of her defense, the knots in her stomach began to ease, and Hermione finally began to drift slowly off to sleep.

At lunch the next day, Hermione marched briskly down to the Ministry lobby to Floo over to Blaise Zabini's office. Unfortunately, before she could find an open fireplace, Ron walked past, most likely headed to meet Lavender. Hermione's first impulse was to make some snide remark, but she thought better of it. In its place came a concerned question, based on her previous day's IM exchange with Snape.

"Ron," she ran up behind him and reached for his arm.

He spun quickly and drew his wand in alarm. Several of the Ministry workers gasped as Hermione glared at him, held up her empty hands, and took a step back.

"What do you want?" he asked viciously.

"I only wanted to try and change your mind about giving Hugo his potion. I talked with Professor Snape over the computer yesterday, and he said it was essential to Hugo's health to keep him on it."

"Rubbish. He was fine last night and fine this morning."

"I'd like to judge for myself if you don't mind, so I'll be at his birthday party tomorrow."

"I do mind, as a matter of fact. You're not invited to his party. You better not show your face anywhere near my house tomorrow if you know what's good for you."

Hermione stared in disbelief. "He's my son, too. I have a right to wish him a happy birthday."

"You should have thought about that before you walked out on us."

"I didn't walk out. You drove me away with your outrageous behavior."

"Look, this is not the time or the place."

"I agree. You will be hearing from my lawyer. But I must insist that you continue to give Hugo his potion. Professor Snape said..."

"I don't give a damn what Snape said. Hugo's fine. Just leave us alone. You wanted out of my life. So stay OUT!" With that comment, Ron turned on his heel and marched out the front door and, no doubt, into Lavender's waiting arms.

All Hermione could do was stand there as she felt dozens of people staring at her while the color rose in her cheeks. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and found the nearest vacant fireplace. As she grabbed a handful of Floo powder and said, "Blaise Zabini's office," she felt the tears begin to fall. *Merlin's monocle*, she thought, *what have I done?*

Blaise's secretary smiled at her as she stumbled out of the posh marble fireplace. "He's ready and waiting for you, ma'am," she said as she pointed towards a large, ostentatious set of mahogany double doors. With a wave of the secretary's wand, they opened to admit her.

As Hermione entered the roomy, darkly paneled office, her robes and hair were automatically relieved of any residual ashes from her mode of transportation. She immediately noticed a surplus of diplomas and awards on the wall behind Blaise's desk. Some were from Muggle universities and law schools, others hailed from Wizarding schools. She didn't even see Blaise as he emerged from a private bathroom door.

"I handle Muggle divorces as well."

Hermione turned towards him, a bit startled by the sound of his voice.

"But don't worry," he continued. "Only people from the magical community can see the wizarding diplomas. And I have a separate waiting room for Muggles, so they don't accidentally witness wizards using the Floo network. Great to see you again, Hermione. Although I wish, for your sake, that it was under more pleasant circumstances."

"Thanks, Blaise. It's good to see you too."

"You see, wizards don't usually divorce each other, especially the purebloods. I actually make loads more money from the Muggle lot." He began to chuckle. "Let me guess... You want a divorce because Ron is cheating on you, but Ron says his affair with Lavender is no big deal and you're overreacting."

"Have you become a seer as well?" she asked in amazement while wiping the tears from her face.

"No," Blaise offered her his white linen handkerchief. "But it didn't take long for Ron's affair to become common knowledge. I may have actually known about it before you did! So, you see, I've been expecting you to contact me. Purebloods almost never want a divorce. It's always the Muggle-borns. They think that the wizarding world works like the Muggle world does. But they're wrong. That's where I come in." He motioned for her to sit down. "I would make small talk, ask you how things are going, etcetera, but I already know the answer. So let's cut to the chase, shall we? What do you want out of the marriage? The house? Half of everything he owns? The account at Gringotts? We can take him to the cleaners if you like, the ruddy bastard!"

"Blaise!" Hermione glared at him dumbfounded. "I have a good job and my parents' old house. We have separate accounts at Gringotts, and I can assure you that mine contains more gold at the moment than his does. I don't need anything from him really."

"Then why in Merlin's name are you here? Just the price of this consultation will set you back 500 Galleons."

"500 Galleons?" Hermione whispered. "I'm in the wrong business."

Blaise chuckled. "No, really, what do you need me for if you don't want anything from him except your freedom?"

"Well, the most important thing of all, of course. I want custody of my children, at least joint custody. Right now he won't let me see Hugo at all. They're throwing him a birthday party tomorrow that I helped to plan, and now Ron won't even let me come. He says I walked out on them and I don't deserve to see him."

Blaise sat back in his high-backed, padded, dragon skin chair and sighed. A worried look began to emerge from his furrowed brow. "You mean, you don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

"You're a Muggle-born, he's a pureblood. He's within his rights to keep you away from the children."

"WHAT?" Hermione's heart began to pound. She had always assumed that the wizarding world decided custody battles the same way the Muggle world did. She never imagined that blood-lines would enter into it.

"When wizards and witches split, custody always goes to the parent of the purest blood. When both are equally mixed, some sort of joint arrangement can usually be worked out. But in your case it's open and shut. If he wants to keep you away from your kids, he's within his rights, and the courts will decide in his favor."

Hermione was devastated. Her children had become her only joy, her only reason for living. Words escaped her, but her stunned look of desperation spoke volumes to Blaise.

"You do have a couple of options."

She raised her eyebrows with a ray of hope in her heart.

"The easiest thing would be to go back to Ron and stick it out until the kids are adults and he has no control over them anymore."

That option held no interest for her whatsoever. "Next."

Blaise smirked. "You make nice with him so he'll let you see the kids out of the goodness of his heart."

"What heart? Next."

"Last but not least, you find a way to prove that he is an incompetent father, or a bad influence. But don't expect an extramarital affair to count as a bad influence. For purebloods, having a witch or two on the side is a status symbol. As long as there are willing witches there will be mistresses."

"What would be considered incompetent?"

"Well, neglect, not taking proper care. Say the boy gets badly hurt or sick or something and Ron doesn't bother to take him to St. Mungo's. That sort of thing."

"Say... if Ron doesn't give him medicine that was prescribed twice a day and he gets sick without it, would that count?"

"Depends on what medicine, who prescribed it, and how sick he gets. But I'll tell you this right now: you'll need someone on the inside to be a witness for you. I know you and Harry Potter are still friends. Harry married Ron's sister, Ginny, right?"

Hermione nodded.

"Look, I don't know just how tight you two are still, but if Harry could watch Ron and look out for Hugo... maybe he could find something you could use against him."

"It's worth a try," she admitted meekly.

Blaise glanced at his Rolex. "Hey, it's about time for my next appointment. I'll have my office bill you."

Hermione nodded slowly.

"And if you come up with anything we can use on him, just let me know and I'll take care of it for you. In the mean time, I'll have Agnes get the Ministry to send us a copy of your divorce papers so I can look for loop-holes."

She nodded again as she absentmindedly rose from her chair.

Blaise stood as well and reached for her hand. "Ron's a reasonable bloke, Hermione. Don't worry, he'll come around."

"I sure hope so. I don't know what I would do without my children."

"Later, then."

Eye of Lizard

Chapter 10 of 35

Snape discovers the real reason that Hermione wrote to him once a month for five years.

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The characters and their world are, of course, the creation of the brilliant J. K. Rowling. I take no credit. I make no money.

Chapter 10

Eye of Lizard

Hermione was still in a numbed state of awareness at the end of the day when she exited the Ministry lobby. She desperately wanted someone to confide in, but Harry would not be back from Ireland until late tonight, and he would need time alone with his family. Hopefully, she would see him tomorrow at Hugo's party. She had made up her mind to make an appearance, no matter what sort of threats Ron threw at her. She contemplated sending Ginny an owl, but she didn't want to drag her into the middle of things. But if she didn't talk to someone tonight, she feared she would burst at the seams.

Her thoughts turned to Snape. Sometimes he did not appear on the computer at all, so she couldn't count on him. But what if he was home but just not logged on? Perhaps he ate dinner late or settled onto the couch to read a good book. There were a million things he could be doing without leaving his house. If he only knew how desperately she wanted to talk, maybe he would gladly log on. But she had to inform him somehow. The family owl was no longer at her disposal. So she decided to stop at Eeylops Owl Emporium to acquire another one. The Owl Post Office was so terribly inconvenient, and their hours were as limited as Gringotts. Yes, an owl of her own seemed a necessity at this point, and it stood just a few yards up the street.

A small brass bell danced happily on a string as she pushed the door open. The shopkeeper, a spry little old man with an ebony cane and wispy white hair, hobbled up to show off his toothy grin. "Good evening, my dear. What may I help you with? We have all kinds of exotic, and not so exotic, pets here. But don't worry. All are quite legal and Ministry approved."

"Oh, nothing exotic. I just need an owl for my mail," she said with a faint smile. It was hard not to like this man. His crystal blue eyes twinkled in a way that reminded her of Albus Dumbledore.

"I have quite an assortment of mail carriers. It just depends on the size of your average package. Although, I must say, many of the small ones can carry an amazing amount of weight."

Hermione nodded as she glanced around the claustrophobic shop. Cages great and small hung from the ceiling, sat on shelves, and stood on the floor, all of which contained any number of creatures. Up in the corner, over the cash register, a lone barn owl sat in a stately manner, yet there seemed an air of sorrow about him. Hermione's heart went out to the bird as he gave her a mournful look.

"What about this one? Is it my imagination, or does he look sad?"

"How perceptive of you, my dear. Yes, he is quite a sad one. You see, his mate was sold a couple of months ago to a tall, dark stranger. I was hoping they would both be sold to a business or organization that needs more than one so they could stay together. But the man only needed the one. I don't even know who he was. He didn't say a word while he was in here. He just pointed to the owl he wanted, paid in Galleons and even left her cage sitting on the counter. Very odd."

Hermione thought immediately of Snape's barn owl. Could he have purchased the mate? She knew that if she sent this one on an errand to Snape's house and he found his mate there, she might never see him again, but it was a chance she was willing to take. She felt a kinship with this sad owl. They needed each other.

"I'll take him."

"Excellent!" The shopkeeper was obviously pleased with her choice. "His name is Gomez. I'm sure that, with a little tender loving care, he will make a fine pet and a loyal servant."

"I'm sure he will." Hermione paid the man, but unlike Snape, she kept the owl in his cage as she left the shop. She planned to pick up Crookshanks tomorrow as well, and the bird would be safer in the cage until the two animals got used to each other.

Hermione was about to take her new friend home when she realized that she would be better off sending the letter now. The owl would reach Snape's house much quicker from here than from Knottingly. So she found a bench, scratched out a quick note on a scrap bit of parchment and tied it to his leg. "Come back to me at 1453 Scatterloaf Lane, in Knottingly, after you've delivered the message. You may hunt on the way home if you'd like." She stroked his back gently and sent him on his way.

Once the barn owl disappeared over the roof tops, Hermione took the cage and Apparated to her parents' house. *This is your house now, Hermione*, she thought. *Your*

house. She had taken the time that afternoon to go to the Department of Magical Transportation and have her fireplace removed from the Floo Network. She didn't want any more uninvited guests showing up. And now that she had finally arrived home, she created the necessary boundaries and wards so the magical world would have to employ the same door knocker that the Muggle neighbors used if they wished to enter.

Then she walked straight to the family room and turned on the computer. To her utter dismay, Snape was not on line. But the bird may not have gotten to him yet, and even once Snape had her letter, why on earth should he drop what he was doing just to talk with her? *I must be delusional. I should never have sent the owl in the first place. What an idiotic...*

HalfBloodPrince: I'm here. What seems to be the trouble?

Hermione gasped with joy. *Oh, thank Merlin,* she whispered under her breath.

MuggleBornWitch: I hope I'm not inconveniencing you. Are you sure you have time to talk?

HalfBloodPrince: I don't have all night, but I can spare a few minutes.

MuggleBornWitch: Thanks. I just thought you might want to hear about the meeting with my lawyer at lunch today.

She hit send, but he didn't reply. When she re-read what she had sent, she realized, with a touch of embarrassment, that the statement didn't require a reply, so she continued.

MuggleBornWitch: He said that, since Ron is a pureblood, and I'm a Muggle-born, he is within his rights to deny me access to my children.

This time, when she hit send, she expected a reply, but none was forthcoming. Had he left the room? Could he offer no words of comfort or encouragement? Perhaps he was waiting for a question, a request for advice. Perhaps he needed her permission to comment.

MuggleBornWitch: My children mean the world to me. Any ideas on how I could sway the courts to grant me access or joint custody?

What seemed like an eternity passed before his reply appeared on the screen.

HalfBloodPrince: This is indeed an unfortunate turn of events. However, I have no experience in such matters. My parents were unfortunately never divorced, nor do I know of anyone personally who has suffered through such an ordeal involving children. I'm afraid I have no advice to give.

Hermione's heart sank. Why did she believe that, by some miracle, Snape would have all the answers?*Of all the foolish school-girl notions...*

Snape's heart went out to Miss Granger. To be denied her children was one of the worst scenarios a loving mother such as herself could endure. But his answer had been an honest one. He had nothing to say in the matter and figured no advice was better than wrong advice. So he decided that he would try to gain access to Hogwarts' extensive library this weekend to study the laws, so he could perhaps be of further assistance to her in the future. Headmistress McGonagall had, in the past, allowed him occasional access to the library out of courtesy, but he was only allowed in at night after curfew.

For now, he decided that the best course of action was to redirect Miss Granger's attention elsewhere.

HalfBloodPrince: Nice owl, by the way. I think my owl, Morticia, has taken a liking to him. You may not see him for a while. But if you need him back, just let me know and I'll send him home.

Hermione chuckled. So Snape *did* buy the mate. Well, at least she had found a way to mend *the bird's* heart. Small comfort.

HalfBloodPrince: I must admit that, although IM's are immensely more convenient, I prefer owl post in some ways. I can get a better sense of the person sending the letter when I can touch the same parchment and actually see the personality in the handwriting. It's so much more personal to have something tangible to hold in one's hand.

And, Snape thought to himself, *to lift to one's nose* He then took another whiff of her recent note.

Hermione found that last statement a bit of a surprise because of his lack of response to those many letters she had written to him so long ago. So while they were on the subject, she decided to delve a little deeper.

MuggleBornWitch: If you enjoy handwritten notes so much, in the first five years after the war, why did you never once answer my letters?

HalfBloodPrince: They provided information somewhat like a newspaper. They never asked a question and therefore never required a reply.

He clicked send, but she didn't answer, yet that didn't surprise him since he had not asked a question. OK, he thought to himself, *if you want to get personal, I have one for you...*

HalfBloodPrince: Now that you have finally left him, may I ask why you married the weasel in the first place?

MuggleBornWitch: Because the only other man I was interested in didn't give me a ray of hope.

So she was interested in someone else. Curiosity got the better of him and he produced his next inquiry.

HalfBloodPrince: What fool would have left an intelligent, warm-hearted, lovely witch such as yourself without a ray of hope?

Her reply took longer than he expected. He wondered if, perhaps, he knew the man in question and she didn't wish to embarrass the bloke, or perhaps, herself.

MuggleBornWitch: The same fool who wouldn't answer even one of my sixty letters.

Snape's jaw dropped. Twelve months times five years equaled sixty letters. Mangled Merlin she was referring to him! He was stunned. All those years ago she had written to him, not out of pity, but because she cared for him. All of those years... All those *lonely* years... He closed his eyes, trying to block out the truth that flashed on the screen before him. Several agonizing minutes passed. What could he say to her? He forced his eyes open and looked at the screen. He was glad she couldn't see his face because he knew that regret and sorrow must have been deeply etched in its lines.

MuggleBornWitch: Are you there?

He swallowed hard and whispered his answer.

HalfBloodPrince: Yes.

MuggleBornWitch: Are you alright?

HalfBloodPrince: I thought you wrote to me out of pity. I didn't want to encourage it.

MuggleBornWitch: Your predicament broke my heart, but I never wrote to you out of pity.

HalfBloodPrince: It's just as well. Life with a convicted felon would have gotten you nowhere. You were better off without me.

MuggleBornWitch: You sound as if you do want my pity!

HalfBloodPrince: Don't insult me! I am simply stating a fact. Life with a convicted felon would have made you a social outcast. A decent job would have been almost impossible for you to acquire. You were much better off with the Witless Wonder.

MuggleBornWitch: My job at the Ministry is barely what I would call decent. And I would much rather have had a sincere, unselfish, loving husband than the one I ended up with, even if he would have been an unjustly accused and convicted felon.

Snape felt a surge of emotion welling up within him that he had not felt since the night Lily was murdered. All of the mistakes in his life were about to engulf him, and he didn't want to subject her to the flood. He wasn't sure how she would react, or even if he was ready to share this side of himself with her, or anyone else, yet. He had convinced himself that emotions were for the weak, and he had worked very hard over the years to push them all deep down inside. Now her words of compassion and long-felt affection brought them erupting to the surface. He could not -- he *would not* let her see any sign of weakness.

HalfBloodPrince: Arguing and lamenting over the past is getting us nowhere. I have indeed had enough of this pointless conversation. If you will excuse me, I have work to do. After a long moment of consideration he viciously added: **And BTW, what did I ever do that could possibly have given you the impression that I would be sincere, unselfish or loving?**

He pushed the send button but couldn't bring himself to log off. He waited for one last reply. He had asked a question, after all. As the torturous seconds passed, he tried to hold on to his composure. Her reply didn't come right away, but after about a minute it, appeared on screen.

MuggleBornWitch: I just know in my heart that you would be.

Would he be? He wasn't so sure. She had willingly been his doormat at school. He shuddered as he remembered some of the cruel things he had said to her. How he must have hurt her... But she kept faith in him. A faith he didn't feel he deserved.

Snape logged off the computer and rested his face in his hands. He felt like crying but somehow found the strength not to. It was all water under the bridge. Perhaps if something had happened between them all those years ago, he would have eventually tired of her youth and incessant blabbering, and they would be sworn enemies now. *Everything happens for a reason*, he told himself. *Besides, just because it didn't happen then, doesn't mean it can't happen sometime in the future.* They were better suited for each other now. There was still hope.

Well, now you've done it...idiot! Hermione berated herself as she turned off the computer. *Never mind lunch on Monday. You'll probably never see or hear from him again.* She could no longer give him reports on Hugo. What use was she to him now? A needy, pitiful, soon-to-be divorcee... He certainly didn't need her or her excess emotional baggage.

More depressed than ever, Hermione had no appetite for food, so she slowly dragged herself upstairs and decided that a good long soak in the tub might help her relax so she could sleep. She didn't even have Crookshanks there to comfort her, and she would probably never see that owl again. What did the shopkeeper say his name was? Gomez? Odd name for an owl.

After an hour in the water, with occasional additions to keep it hot, she finally felt so pruned that she feared the wrinkles would become permanent if she didn't remove herself and dry off. So she forced herself up, wrapped in a towel, and wandered into the bedroom. To her surprise, her owl sat on the windowsill, dutifully tapping to gain entrance. She rushed over to let him in. No note was forthcoming, but the owl immediately began to cuddle up to her, rubbing his head against her chest. It was as if he knew her heart was breaking. Did Snape send him back because he knew that she would need some companionship tonight? Or did Gomez somehow feel her sadness across the miles? She could only guess, but no matter the reason for his return, she was grateful to have a warm, soft, living creature on which to bestow affection. Thank Merlin for small favors.

The next day, Hermione got dressed, grabbed the already gift-wrapped Quidditch book she had purchased for Hugo the previous week, and headed for her former abode. She was determined to show herself, if only to retrieve her cat and reassure Hugo that she could never forget his birthday party. But Ron had other ideas. She found that he had effectively constructed Anti-Apparation wards around the house, so she was forced to Apparate into a wooded area a couple of blocks away and walk up to knock on the door. As Ron approached, she heard him cast the Muffliato spell and braced herself for what was to come.

"What do you think you're doing here?" asked Ron as he opened the door with wand in hand.

"I came to wish my son a happy birthday and to give him his present. I would also like to retrieve my cat, if you don't mind," Hermione informed him with a condescending tone.

Ron reached behind the door and scooped up Crookshanks, who had followed him out of curiosity. He then unceremoniously shoved the fur-ball in her face. "Here, take him...and good riddance!"

She plopped Crookshanks into the flower garden, and he immediately began to chase gnomes. "I'll get him after I've seen Hugo."

"I told you yesterday that you'd better not come round."

Hermione recalled her conversation with Blaise and the suggestion that she try to "make nice" with Ron so he would be reasonable. "Please, Ron," she said with sorrowful eyes. "He's my son, too. I love him. Can't you let me see him just long enough to give him his present? Then I'll leave, I promise."

"I can't let you in here. Merlin knows what my mum might do to you if she sees you. You've pissed off the lot of us. Just give me the present and I'll see that he gets it." Ron reached out his hand to grab the book from Hermione's arms, but she pulled back just in time.

"You'll say you bought it for him," she accused him suspiciously. "You'll say you ordered it and it just now arrived."

"Oh, grow up, Hermione!" He withdrew his hands and pursed his lips. "Have it your way then. Some mother you are!" He then turned and slammed the door in her face.

She immediately began pounding on it, demanding to be admitted, but to no avail. She then leaned over the bushes by the front windows to see if she could get a glimpse of Hugo and the others, but no one was visible. They must have all been in the family room. When she attempted to walk around to the back of the house to at least wave at Hugo from a window, an invisible barrier prevented her from venturing past the fence gate. She tried every anti-Lock charm and counter curse she could think of, but nothing worked. Ron had become much better at these sorts of charms with age and experience. His job as an Auror required it.

With a huge sigh of disappointment, Hermione walked back to the front yard, scooped up Crookshanks, and made her way back to the wooded area where she could inconspicuously Disapparate home.

Once home, she searched the house for Gomez, but he was nowhere to be found. She opened an upstairs window and called his name, but immediately felt stupid for doing so, as one of the neighbors' kids looked up at her from a nearby backyard, as if she were insane. But she now desperately needed the bird. She wanted to write to

Rose at Hogwarts, to let her know what had been going on and what to expect when she returned home in a couple of weeks. She also wanted to send the book to Hugo via owl, along with the birthday card that was already attached. That way he would know most certainly that she did not forget his birthday party. But most of all, she wanted to write to Harry to give him her side of the story. Merlin knows what Ron might have filled his head with by now.

Out of desperation, she turned on the computer. Snape was not on line, so she sent him an email.

Dear Professor Snape,

I hope your Saturday is pleasant. Mine has been a disaster. As you can imagine, Ron would not allow me to attend Hugo's party. So I need my owl to send him his birthday present. But Gomez is not here. If he is at your house, would you please send him home for me?

Thanks so much,

Hermione

She thought it was best not to allude to their previous exchange. Perhaps they could simply pretend that it had never happened and continue on as before. It was worth a try.

The sun shone brightly in the spring sky, so in hopes that the fresh air and bright blue sky would cheer her spirits a bit, Hermione ventured into the back yard and began to pull weeds from her flower bed. She had to be careful to do it by hand. This was a Muggle neighborhood. But she simply refused to buy a lawnmower or pay someone to cut the grass. No, that chore was easily taken care of with a spell cast under the cover of darkness.

About an hour later, Gomez arrived home with a flutter and a hoot! Snape must have gotten her email. She took him in and introduced him to Crookshanks. When a swat from the cat was met by a vicious bite from the owl, the two seemed to understand each other, because no further aggression was exhibited by either party. This relieved Hermione greatly. The screech owl that was now Ron's had lived in constant fear of Crookshanks, but Gomez made it plain that he was not easily intimidated.

So she attached the book to Gomez's leg and set him on his way, giving him strict instructions to return immediately for more deliveries. After finishing Rose's letter, she began to write one to Harry, but instead of a long and drawn out explanation, she simply requested that he come see her alone on Sunday if family obligations permitted it. What she really needed was a hug. And one of those could only be delivered in person.

After the necessary letter writing had been taken care of, Hermione checked her computer to see if Snape was on line, but she was once again sorely disappointed. In fact, she didn't see him on line for the rest of the weekend. By the time Harry popped over after dinner on Sunday night for a quick visit, Hermione had concluded that lunch with Snape on Monday was no longer going to happen.

Her heart felt like a Bludger at the Quidditch World Cup. She didn't think she could take much more of this, so when Harry opened his arms to her, she didn't hesitate to rush into them. Then the floodgates opened. She wept so long and so hard that she had to use a Drying charm on Harry's shirt when she finally calmed down. But he sat with her on the couch in the family room, patiently rocking her back and forth, just as he had done when her parents were killed over two years before. If she would never be allowed to see her kids again, she would prefer to go the way of her parents, it hurt that much.

Hermione painfully recounted the conversation with Blaise Zabini and his advice on changing Ron's mind. She asked Harry if he would be willing to help her, for the sake of Hugo's health and future Hogwarts education. Of course Harry said "yes" but didn't want to do anything underhanded or unfair to Ron. He was, after all, still Ron's friend too. He promised to at least try to persuade Ron to see reason for Hugo's sake. The boy obviously missed his mother terribly at his birthday party, and was only slightly cheered up when her owl arrived with the book and card from her. Hugo had informed them all that she had promised to be there somehow, and he was quite disappointed that she didn't keep her promise.

When Hermione told Harry that she did come, but Ron wouldn't let her in, he was infuriated. Ron had returned to the room claiming that he had had to get rid of some neighborhood kid selling candy.

"So you were there and he wouldn't let you in, not even for a minute?"

"He claimed that he couldn't guarantee my safety, considering how angry his mum and dad were with me."

"Oh, that's rubbish! They all know why you left. Arthur and George berated him for not being discreet about it out of consideration for your feelings."

"But they don't mind that he was cheating on me?" Hermione asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged. "Didn't seem like it. But Molly's plenty pissed at him, or she was until you didn't bother to show up at your own son's party. Now he's trying to convince her that you're a bad mum, and Hugo's better off without you. I'm not sure she's swallowing it all though."

"You mean there's hope that she might be on my side after all?"

Harry nodded slowly. "I'll tell Ginny what you told me, about trying to get in and Ron wouldn't let you. She'll let Molly know the truth."

"Thanks, Harry. I don't know what I'd do without you and Ginny. Sometimes I feel like you are the only two real friends I have in this world."

"You should keep trying to see your kids, Hermione, and document the attempts. That way, if it ever comes before a judge, you'll have proof that you are not neglectful, and you want to be with your kids. If nothing else, it will show the rest of Ron's family that you're not the selfish prat that Ron is trying to make you out to be. If you can win Molly over, she'll make Ron give you visitation rights, at the very least."

"OK, Harry. I'll do everything I can."

They sat in silence for a moment; then an idea struck her. "Hey, you know, even though yesterday was the party, tomorrow is Hugo's actual birthday. Perhaps I can stop by his school and take him out to lunch. Did Ron say anything about doing something for Hugo's actual birthday at school? Cupcakes or something?"

"Are you kidding? Ron take cupcakes to a Muggle school?"

Hermione chuckled. "Good. Then I'll pluck him out for lunch and bring him back when we're done. Ron will never know he was gone, and I will get to wish my son a happy birthday in person."

With that happy thought in her head, she said goodnight to Harry. Then after one final disappointing search for Snape on her computer, Hermione headed for bed.

The next day at lunch, Hermione hurriedly headed out the front doors of the Ministry so as to Apparate as close to Hugo's school as she could. He was so happy to see her when she appeared in his classroom door that he jumped up and ran into her arms without permission from his teacher.

"I'll have him back in about an hour, Mrs. Alexander," Hermione informed the stuffy Muggle woman at the front of the classroom.

As they began to leave, Hugo turned on his heel and ran back to his desk. "I can't forget Lizzy," he exclaimed as he retrieved the stuffed lizard. He clutched his constant companion even tighter these days, an unfortunate symptom of the emotional upheaval this break-up was putting him through.

They walked out of the school and down the street to a side street where it was safe to Disapparate back to Hermione's house. She had lowered the Anti-Apparation wards

that morning, so she could get to work and bring them back home. Once there, she didn't raise them again, but instead, immediately walked into the family room and turned on the computer, ever hopeful of finding Snape on-line. Then she turned her attention to the kitchen to fix them both a sandwich.

"Tuna salad or chicken salad?"

"Lizzy's lost an eye, Mum. Can you conjure her another one?"

"Lost an eye?" Hermione exclaimed as she reached to examine the toy. The remaining eye looked like a simple red button sewn in place with some black thread to look like the pupil. "Not a problem. I'll do it after lunch," she said with a smile.

"After lunch?" came a low, deep, smooth voice from the family room.

Hermione jumped in fright as she turned to face the voice. Severus Snape stood in the kitchen doorway, smiling at them both. "I thought lunch was to be at my house."

"You startled me, Professor. How long have you been here?"

"I just now arrived."

"Most people Apparate with a crack so loud it wakes the dead. Why didn't I hear anything?" she asked with a touch of suspicion in her voice.

Snape's lip curled slightly. "When one relies on stealth to survive, one finds ways to Apparate in silence."

"I see." She raised an eyebrow at his mysterious answer.

Hugo's eyes got bigger and bigger as Snape strode over and stooped down to his level. "And you must be Hugo, I trust. I'm Severus Snape. It's good to meet you."

"Oh, please pardon my manners," Hermione said hastily.

"What manners," Snape replied dryly.

"Sorry," Hermione admitted sheepishly, "but I didn't think you'd come after our last conversation."

Snape stood to face her. His expression became soft, almost kind. "I extended an invitation. You accepted. It would have been rude of me to just not show up without offering an explanation. Did you actually think I would do that to you? After all that you've been through this week?" A concerned expression crossed his face. Hermione got the distinct impression that she had hurt Snape's feelings.

"I'm sorry. I just didn't know what to expect from you. I don't know what to expect from anybody any more." She began to choke up. "Please forgive me."

As he noticed her eyes begin to water, Snape quickly turned his attention towards Hugo. "It's good to see that your husband has finally come around in his thinking so you two can spend time together. You are both welcome at my house. Winky has prepared enough food for a small army."

"Well," she confessed, "Ron doesn't actually know that Hugo is with me."

"What?" asked Snape, obviously alarmed.

"But it's no big deal. I just picked him up from school for lunch. I'll take him back there when we're done eating. Ron will never know I saw him."

"Miss Granger, listen carefully. You must return Hugo to school this instant. If you took your son without your husband's permission and he catches the two of you together, he could have you arrested for kidnapping!" Snape had spent the better part of both Saturday and Sunday night in the Hogwarts library and knew a great deal about divorce laws at this point. Hermione had indeed made a grave mistake that could very well cost her her freedom.

"Oh, that's ridiculous. I'm his mother. I have a right to see him," Hermione insisted.

"This is not the Muggle world, Miss Granger. You must take him back to school *now*, before it's too late." Snape had begun to pace the kitchen, becoming more agitated with each step.

With a sudden loud crack, Harry Apparated into the middle of the kitchen floor as Snape passed. They almost collided.

"Oh, thank Merlin you're here." Harry seemed almost frantic.

"Harry, what the..."

"Ron knows you've got Hugo. He's on his way here right now to have you arrested for kidnapping."

"How did he find out?"

"I think he put a tracer on that lizard toy."

"Not Lizzy!" objected Hugo.

"Here, let me see it." Harry grabbed the toy as Hugo objected. "When did its eye go missing?"

"I noticed it yesterday," said Hugo as Harry handed back the toy.

"He must have plucked one of the eye buttons from it after he cast the spell."

"The button probably is set to vibrate or ring if the toy is moved from its rightful place," Snape added.

"This is the first place he'll look for you. You've got to get out of here."

"It won't matter where they go, Potter. If Weasley cast the charm correctly, when he Apparates, the button will bring him wherever the toy is. Just as the Dark Mark would take me straight to the Dark Lord; I didn't need to know where he was."

"Look, we don't have much time. Ron is meeting Lavender to cancel their lunch, and then he'll be here. I can't be seen helping you or he will no longer trust me. It's no fun trying to work both sides of this fence, believe me."

"You don't have to tell me, Potter. I lived it for 16 years, remember?"

"Can you help her, Professor?"

"Don't worry, Potter. I have a plan."

"Thanks. I've got to go." He traded worried glances with Snape and Hermione, and then with a spin and a crack, Harry was gone.

"Hugo, you must trust me. I'll take you someplace safe." Snape reached out his hand to Hugo, who recoiled and ran to his mother's side.

"This is the man who makes your potion, Hugo. He won't hurt you. He's trying to help both of us. Please go with him. You'll be safe with him." She stared longingly into Hugo's frightened eyes.

"Hugo, please. There is no time to waste."

The boy reluctantly let go of his mother and allowed Snape to grasp his hand, at which time Snape pulled him in close.

"Where are you taking him?"

"If you don't know, you can answer truthfully when you are asked."

Hermione nodded.

"Wait here. I'll return as soon as I can."

Suddenly, Hermione heard a loud crack from the sitting room in the front of the house. Her eyes grew wide with fear as she glanced down the hallway, but when she glanced back at Snape, he and Hugo had already silently vanished. She closed her eyes and let out a trembling sigh of relief as she heard Ron's voice say, "I've got you now, Hermione!"

Unspoiled

Chapter 11 of 35

Severus takes Hugo someplace safe.

As always, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for all of their hard work on my behalf.

A big Thank You also goes out to the staff here at The Petulant Poetess. Their hard work and constant vigilance benefits us all.

This story and its characters belong to J. K. Rowling. I take no credit. I make no money.

Chapter 11

Unspoiled

"If you expect me to feed you lunch this time, forget it!" Hermione barked defiantly.

"Where's Hugo?" Ron demanded as he and another Auror marched into the kitchen. Before she could answer, Ron ordered the young man to search the upstairs. "And use the Magical Detection spell. She may have put him under a Disillusionment charm."

"He's not here, Ronald," she insisted. "Didn't you take him to school this morning?"

"I did, but I knew you'd try something like this, so I figured out a way to track him. If he turns up anywhere besides school, my house, or the Burrow, I have an alarm that goes off."

"Well, today is his birthday. Perhaps your mum and dad picked him up from school and took him out to lunch or something. Ever think of that?"

"Mum would have told me about it. Besides, I have reason to believe that he's here."

"Well, search all you like. He's not here, and I have no idea where he is." She decided a little dig was in order. "And you call yourself a good father you can't even keep track of your child. Did you even check at the school or the Burrow before you came here? Maybe your Tracking charm is *faulty*."

"There's nothing wrong with the charm, Hermione. He's here and we'll find him. And when we do, I'll arrest you for kidnapping." With those words, Ron cast the Magical Detection spell and began to comb the kitchen and then the remainder of the rooms downstairs, but, of course, Hugo was nowhere to be found.

When Ron was joined, once again, by his empty-handed coworker at the bottom of the stairs, Ron strutted back into the kitchen where Hermione sat impatiently at the table.

"This isn't over, Hermione."

"Please let me know he's alright once you do locate him. You have me worried sick now." Of course she knew he was safe with Snape, but she had to pretend, if for no other reason than to make Ron doubt himself.

"Stuff a sock in it!" He walked back to the front sitting room, and she heard two more loud cracks as they finally left.

That was a close one, Hermione, she thought with great relief. She decided then and there that she'd better bone up on divorce laws in the wizarding world so she wouldn't risk a blunder like that again. The Ministry's library was full of books on the subject. She had her work cut out for her.

Snape and Hugo silently appeared on the outskirts of Molly and Arthur's yard at the Burrow. But they didn't go in the house straight away. Instead, Snape lead the boy to a back-yard table with a tattered, crooked umbrella and some rusting chairs. As soon as Hugo realized where he was, he relaxed. He knew he was safe at his grandma and grandpa's house. But he still clutched tightly to Lizzy as he gazed into the endless depths of Snape's black eyes.

"Are you alright?" Snape asked him gently.

Hugo nodded.

"Is your father still giving you your potion twice a day?"

Hugo shook his head slowly side to side.

"That is most unfortunate. How are you feeling these days?"

"Pretty lousy," the boy replied meekly. "My stomach was so upset yesterday that I couldn't keep supper down. And I had one bad dream after another last night. I feel like I didn't sleep at all."

"I see... Does your father know about this?"

"No. He won't listen to me. He just keeps telling everyone that I'm fine. It's like he thinks that if he says it enough, it will come true. But it only makes me feel worse."

"You need your potion, Hugo. Do you have access to it?"

He shook his head again.

"If I send you some more by owl post, do you think you could manage to administer it to yourself while your dad is not looking?"

He nodded.

"And would you be able to write to me at least once each week to tell me what affect the potion has on your health?"

"I think so, but that might be much trickier to do without my dad's permission. Would I get into trouble if he finds out?"

"Perhaps not, if we enlist the help of your grandmother. Doesn't she pick you up after school most days?"

"Every day," Hugo replied.

Snape glanced over at the failing structure that was supposed to pass for a house. "Do you think she's home now?"

"I don't know."

"Let's find out, shall we?" He stood and took Hugo by the hand, and they walked up to the back door where Snape rapped sharply with his knuckles.

A bewildered Molly Weasley opened the door as a look of shock invaded her face. "Severus Snape and *Hugo*? What on earth?"

"Good afternoon, Molly. May we come in?"

"You two know each other?" asked Hugo in amazement.

"Off and on over the years, your grandfather and I have worked closely with Professor Snape to help bring about the defeat of Lord Voldemort. So yes, we've known each other for a very long time."

That one statement changed Hugo's entire perspective on Professor Snape. He looked up at the stern dark man with a smile, and Snape immediately smiled warmly back.

This surprised Molly. In all of her years, she had almost never seen Snape smile at anyone, least of all a child.

"Please sit, make yourself at home, Severus. Care for some tea?"

"Thanks, but I can't stay." Snape proceeded to tell Molly what had just transpired, as well as the fact that Miss Granger had indeed attempted to attend Hugo's party but was denied entrance by her son. Then he continued with the importance of the potion to Hugo's health and asked that she help Hugo with his weekly updates to Snape about his condition. Molly understood how much the potion helped and that he needed it even more under the circumstances. She vowed to make sure Hugo continued to receive the necessary dosage and that Snape was informed of his progress.

As he stood to leave, Snape looked deep into Molly's eyes with great concern. "The boy needs his mother, Molly. And you of all people must know how she feels. You know what it's like to have one of them taken from you."

Even after all these years, the thought of losing Fred still brought tears to her eyes. She nodded in agreement.

"You must convince your son to let them have access to each other. It would be better for everyone."

"I'll do my best," she promised.

Snape knelt down once again to look Hugo in the eye. He placed his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "It will all work out, don't worry. Your grandmother will see to it."

Hugo smiled and impulsively flung his arms around Snape's neck. Molly had to stifle a giggle at the shocked expression that came across his face as he awkwardly patted the boy's back.

"Thanks for saving my mum today." He pulled away just enough to see Snape's face. The expression in the boy's eyes tore at his heart. "It would have been *horrible* if she had ended up in Azkaban just because she wanted to see me!"

"I'm glad I was able to help," he said with a touch of embarrassment as he stood up to leave. He was certainly not used to children showing him affection.

"It was good to see you again, Molly. Give my regards to Arthur."

"Good to see you too, Severus. I'll see to it that Hugo gets back to school."

With those assurances, Snape marched to the perimeter and Disapparated back to Miss Granger's house.

"You selfish little fool!" Snape bellowed the instant he had reappeared in Hermione's kitchen.

Since Ron's departure, she had been impatiently pacing the kitchen floor, awaiting Snape's return. But the abrupt harshness of his voice almost made her jump out of her skin. "What are you talking about?" she retorted defensively. "Where did you take my son?"

"He's at your in-laws' house. Do you have any idea what your imprisonment would have done to your child's self esteem?"

"I just wanted him to know that I love him. I didn't realize..."

"Hermione Granger didn't do her homework," he spat with a viciously mocking tone. "You...of ALL people! Have you any idea how close you came to ending up in Azkaban?"

"I didn't know... I didn't know," she pleaded with him to understand as she broke down into sobs and collapsed onto the nearest chair.

"Your *ignorance* is no excuse!" he shouted with red rage. "His emotional well-being would have been crushed. He would have blamed himself for your incarceration!"

"I would never have done it if I had known..."

"Can't you see what it would have done to him?" He glared at her with fire in his eyes. "It would have hardened his heart, leaving him forever to make cold and calculating choices with no thought of the consequences."

Hermione gasped at Snape through her tears. He was describing what he thought to be himself, and he hated the thought that Hugo would end up like him. But she knew better. Somehow, her logical mind began to climb to the surface of her pain. She finally saw Snape clearly for the first time. This complex, angry man cared deeply for her as well as her son. If he hadn't, he wouldn't be nearly this angry with her. It didn't make his words sting any less, however, for she knew that he was right.

"Lunch is canceled!" he growled through clenched teeth. "The sight of you has robbed me of my appetite."

He bared his teeth and hissed like a wild animal about to strike. Hermione cowered in her chair, afraid of what he might do next. She watched in horror as he drew his wand, but he tapped himself on the head and began to fade from her tear-streaked view. When she no longer sensed his presence in the room, she laid her head down on the table and openly wept. But she knew that Snape had spoken the truth. She had to educate herself so as to prevent a similar incident from happening in the future. And the Ministry library was the perfect place to start.

Snape made sure that no prying eyes were watching before removing the Disillusionment charm as he made his way up the riverbank to Spinner's End. Since the neighborhood had cleaned up this area, the warmer months of the year made the place much more inviting. More often than not, a few of the neighborhood children, or a young couple entwined in romantic activities, dotted the riverbank during all hours of the day. So he had gotten into the habit of Disillusioning himself before Apparating back home. Today was no exception. Even though Muggle school was still in session, a couple of miscreants stood ankle deep at the river's edge, skipping stones across the water's surface.

"Shouldn't you two be in school?" Snape barked viciously as he revealed himself from behind some bushes.

The two boys stared in wide-eyed disbelief at Snape since they had inspected the area thoroughly before beginning their activity and thought they were alone.

"If I catch you here again during school hours, I'll tell your parents!" he hollered after them as they took off running.

He plodded slowly up the bank towards his house, but as he thought back over the previous few minutes, his spirits sank lower and lower. Once again, he had been unnecessarily cruel to Miss Granger. And although he felt greatly disappointed in her for not educating herself on the subject before attempting this stunt, he also felt that there were much more eloquent ways of conveying that fact that would not have resulted in her emotional collapse. But the look on Hugo's face, the concern in his eyes, the potential for guilt and pain that lay dormant there... One wrong move from Miss Granger, and her son would plunge over the same emotional cliff that he had himself fallen off of as an adolescent. He simply could not let her do that to him...or to herself.

When Snape opened the door and entered alone, Winky understandably displayed great puzzlement and disappointment. But Snape simply held up his hand. "There will be no luncheon, Winky. So sorry to have troubled you for nothing."

"But, Master Severus..."

"Please, I just need to be left alone for a while." As he began to ascend the staircase, he noticed that Winky was crying.

"Winky," he added with concern, "I said I was sorry."

"Winky doesn't cry for Winky, Winky cries for Master Severus." She stared up at him with unblinking tennis ball eyes as the tears streamed down her face. "Winky feels Master's pain. Isn't there anything Winky can do to help?"

"Not unless you possess a Time-Turner... I really made a mess of things, Winky." Snape swallowed hard. He felt his own eyes begin to well up, and he didn't want to cry in front of her, so he continued slowly up the staircase.

"Miss Granger will forgive Master, don't worry. She always has."

Snape silently nodded as he disappeared into his bedroom and closed the door. The instant the door snapped shut, he let the tears flow freely. Why had he gotten so angry with Miss Granger? Didn't she need him this afternoon more than ever? Didn't he want to be there to comfort her? He could be rocking her in his arms at this very moment if he had only held his temper. But the thought of her in that awful place simply sent him over the edge, not to mention the damage it would have done to Hugo. Now that Snape had actually met the boy, he saw an unspoiled version of himself in that innocent face and wanted more than ever to keep him unspoiled.

But as he continued to analyze the reasons behind his actions, he realized that he had been the selfish fool, not Miss Granger. It would have caused him great pain to see her thrown into Azkaban. His feelings were at risk here. No more fragrant letters, no more IM's, no more lunches. And with her out of the picture, surely the wooden-headed Mr. Weasley would deprive him of any access to Hugo whatsoever, no matter the consequences to Hugo's health. This scenario would mean absolute torture for Snape. He would rather serve her sentence for her than to have that happen.

He would have to make it up to her somehow. But what could he possibly do that would convince her that he was truly sorry? He wouldn't blame her if she never wanted to speak to him again, but he had to try, so he decided, without deliberation, that a handwritten letter of apology was the best way to start. He pulled out a stack of parchment, a piece of 100% papyrus, his favorite quill, and began to write. It took him several tries, but he finally found just the right words to convey his genuine remorse and proper request for forgiveness. He then copied the words to the papyrus, sealed the letter with a Slytherin wax stamp, and opened the window.

Gomez and Morticia had begun to construct a nest under the eaves in an odd architectural detail at the apex of his roof-line. The two birds seemed so happy together that he almost hated to call Gomez away. For a fleeting moment, he thought of delivering the note personally, but a vision of having the door slammed in his face made him think better of the idea.

"Gomez, sorry to break up your little party, but I am in need of your services." He attached the letter to the bird's leg. "Take this to your owner, will you?" he requested with a sad tone. "And give her a hug for me." He stood at the window and watched the owl fly towards the horizon until he was no longer visible. Then he closed the window and plopped himself down on the bed in disgust. *Merlin, please let her find it in her heart to forgive me.*

After a good cry at the kitchen table, Hermione had resolutely picked herself up, brushed herself off, and grew a new determination to learn all she could about child custody cases in the wizarding world. She would get her kids back with or without anyone's help. There simply had to be a way. She replaced the Anti-Apparation wards on her home and walked across the street to the park to Disapparate back to London. Once she was back at the Ministry, she headed straight to the library and checked out every book she could find on the subject. The pile was so big she had to shrink it considerably to fit it into her purse.

When she finally made her way back up to her office, Gomez was waiting patiently at the window. As soon as she opened it, he jumped in and fluttered up to her affectionately with wings outstretched. She pulled him back just long enough to remove the letter from his leg, and then he began to rub up against her again as he made soft cooing sounds. She had never seen an owl act like this. He even put his face next to hers at one point.

She caressed his head and kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Gomez, I needed that." She glanced at the letter and recognized Snape's handwriting immediately. She swallowed hard as tears began to well up in her eyes again. "Don't leave yet," she told the owl, "I might need to send a reply."

With great trepidation, Hermione opened the letter; then she sighed with relief. *Well at least it's not a Howler*, she thought as she unfolded its single page. 100% Papyrus again. This was a good sign.

My Dearest Miss Granger,

Words cannot express my regret and remorse over our last exchange. You needed a friend, not a scolding, and I failed you dismally. I can only hope that, someday, you will find it in your heart to forgive me.

It was indeed a pleasure to meet your son, Hugo, today and see the sweet innocence in his smile. It was the thought of him forever losing that innocence that pushed me over the edge as well as my selfish thought that my own life would be so much less pleasant without you in it.

Please let me make it up to you. I spent the better part of last weekend in the Hogwarts library, reading up on the subject of wizard divorce law, hence the reason that I knew that you had placed yourself in peril. Perhaps I could share what I have learned so that similar circumstances can be avoided in the future.

Once again, please accept my deepest apologies for my inexcusable behavior.

Your humble servant,

Severus Snape

Hermione stared at the page in amazement. Not only had he said that he was sorry, but he wanted to make it up to her! He was willing to help her with the research. And not only did he seem to genuinely like Hugo, he also put in writing that his life without her would be much less pleasant! It was more than she could ever hope for. And his salutation... "My Dearest." She had read his anger correctly. He *did* care. But for the first time, he had actually signed his name instead of just his initials. This was indeed a significant gesture. This let her know that his words had come from his heart.

Hermione's mind drifted off into a daydream about the next time she would see Snape. Would he finally allow her a hug? She imagined him wrapping his arms around her for side-along Apparition to his house, and as the spinning stopped at their destination, instead of letting go of her, he reached down and bestowed a kiss on her welcoming lips. Would he ever kiss her? She was legally separated now, and Ron was deep in a relationship with someone else already. As far as she was concerned, there was no reason whatsoever for her not to kiss him if he wanted her to. And it most certainly was not against the law to dream about it...

"Are you OK, ma'am?" asked her coworker, Cecelia.

"Oh, yes," stammered Hermione as she was rudely startled out of her musings.

She quickly pulled out a piece of parchment and scribbled a note in reply to Snape's letter. Then she attached it to Gomez's leg and gave the bird a kiss on the cheek. "That's for the Professor," she said with a giggle. "Off you go, then." And she watched the bird fly over the rooftops with a ray of hope in her heart once again.

Homework

Chapter 12 of 35

Snape and Hermione study wizarding law books with the hope of finding a solution to her problem.

My heartfelt thanks goes out to my two betas, JENGEOGE and NervousAboutAngels, plus the staff here at The Petulant Poetess, for sifting through the drivel and helping me to hone my writing skills.

And homage is paid, as always, to the amazing J. K. Rowling for inventing the wonderful characters and environment that we now get to play in. I make no money from the writing or sharing of this tale.

Chapter 12

Homework

No sooner had Gomez disappeared over the rooftops to deliver her letter to Snape than another bird landed on Hermione's windowsill by her desk at the Ministry. The burrowing owl stuck out his leg without hesitation as she reached for the note.

"Wait!" she implored him as she hurriedly unfurled the parchment. It was from Lisa Turpin-Belby, her friend at the *Prophet*, requesting that they meet for drinks after work. She scribbled out her agreement on a separate sheet, rolled it up and tied it to the waiting bird's leg, then sent him on his way. With all of the commotion surrounding her failing marriage, she hadn't given Rita Skeeter's curse one moment of thought. But now that she had Severus Snape back on her side, as well as Blaise Zabini, she knew that her custody battle would be settled with some sort of visitation rights eventually, so she could spare a few moments to contemplate Rita's fate.

Snape sat at his desk, staring at the computer screen. He had turned it on, not knowing where Miss Granger had elected to spend the rest of her lunch hour. Did she remain at her parents' house or return to work? The Ministry contained an extensive law library within its walls. If she had not become too distraught from his torturous verbal thrashing, she may have taken the opportunity to check out some books on the subject of her current dilemma. If she was half as strong-willed and clever as he knew she could be, that was surely the reason that he had not heard back right away. There were no windows in the library since it was down deep in the bowels of the building and well underground. The letter's delivery had been delayed somehow. He hoped that her visit to the library was the reason, and she would be even more anxious to compare notes once she had read his letter. At least these were the excuses he tried to force into his mind as he tried equally hard to quell the idea that she simply refused to accept his apology.

Finally, there came a tapping at his bedroom window. But when Snape looked up, he was surprised by both Gomez and Morticia impatiently pacing the ledge. When allowed entry, Gomez obediently stuck out his leg while Morticia flew up to Snape's shoulder and rubbed her head against his cheek. Both birds then nuzzled up against

him as he put the letter to his nose and slowly inhaled. *No howler ever smelled this good*, he thought as he carefully opened it. But both birds continued to rub up against him to the point of distraction, so he gently gathered up each one and unceremoniously placed them on the outside ledge. "Off you go," he insisted, shaking his head at their odd behavior. Never in all his years had he seen two owls behave with such affection towards a human.

My Dearest Professor Snape,

There is never a need to apologize when one speaks the truth. My actions were selfish as well as foolhardy, just as you pointed out. To have ended up in Azkaban would have been the worst possible scenario for both myself and Hugo. I will be forever in your debt for rescuing me from the clutches of my ex-husband. I only hope that you can forgive me for such a blunder. But it warms my heart to know that you would also have been adversely affected by my absence.

Just as they've done so many times in the past, your harsh words have spurred me into action. I have checked out a multitude of books on the subject from the Ministry library and would find your take on their contents both informative and insightful. Tonight, when I return home, I will IM you a list of titles and authors that I have procured. If you wish to peruse their pages, I will see to it.

Thanks once again for becoming my Knight in Shining Armor. I would be lost without you.

Yours Most Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Snape caressed the parchment as if it were Miss Granger's face. His guilt-ridden vision of her sorrowful tears faded as the memory of her joyous smile took its place. She forgave him, thank Merlin. Not only that, she had called him her *Knight in Shining Armor*. No woman had ever referred to him in that light. To anyone else, he was just a mean and bitter old man. And she was willing to accept his offer of help. In fact, she had expressed a need for it. She would even be lost without him. Snape felt both relieved and elated. Her words were more than he had dared hope for. With the exception of Albus Dumbledore, Miss Granger was the only person that Snape had ever known who could see through his stony exterior and into his heart. She had somehow managed to search beyond his angry words and find the concern that he really felt, the desperation, the compassion. Her heart held a gift beyond words, and that walnut brain, Weasley, had just thrown it away.

What a fool.

Snape turned off his computer and made his way over to the bed. Even though he now habitually forced himself to wake up at 8 a.m. every morning, he could never quite bring himself to fall asleep until 2 or 3 a.m., so he usually required a nap in the afternoon. Today was no exception. With great relief, he disrobed and eased himself under the soft comforter and nestled his head into the pillow.

About an hour later, Snape bolted upright, panting heavily, as he clutched the comforter up to his chest. His hair was stuck to his face and neck with sweat, and the comforter felt sticky from his waist to his knees. He had been dreaming about Miss Granger. Her face, her eyes, her hair, so soft and fragrant... He had been kissing her neck, just in the spot where he imagined that she dabbed on the Secret Recipe. The taste of her skin mixed with that perfume had teased and tantalized his dream senses to the point of ecstasy, and he realized, with great embarrassment, that his dream self had spent his very real manhood all over the comforter!

Snape stood hastily and cast a Scourgify spell over the bed, then gathered up his clothes and headed into the shower in the hopes that Winky had given herself the afternoon off. What in Merlin's name was this woman doing to him? He had previously doubted that that part of his anatomy worked anymore. And now his worries included what to expect if his groin had a mind of its own the next time they met in person. The mere thought turned Snape three shades of purple. Hermione Granger turned him on. Who'd have thought?

Later that afternoon, Hermione met Lisa in the Leaky Cauldron for a drink. She learned that, since the article on Flitwick's retirement hit the newsstands, Rita had been conspicuously absent from the office. Hermione's broad smile told Lisa that she definitely had something to do with it, but Hermione resisted the temptation to let Lisa in on the little secret. "Let's just say that I have my suspicions as to why Rita is not around this week. And I predict that she will come back on Thursday morning."

Their conversation turned to Hermione and Ron's failed marriage and the shameful way in which her ex-husband had been conducting himself in public with Lavender Brown. Lisa was lucky to have Marcus. Not only did his family have clout, but he knew how to treat Lisa with respect and conduct himself with dignity, two things that Ron had never learned.

Lisa finally confessed that she needed to get home to her husband, so they said their goodbyes, and Lisa promised to send Hermione an owl when Rita returned to work.

As pleasant as Lisa's company had been, Hermione could hardly wait to get back home to see if Snape was online. To her delight, his screen name showed up on her buddies online list. The instant her screen had fully loaded, his first line appeared.

HalfBloodPrince: I've been waiting for you. I was beginning to worry.

MuggleBornWitch: Sorry. I had a drink after work with Lisa Turpin-Belby. She informed me that Rita Skeeter has been conspicuously absent from work since that article on Flitwick came out.

HalfBloodPrince: Interesting. Sounds as if your little plan may be working.

MuggleBornWitch: Well, I'm sure it will take many instances before she figures out why she is being made to suffer. Lisa also told me that Rita offered the chocolates to several of her office mates before she would eat any, so she was definitely suspicious of the package.

HalfBloodPrince: You don't have to look closely to surmise that Miss Skeeter was most definitely not born yesterday. You mentioned in your note that you checked out a few law books that may be of some use. I would be interested in the titles. I read through several books at Hogwarts last weekend, but must admit that their selection was a bit limited. I'm sure the Ministry library has a much more comprehensive collection.

Hermione proceeded to dictate the titles of all 20+ books she had checked out, and he replied back as to which ones he had already read, which ones sounded promising, and which he would be most interested in reading. Then the screen remained unchanged for few moments as Snape contemplated his next move.

He had asked her to lunch and rescinded the offer. Should he ask her again? Was it too soon? Would she reject him before he could reject her again? His doubts clouded his usual crystal clarity of purpose. In the past, the idea of lunch during the week was all he thought he could stand, but now, when faced with the notion of her inaccessibly confined in Azkaban, he felt that an eternity wasn't long enough for a good lunch. Besides, if they seriously needed to filter through and assess all of this reading material, they would need hours. But it was only Monday. He didn't want to wait until the following weekend. That seemed months away, not days. That left an invitation to dinner. But what would she think of that? Would she question his motives? Come to think of it, what were his motives? After his eventful dream, he was no longer sure.

Snape finally decided to plunge ahead. He had screwed things up earlier today. Perhaps by day's end he could find more than one way to make it up to her.

HalfBloodPrince: Have you eaten dinner? Winky has all of this leftover food from some banquet that never materialized this afternoon. She informed me that the host had consumed an evil dark potion which made him act like a complete arse and scare away the guest of honor. You could bring the books and we could go over them together.

Hermione's heart jumped from her chest to her throat. Severus Snape had just asked her to dinner! She couldn't believe her good fortune. Once again, her mind drifted back to the daydream she had had earlier in the afternoon and to the imaginary kiss at the river's edge. His letter of apology sounded so gracious. There was still hope. But

she was tired, and it was already late. The harrowing day had worn away at her already ragged nerves, and she had downed three firewhiskys at the Leaky Cauldron. The last thing she wanted was to turn into a sobbing idiot in Snape's dining room. No, if she was really going to spend hours with Severus Snape, she wanted to be wide awake, sober and have total control of her emotions.

MuggleBornWitch: I'm so exhausted that I will probably just go to bed without eating. May I take a rain check? Tomorrow night, perhaps?

The instant she hit send, she felt a spike of fear go through her heart. She really was tired and would probably truly go to bed after they had finished their computer dialogue. But she was so afraid of offending him. Part of her wanted to see him so badly, but in her present condition, she couldn't guarantee that the evening wouldn't end in disaster. Hermione held her breath as she waited for his reply.

HalfBloodPrince: Tomorrow it is. Same plan as before. I will await your appearance on the computer. Then I will come to your house. No need to drop your Anti-Apparation wards. I will knock on the door as I did the very first time I arrived.

MuggleBornWitch: Sounds great. I should be home by 5:30 barring any unforeseen catastrophes.

HalfBloodPrince: Tomorrow then.

With a much lighter heart, Snape logged off and headed downstairs for the kitchen. There would be no dinner guest tonight, so he figured this would be a good time to brew another vat of Hugo's potion. As he worked in his kitchen, Winky Apparated in with a pop and asked him what his wishes were for dinner.

"Leftovers from today's lunch, I suppose," came his reply. "Oh, by the way, I have extended an invitation to Miss Granger for dinner tomorrow."

Winky smiled broadly. "Winky knew Miss Granger would forgive Master."

"If I say anything stupid or cruel while she is here," Snape asked with sparkling eyes, "would you please place me in a full Body-Bind curse and give her my apologies?"

"Oh, Master Severus." Winky turned her head to the side and looked up at him innocently. "That won't be necessary. The evening may not be everything Master hopes for, but it will go well enough." With that oddly prophetic statement, she turned towards the refrigerator and began to Levitate the leftover food to the dining room table where she arranged it all with her usual artistry. "Just tell Winky when Master is ready to eat."

"Just a couple more ingredients and I'll be finished here," Snape commented absent-mindedly. He had brewed Hugo's potion so many times that he could almost do it with his eyes closed. After the addition of a tablespoon of honey to make the taste more bearable, Snape set the fire to low so it could simmer for an hour. Then it would need eight hours to mature and he could send a phial to Molly's house in the morning.

Hermione seemed to float upstairs to draw herself a bath. In less than 24 hours, she would be dining with Professor Snape *in his house!* As she eased herself down into the steaming water, she felt her aching muscles begin to relax. She closed her eyes and imagined his warm hands caressing her curves as the warmth of the water caressed her bare skin. Would he kiss her? Would he, perhaps, just perhaps, even ask her to stay?

She fantasized about his appearance under those many layers of clothing. She had seen his bare chest in St. Mungo's all those years ago. His physique had seemed gaunt then, almost as if he had been starved half to death. But his muscles still appeared well toned and developed, and there was just enough black hair against that pale skin to entice her fingers...

Hermione felt a slow burning sensation in her nether regions that she had not felt for a very long time. Severus Snape turned her on! Merlin's monocle! Was she going senile? No, she told herself after some time. She had always felt attracted to the mysterious and distant Potions professor.

The following day dragged on as Hermione forced herself to go through the motions at work. Instead of Apparating home, she spent her lunch hour at her desk going over two of the books that she felt held the most promise. But the hours inched by at a snail's pace. As she stared at the clock on the wall, it seemed that the second hand stood still in some sort of suspended animation. And her job had never seemed so boring.

At 4:30 p.m., Hermione stood up and announced to her coworkers that she was calling it a day and marched out of the door without ceremony. When she got home she bounded up the stairs to change clothes and freshen up. She had to look her best for the tall, dark, and mysterious Professor Snape. Would a bit of his mystery be unveiled this evening? Hermione hoped so with all of her heart. She couldn't remember when she had ever been this excited about an evening with a man. The night of the Yule Ball her fourth year at Hogwarts came to mind, but that night she was more nervous than excited. Since the only man she had ever had sex with was Ron, that revelation didn't surprise her, but she suddenly realized how inexperienced and how innocent to the ways of the world she really was.

Hermione checked herself in the mirror. A dark, Slytherin green skirt with black belt, low black pumps, and a Gryffindor gold tank top... Onyx earrings set in gold, with a matching necklace which hung low around her neck, inviting a glance into her cleavage... Her black traveling cloak matched her pumps and would suffice to keep the chill off as they walked by the river's edge. She studied her hair. Each curl had been carefully charmed to stay in place so that it couldn't get too wild, even if the wind had other ideas, and her make-up was perfect. After dabbing on the Secret Recipe, she let out a great sigh and headed back down the staircase to the family room. The mantle clock told her that the time was already 5:35 p.m. This was it.

She turned on her ancient computer. It seemed to take forever to come up, but when it finally did, she saw Snape's screen name in her buddies list box. Then, almost instantly, a message appeared on screen.

HalfBloodPrince: Ready or not, here I come...

Hermione grinned from ear to ear. She was ready for him.

A few moments later the doorbell rang. She walked briskly to the door and looked out onto an apparently empty front porch, but she knew better. "Won't you come in?" she asked.

Snape drank in Miss Granger's form like a cool glass of iced tea on a hot summer day. He couldn't remember the last time he had had the privilege of witnessing such loveliness. "Actually," replied his silky voice from what seemed to be thin air, "if you Disillusion yourself, we can simply Disapparate from your front porch.

"Why waste time?" Hermione chuckled. "Let me get my bag. It has all of the books in it." She stepped quickly back into the family room to retrieve the bag and returned to the front hallway to grab her traveling cloak.

"Here, let me help you with that," Snape offered as he took her cloak and draped it gently over her shoulders.

Hermione then tapped herself on the head and began to vanish, but the instant she did so, she felt Snape's strong hand grab her arm and lead her outside. "We mustn't lose each other," he explained as she felt his arm slip around her waist. Her heartrate skyrocketed as she pulled the door closed and tapped her invisible wand to the knob, reengaging the Muggle lock. "Hold on tight," she heard him say. She obediently wrapped both arms around his midsection and closed her eyes. It didn't matter where he was taking her. She would have gone anywhere with this amazing man.

For the first time in his life, Snape actually enjoyed the sensation of being squeezed through the Apparation process. He could feel every inch of Miss Granger's body pressing against his even through their many layers of clothing. His face buried itself in her hair as he greedily took in her scent mixed with the Secret Recipe. But just as his blood began to rush to places that might cause him embarrassment, the trip was over and they stood in each others' arms on the riverbank. It was still broad daylight,

so he immediately glanced around to see if they were alone. A young couple could be seen off in the distance, holding hands as they walked along the shore, but they only had eyes for each other.

Snape found it difficult to let Miss Granger go. She seemed to be having the same problem, because they stood motionless for quite some time. But since he couldn't see her face, he had no idea what she might be thinking. Finally, he broke the silence. "I think the coast is clear." They reluctantly released each other and removed their respective Disillusionment Charms. Miss Granger appeared before him, once again, as a vision of such loveliness that she left him speechless.

Hermione glanced around and noticed a playground with a see-saw, a merry-go-round and a shiny new swing set obscured by some bushes only a few meters away. Her mind drifted back to Snape's childhood memories that Harry had mentioned from his Pensieve dive on the night of Voldemort's downfall. "So, this is the river from your childhood? This is where you met Lily Evans?"

The instant she mentioned Lily's name she felt Snape's entire demeanor change. He became stiff and cold as a dormant, leafless tree in the dead of winter. Hermione kicked herself inwardly. *Idiot! The last thing you should do if you want to break down the walls around his heart is to mention the only woman he ever loved!*

"Yes," Snape confirmed with a barely discernable nod. "This is the river of my childhood. Only now, as you can see, the atmosphere is much more pleasant. The Muggles," he explained as he carefully redirected the conversation, "have done an excellent job of cleaning up the area and eliminating the pollutants which used to contaminate its waters."

Snape hadn't thought of Lily for quite some time. But the mere mention of her name brought back a flood of memories both pleasant and torturous. The poison of pureblood rhetoric that had infected his soul had been her undoing. And even though he had saved her son and given the boy the tools that he had needed to defeat Voldemort, he still felt gut-wrenching guilt at the mention of her name.

Would the residue of that poison bring about Miss Granger's downfall as well? If they became romantically involved, would his status as a convicted felon cost her her job at the Ministry? Or worse, could it prevent her from gaining access to her children? With those questions embedded in his mind, he pushed his fantasies aside and decided that, for her sake as well as her children's, a clandestine friendship was all that he could allow.

Silence reigned for the remainder of their walk from the riverbank to the little house on Spinner's End. Hermione barely noticed the nice, neat, two-story cottages with their manicured yards and flowerboxes in the windows. All she could think about was how she had already ruined her chances with this emotionally fragile man with just one stupid, senseless, irrelevant question.

When they reached the house, Winky's glowing smile greeted them just inside the doorway, but it was soon replaced with a look of concern as she glanced first at Snape's austere face and then at Miss Granger's sorrowful one. But she warmly greeted them both and dutifully painted the same smile back on in hopes of salvaging something of the evening. They had just arrived, after all. Good food and spirits would surely cheer them up.

Snape removed Miss Granger's traveling cloak and hung it in the front hall closet, and offered Miss Granger a seat on the couch.

"Would you care for a cocktail, a glass of wine perhaps?" Snape offered graciously.

"Just some water for now, I think," Hermione replied as she remembered her reason for declining the previous day's invitation.

"Winky has made lemonade and iced tea for miss, if miss would like," Winky mentioned from the kitchen doorway.

"Lemonade would be fine, thanks."

"Make that two," added Snape as he settled himself into the padded chair beside the couch.

Winky was quite surprised by Snape's request for lemonade. She had never seen him drink it, but she brought two glasses, along with the baguette toasts and foie gras, and watched with amusement from the doorway as he took his first sip. He tried not to let his distaste show on his face, but Winky had to retreat to the kitchen so her giggles couldn't be heard. Luckily, Miss Granger happened to be reaching for a piece of toast, so she didn't notice his grimace or Winky's reaction.

"So," Snape began as he put down his glass in disgust, "which books did you bring with you?"

"Oh, I have quite an assortment, as you know from the list I provided you last night." She reached into her handbag and began to pull them out.

Snape took each one in tiny form and sorted them into the titles which he had already read, the ones that held promise, and the ones that, in his opinion, would do nothing to further her cause. "Here." He handed her back the pile that he felt would be useless. "Put those away for now. These others should give us plenty to focus on tonight."

Just then, Winky emerged from the kitchen with more toast and foie gras and a glass of red wine for Snape.

"Great lemonade, Winky. Very tasty," commented Hermione with a smile.

"Winky is glad that somebody thinks so," she said with a smirk as she handed Snape his wine and removed the offensive beverage from his coaster.

"Sorry, Winky, but it's just not my cup of tea." Snape smiled graciously at her as she replenished the toast.

Hermione looked from Winky to Snape and back again. She could tell by their brief exchange that they had mutual respect and affection for each other. It felt much more like a partnership than a master/slave relationship. This put her mind at ease. She never liked the idea of house-elf ownership. It was a repulsive tradition that she had spent much of her adult life fighting against.

"Why did you ask for it if you didn't like it?"

"I had never tried it before, so I didn't know."

"Then how did she know that you didn't like it? You didn't tell her. I didn't hear you ask for the wine."

"I've come to the conclusion that, over the years, Winky has learned to read my moods so well that she could almost be classified as a psychic."

"I see." Hermione nodded her head. "I'll keep that in mind."

This exchange lightened the mood considerably as they began to peruse the books and discuss their contents. Hermione still felt that any ideas of romance had evaporated the moment she had mentioned Lily while on the riverbank, but the mood was still amiable and the evening would still pass pleasantly.

After about an hour, Winky announced that dinner was served, and the two moved themselves to the dining room, leaving the books behind for the moment. A dusty dry red wine in a long-stemmed crystal glass adorned each place setting as did the most beautiful china and sterling silver that Hermione had ever seen. Winky had outdone herself as the two started with a spinach salad, followed by veal in a light cream sauce, with rice pilaf and steamed vegetables on the side. And even though Hermione felt she was about to burst, she didn't have the heart to turn down the grand finale, a chocolate mousse parfait topped with whipped cream and a cherry.

"If I ate like this every day, I would be as big around as my refrigerator!" she admitted. "How do you stay so fit with meals like these?"

Snape smiled broadly. "Don't worry. I don't expect Winky to go to this much trouble every day."

"Winky would gladly do so for Master Severus," she interjected from the kitchen.

"Ah, yes, but then I too, would be as large as my refrigerator. And that would be a disaster since then I would no longer be able to fit through the door of my greenhouse or into my bathroom shower!"

Hermione couldn't help but laugh out loud at that notion. "Yes, that would be a disaster!"

They let the books sit unattended for just a while longer as they engaged in conversation with each a snifter of fine cognac in hand to help wash down the food.

"You know, I thought of an idea that just might help you gain access to your children, whether your dunderheaded husband likes it or not."

"Oh?" He had definitely piqued her interest.

"Why don't you apply for Flitwick's job? You excelled at Charms. Certainly you are qualified to teach it."

Hermione stared at him, dumbfounded. *Of course...* It was the perfect solution to her dilemma. She was speechless. Why hadn't she thought of it?

"You could see them in your classroom at school and at meals every day, and there would be nothing Walnut Brain could do about it."

"I did fancy becoming a teacher at one point. And I do love children."

"I assure you that love of children is not a requirement," Snape said with a sneer. "But I imagine that would make it a more enjoyable and rewarding experience."

"Oh, come on. You enjoyed teaching, admit it. You miss it... All those fresh young minds just waiting to be filled with potion formulae."

"I like to think that I filled them all with fear and intimidation first and foremost."

This time it was Hermione's turn to sneer. "I really do hate my job at the Ministry. I doubt that there's anything more I can do for house-elves or centaurs, much less the giants. It's worth a try, I guess. Did Headmaster McGonagall say anything about it when you were there last weekend?"

"Only that she had no applicants yet who were even remotely qualified. She was hoping for someone who had at least scored an Outstanding on the Charms NEWT exam."

"I scored an Outstanding on all of my NEWT exams," Hermione admitted with a touch of pride.

"Well, there you are."

"But Hugo won't even start at Hogwarts until next fall, and that's over a year away. I haven't seen Rose since Easter break. I can't wait that long. There has to be a way for Ron to see reason."

With that urgent plea, the two took their snifters and retreated to the study and went back to searching through the pile of books.

After reading for some time, Hermione sat back on the couch and snorted in disgust. "I can't even get my children back if the bastard dies!"

"What?" Snape leaned over to read the passage she had just finished.

"It talks about a case where the wife murdered the ex-husband, and the children were raised by the husband's parents while the wife spent the rest of her days in Azkaban."

"Well, what would you expect if she was a murderer?"

"She only murdered him because he wouldn't let her see her children. She had no prior criminal record."

"But still..."

"And she would have gotten away with it, too, but for the portrait who witnessed it."

"A portrait was the only witness?"

"Yes."

"Then why couldn't Dumbledore's portrait testify in my trial?"

"The circumstances there were completely different. He would have had to testify about things that had happened while he was still alive. No one knows comprehensively how the memory is affected when someone's consciousness is imprinted on a portrait. His memory of his life could have been distorted; important facts could have been missing."

Snape sat back in his chair with a huff. "You sound like Kingsley when he informed me of the Wizengamot's decision."

Hermione sat in silent contemplation for a moment. "No portrait had even been allowed to testify in his own murder trial before. There was no precedent. They voted, didn't they? Whether to allow it or not?"

"Yes, yes. And it was voted down." Snape sighed heavily. This was definitely not something that he had any desire to talk about. "Let's move on, shall we?"

"Sorry." She buried her nose back in the same book. "Right... Here is another case listed where the pureblood ex-husband died of natural causes, and his parents still ended up with the children, even though the Muggle-born mother was alive and well and innocent of any wrongdoing."

"That is most unfortunate." Snape sat back in his chair and became thoughtful. "I mentioned that I spoke with Molly about the truth of your predicament, didn't I?"

Hermione nodded. "You told her that Ron had been lying to everyone about what was happening."

"Yes, and now I will be sending Hugo's potion to her house, and they both have vowed to send me letters every week with updates as to his condition."

Hermione let out a sigh of relief. "Thank Merlin that someone is on my side."

"Perhaps we are taking the wrong approach. Perhaps, if we work on Molly's sense of fairness and what's best for the children, she can help convince the wastrel to let you have access to your children."

"Do you think I should write to her?"

Snape nodded thoughtfully. "I would think that a diplomatically worded plea to her sense of justice would work wonders. Over the summer, she's bound to be taking care of the children while her son is at work. Perhaps you could convince her to let you stop by for a visit, or invite her over for lunch and bring the children."

Hermione's spirits lifted at the mere thought of such an event. "Thank you, Professor. That's a great idea. I may need you to send my owl back to me, though. I assume that he has taken up residence here?"

"Yes, Gomez and Morticia have become an item," Snape informed her with some amusement. "They are constructing a nest. I suspect that there will be eggs soon. And they are the two most affectionate creatures that I have even encountered."

Hermione beamed at him. "With each other or with you? I only ask because the last time you sent me a note, Gomez spread his wings and rubbed against me as if he were trying to give me a hug. It was the strangest thing I have ever seen an owl do."

Snape agreed. "When you sent back your reply, they both came to the window and acted in a similar fashion. I couldn't even read your letter without setting them both back outside. Very strange, indeed."

"I think it's rather touching, myself," she admitted shyly as she stole a quick glance at Snape. As their eyes locked, she felt herself wishing that the evening would never end. She longed for his arms to hold her. As she tried to silently convey that thought to him, however, he hastily looked away. *Damn! I just couldn't leave well enough alone, could I?*

Snape felt that hungry desire begin to build up again. *Merlin...if she only didn't have children, if I only had not been convicted... if she had only just left me to die that night as I was meant to.* He turned his gaze to the myriad books lining his shelves, but he didn't see them. Instead, his mind was filled with what could have been had his life been just a little bit different. If the court had only listened to Potter... if Dumbledore's portrait could only have been allowed to testify... if Snape had only answered one of Miss Granger's sixty letters... If only. Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "It's getting late. Perhaps we can continue this another time."

Hermione swallowed hard. She made a pitiful attempt to hide her disappointment. "Would you like to keep any of these to read?"

Snape reached across the table and pointed to three of the larger tomes. "Those should keep me busy for a few days."

"Very well, then." She shrank down the remaining books and shoved them back into her handbag.

Snape stood and retrieved her traveling cloak from the front hall closet as she came to the door. "Goodbye, Winky," she called out, hoping the elf was within earshot.

Her little head appeared promptly in the kitchen doorway. "Leaving so soon, miss?"

"It's getting late, Winky." Snape glared at Winky with stern eyes to let her know not to try to redirect this turn of events. "Miss Granger has to be at work early in the morning."

"Dinner was outstanding, Winky. You're an amazing cook. Professor Snape should consider himself blessed."

"Oh, thank you, miss." Winky bowed deeply. "Will we see you again soon?"

Snape turned his head so only Winky could see as he scowled and bared his teeth at her in an unmistakable gesture that she had better silence herself, or else!

"Actually, I was hoping that Professor Snape would join me for dinner tomorrow night."

"That won't give me time to read these and work on my potions projects as well. Perhaps by this weekend I will have given them their proper attention. Shall we aim for Saturday night?"

Hermione's face lit up. "You could come for lunch and stay through dinner if need be. It would give us much more time."

Snape wasn't sure if he liked that idea or not, but this was not the time or place to discuss it. "We'll see," was his only response. "Let me walk you back to the riverbank. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you in the dark. It's not a bad neighborhood anymore, but one never knows." As he opened the door for Miss Granger, Snape shot one last warning glance at Winky, who had placed her tiny hand over her mouth and was trying not to giggle.

They walked again in silence as they made their way to the river's edge. "I believe that you can Disapparate from here without being seen by anyone, but you may want to Disillusion yourself first." Snape gazed into her face as she turned towards him to say goodbye. Her eyes glistened and sparkled in the moonlight, just as the moon made the rushing river sparkle. The serenity and romance this scene had to offer was not lost on Snape's heart, but he couldn't let his heart rule his head. Not only did her aroma fill his nostrils, but he could actually feel the effects of her pheromones as they filled the air. Oh, Merlin's maelstrom, how he wanted to scoop her up and take her back to his bed. But he knew that that would be selfish and foolhardy. For her own good, he had to keep his distance.

Hermione wanted to dive into the depths of his bottomless black eyes, if for no other reason than to see why he looked so sorrowful. His look was of longing, but was it longing for her or for Lily? Or for something else that was indefinable? She would have given almost anything to have been a decent Legilimens at that moment, but she never could master the spell. She would have settled for letting him see inside of her mind so he would know, without question, just how she felt about him, but he didn't use it on her. So instead, she looked at him with such longing that it must have been unmistakable, undeniable. But he just stood there like a stiff, wooden statue with a pained expression on his face.

Finally, Hermione could take no more. She flung her arms around his neck and kissed his hot cheek. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear, "for everything." She kissed his cheek again, hoping against hope that he would turn his head and their lips would meet, but she was disappointed once more. As she continued to hold him, she eventually felt his arms wrap lightly around her, but there was no passion in his grip. And when she finally faced the fact that nothing more was going to happen tonight, she let go and stepped away. Snape's eyes appeared tightly shut and his brow was furrowed. When he didn't open his eyes, her heart sank. She assumed that she had messed things up yet again, and without another word, she Disapparated.

With the sound of rustling leaves and the tell-tale "crack" of Disapparation, Snape opened his eyes. He had kept his eyes shut so as not to betray his feelings. He knew that if she had tried to kiss him, really kiss him, his resolve would have given way to reckless abandonment, and then there would have been no turning back. He would rather have suffered the Cruciatus Curse than to let her leave like that, but he knew it was the right thing to do. With a heavy heart he made his way back home. He was not looking forward to Saturday.

Illogical Behavior

Chapter 13 of 35

Snape and Hermione continue to work on a legal solution to her problem.

As always, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for all of their hard work on my behalf. And the staff here at The Petulant

Poetess deserves accolades for the constant vigilance as well. Thanks so much for everything.

The characters and the backdrop are from the amazing mind of J. K. Rowling. I make no money from the writing or sharing of this story.

Chapter 13

Illogical Behavior

As the week progressed, Hermione and Snape conversed and compared notes via computer as they did their legal research, but the more they read the more hopeless Hermione's situation appeared. Historically, the law sided with the parent of the purest blood in every case. Sometimes, if both parents had equally pure or mixed blood, joint custody was awarded. But the courts never sided with the Muggle-born, even if the Muggle-born was talented and well-to-do and the pureblood didn't have two knuts to rub together. It really all came down to one thing: Hermione had to get back on Ron's good side if she ever wanted to see her kids again.

The more Snape thought about it, the more he felt that the best thing he could do for Miss Granger was to help her smooth things over with Wart Face and perhaps even help them get back together. He had made up his mind that a relationship with her was out of the question under their present circumstances, perhaps even forever since he would die a convicted felon. So his only concern now was to act as her friend and confidant and do what he could to see her happy. Isn't that what friends do? Help each other find happiness? It had never been his habit to put someone else's happiness before his own. But for some reason, Miss Granger brought out an uncharacteristically generous nature that he had never before even realize he had.

Every time he had witnessed Miss Granger and that whiffet together since their lunch in early March, emotions had run so high that they couldn't effectively communicate. He knew from painful, personal experience that, when communication lines go down, nothing gets resolved and people go their separate ways (sometimes permanently). That would have been fine with him if there had been no children involved, but Miss Granger needed her children, and Hugo, at least, most definitely needed her. There simply had to be a way to make Walnut Brain see reason. But if they were to make any progress in that regard, they would need to set aside their emotions and talk calmly with each other.

Fat chance! he thought to himself as he continued half-heartedly to flip through the pages of the third legal volume.

Hermione continued her research and computer dialog with Snape and came to a similar conclusion. But she had no desire to communicate with Ron...much less get back together with him. So she took Snape's other advice and appealed to Molly's sense of justice, fairness, and motherly love, in a carefully crafted letter that didn't implicate her son in any way. Then, rather than bother Snape to send Gomez, she used a Ministry owl to deliver it.

No sooner did she open her office window to send the owl, but another landed on her ledge. It held out its leg and offered her the note. She sent the Ministry owl on its way and removed the note from the other owl. To her delight, she found a letter from Lisa on *Prophet* letterhead, informing her that Rita was back at the office, but with heavy makeup on her face and a wobble in her step. The letter requested her presence at the Leaky Cauldron after work. With great enthusiasm, she scribbled her affirmative reply and attached it to the waiting bird's leg.

As soon as 5:30 p.m. came, Hermione headed out the door to the Leaky Cauldron. Lisa was already waiting for her with two Firewhiskies and some chips. "I don't know what you did to her," Lisa informed Hermione with a laugh, "but the woman is in a real state! She can't stay in her seat for more than a minute, and when she does sit down, she's squirming constantly. And I've never seen her wear so much make-up. Her face almost looks like it's made of plastic!"

The news of Rita's misery was the only bright spot in Hermione's otherwise depressing week. She told Lisa of her Muggle-born woes in connection with child custody and how any hope of seeing her children rested solely within the questionable goodness of Ron's heart. "It's just not fair. I can't help my blood status. I'm responsible and a good mother. I set a good example, which is more than I can say for Ron with his drinking and carousing."

"It's the last underlying prejudice that our world has, Hermione," Lisa explained. "No one will admit it out loud anymore, but most purebloods, and even a lot of the mixed-bloods, still feel superior to any Muggle-born, no matter how talented or intelligent they might be. It's sad, really. But I've seen it happen over and over... Some poor businessman or shopkeeper who has been trying to pass himself off as a pureblood is discovered to be a Muggle-born, and his business slowly goes down to the point that he has to close up shop and move on."

"Yeah, I remember just last year... That little shop that sold Muggle cross-over clothes for witches and wizards who did business or lived with Muggles. What was his name? Otto Steingold?"

"He was from Germany, so I guess he thought he could get away with claiming to be a pureblood because no one around here knew his family."

"Didn't Rita break that story?"

"Yes, she did," admitted Lisa. "I don't touch stuff like that. I feel that it's nobody's business where someone comes from or who their parents are. If they offer a good product or service and stand behind it, I'll go to them no matter what their background."

"Do you think his business dropped off because his heritage was discovered, or because people found out he was lying about it and they no longer trusted him?"

"Does it really matter why?" Lisa asked. "He had no choice but to leave."

"Any idea where he went?"

"He probably left the country or opened up a Muggle shop in a Muggle neighborhood somewhere. It would be easier to keep his wizarding powers a secret in the Muggle world than to keep his bloodlines a secret in our world."

"It's a shame. I loved his selection. He had an uncanny ability to blend wizarding fashion with Muggle looks in a unique way. I could wear his outfits anywhere and not feel out of place."

Later that night, Hermione IM'd Snape about her meeting with Lisa. They batted around ideas about her Muggle bloodline status, but no new breakthroughs were forthcoming. Hermione went to bed that night more depressed than ever.

When Snape arrived at her house on Saturday just after noon, Hermione had fish and chips with rolls and a salad ready for him. It quickly became a working lunch with the law books strewn all over the dining room table as they ate. This was Snape's idea. He felt that they had gotten way too friendly at his house earlier in the week, and he was determined that today she would be kept at arm's length.

He hadn't counted on their uninvited guest...

No sooner had they both finished their food than there came a pounding on the door. "Open up, Hermione, I need to talk to you!" Ron's gruff voice could be heard loud and clear even through the heavy front door.

Hermione looked up, horrified. "I wonder if he found out that I wrote that letter to his mum."

"Did you ever hear back from her?"

"No." Her anxiety began to build.

"Then you may assume that he knows."

Tears began to well up in Hermione's eyes.

Snape glanced around. Their lunch together was nothing to hide, but the research would most definitely cause alarm, even in a dunderhead like Weasley. "Go answer the door. I'll hide the books. We're just having a friendly lunch. There's nothing wrong with that. Just try to stay calm."

Another loud knock accompanied another cry of, "Hermione!"

"Impatient whippet, isn't he?" Snape commented with a scowl as he began to shrink the books with a nonverbal spell.

She nodded and dabbed her eyes with her napkin then stood up and headed for the front door. When she opened it, he pushed his way past her and came in over her obvious objections. "What do you want?" she asked in a combative tone.

"It's about that letter you wrote to my mother." His eyes narrowed accusingly.

"What about it?" she asked defiantly with her head held high.

"You had NO RIGHT to involve her in this. Now she's all upset because she's caught in the middle. And now that school is out and the kids spend all day with her, it's not good for them to see her so upset. Did you think about that? How it would affect our kids?"

That line sent Hermione into orbit. "How DARE you accuse me of not thinking about our children! They are ALL I have thought about since you forbade me to see them, you cold-hearted PEA BRAIN!! They NEED ME, just as much, if not MORE, than they need *you*. Did *that* thought ever occur to you?"

"I'm warning you, Hermione." Ron drew his wand and waved it in her face. "You leave my mother out of this, or I swear I'll..."

"Or you'll do what?" Severus Snape's cool, deep voice stung in Ron's ears just as he felt the jab of Snape's wand in the side of his neck.

Ron froze. "You wouldn't dare," he said, but his voice betrayed his uncertainty. "I'm an Auror, remember?"

"Oh, I'm shaking in my shoes," Snape replied with thick sarcasm.

Hermione tried unsuccessfully not to smirk.

Ron glared at Hermione. "Bloody Hell! Does he live here now?"

"Don't be ridiculous. He's here for lunch."

Ron gingerly held his wand with only two fingers and slowly placed it back in his robe's pocket. Snape eased his own wand back down by his side, but he didn't put it away.

"If you don't mind, Snape, I'm having a private conversation with my wife." Ron tried to keep his voice level, but his underlying tone was anything but calm.

"I believe you mean, 'ex-wife,'" Snape drawled silkily.

"Whatever you need to say can be said in front of Professor Snape, Ronald," Hermione announced in defiance.

"Alright then. Have it your way... If you ever want any hope of seeing Hugo and Rose again, you'll leave my mum out of this. And another thing, you'd better be more careful who you keep company with, my dear." Ron glanced down his nose at Snape. "I doubt that the courts would find your relationship with a *convicted felon* to be a good influence on our children."

Hermione was incensed. "You know that's not fair, Ron. He should never have been charged, much less convicted..."

"I don't know anything of the sort. And neither does the Wizengamot." Ron gazed at Snape with a triumphant arrogance that made Snape's blood boil. Then he pushed back past Hermione and opened the front door. As he stood on the porch, he looked back at Snape and Hermione standing side by side in the doorway. If looks could kill, he would have dropped dead many times over. "You'd better watch your step, witch!" Then he spun, and with a loud crack, Ron Disappeared.

Hermione wasn't even concerned that the neighbor doing yard work across the street turned around to find the source of the loud noise. She closed the door as she closed her eyes. Then the tears began to flow. If she gave up Professor Snape's friendship, that still wouldn't guarantee that Ron would let her see Hugo and Rose. Professor Snape was the one bright spot in her dismal life. The mere thought of trying to get along without him tore at her heart like a dagger. When she turned to look into his eyes, she found great sadness reflected there. She felt eternal gratitude when he gathered her up in his arms and began to rock her back and forth slowly, gently. His arms felt so warm, so secure. The last time she needed such comforting was right after she had learned of her parents' deaths. Harry had been there for her then, but this felt very different. At first her hands had been clustered at his chest, but as the reality of her situation sank in and her sorrow deepened, she snaked her arms around his waist and held on for dear life. Even though she had waited for this moment for so long, no thoughts of romance entered her mind. She didn't just need comforting, she needed *him*... his stability... his strength... He was the only person she had left to hold on to. How could she let him go?

"I don't care what Ron says; I need you in my life, Professor," Hermione admitted through her sobs. She looked up at his fathomless depths with a wet face and watery eyes. "Please don't abandon me."

Snape's return gaze held great compassion as he offered uncharacteristic words of comfort. "You never abandoned me, Miss Granger," he admitted softly, "even when I tried to get rid of you. Don't worry. You'll always have me to talk to."

His words felt velvety soft as they penetrated her tortured soul.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back in a gesture that seemed to invite a kiss. It was all Snape could do to resist the urges that began to surge through him at the sight of her parted lips and long dark lashes wet with tears. But he gently wiped the drops from her cheeks, then put his palm to the side of her head and eased her face to his shoulder. Then he stroked her soft curls as he continued to rock her gently. She needed a friend now, not a lover who would only cloud her judgment and perhaps ruin her chances to see her children. That's the last thing Snape needed to add to his already guilt-ridden past. That felony conviction hung like an albatross around his neck. At times like these he felt that he would drown because of it. But he couldn't drag Miss Granger under as well, so he steeled his resolve to once again make sure that this friendship didn't evolve into anything more.

Once Hermione had finally calmed down, Snape helped her clean up the remnants of lunch. Then he pulled the shrunken books from his robe's pockets and left them on the dining room table. There seemed to be no legal recourse for her. Hermione's only chance was to force Ron to see reason somehow. With that apparently impossible task looming ahead as her only hope, Hermione saw Snape to the door with a heavy heart.

As Snape reached for his traveling cloak, he began to think out loud. "The entire time you were at Hogwarts together, I don't remember Weasley as being overly cruel. He was never the sharpest tool in the shed, and he could be a rather insensitive clod when it came to others' feelings..."

"That's an understatement," Hermione interjected viciously.

"... but I never got the impression that he was cruel or ruthless. Romances come and go, but true friendship is forever. Weren't you two friends before the romance started up?"

"Yes," she replied curiously. "What are you getting at?"

"That his behavior is illogical. It's not... *him*." Snape's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I'll bet he has a reason for treating you this way. There's something he wants, and he wants it badly enough to put you and the children through hell to get it."

"But what could it be? I'm not asking for the house or any of his money. And I don't want to take the kids from him, I only want joint custody." Hermione felt totally flummoxed. "What could he possibly want from me?"

"I don't know." He pulled her in for another friendly hug. "But I'll do some digging and see what I can come up with."

Her head tilted back again as she closed her eyes. Snape looked down at her beautiful face and smiled sadly. At least this time, she wasn't crying. He planted a chaste kiss on her forehead.

When he let her go, her face became a question mark. He opened the door and glanced around. Not a neighbor in sight, but since he wasn't sure who might be around when he Apparated to the river's edge at Spinner's End, he tapped himself on the head and began to disappear.

"I'll be in touch," he whispered in her ear. His hot breath enveloped her neck and sent a shudder down her back to her loins. Then she felt him brush past her to the front porch, and with a rustle of the surrounding bushes, he was gone.

And she felt part of herself go with him.

Sources of Amusement

Chapter 14 of 35

Snape discovers the reasons behind Ron's cruel behavior.

As always, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my two betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for all of their help, as well as the staff here at The Petulant Poetess, for helping me to iron out the kinks in my story.

And, of course, all of the credit goes to the brilliant J. K. Rowling for inventing the amazing Harry Potter Universe and all of its wonderful characters. I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story.

Chapter 14

Sources of Amusement

Snape had his "digging" cut out for him. Since he was neither married nor a pureblood, he had no insight into what might be driving the Weasley whelp's behavior, so he would have to ask someone who did.

His first impulse was to turn to Lucius Malfoy. If anyone was an expert at keeping women on the side, it was Lucius. But since he had for years refused to accept Snape's owl post, much less an invitation to tea, Snape thought better of it. Why waste a perfectly good sheet of papyrus?

Draco was quite another matter. His standing in high society was rock solid. He had absolutely nothing to fear from being seen in correspondence or light conversation with what the general wizarding population would consider an unsavory character. He had also been one of the first of his class to marry. Their union had produced a flaxen haired replica of Draco about the same time the first Potter brat had been born. Perhaps Draco had already tired of his bride years ago and had by now turned to Daddy for advice.

It's worth a shot.

As he sat at the desk up in his bedroom, Snape penned an invitation to Sunday afternoon tea on his finest papyrus, with a P.S. to apologize for the short notice. Then he slipped it into a matching envelope and sealed it with opalescent green wax and an ancient Slytherin stamp that had been passed down from his maternal grandfather. Then he beckoned Morticia to take a break from her nest building. She dutifully allowed him to tie the note to her leg, but she seemed uncharacteristically aloof, not at all her affectionate self.

"What's the matter, Morticia?" he asked curiously as his attempt to caress her back was squelched by a quick sidestep. She took off in a huff, leaving a perplexed Snape in her wake. This new development was disconcerting. He had actually become quite fond of both birds and took comfort in their oddly affectionate behavior. But he brushed it off, deciding that she must be about to lay eggs, and like human females, her hormones must be taking her on an emotional rollercoaster ride.

Poor Gomez.

The next person he figured he could ask for insight into Weasley's behavior was Potter. For a brief moment he contemplated sending Potter an invitation for the same date and time as Draco, but the fleeting picture of the two of them strutting and posturing like peacocks during mating season made him think better of it. They would be so busy trying to insult and outdo each other that no useful information would be forthcoming. What a waste of perfectly good tea.

And although the thought of suffering through an hour one-on-one with "The Chosen One" still left Snape a bit queasy, he felt that he could force himself, if only for Miss Granger's sake. So a second invitation for lunch on Monday was penned but this time only on common parchment. He still sealed the note with his Slytherin stamp however. His Slytherin pride shone through even after all these years.

Now it was Gomez's turn. The owl came when summoned and dutifully stuck out his leg. He was not overly affectionate but did allow Snape to stroke his back before flying off into the stifling humidity.

Snape then sat back in his chair and realized that he had not yet indulged in the usual afternoon nap. Suddenly overtaken with exhaustion, he peeled out of his clothes and

slipped under the covers. He closed his eyes but could not clear his mind of the day's events... Miss Granger hunching over a book while slowly chewing a mouthful of food... Miss Granger sitting back and laughing at one of his snide remarks concerning her derelict ex-husband... Miss Granger fiercely standing up to said derelict with regards to her children... Miss Granger's smug expression when Snape came to her rescue... The intoxicating aroma of Miss Granger's skin, tears, and Secret Recipe as she fell into an emotional heap in his arms... Her tear stained face... Her parted lips... And here he was trying to figure out a way to get her back together with her husband...was he MAD??

Merlin, help me.

Snape tossed and turned, but finally, sleep enveloped the desire and denial that tore at his heart.

But then his subconscious mind took over and began to act out his long-imagined fantasies. He and Miss Granger found themselves intertwined, his fingers tangled in her wild mane, hers attempting to unlock his many buttons. He tasted her neck and his heart raced. Her scent combined with Secret Recipe often pushed him to the edge in real life, but to his dream senses every whiff, every taste, every touch seemed magnified. His mouth moved up to taste her lips. Those soft, supple, hot lips, wet with desire for him. He pulled her closer as the bulge in his pants expanded and became rock hard. Her hands slid around his neck as their kiss deepened. His long fingers came to rest on the small of her back as their pelvic areas pressed into each other... so hard... so hot... Her breath, her hair, her swollen breasts...

"Bloody Hell, not again!" Snape bolted upright in the bed. This time he not only had to Scourgify his sheets and comforter, he had to take himself in hand in the shower as the memory of that lecherously real dream came back to haunt him.

Well, at least he knew he wouldn't need that Viagra prescription offer that kept showing up in his junk email.

As Snape dried off, he peered through the bathroom door into the bedroom and noticed that Morticia had already returned with Draco's reply. After wrapping himself in a towel, he crossed the room, opened the window and was greeted with a light, but obviously aggressive, peck on the wrist as he reached for the attached note. He scowled at the bird but didn't reprimand her. He would worry about her behavior later.

No sooner had he rid her of the unwanted baggage than she flew through the window to points unknown. Snape opened the note, also penned on 100% papyrus, with an antique Slytherin seal. Ever the arrogant show-off, Draco's papyrus sported a pre-printed Malfoy crest at the top in full color.

Snape was not impressed.

Snape was even less impressed when he read the reply.

Dear Professor Snape,

What a pleasant surprise to hear from you after all these years. I trust you are in good health and that your free time has been well spent.

I would love to accept your invitation to tea tomorrow, but I am a very busy man and, with such short notice, I fear that I will not have time to come to your house. I hope that you will instead accept my invitation to Malfoy Manor at the same time tomorrow.

I look forward to your affirmative reply.

Best regards,

Draco Malfoy

Snape raised an eyebrow. *Busy man, indeed!* Snape knew that he merely wanted the meeting to take place on his turf so he could keep the upper hand.

He wondered if Lucius would be there.

Sunday at four P.M. on the dot, Snape Apparated to just inside the gates of Malfoy Manor and made his way past the perfectly manicured gardens, the snow white peacocks in full display, and up to the main house. But before he could reach for the door knocker, a house-elf appeared to show him in. The tiny, clean elf led him past the white marble staircase that spiraled so perfectly up to the second floor, past the bright, sunlit parlor, and past the mahogany paneled study with its luxuriously padded dragon-skin chairs and hand carved, ebony inlaid end tables. And finally, the tiny elf opened a set of double French doors to reveal the covered patio, just as he had remembered it from all those years ago, with the stately, ornate, formal gardens forming the backdrop.

"Amazing," echoed a familiar voice from Snape's distant past. He turned on his heel to find not Draco, but Lucius, lurking in the shadows under the eaves with a firewhisky in his hand. "You haven't aged a day, old man. How do you do it?"

Snape raised an eyebrow at Lucius' insincere attempt at flattery. Then the two men came together. Lucius' hand extended as a warm smile erupted on his lips, but Snape hesitated. "I'm somewhat surprised that you're here. Aren't you afraid to be seen associating with the likes of me?"

"Whatever do you mean, Severus? My door has always been open to you. Even after enduring your silence for almost two decades!"

"My silence? I wrote to you three times after I was released from Azkaban, but the charm I used on the letters told me that they had been destroyed upon arrival. I assumed that since I had suffered a conviction which labeled me as damaged goods, so to speak, you wanted nothing more to do with me. So I stayed away."

"You cut me to the quick, old friend. I never received those letters. I swear it. Someone must have intercepted them."

Snape carefully studied the lines on this cunning and manipulative face. He saw no evidence of deception, but noticed that the skin still appeared taut and supple...*must be a cosmetic charm of some kind.* His physique was still slim and undeniably quite handsome, even after almost twenty years. He looked suspiciously too perfect. But looks could be deceiving, especially where vain and aging wizards were concerned. His silver hair blended quite nicely with the platinum blond. But other than that, he hadn't aged a day. Literally.

Snape wondered if Lucius needed Viagra.

"Someone... in this house... destroyed those letters. I know they arrived here before they were destroyed. My charm told me that much."

Lucius seemed genuinely distressed. "I can't imagine..."

"It was I who destroyed your letters, Severus." Narcissa's cutting feminine voice jolted both men as they turned to meet her. Her steps were so even, her posture so erect, she seemed to float through the French doors onto the patio.

"My pet, why on earth..."

"He betrayed us," she spat as her usually pristine face contorted into righteous indignation. "He is responsible for my sister's death just as surely as if he had cast the Killing Curse himself!"

"But he saved Draco from prison," argued Lucius. "If he had not testified on Draco's behalf..."

Narcissa swept past her husband and stormed up to face Snape. "You used me." Her eyes shot daggers. "You used my fear and concern for my son to cement your position of favor with the Dark Lord."

"He took the Unbreakable Vow, my love," Lucius tried to persuade his fuming wife. "He put his own life in danger. Can you imagine how it would have gone for Draco if he had been the one to kill Dumbledore? With Severus' help he managed to avoid any prison time whatsoever. And as a result, he still has his honor and a place of wealth and power in wizarding society... Which is more than one could say for Severus here."

Lucius looked upon his old friend with pity, and Snape felt a twinge of resentment touch his soul.

Narcissa's hateful energy waned, but her eyes narrowed as she put the tip of her wand in Snape's face. "I would like nothing better than to hex you to Hell."

Snape appeared unmoved. "You would have every right," he admitted softly, his voice turning to velvet. "But, if it makes you feel any better, I've already been there."

Narcissa lowered her wand. "I'll never trust you again as long as I live," she hissed in a low voice. Then she turned on her stiletto heels and floated back into the house.

Lucius and Snape both let out a collective sigh. "Would you have really let her hex you, old boy?"

"What do you think?" Snape snorted with dark sarcasm.

"I would hate to see my white marble pavers stained with... anything."

Snape's lips curled ever so slightly. "Well, they wouldn't have been stained with anything *of mine*."

Lucius laughed. "You never change, do you?"

"Not if I can help it," Snape admitted with a smile. But as his thoughts revisited the reason why he was here in the first place, he realized just how much he had changed over the years. Not nearly as hateful or vindictive, he had mellowed considerably. And he had learned one of the most valuable lessons of all: how to forgive others... although perhaps not himself.

"Oh, by the way, Draco is running late. He asked me to stand in his stead until his arrival. He's a busy man, Severus, and you gave him almost no notice. You should be grateful that he can squeeze you in at all today. He hopes you'll understand."

So, Draco believes that his time is more valuable than mine... How humble of him.

"Actually, Lucius, it was you I was hoping to see. I didn't ask you to tea for the reasons I mentioned when I first arrived. But now that that issue is resolved, I'm just as grateful for your audience as I would have been for Draco's."

Just then, the house-elf skittered through the French doors with a tea tray. But it held not only two tea cups and the matching pot, but two tumblers with straight up firewhisky.

"Thought you might prefer a choice. After all, I gave up on tea long ago." He drained his glass and placed it on the tray, then picked up another.

Snape decided that a glass of firewhisky would indeed bring more pleasure than the tea, so he joined Lucius. They took their glasses and settled into the comfortably cushioned wicker patio chairs that overlooked the ornate formal gardens.

The idle chit chat that followed caught them both up on the previous nineteen years. Snape offered very little about his own life, since there really wasn't much to tell. But he also knew that Lucius would rather talk about himself and his family anyway. So after a couple of carefully crafted questions, Snape merely kicked back and listened.

Surprisingly, Lucius didn't have much to say about himself either, since he had enjoyed a life of leisure as he kept a low profile. But as he read between the lines, Snape got the distinct impression that Draco had taken Lucius "out of the loop" so to speak, because of his trial and subsequent probation. It was selfishly satisfying for Snape to know that Lucius, who found power so intoxicating, had been stripped of it after the war, even by his own son. So he had not gotten off completely without punishment.

And so Lucius proudly bragged to Snape about Draco's accomplishments. Snape had read several stories outlining his rise to power in the *Prophet*, but the blow by blow description supplied by Lucius brought many more details into focus.

Draco had written his memoirs after the war, but when no other wizarding publisher would touch the project, he started his own publishing company with what was left of the family money. And although his own book was only a mild success, he soon produced other projects that took off like wild-fire. It seemed that his talent lay not in writing, but in realizing a best-seller in the raw. He had even approached Harry Potter in hopes of an autobiography, but when Potter refused, insisting that he only wanted to get on with his life, Draco hired Rita Skeeter to write it. After her great success with Dumbledore's postmortem biography, she was anxious for a new challenge. Draco outbid her previous publisher and sealed the deal. The book made them both very rich, and his success had only grown since then.

"Skeeter wrote to me in Azkaban, requesting an interview, but I refused. Now I know why she was so anxious to speak with me."

"It was quite good. Did you ever read it?"

"Don't insult me!" Snape looked down his nose at Lucius.

Lucius snorted with laughter, spewing his drink all over himself. After quickly lifting the stains with a Cleansing Spell, he called the house-elf back to replenish their drinks.

Snape now knew where to turn when his textbook project was finished which, by his estimation, would be in another couple of weeks. But to assure that no one found out that he was the true author, he kept quiet about his plans. He would hire a foreign literary agent and take on a pseudonym when he was ready. Even Draco would never know who had truly written the books.

But as enjoyable as the afternoon had been so far, in spite of Narcissa's initial reaction, Snape was no closer to his goal. So he gently tried to steer the conversation to marital bliss and romance, in hopes of gaining some insight into the pureblood way of handling such matters.

"So, you and Narcissa still manage to live under the same roof. Quite an amazing feat after all these years. My hat's off to you."

"Yes, well, she has her private wing, I have mine. And we both have a separate entrance. It comes in handy when one wishes discretion and convenience at the same time." Lucius gave off a satisfied sigh as his eyes reflected the pleasure of a recent encounter.

"I suppose that discretion is the key, is it not?"

"Quite the key," Lucius explained. "It's amazing how much she is willing to tolerate as long as we keep up appearances."

"But if you don't love her anymore, why on earth do you bother?"

Lucius' expression turned to disdain. "But I *do* love her, Severus. Whatever made you think that I no longer love her?"

Snape's face betrayed his obvious confusion. "You've been cheating on her for years. I just assumed that..."

Lucius threw his head back in haughty laughter. "Good God, man! Sex and love have nothing to do with each other! Sex is an adventure, a hunting expedition. Copulation is just another form of entertainment!"

Snape tried not to look disgusted, but instinctively raised an eyebrow in spite of himself.

His silence urged Lucius to continue. "Ah, did you never marry, did you never find the love of your life?"

Snape began to pay close attention to the way his firewhisky slid down the sides of his glass after he swirled the liquid around.

"I gave you a book at the end of your 5th year, remember? You seemed so distraught over that Mudblood brat who later married James Potter..." Lucius' voice trailed off as he obviously remembered the details that had come out in the trial. Then he tactfully redirected the conversation. "That book was a wealth of information. Didn't you ever read it?"

Snape's expression was inscrutable. "No, I... must have lost it somewhere along the way."

"What book is that, Father?" Draco's bright voice echoed on the hard surfaces of the covered patio.

Snape stood up to greet his official host. "Draco, it is indeed a pleasure."

They shook hands warmly. "Sorry I'm late," Draco apologized in earnest.

"Not a problem. Your father was quite entertaining and informative as always."

The house-elf returned with a tray, this time containing three glasses of amber liquid and no sign of tea

Draco grinned at his father and reiterated his initial question as the three men reached for the glasses. "What book?"

"That one about charming witches. You know... I gave you a copy at the end of your 5th year as well."

"Ah, yes, *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*," Draco drawled with a blissful gleam in his eye. "I don't think I could have ever convinced Wilhelmina to marry me without the spell on page 147."

"Ah, the 'Say Yes to Anything' spell?"

"That's the one."

"Worked on your mother like the Charm that it is."

The two Malfoys laughed as Snape looked on in quiet disbelief. So they had both used spells to woo their brides into submission. With good looks, great wealth, and power, why on earth would they have needed to resort to spells and charms?

"So you lost your copy, eh?" asked Draco. "Don't worry. I'll send you another by owl tomorrow. I bought the publishing rights when they came up for renewal five years ago. It's one of my best sellers."

"Don't bother," Snape shook his head. "I think I'm past the point of needing..."

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus. It's no bother at all. Only I have a word of advice," Draco put a friendly hand on Snape's shoulder. "As soon as it arrives, be sure to charm it so only males can see it. If a woman ever got a hold of a copy we would all be in mighty hot water."

"I have an idea, son. Why don't you ship them already charmed, that way there'll be no danger of a copy falling into the wrong hands."

"Great idea!" Draco exclaimed with a huge grin. "That way idiots like Ron Weasley can't screw it up for the rest of us."

Snape's heart skipped a beat. This could be exactly what he had come here for. "Whatever do you mean?"

Draco shook his head and made a face that flirted with contempt. "I was in a bar in Diagon Alley a couple of months ago and I overheard Weasley lamenting over the fact that his wife, that Mud...sorry...Muggle-witch Granger, was no longer responding to the spells he had learned from the book. He swore that the book was still in its hiding place, so he knew she hadn't found it. But nothing worked on her anymore."

Snape's mind began to race. *No wonder she married Weasley.* Now it was all beginning to make sense.

"Perhaps her blood is so muddy," Lucius offered with a snicker, "that such subtle magic simply can't get through."

"I suppose anything's possible!" Draco mused. "Anyway, he was talking with Theodore Nott, and Nott advised him to get a little side action, if you know what I mean." He winked at Snape. "Then the next thing ya know, he's parading around town with that harlot, Lavender Brown, on his arm for the entire wizarding world to see."

"Fool!" observed Lucius.

Snape couldn't argue with that.

"Now the moron wonders why she wants a divorce!"

"Has he no sense of honor? He's a pureblood, for Merlin's sake!"

"Yeah, but he married *Hermione Granger*, remember?" Draco reminded his father with a sour face.

Snape thought he saw Draco's skin begin to crawl.

Draco continued. "I would have gotten tired of her long ago."

"I would hope that you would know better than to marry such filth in the first place!"

"Now, Father, we're not supposed to be prejudiced against Muggle-witches and wizards anymore, remember?"

"Ah, yes, the politically correct term we are now expected to use." Lucius' voice dripped with disdain. "Now, you see, Severus, why Draco sequesters me here most of the time. I may cause embarrassment if he lets me out in public too often."

Snape was becoming more uncomfortable by the second as he found it increasingly difficult to play along with this blood-bashing charade. Grasping at straws, he decided to see if they could give him a bit more insight into Weasley's motives. The sooner he got what he came for, the sooner he could leave. "But there are children involved. Wouldn't that make a difference?" he asked hopefully.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot about the kids." Draco took on a worried look. "Scorpius tells me that Rose is smart as a whip and very talented." Then his voice dropped almost to a

whisper. "I think he actually likes her." His face distorted in disgust.

"Merlin's minions, I just hope he doesn't want to *marry* her," interjected Lucius as both he and Draco gave a shudder. "I couldn't stomach being related to the *Weasley* clan... not to mention that Mud-bl..."

"Father!"

"Sorry." Lucius shrugged and then paused to take a swig. "Children definitely change things," he continued. "When Narcissa first found out I was cheating, she wanted to leave me, but I threatened to keep her away from Draco for the rest of her life, and she consented to stay. Women are such sentimental creatures. So loving, so easily manipulated. Aren't they, son?"

Draco gave a knowing smile. "And thank goodness for that. I had to hold Scorpius hostage to keep Wilhelmina. But she knows now that it's a perfect arrangement, really. We share the house, we share the child, but we both see whomever we wish on the side."

"And since you're still married, you keep your wealth and your status," added Lucius.

"Of course, that shouldn't matter for Weasley," Draco chimed in. "He has neither!"

The two Malfoys broke into hideous laughter that made Snape feel almost nauseous.

The house-elf appeared again with tray in hand, only this time the three full glasses were accompanied by the firewhisky bottle so they could serve themselves.

"Can you imagine what my life would be like if divorce were a matter of course with wizards like it is in the Muggle world?" Draco asked Snape.

His eyebrows went up as he gave a barely discernable shake of his head.

"I'd be Knutless, with three or four ex-wives and three or four fat alimony checks to write, and Merlin knows how many children to support... And I'd be working my arse off for nothing!"

"Yes, this arrangement is much better," Lucius explained. "The mistress knows her place and doesn't ever expect or even hope for wedding bells. And if she decides that she doesn't like it, she can leave. There will always be another source of amusement to spring up and take her place."

"Here, here!" Draco raised his glass.

"To never-ending sources of amusement!" toasted Lucius.

Snape's heart wasn't in it, but he forced himself to join in for appearance's sake.

Their three glasses clanked together, and the Malfoys drained theirs with cheer.

Snape finished his in two gulps and gave a slight bow. "And with that ah... happy thought, I must leave you. Draco, Lucius, it has been a delightful afternoon."

"Thanks for coming, my old friend," Lucius smiled warmly.

"It was my... pleasure, I assure you," Snape replied with at least the appearance of sincerity.

"Don't wait nineteen years before you come back. You're welcome anytime," added Draco.

The same house-elf who had been waiting on them all afternoon appeared to show him out. As they approached the front door and were out of earshot of the Malfoys, the little elf reached up and touched Snape's arm gently. "Tolky is sorry that Severus Snape had to endure such evil talk about Muggle-borns. Tolky knows that Severus Snape finds it offensive."

Snape looked down at his quivering ears and tennis ball eyes with astonishment. "But, how do you..."

"Winky is Tolky's friend," he whispered. "Winky tells Tolky that Severus Snape is trying to help Miss Granger. Miss Granger has done so much to make house-elves' lives better. If Severus Snape is Miss Granger's friend, he is our friend, too."

Snape couldn't help but smile.

"Tell Winky that Tolky says hello."

Snape nodded. "I will." Then he slipped out of the front door and headed home.

When Snape made it home, he informed Winky that he had met Tolky which delighted Winky to no end. It turned out that Tolky was Dobby's brother. They had all known each other for decades, and Tolky was one of the elves that Winky would visit when she had free time. Snape came away with the distinct impression that Winky and Tolky rather liked each other.

That evening he kept his computer dialog with Miss Granger limited to small talk. Although he now had a solid theory explaining Weasley's behavior, he didn't want to mention what he had unearthed until after he had a chance to talk with Potter.

But when the noon hour arrived on Monday, Snape's doorbell remained silent. Winky was busy readying their sumptuous lunch as she set the table and put the final touches on the main course. But the minutes continued to tick slowly by.

"If he's not here by 12:30, Winky, you may have his share. No doubt, I would prefer your company over his anyway."

"Winky hopes nothing has happened to Harry Potter. Winky thinks Harry Potter would not slight Master Severus like this on purpose."

"Only time will tell. I wouldn't give a rat's arse, if I didn't need to speak with him about Miss Granger's predicament," Snape commented acidly. "Oh, to hell with him. I'm starved. Let's eat!"

Snape transfigured the chair to elevate Winky up higher so she could more easily reach the food, then he pushed the chair in for her and was just about to sit down himself, when the doorbell finally rang. "Sit there, Winky," he instructed as she began to climb down from her tall chair. "I'm up. I'll get it."

He slowly made his way through the study to the front door and opened it with a scowl. "You're late!"

"I'm sorry," Harry explained, feeling rather like he was back in school. "I Apparated to the wrong place. I thought I could get here by Apparating to the playground I recalled from viewing your memories in the Pensieve, but I ended up at the old, run-down playground in my aunt and uncle's neighborhood instead. So I had to go back to the office and look at a map to figure out how to get here."

"Fifty points from Gryffindor!"

Potter started laughing, and Snape couldn't help but let the hint of a smirk dance across his lips as he stepped aside to let Potter enter.

"Mr. Potter, you remember Winky. She was Barty Crouch's house-elf."

"Good to see you again, Winky."

"And Winky is happy to see Harry Potter."

"Winky, could you please set another place at the table?"

"Oh, no, Master Severus, Winky will eat in the kitchen," she said as she pushed the tall chair aside to make way for an unaltered chair for Potter to sit in.

"I insist, Winky. I'm sure Mr. Potter will be relieved to have another person at the table." He stole a glance at Potter and noticed a touch of surprise on his face.

"Are you a mind reader now?"

"Of course not, but I remember our history all too well."

"Right."

Another place setting magically appeared across the table from Winky's, and the two men settled down in their chairs. With a wave of his hand, Snape directed the bread basket towards Potter, who gratefully took it and pulled out a freshly baked roll. Then came the roasted chicken already sliced, the mashed potatoes, and the rich, brown gravy. Some green beans mixed with toasted almonds rounded out the meal.

"Wow!" commented Potter, "this is quite a spread for lunch. I won't be able to eat dinner tonight."

Vivaldi's Four Seasons kept the mood light as they enjoyed the exquisitely prepared meal.

"Winky, as always, you have outdone yourself."

Winky gave Snape a broad smile. "Winky knows that Harry Potter is a very special guest."

Snape would never have admitted that out loud, but he knew in his heart that it was true.

"Why, thank you, Winky. I really appreciate that," Harry replied graciously. He nodded his head towards the elf, but stole a quick glance at Snape and noticed his lip curling slightly. Harry tried not to let the smile that flirted with his lips grow into a full blown grin.

Several more mouthfuls were chewed and swallowed in a rather awkward silence before Harry spoke again.

"Ron tells me that you and Hermione seem to be spending a lot of time together lately."

Snape nearly choked on his food. "A lot of time together?" he asked, obviously quite irritated. "Since the beginning of March...and that has been how many months, four?...we have dined together three times, twice for lunch and once for dinner. Does three times in four months define 'a lot' to you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry was obviously taken aback by Snape's hostile reaction to his attempt at small talk. "No, sir."

"He just seems to show up whenever I'm there. And he's always quite determined to ruin her day." Since the conversation had taken this particular turn, Snape figured he may as well begin the interrogation that he had planned from the start. He had already suffered through enough pleasantries for one weekend. "Can you tell me why that is, Mr. Potter?" Snape placed his knife and fork down on his plate with a clank. "You know him better than anyone else. Why is he treating her this way? What on earth has she done to deserve such cruelty?"

Potter sat back in his chair, too shocked to reply. His mouth hung open and his eyes stared widely at Snape in total disbelief. When he finally came to his senses, his first thoughts were in defense of Ron. But then the reality of the situation began to sink in. If Hermione had been in distress and his best friend had not been the cause, wouldn't he also try to get to the bottom of the problem? He then put two and two together and realized that Snape cared for Hermione and was trying to help her. He wanted to see her happy just as Harry did. He wanted to see her get her children back.

Then another thought occurred to him as Harry's mind began to race through the long-forgotten memories of Snape's that he had viewed in the Pensieve those many years ago. Snape had come from a tumultuous home. He had looked pale and sickly in those memories. But he was obviously an intelligent and sensitive boy, not to mention talented. There were so many similarities between the young Snape and Hugo that Harry unconsciously gasped as he realized it. Snape saw himself in Hugo, and he didn't want the boy to suffer the same fate because of his parents' failures. That's why he was so willing to brew Hugo's potion and why he was so adamant that Hugo consume it. Hermione had tried to convey that very idea to him in Diagon Alley a while back, but he wasn't sure then. Now it made perfect sense.

"You haven't answered my question, Mr. Potter!"

"I'm sorry," he stammered. "I...I don't know, sir. I really don't understand it. It's not like Ron to act this way."

"I came to the same conclusion on Saturday afternoon after his vulgar display ruined another perfectly good meal. This is why I invited you here. I felt that he must have a reason for acting with such cruelty. He must have a goal, something he wants. I was hoping you could shed some light in that regard. Has he said anything to you? Mentioned any ulterior motives?"

Harry began to push the mashed potatoes around on his plate and let out a huge sigh. "No, not really. Everyone in his family has tried to pressure him into letting Hermione see the kids, but he won't budge. He's got the lot of them mad at him. But it doesn't matter. He's determined not to let her see them."

Snape's thoughts drifted back to the previous day's conversation at Malfoy Manor. To get their wives to stay, each had to hold his child hostage. That must be it. "Do you think he wants her back?"

"Well, if he does, he's got a warped way of showing it... parading around with Lavender Brown." Harry's voice betrayed a hint of disgust.

Snape's mood softened. He knew that Potter had been pulled between his two best friends for decades, and he imagined that it had not been an easy tightrope to walk.

"Are you no longer his partner in crime, his confidant?"

"Not in this instance. He knows I'm on Hermione's side this time... Besides, I'm not a pureblood. Keeping a woman on the side is something I would never condone, much less actually do."

"Well, it's nice to know, with all that you've suffered, that there is something left of your moral fiber." Snape thought about that ridiculous book that both Malfoys had had to resort to in order to get and keep their wives. "You didn't stoop so low as to use some cheesy spell book to woo your bride, did you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry knitted his brow with a puzzled look. Then it dawned on him. *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches?*

Snape didn't mention the brand new copy that Draco had sent over that morning by eagle owl post that was still wrapped in brown paper on the sofa in his study.

"Not you, too?" Snape didn't even try to hide his disgust.

"No, no...Ron gave me a copy after sixth year, but I wanted real love, not some coerced, twisted form of..."

Snape could almost see the light bulb turn on over Potter's head.

"Hermione was never really in love with him."

"Obviously."

"She loved him like she loves me, as a friend. They were never really suited for each other."

Snape raised his eyebrows and nodded knowingly.

"They should never have been married in the first place."

"Bingo! Good job, Mr. Potter. Winky, bring this man his prize. He's earned it."

Winky looked at Snape in an utter state of cluelessness.

"Dessert, Winky. Time for dessert." Snape gave her a quick wink.

"Oh," she whispered sheepishly. Then she disappeared into the kitchen with a snap of her fingers.

"Did Miss Granger ever admit to you that she found the book?"

"Did she tell you?"

"No, she hasn't mentioned anything to me about it. But my sources tell me that the book's spells no longer work on her, which leads me to believe that she found it and figured out a way to counteract their effects."

"Your sources?" Harry eyed him suspiciously.

Snape's look was inscrutable. "What has she told you?"

"This has to be off the record. If she knew I was telling you any of this..."

"I'll never breathe a word."

"...she would kill me."

"My ability to keep secrets is, as you know, legendary."

Harry's eyes narrowed as he sized up Snape's sincerity. Then, after a moment, he finally admitted, "She found the book shortly after Hugo was born. But instead of destroying it and confronting Ron, she learned how to counteract the spells. Then slowly, over the course of the following months, she got a much more accurate sense of what Ron was really like as a husband and father, how he had been using her and controlling her, and how the spells had affected her decisions. I think her original plan was to wait for Hugo to enter Hogwarts before leaving him, but when he started his blatant affair with Lavender, she just couldn't take it anymore."

"His blatant affair... What a fool." Snape's irritation with Weasley showed plainly on his face. "It is horrid enough that he betrayed her with his infidelity, but did the thought ever occur to him to act with discretion in order to spare her feelings?" His irritation grew to resentment as he rose from his chair and began to pace the room. "For Merlin's sake, even the Malfoys have enough sensitivity to use discretion when it comes to their mistresses. At least that way, their wives can go out in public while maintaining their dignity."

Harry observed Snape's reaction with great curiosity. Snape found it repulsive that Ron was cheating, but more importantly, he clearly cared about Hermione getting hurt. *Since when did Severus Snape care about anyone's feelings, especially Hermione's?*

"I don't think he considered her feelings at all in the matter. He just wanted..." Harry was too embarrassed to finish his sentence.

"A good **SHAG?** Is that what you were going to say?" Snape was incensed.

"Don't get mad at me," Harry pleaded defensively. "I'm not the one who hurt her."

"And she did get hurt, trust me."

"I know. I was there. It hurt *me* to find out. I can't imagine what it did *to her*." Harry could almost feel his own heart breaking as he recalled that day in Diagon Alley. But he was astounded when his eyes met Snape's and he saw his own sorrow reflected there mixed with the hatred that he knew was aimed squarely at Ron. At that moment he knew that Snape's feelings for Hermione ran deep, very deep indeed.

"I'm not a pureblood, Professor. And usually Ron doesn't act like one either. But lately, when he's not with Lav-Lav..."

"Lav-Lav?" Snape looked as if he were becoming nauseous.

"... he's taken to hanging out in a bar with other purebloods. I know how they talk in there, and I can't stomach it, so I stay away."

"*Lav-Lav?*" Snape appeared as if he were about to puke.

"Don't ask," Harry finally advised him.

Snape made an attempt to recover his composure. "It seems that the wizarding world has yet to rise above their prejudices, even after all these years."

"It would seem so." Harry paused for a moment as the injustice of it all sank in. "I wouldn't be surprised if those blokes have been filling his head full of malarkey about what a pureblood marriage is supposed to be like, with a loving wife at home with the kids and a mistress or two on the side. Ron just never imagined that Hermione would leave him."

"Could he be trying to lure her back by using his children as bait?"

"As revolting as that sounds, I suppose it's possible."

"Other purebloods I have known have used similar tactics."

"I don't know if Hermione will ever go back to him though, now that he has humiliated her in public."

"Not to mention the fact that she doesn't love him," Snape stated with an air of triumph.

"I wish they could both simply calm down and talk this out. It would be infinitely better for the children."

"So true, but have you seen their attempts at communication lately? It's a farce."

"Yeah, all they do is yell at each other. They can't calm down long enough to listen."

"Their emotions get in the way of the words." As soon as he had uttered the phrase, Snape saw a possible solution to the communication problem. He wasn't sure what would come of it, but he knew it was worth a try. "What if all they had were the words and nothing else?"

"What do you mean?" Suddenly, just from the different tone in Snape's voice, Harry felt hopeful.

"What if we could take the emotions away, the body language, the elevated aggression? What if the volume knob could be turned off completely?"

"How in the world are you going to accomplish that, Professor? With a spell? A new potion?"

"No, Mr. Potter. With a Muggle device... the computer."

Computer Lessons

Chapter 15 of 35

Snape and Harry kidnap Ron and teach him how to use Snape's computer.

As always, I would like to thank my fearless betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for all of their diligence and hard work on my behalf. And also, the staff at The Petulant Poetess keeps me on my toes with their constant vigilance! Thanks to you all.

The characters and their world belong to the amazing J. K. Rowling. I make no money, I take no credit. I'm just here to have fun, and I hope you all enjoy the ride as well. Thanks for reading.

Chapter 15

Computer Lessons

How many times had Snape and Miss Granger conversed over the computer with only the words on the screen to go by? How many times had Snape been thankful that she could not see his reactions to those words, his sorrow, his regret, his joy, his embarrassment? Or the anguish on his face as he chose the words for his replies slowly and carefully? It was the perfect solution. Perhaps Walnut Brain and Miss Granger couldn't iron out all of their problems, but they could get past the first hurdle; they could take their emotions out of the communication equation and talk to each other in a civilized manner. After all, every journey begins with the first step.

After hearing out Snape's idea, Harry enthusiastically volunteered to do everything in his power to help out. So they took the next half hour to work out the details, and then Harry excused himself to get back to the Auror office. They vowed to exchange Patronus messages that evening, and if everything checked out with the other people that would need to be involved, they would put their plan in motion tomorrow.

After Potter left, Snape made his way to the riverbank and Disapparated to Molly Weasley's house. He was greeted with great enthusiasm by Hugo, who dragged him into the family room to meet his sister, Rose. She didn't seem the least bit intimidated by his tall frame or billowing black robes, but it was hard to intimidate anyone with a ten-year-old clinging to one's waist. Molly was quite happy to see him, and she sent the kids out to play so they could carry on a private conversation.

She admitted to Snape that she felt awful about the way her son was treating Hermione, and she wanted very much to disregard his wishes and simply let her come for lunch one day to see the kids. But Ron tended to pop in unannounced, as if he suspected that she might do such a thing. Then Snape explained his idea, and it didn't take any persuading to gain her total support.

That evening, Snape received Potter's Patronus to let him know that his part of the plan had fallen into place. Snape sent his Patronus back to Potter with reassurances that they could count on Molly's cooperation and then IM'd Miss Granger that he would have news for her by lunch tomorrow, so she would most certainly take her lunch break in front of her computer.

Snape went to bed that night with a broad smile on his face. Everything was progressing as he had anticipated.

The next day at lunch, Hermione Disillusioned herself and Apparated straight to her front porch. Then she marched into her family room and turned on the "dinosaur," as Snape had once called it. She was so anxious to hear from him that she got very impatient with the eternally slow pace at which this one came up and vowed to invest in a new one the next time she got paid.

Before she could log on, there was a knock at the door. With great trepidation, she stalked down the hall to investigate. As she opened the door, she never dreamed such joy existed in the world. There, standing in front of her with open arms, were her children, with Molly behind them, grinning from ear to ear.

"MUM!" they both cried in unison as she was engulfed in their arms and they in hers.

All Hermione could do was cry as she held on for dear life. Molly had the common sense to herd them all into the hall and shut the front door before any of the neighbors noticed the emotional scene. They made their way down the hall to the family room where she immediately noticed that Snape's screen name had appeared in her buddy list, but no message had appeared on the screen yet. Did he already know about this? Is this why he wanted her at home today?

"Did Professor Snape put you up to this, Molly?"

Her smile gave it away. "Yes, he came to see me yesterday. I wanted you to see your children, but was afraid that if I invited you to lunch, Ron would pop in while you were there and ruin everything. So he suggested this instead."

"He's bloody brilliant," announced Hugo.

They all started laughing. But then something suddenly occurred to Hermione. "Hugo, where's your stuffed lizard toy?"

"Don't worry, Mum. I left it at Grandma's."

Hermione let out a huge sigh of relief. "Well, then we might just get away with it." She smirked. "How about some lunch? PBJ's anyone?"

"I'll make lunch, dear," Molly offered. "You spend some time with the kids. That's what we're here for, after all."

The trio settled down on the comfortable couch while Molly retreated into the kitchen. Then Rose talked excitedly about Hogwarts as Hugo snuggled up to his mum and listened. She could tell that he was still counting the days until it would be his turn to get on the Hogwarts Express for the first time.

"Well, well, well... What a happy little family reunion." Their enjoyable conversation was rudely interrupted by Ron's voice as it floated up from behind them.

Hermione gasped as the three of them turned to stare at him in disbelief. Molly ran in from the kitchen. Upon seeing Ron, she dropped the plate of sandwiches she had in her hand, and it shattered on impact with the tile floor. The noise brought Molly back to her senses. "This is NOT her fault, Ron. This was all my idea. Blame me, not her. It's just not fair to keep them apart, and you know it."

Hermione stood and walked around to his side of the couch. "How did you get in here?" she demanded.

"The front door was conveniently unlocked. So I just let myself in," Ron replied smugly.

Hermione glanced towards Molly with an expression that mixed suspicion with accusation.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. I never thought...I never expected...it was not supposed to happen like this!"

"Like what?" asked Ron suspiciously.

"How did you know we were here?" Molly had now become angry and was beginning to wonder if Snape had set her up.

"I went to your house at lunch like I do sometimes, and you weren't there. But I found Lizzy on the coffee table in the living room." Ron glanced quickly towards Hugo, who stared back at him with a defiant scowl. "So I knew something was up." He paced the room as the venomous level in his voice began to rise. "I figured I'd try here first, and my hunch was right."

"But," stammered Molly, "I thought you and Harry..."

"Me and Harry what, Mum? Is he in on this too?"

Just then, the front door flew open again. Harry stepped quickly inside and shut the door. "Ron, stay calm. I can explain everything!" Harry pleaded as he rushed to Ron's side.

"So this is your doing?"

"Partly."

"You went behind my back and against my wishes. You even got my mum involved. I trusted you," he growled threateningly. "*thought* you were my friend!"

"I *am* your friend, Ron. But I'm Hermione's friend, too." Harry's tone softened as he tried to placate Ron. "It's not like you to be cruel this way. Professor Snape and I decided that..."

"Professor Snape?!" Ron's face reddened with fury. "You've been talking about my private life with that greasy git?"

"He's not a greasy git!" shouted Hugo stubbornly.

Everyone in the room turned in amazement to stare at the defiant boy. When he realized that, suddenly, he had become the center of attention, he recoiled a bit. But his sister put a reassuring hand on his shoulder and gave him the courage to continue. "He's nice, and he's funny..."

"Who?" asked Ron incredulously.

"Professor Snape," insisted Hugo. "And he's really smart, too."

"Why, thank you, Hugo," replied a silky, smooth voice from just over Harry's shoulder. Snape stepped unceremoniously into the family room doorway. "By the way, Miss Granger," he added, "you may want to consider warding your door. Otherwise, you never know what sort of riffraff might wander in." He twitched his head ever so slightly in Ron's direction.

Hermione unsuccessfully quelled a smirk.

Ron clutched his wand and barred his teeth. "You overgrown bat! Why, I ought to..."

"No, Dad!" gasped Hugo as he ran to stand between Snape and his angry father.

"Hugo!" Hermione lunged for her son's arm but was too late. The boy looked haughtily back at his mother and replied, "He saved my life with his potion. The least I can do is return the favor. Dad *is* a powerful Auror, after all."

The adults exchanged quick glances. Ron's chest had puffed out with pride, and Snape graciously kept his mouth shut, although not for Ron's sake. He didn't want to be the one to shatter Hugo's illusions about his father's skills with a wand.

"It's alright, Hugo," he said as he put a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder and steered him out of harm's way.

"You got my Patronus, I see." Harry wisely decided to change the subject.

"Yes, thank you." Snape nodded at him.

"A bit of a change in plans, I suppose."

Snape smirked. "Nothing we can't handle."

Molly seemed quite relieved to see Snape as she pulled Hugo to her side.

Hermione and Ron were both still in the dark. They glared at each other, then at the other adults in the room, and rested their collective gaze on Snape. Hermione finally asked, "Would you mind enlightening me as to what is going on here?"

Snape's expression held a bit of amusement as well as mischief. "Mr. Potter and I came to the conclusion that you two have a communication problem."

"Oh, you did, did you?" Ron glared mutinously at Harry.

"Yes." Harry glared back. "We felt that you were being unreasonable and uncharacteristically cruel to Hermione."

"It's not like you to be so cruel, son," Molly chimed in.

"I have my reasons," Ron insisted defensively, "and I don't have to explain myself to *you lot!*"

"I have a right to know what your reasons are," Hermione stated blatantly as she took a menacing step in Ron's direction. "And so do your children."

Ron's posture immediately mimicked hers as they both clutched their wands and gazed with pure contempt into each other's faces.

Snape and Harry both stepped quickly between her and Ron. "Miss Granger, you forget yourself," Snape stated flatly with a glare of disappointment. "Your children are watching," he reminded her in a low but intimidating voice as his eyes diverted hers to the two horrified faces standing with Molly at a safe distance.

Hermione felt like a first-year under his menacing gaze. She immediately put away her wand and lowered her eyes as they began to well up.

"This is exactly what we were trying to prevent with our little experiment," Harry tried to explain as Ron calmed down and shamefully stowed his wand in a side pocket.

"As I said before, you two need to work on your communication skills," Snape reminded them. "But before anything can be resolved, you must put your emotions aside and talk in a civilized manner."

Ron studied his shoes while Hermione stared into the depths of Snape's coal black eyes. They both knew he was right. "But how can we do that? We can't just turn our emotions off," she admitted with a sense of hopelessness.

"No... but you can do the next best thing." Snape grinned rather impishly at her.

Hermione looked questioningly from Snape to Harry, and then back to Snape. "Did you invent a new potion?"

"That's what I thought, too, but, no," Harry began to explain.

"You'll use the computer," Snape finished. "You stay here with Molly and the children, and Mr. Potter and I will escort Mr. Weasley back to my house to use mine."

"*YOUR HOUSE?!!*" Ron yelled, half angry, half terrified. "I'll be damned if I'm going anywhere with the likes of *you!*"

"I thought you might say that," Snape admitted with a grin. Before Ron could decide which shield charm to put up, Snape had silently cast a full Body Bind Curse, and charitably added Wingardium Leviosa, to keep him from falling over in his stiffened state. "Shall we?" Snape raised his eyebrows to Harry.

"No time like the present," Harry agreed.

They each grabbed one of Ron's arms.

"My study."

"Directly there?"

"I removed the wards before I came. I felt that it would make things easier."

"Right."

"On the count of three... one... two... three!" With a loud crack, the men Disapparated.

Hugo and Rose stood in shocked silence in their wake. Snape had taken control of their father without a word or a flick of his wand. Hermione could almost see the pride bubble burst, but it was Molly who quickly came to their rescue.

"Have you studied the two Voldemort Wars in History of Magic yet, Rose?"

"No," she replied absently. "We don't get to that until fifth year."

Molly nodded wisely. "Well, when you do, you'll learn that Professor Snape was a spy, a double agent for our side. Don't feel badly that he got the best of your father. He fooled Voldemort for years. He has skills that would have rivaled Albus Dumbledore's. He's one of the most powerful wizards of our time."

"Professor Snape?" whispered Hugo with sheer amazement. "Then why isn't he Minister of Magic or something?"

"He doesn't like to draw attention to himself," explained Hermione. "He prefers to stay in the background."

"You father is a powerful Auror, Hugo," Molly reassured him, "and you shouldn't feel embarrassed that Professor Snape got the best of him."

"Professor Snape could get the best of your Uncle Harry as well," Hermione added.

"Even Uncle Harry?" asked Rose, genuinely astonished. Until this moment, she had seen nothing exceptional or remotely interesting about the reserved, austere man who she had met for the first time only yesterday.

"I don't think there's a wizard alive who could take him in a fair fight," said Molly.

"Or a dirty fight, for that matter," added Hermione with a laugh.

Molly's laughter joined Hermione's as they all began to relax a bit. "So how does this contraption work?" asked Molly, redirecting everyone's attention to the computer.

With a loud crack, no doubt from Harry's Apparation, the three men arrived in Snape's study. Winky appeared in the kitchen doorway, obviously elated to have company to dote over. As Ron hovered just above the ground, Snape systematically revolved on the spot, recasting his complicated wards to prevent unwanted intruders. Then, for good measure, he sealed the doors and windows so Weasley couldn't try to escape before his task was fulfilled.

"What can Winky get for Master Severus and his guests?" Winky asked after Snape had finished.

"Oh, just some sandwiches and pumpkin juice, Winky. This will be a working lunch. We will be dining in my bedroom while using the computer."

"Winky will bring lunch up when it is ready, then."

"Thank you, Winky." Snape nodded at her, then he turned his attention to Ron. "When I release you, I expect your full cooperation. If you resist, there will be consequences. You cannot escape this house. I will let you leave when you have completed your task as I see fit. If you try to escape, or use your wand against either

myself or Mr. Potter, I will confiscate it until further notice. Do I make myself clear?"

Since Ron was still in the Body Bind Curse, he couldn't even blink, but his look of terror had subsided and contempt had taken its place, so Snape took that as a "yes," and lifted both curses at once. Ron dropped two inches to the floor and almost lost his balance, but Harry grabbed his arm and helped him to steady himself.

"You've got your nerve both of you!" Ron shot resentful glances in both directions. "So this is the great new restaurant you wanted to take me to?" he added with heavy sarcasm.

"As a matter of fact, yes. Wait until you taste Winky's cooking! She's fabulous!" Harry informed Ron with a grin.

"Winky is flattered, Harry Potter!" Winky's squeaky voice came floating in from the kitchen.

"The computer is upstairs. I suggest that we waste no time. I'm sure you two will need to get back to work eventually." Snape began to herd the boys upstairs and into the bedroom. He sat Ron in front of his state-of-the-art computer and conjured two more chairs for himself and Potter. Then he conjured a side table for the food that he knew would soon arrive. He saw from the screen that Miss Granger was online and ready for the first message. He explained the basics to Weasley and dictated a message to demonstrate how it worked.

Ron's anger quickly dissipated as fascination took its place.

HalfBloodPrince: From this point forward, until you read otherwise, the correspondence will be from Mr. Weasley.

Snape hit send and waited for Miss Granger to reply. After a brief moment, with a three note melody, her response appeared on the screen.

MuggleBornWitch: I'm ready.

At that point, Snape charmed the keyboard to activate at the sound of Ron's voice.

"So that's all there is to it?" Ron asked as he watched his words appear on the screen. "Look! There on the screen I just said that!"

"How perceptive of you," Snape commented sarcastically. "If you say something that you don't want to send to her, simply hit delete like this." He leaned over and showed Ron the delete button, demonstrating on the phrase that had just appeared.

"Amazing. I wish Dad could have come. Do you think I could bring him back some time?"

Snape's reply came in the form of an incredulous glare.

Potter stifled a snort.

"Guess I better get on with it..." Ron sighed as he hit the delete button to erase his inane comments. Then he looked at the two of them and sheepishly admitted, "I don't know what to say to her."

"Why don't you start by explaining why you are treating her this way?" suggested Harry.

"I want her back. I thought if I kept her away from the kids, she would come back."

"Say it as if you are talking to her, not to us," Snape explained as Ron's previous words appeared on the screen.

He took to the task of deleting the previous phrase, and restated his sentence to be directed to Hermione.

HalfBloodPrince: I want you back. I thought that if I kept you from seeing the kids, you would come back to me.

"Now what?" Ron asked in a low voice, turning back to Snape and Harry. He found that if he faced away from the computer and spoke in a quiet voice, the computer would not type his words.

"Hit the send button, here," Snape directed him.

Ron did as he was told, and the message appeared in the sent box. "Now we wait for her reply."

The three of them stared at the screen in anticipation.

MuggleBornWitch: But what if I don't want to come back?

Ron's mouth dropped open. Her words had simply appeared on the screen, as if by magic *Muggle Magic*, Ron thought silently. After a few moments of astonishment, he turned to the others. "I never dreamed that she wouldn't come back to me. What do I do now?"

Harry and Snape both stared at him in disbelief. "How could you possibly think that she would come back after all that you've put her through?" asked Harry angrily.

"Well, that's what Nott and Malfoy did to get their wives back. They said that it may take a while, but it was bound to work."

"Since when do you take advice from Malfoy and Nott?"

"They are purebloods at their worst, Mr. Weasley. Do you wish to emulate such Muggle-hating scum?"

"I don't... I never..."

"The way you've been parading around with Lavender Brown is disgraceful," berated Harry. "You've humiliated Hermione in public. How could you ever expect her to come back?"

"*For the kids*. I thought *surely* she would come back to be with the kids. I have the right to keep her from them, you know!" He stiffened his lower lip and raised his chin defiantly.

"And what do your children think of this tactic, Mr. Weasley? Have you considered their feelings in this matter?" Snape looked down his long nose condescendingly.

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, I have," Ron declared defensively. "They need their mother *all the time*, not just on weekends or whenever."

"If yours had been a happy home when you all lived under one roof, I would agree. But that is not the case, is it, Mr. Weasley?"

"How would you know? What has Hermione been telling you?"

"She didn't have to tell me anything. I deduced the truth from Hugo's delicate state of health. His health has been in decline ever since you two stopped getting along. Am I correct?"

The quick three note phrase that sounded the arrival of an IM turned everyone's attention back to the computer screen.

MuggleBornWitch: What about Lavender?

Ron instantly took up the conversation.

HalfBloodPrince: What about her?

MuggleBornWitch: Don't you love her?

HalfBloodPrince: Of course not.

MuggleBornWitch: But I thought you wanted to marry her and have loads more children.

HalfBloodPrince: I don't want Lavender, I want you.

"I think this might be working," Harry leaned close and whispered to Snape.

Snape nodded in agreement as the two watched, mesmerized.

MuggleBornWitch: Well, you have a funny way of showing it, shagging like a couple of rabbits.

Ron turned back to Harry and Snape as his face reddened. "Now what?"

"Looks like you have some suckin' up to do, mate," suggested Harry.

"Perhaps if you tell her how you feel, it would help to soften her a bit," added Snape. "This is why I arranged for her children to be there. She would be reminded of just how much joy they bring into her life, and she would perhaps be more easily swayed in your direction."

Harry shot a sideways glance at Snape but kept silent.

Ron turned back to the computer screen. "I love you, Hermione. I need you. I would be lost without you." Before hitting the send button, he turned back to the two men. "What do you think? Is that good enough?"

Snape glanced over his shoulder to read the words on the screen then pursed his lips. "*Pathetic!*" he snarled at Weasley. "Miss Granger is one of the most intelligent, sensitive, talented witches of our time. You can't expect to sway her with primal grunts. She craves substance... details. Describe your feelings, don't simply list them." He turned away, exasperated.

"I can't. I don't know how. That's just not me." Ron gazed helplessly at Snape's back, then at Harry's empathetic face.

Snape suddenly turned on his heel to face Ron with an anxious tone and an even more tortured look. "Tell her how her eyes glisten like a rushing river in the moon's glow. Tell her that she brings life to a room when she enters, just the way she brings life to your heart. Tell her that your soul sings with joy whenever you hear the music that is her voice." Snape stopped and swallowed hard, and his eyes seemed a bit watery to Harry, who was watching him very closely. When he continued, his voice was barely above a whisper. "Tell her that... that your spirit... will shrivel into dust... without her." With those words, Snape turned away from both of them and stalked over to the only window in the room. His breathing was ragged. To Harry, he seemed fatigued.

Harry and Ron sat with eyes and mouths agape. Ron was dumbfounded. He never would have imagined that Snape could show such passion. But Harry knew, having seen Snape's memories all those years ago. Yes, Harry knew how passionate Snape could be, and he was sure now that Hermione was the reason.

"Wow," testified Ron with admiration, "you're good. You're *really* good. Can I use that? Can I write that stuff down?"

Snape turned again, and this time it took all of his willpower to not lose his temper. "NO!" he snarled. "The words must come from *your* mind... *your* heart. *Not* from me, and most certainly *NOT* from some cheesy, two-bit book on how to charm witches!" His eyes shot daggers as he stomped up to Ron and towered over him in full intimidation mode.

Ron didn't seem to notice Snape's sneer as soon as the book was mentioned. "You've heard of the book, too? Bloody brilliant, eh? I couldn't have gotten Hermione to marry me without it!"

Snape stared in disgust into Ron's oblivious eyes. "I was so impressed with that book that it holds a special place of esteem for me. It is the only book in my extensive collection that I have ever *used as fuel in my fireplace*, Mr. Weasley, and you would do well to destroy yours!" Snape let out an enraged growl and marched to the doorway. "I think I'll check to see what is taking so long with our lunch." He knew that if he didn't leave the room this instant, he would surely do something that he would regret, if only because he would end up back in Azkaban for doing it.

"I think I'll go with him and give you and Hermione your privacy," added Harry hastily as he jumped up from his chair.

"But, what if I need advice?" Ron pleaded after them hopelessly.

Harry ran down the stairs two at a time, leaving Ron to face Hermione's IMs alone. He caught up with Snape in the kitchen. Winky was dishing out the cold potato and leak soup, and some roast beef sandwiches on rye bread, and arranging them on a tray that looked too big for her to carry. Snape busied himself by pouring the pumpkin juice into tall glasses and setting them next to the sandwich plates.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Harry flatly.

"Doing what?" asked Snape with mock innocence as he reached for another glass.

"Pushing Ron and Hermione back together? You know she doesn't love him."

Snape flicked his wand towards the dining room, and three cloth napkins flew into the kitchen to rest on the tray. "She is my friend, and I wish to see her and her children happy. That is all."

"But she won't be happy with Ron."

"That is for her to decide."

"But what if she does go back for the sake of the children?"

Snape slammed the last glass down on the tray, and a few drops sloshed up over the rim and landed on the kitchen counter. "Then she goes back, Mr. Potter." He siphoned the mess up with his wand. "What are you getting at, besides the obvious?" he asked as impatience began to creep into his tone.

"What happens with you and her?"

Snape furrowed his brow and glanced accusingly at Potter. "What do you mean? We'll still be friends. That's all we are, that's all we ever were." He turned his attention back to the food tray. "And I imagine that that is all we ever will be."

"How can you say that?" Harry demanded. As Snape ignored his question, he took a deep breath, screwed up his courage, and continued forward. "How can you say that when you're in love with her?"

"WHAT?!" Snape's voice reeked of incredulity, but his eyes darted to the greenhouse door. "I, Severus Snape, in love with that insufferable know-it-all?" He let out a nervous chuckle. "Have you lost your mind?"

Winky covered her mouth with both hands as her tennis-ball eyes turned to Harry with a wary look. He knew from her expression that he had uncovered the truth.

"I could see it in your face upstairs. You've seen her eyes sparkle in the moonlight. You've felt your heart come to life when you're with her. And her voice is music to your ears."

"Enough of this nonsense!"

"No! It's not nonsense and you know it! It's *your* spirit that will turn to dust if you can't be with her, not Ron's. You can't let her go back. Not if you love her. She's been miserable with him for years. That's not going to change if she goes back. Do you want her to be miserable?"

Snape's stance softened. He stared into Harry's intense green eyes. He had been in love with those eyes once, but that love had finally faded over the decades. If anyone had asked him a year ago if he would be having a conversation such as this with Harry Potter, he would have had them committed to St. Mungo's long-term ward for the criminally insane. But now, here he was, facing those eyes back from the grave to haunt him. When Harry was in school, the only reason he couldn't see into Snape's soul was because their mutual hatred for each other clouded their vision. Now, he no longer felt hatred for James, much less Harry. Even if he had, he no longer possessed the anger to use it. But he could never hide anything from those eyes, and this moment was no different. Those eyes could see that he was in love with Hermione Granger. Somehow he knew that Lily would approve.

Snape turned his face back to the greenhouse door. "If Weasley will not listen to reason, she may decide to go back to be with her children. She will do what's best for them. What happens to me is unimportant."

"It's important to *her*..." Harry insisted. Then, after a moment of hesitation, he added, "...*and* it's important to *me*."

Snape turned back to Potter with that same tortured look on his face. "I'm a convicted felon, Mr. Potter. What sort of life could I possibly offer her? She would likely lose her job at the Ministry for consorting with me, and she may not be able to procure employment elsewhere. I don't mind being a recluse, but she is a social creature. She needs people in her daily life. She couldn't have that with me. It would never work. It would never last."

"So just like that, you're willing to give up? That doesn't sound like the Severus Snape that I used to know."

Snape took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The Severus Snape you used to know... no longer exists."

The two stood in silence for a few moments as Winky put the finishing touches on the tray. Then Snape flicked his wand and sent one of each item to the dinette table in the corner of the kitchen. "You take the tray up to Weasley. I think it would be safer for him if I eat here and stay out of it. Otherwise, I may have to hex his testicles off."

"But, Professor..."

"Please, just go, Mr. Potter," Snape whispered as he furrowed his brow and turned back to stare through the sliding glass door into his greenhouse.

Winky tugged at Harry's sleeve and gestured towards the tray. She knew that her master needed to be alone right now. Harry obediently grabbed the tray, nodded his thanks to the little elf, and made his way silently back upstairs.

Snape heaved a heavy sigh as he felt Harry leave the room, then he rested his forehead on the door, closed his eyes, and allowed one lone tear to escape down the side of his cheek.

"Come eat, Master Severus," Winky implored him softly. "It will help you feel better."

After a few moments, Snape conceded and stepped over to the table where he sat in silence through his meal. He didn't even notice how delectable the soup was or that the tender roast beef had been cooked to perfection. He could only taste the bitter-sweetness in his heart from the knowledge that whatever happened, it would be for Miss Granger's good and the good of her children. And that was all that mattered.

Rock Skipping Lessons

Chapter 16 of 35

Ron and Hermione come to an agreement.

As always, I would like to thank the people that have helped me so much, JENGEORGE, NervousAboutAngels, and the staff at The Petulant Poetess. They keep me on my toes with their constant vigilance! Thanks to you all.

I make no money, I take no credit. It's all J. K. Rowlings.

Chapter 16

Rock Skipping Lessons

Hermione stared at Ron's latest IM on her computer screen.

HalfBloodPrince: I love you, Hermione. I need you. I would be lost without you.

"There, dear, you see? He does love you. Perhaps you should forgive him and give it another chance." Molly had been sitting beside Hermione and watching the exchange with great fascination.

Hermione didn't mind the fact that Molly was eaves-dropping, but she felt that, in order for Molly to understand her point of view, she would have to tell her about the book. She turned to face Molly and took a deep breath.

"I don't think that moving back in with him is the answer. I hate to tell you this, Molly, but I don't know if I ever really loved him as anything more than a friend."

Molly's shocked look didn't surprise Hermione. "Then why in Merlin's name did you marry him?" she asked, with just a touch of resentment in her voice.

"Have you ever heard of the book, *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*?"

Molly gasped. "Did he use those spells on you, dear?"

Hermione nodded, "Even before we were married. I think that he actually used one of the spells to get me to agree to marry him. My instincts told me that the marriage would never work, but looking back, I think he even had me under a spell on our wedding day so I would go through with the ceremony."

Molly shook her head as outrage began to erupt on her face. "If Arthur gave him that damn book, I'll kill him! He tried to use those spells on me before we were even out of Hogwarts. I told him that if he ever tried it again, I'd turn his hair green and dump him."

"How did you know what it felt like?"

"My mum had taught me how to detect the spells and how to counteract them. My father had used them on her, but by the time she found out what was going on, there were six children to consider. It was too late for her, but she didn't want the same fate to befall her own daughter, so she trained me. And I have since taught Ginny as well."

"How fortunate for you both. I didn't know about such things. I happened upon the book when I was cleaning out the dresser drawers while I was on maternity leave with Hugo. Then I researched ways to detect and counteract the spells. It was quite an eye-opener to see just how often he had used them to manipulate me."

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," Molly replied with quiet sincerity. "I had no idea. No wonder your marriage fell apart... Does Ron know that you found the book?"

"I don't think so. I never told him."

"Perhaps you should. At least then he will understand how you really feel and why."

"Now I know why Professor Snape wanted you here with me." Hermione smiled at Molly. "You can help me see things from Ron's point of view. You can remind me why I still care about him."

"He's not a bad person, dear. But even good people follow bad advice sometimes."

"I know. And I'll always love him as a friend." Hermione glanced over at the two children who were eating their lunch at the kitchen table and sighed heavily. "But I was never really in love with him." She gazed sadly into Molly's eyes, willing her to understand and not be resentful of her next statement. "He's just not the man I want to spend the rest of my life with."

Molly's posture slumped. "I understand, dear. Please forgive me for not wanting to lose you as a daughter-in-law especially if you are to be replaced with a harlot like Lavender Brown!"

They both laughed. "Perhaps he will come to his senses before it's too late," Hermione reassured her.

"And perhaps I should give you two some privacy in your virtual conversation." Molly stood and walked into the kitchen, but turned back to Hermione. "Can I make you a sandwich, dear?"

"Yes, thanks, that would be great."

Hermione turned back to the computer screen in silent contemplation. She had to tell him that she had found the book. But how? She finally decided that the truth was always the best course of action.

MuggleBornWitch: I know about the book, Ron. I've known about it for years. I found it when Hugo was just a baby.

It took a while for his reply to appear on the screen.

HalfBloodPrince: What book?

Hermione rolled her eyes. I can't believe that he's playing dumb.

MuggleBornWitch: The one about twelve ways to charm witches. I learned to detect and counteract the spells. Imagine how I felt when I realized that you had been manipulating me for years. How would you have felt if I had done that to you?

Again, a long span of minutes ticked slowly by.

HalfBloodPrince: Pretty mad, I suppose. But I love you. I can't live without you, Hermione. Please try to understand. I didn't think that you would have wanted me if I didn't use the spells on you.

MuggleBornWitch: And you were probably right. I always thought of you as my friend. By using those spells, you made me believe that you were someone that you were not. I fell in love with someone who didn't exist. I was bound to find out sooner or later. How would you have expected me to react?

HalfBloodPrince: I never thought you would find out. Some of my friends have wives that still don't know anything about it.

MuggleBornWitch: I bet those same friends cheat on their wives as well, don't they?

HalfBloodPrince: Now that you mention it... But they are all purebloods. It's just what purebloods do. Most of their wives know and it's no big deal. And the wives see whoever they want on the side as well.

MuggleBornWitch: Sorry, but that's not how I was raised. I can't believe that your parents raised you that way either.

"Here, here!" commented Molly, who had been listening in from the kitchen.

HalfBloodPrince: They didn't, but they never had such a non-existent sex life.

MuggleBornWitch: Because they were both in love with each other, not because your mum was under some spell.

When Ron didn't answer right away, Hermione added another sentence.

MuggleBornWitch: You can't expect me to love you when you are pretending to be someone that you're not.

HalfBloodPrince: But you would never have fallen in love with the real me.

MuggleBornWitch: I'm afraid that's probably true.

Another long pause...

HalfBloodPrince: So you don't love me?

Hermione sighed and shook her head. So he finally gets it!

MuggleBornWitch: I love you, but only as a friend, like I love Harry.

HalfBloodPrince: So you wish we had never gotten married?

Hermione had a feeling that Ron's heart was breaking, and she didn't want to hurt him any more than necessary. They had made some headway in the right direction, and she didn't want it all to be flushed instantly down the drain, so she thought long and hard about her response.

MuggleBornWitch: I wouldn't say that. Our two beautiful children are the best things that have ever happened to me. I have you to thank for them.

HalfBloodPrince: They are great kids, aren't they?

MuggleBornWitch: Yes. The best.

HalfBloodPrince: So why won't you come back for their sake?

MuggleBornWitch: It is for their sake that I don't want to come back. You and I are miserable together and it is affecting Hugo's health. After thinking about it, I believe that Rose's aggressive behavior can be attributed to our failing marriage as well. Don't you think that the children would prefer two separate, but happy, parents? Wouldn't a stress-free environment be a better atmosphere for them to grow up in?

*

Harry returned to the upstairs bedroom with the tray filled with delicious food. Ron reached over and grabbed a sandwich. "Thank Merlin. I'm famished," he whispered so as to not add his words to the screen behind him. He took a huge bite and glanced at the doorway as he chewed. "Where's Snape?"

"He decided to eat downstairs."

Ron shrugged. "Too bad. His suggestions were better than the book's." He took another huge bite of the roast beef on rye. "Horseradish! Yum! You're right about Winky's cooking. This is terrific."

Harry glanced over Ron's shoulder to read the last few lines of his conversation with Hermione. "So she knows about the book, eh? It's just as well. Two people should marry for love, not because of good spell work."

Ron glared at Harry for taking Hermione's side in this. "She's got to come back. She's just got to."

"Why?" Harry felt almost angry at Ron's stubbornness in this. "After you deceived her all these years, and then cheated on her out in the open, why should she come back to you?"

"Because if I get a divorce, then Lavender will want to marry me, and although she's hell between the sheets, I have no desire to get permanently hitched to that witch."

"Then just tell her that you don't want to get married." Harry took a bite of his sandwich. "Simple as that."

"But then she'll dump me. And from what I've heard, she's pretty ruthless about it. I wouldn't want to cross her."

"You should have thought about that before you started shaggin' her on the side, mate."

They both sat in silence and slurped their soup. "I guess I wasn't thinking straight when I decided to listen to Malfoy and Nott."

Harry chuckled. "Oh you were thinking *straight*, alright. But you were thinking with that heat seeking Nimbus 2020 between your legs instead of with your brain."

Ron's ears turned beet red as he took a swig of his pumpkin juice. Then he put his glass down on the table and turned back to the computer screen and re-read Hermione's previous IM. Then he turned back to Harry with a pained and helpless look on his face. "What would you do?"

"Do you love her? Truly love her?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Hasn't she always done what was best for you and the kids?"

After a short pause and a sigh, Ron answered, "Yeah."

"Then don't you think you should return the favor? You know she's a Muggle-born. You know she would never agree to a loveless marriage where you both see other people on the side. And you know that she loves your children more than life itself." Harry leaned forward and put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "You have a good heart. You know what's right and fair. Don't listen to Malfoy and Nott. Listen to your conscience."

Ron looked at Harry with sad eyes and nodded slowly.

Harry came bounding down the staircase two at a time again, followed anxiously by Ron.

"They came to an agreement!" he shouted excitedly as he ran into the kitchen. But the room was deserted. Harry glanced around the other downstairs rooms and found no one, not even Winky. He peeked out through the sliding glass door to the greenhouse. Empty. Harry had a feeling that the potential outcome was simply too painful for Snape to consider, and he had left so as not to reveal his true feelings to Ron when they had finally come to a decision.

"Well, I guess he had errands to run. Let's see if he lifted the wards so we can at least get out of here." Harry walked over and tried the front door. It opened easily. "Why don't you go on, Ron. I'll just write him a quick note to let him know what you decided."

"Tell him 'thanks' for me."

"Will do." Harry nodded as Ron Disillusioned himself and stepped out on the front porch to Disapparate. But Harry didn't have any intention of writing Snape a note. He wanted to find him and talk with him in person. "Winky!" he called out in desperation.

The little elf appeared in front of him with a crack. "Yes, Harry Potter. Winky is at your service." She bowed low to him.

"Winky, do you know where Professor Snape is? I really need to talk with him. Ron has agreed to let Hermione see the kids on a regular basis. She doesn't have to move back in with him. He'll sign the papers this afternoon. She'll be free, and she will still be able to see the children.

"Oh, this is wonderful news, Harry Potter! This will make Master Severus very happy, indeed!"

Harry smiled broadly at her. "But where is he?"

"Winky does not know. Master Severus transformed his clothes to Muggle style and walked out the front door."

Harry thought about the memories from the Pensieve and figured that if he could find the river and follow it, he would eventually come across the old playground where Snape had met his mother all those years ago. Something inside told him that Snape would be there, searching his soul for the strength to carry on if Hermione chose to go back to Ron.

"Thanks, Winky." Harry grabbed his cloak from the front hall closet and shrank it to fit into his pocket. Then he took off out the front door in search of the river. It was only a block away, and there were signs and a bike path that led to the refurbished playground. But still no Snape. So Harry continued to follow the river until he rounded a bend, and in the distance he spied a tall, slender figure, with long black hair and blue jeans, skipping rocks along the water's surface. With a huge grin on his face, Harry slid down the bank to land on the sand and came up beside Snape.

"Mission accomplished!" he announced energetically.

"Oh?" Snape raised an eyebrow in his direction.

"Ron agreed to let Hermione keep the kids on weekends and when he has to work late. And they will work out other times as well, such as holidays and vacation time, depending on both of their schedules. And, best of all, she doesn't have to move back in with him."

Snape closed his eyes and said a silent prayer of thanks to Merlin. "I suppose I have you to thank for talking him into it?"

"No, actually, Hermione admitted that she had found that book, and it was all downhill from there. He knew then that he didn't stand a chance of ever getting her back."

"That book should be outlawed. I wonder how many women have married while under the influence of its spells, only to live out their lives in misery as a result. Not to mention the effects that bad marriages have had on the countless children involved over the years." Snape skillfully skipped a small, flat rock, and both men watched it flitter effortlessly across the surface of the sparkling water.

"She's free, Professor. Nothing stands in your way now." Harry announced hopefully. But Snape's reaction was reserved instead of excited. Harry couldn't help but show just a hint of disappointment at Snape's lack of enthusiasm for the situation that they had both worked so hard to bring about.

"My status in society is still problematic. And she is on the rebound. She needs friendship, not romance. She needs to move on... figure out who she is without the wastrel by her side before she becomes involved with anyone new." Snape paused to look into Harry's eyes in hope of finding understanding there. He wanted to be sure that Harry could see that his decision to keep her at arm's length was for her own good. The last thing he wanted to be accused of was taking advantage of Miss Granger during an emotionally fragile time in her life.

"She hasn't told me anything, but I can tell that she cares for you deeply. She won't understand why you're pushing her away."

"I don't plan to push her away. I'll be the best friend she could ever want."

"Just as you tried to be with my mother?"

Snape gazed back out over the water. "Precisely."

"But what if she thinks that you don't love her due to your inaction? What if she finds someone else?"

Snape's face went pale at the thought of losing her to another man. "All the better for her," he whispered with more than a hint of anguish in his voice.

Harry became angry. "She needs to feel loved, Professor. Especially now."

"And she will," Snape soothed Harry with his silky voice. "Friendship is the purest form of love. There is only the desire to help, with no conditions, no strings attached. Trust me. I can make her feel loved without making love to her." His lip curled ever so slightly with this statement. He knew that Harry loved her as well, and only wanted her to be happy, just as he did.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I hope, somehow, someday, the two of you can find happiness together. You two were made for each other. I don't think it would have worked twenty years ago, but you both have changed. You seem perfect for each other now. If it weren't for that damn conviction..."

Snape sighed. "Mr. Potter, I have never properly thanked you for all of your hard work on my behalf after the fall of Voldemort. I know that you did all you could. Without the testimony of Dumbledore's portrait, what you saw in the Pensieve was considered hearsay. I was lucky that they didn't toss me into Azkaban and throw away the key."

"I still don't think it's fair. Just because a portrait has never testified at his own murder trial doesn't mean it can't be done."

"But the Wizengamot took a vote to allow it, and the motion did not pass."

"In order to set a new precedent it has to be unanimous, and there was one holdout. ONE HOLDOUT!"

"Any idea who voted down my only chance at freedom?"

"No. They used a secret ballot, so whoever it was wouldn't be badgered by anyone for making that decision."

"How convenient," muttered Snape with more than a touch of resentment.

The two men stood in silence by the river's edge as Snape continued to skip rocks. "Here." He handed Harry one of the flat stones in his hand. "Try it. Helps to take one's mind off the complications of life."

Harry's first attempt failed dismally. It hit the water at a sharp angle and disappeared with a loud bloop! Snape glanced quickly from side to side then reached out his hand. The ill-fated rock flew out of the water and back to his waiting fingertips. "Watch and learn. It's all in the wrist. Keep the angle parallel to the water's surface and throw it like that Muggle toy... what's it called...a Frisbee?" He tossed the rock, and it skipped over a dozen times before it finally disappeared beneath the surface. Then he bent down and retrieved another flat rock from the sand and handed it to Harry.

This time Harry's attempt was much better. After five good skips, it went under. They looked at each other and smiled. Harry Potter was actually enjoying the company of Severus Snape. And it seemed surprisingly relaxed and natural.

"Do you miss teaching?" The words just slipped from Harry's lips. He felt stupid and callous the moment he had uttered them, since, with the conviction looming over his head, there was no way Snape could ever take up that profession again.

"Suffering through hours with brats and dunderheads like you and Weasley every day?" Snape gave Harry his most sarcastic sneer. "You must be joking!"

They both started to laugh.

But suddenly, Snape caught himself and became quite serious. "Speaking of teaching, Hogwarts needs a new Charms professor. I have suggested to Miss Granger that she apply for the job. She hates her current duties at the Ministry. Her talents go so dreadfully underused there. She needs a challenge, something more rewarding. Now that this mess with her marriage has been ironed out, perhaps you could prod her in that direction."

"That would be perfect for her. She loves Charms."

With their new plan for Miss Granger in place, the two men parted ways. Harry found a hedge to hide behind so he could Disapparate back to the Ministry, and Snape made his way back home to put the finishing touches on his Potions textbook manuscript.

It was time to set up a meeting with Viktor Krum.

Viktor Krum

Chapter 17 of 35

Snape takes Hermione with him for a business meeting with Viktor, but all doesn't go as planned.

As always, I would like to thank the people that have helped me so much, JENGEORGE, NervousAboutAngels, and the staff at The Petulant Poetess. They keep me on my toes with their constant vigilance! Thanks to you all.

I make no money, I take no credit. It all belongs to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 17

Viktor Krum

Seven years into his illustrious Quidditch career, the most eligible bachelor in the western wizarding world (since Harry Potter was already married) finally got hitched to a bewitching fashion model named Leona Barelli. Three years later, Viktor suffered an injury to his right arm that no healer in the wizarding world could rectify. So, just like that, he was relegated to the sidelines as a permanent spectator. Shortly afterwards came divorce number one. Leona kept his name and managed to drain all of the Galleons from his bank account, so he was left knutless and with no source of income.

By this time, Draco's publishing company was up and running, and he approached Viktor with the idea of writing an autobiography. A Bulgarian ghost writer helped him with the project since Viktor had never learned the art of verbal eloquence. After being translated into several languages, the book was released with much fanfare and became an instant success, saving Viktor from the poorhouse and putting him back in the spotlight at the same time.

The book deal turned out to be not as lucrative as the hefty Quidditch salary had been, but it was better than nothing. And after a year of touring Europe, autographing books and granting interviews, wife number two had been procured. A helpless romantic, Viktor could never bring himself to force the prospective wife to sign a prenuptial agreement. And, sure enough, after realizing that Viktor's intellect didn't match the skilled prose in his autobiography, the new wife ran off with the true talent behind the words, the ghost writer that Draco had hired to help him.

Once again, Viktor had found himself alone and broke.

But as other athlete friends began to retire, he began giving advice and making introductions that would help them navigate the pitfalls that had kept him from keeping more of the money that his book had generated. He may not have been the brightest man, but he did learn from his mistakes. When one of his former professors from Durmstrang realized what he was doing for his friends, he advised Viktor to become a literary agent. The profession became a perfect fit for Victor, since he was so well connected already, and so many people owed him favors. His experience made him a shrewd and successful businessman, and he quickly became a master at negotiating the best deals for his clients.

Snape didn't need help in the negotiation process, but he wanted to keep his identity a secret. Since Viktor's office was in Bulgaria, and he was the best in the business, Snape had never seriously considered anyone else to help him with the deal. But most importantly, Viktor Krum had graduated from Durmstrang. He knew how to keep a secret under pressure.

And so, after several letters by owl post to work out the details, a meeting to deliver the manuscript to Viktor's office in Bulgaria was arranged. And although it would be too late for the upcoming school year, Snape had high hopes that his Potions textbooks would become standard issue for many years to come. And if they were well received in Great Britain, they could be translated into many other languages. Snape would never have to worry about money again, just as long as no one ever found out that a convicted felon was the source of the invaluable information.

Without hesitation, Hermione had taken Snape and Harry's advice and applied for the position of Charms Professor at Hogwarts. Headmistress McGonagall ecstatically informed her at the end of her first interview that the post was hers and gave her former star pupil a big hug to drive the point home. The pieces of Hermione's life had finally begun to fall back into place.

With one huge exception... Snape.

They had both been kept busy since the day he and Harry had kidnapped Ron, but Hermione still missed his presence in her life. They corresponded daily through the computer, but words on a screen could not compare to the sensation of his arms wrapped around her. She had invited him to dinner the following Saturday, but he had declined. He felt that her time would be better spent with her children now that she had access to them on weekends.

So it was with great surprise and joy that she accepted his invitation to accompany him to Bulgaria for his meeting with Viktor Krum. She would need much more than a mere hour for the trip, so he suggested that she take the day off, if possible. He and Winky were to Apparate to her house on Tuesday at 11:30 a.m. Then Winky could transport them both all the way to Bulgaria! House-elves had a much more powerful Apparation range than wizards. They could pop half-way round the world in the blink of an eye. A wizard would take hours making multiple Apparations to reach the same distance.

The knock on Hermione's door came at exactly 11:30, and as usual, the front porch appeared empty when she looked out. But she greeted them and stepped aside so

they could enter, and she watched with delight as they both began to materialize in her front hall.

"What a lovely home, miss," exclaimed Winky.

"Why, thank you, Winky." Hermione knew that she was only being polite. She imagined that the Crouch family home would have put hers to shame.

"If you are ready, Winky can take us directly to Viktor Krum's office. There is no need to lower your wards."

"Yes, I remember. Dobby got us into the Malfoy's house that way."

Snape shot Hermione an irritated glance at the mention of Dobby's name. Then he turned his tentative gaze to Winky and held his breath as she slowly turned her eyes to meet Hermione's.

"Dobby saved Harry Potter," she whispered with a touch of pride in her now-quivering little voice.

"Dobby saved me, too, Winky. I would have died a horrible death at the hands of Fenrir Greyback that night if it weren't for Dobby."

Winky drew in a quick breath as her watery eyes grew as big as saucers. "Fenrir Greyback the werewolf?"

Hermione nodded. "Dobby was the bravest elf I ever had the honor of knowing."

Winky smiled as a lone tear trickled down her tiny cheek.

When Hermione looked back at Snape, his smile had returned, and he winked at her.

Good save, she thought. This time, at least, she had managed to pull her foot out of her mouth before she swallowed it.

"Now remember the condition, Miss Granger." Snape kindly redirected the conversation. "You promised to ask no questions today."

"Yes, yes. Your business with Viktor is none of my business."

"Precisely."

"And I am to tell no one that you even met with him."

"Come on, come on!" insisted Winky. "Master doesn't want to be late, does he?" She reached for both of their hands, and the next moment they all stood in Viktor Krum's waiting room in Sofiya, Bulgaria.

A plump young receptionist with spiky red hair calmly looked up from filing her nails. "Professor Severus Snape, I presume?" she asked in a thick Bulgarian accent.

"Yes, ma'am." He gave a slight bow.

"I am Salina Leystova, Mr. Krum's assistant. I'll let him know that you have arrived."

Snape nodded his approval.

She flicked her wand at a nearby door, then touched the tip to her throat. "Professor Snape is here to see you." The words echoed from inside the newly exposed office. She turned back to the threesome and motioned for them to go in.

But before they reached the door sill, Viktor emerged with his arms outstretched. "Greetings, greetings. Hermione! What a wonderful surprise! It's so good to see you. Professor, you should have warned me. I would have taken a moment to tidy up." His face beamed in welcome as he shook Snape's hand briefly, then turned hastily to Hermione and wrapped his arms around her. She seemed just as happy to be in Viktor's company as he obviously was in hers. Snape wasn't sure if he should feel relief or anxiety at their mutual enthusiasm for each other.

Viktor glanced down at Winky as he ushered Snape and Hermione into his office. "Perhaps your house-elf wouldn't mind getting us all some tea?"

"Actually..." Snape raised an eyebrow at Krum's presumptuous request. "...shedoes mind. Besides, your receptionist looks as though she could use the exercise."

Winky smirked.

Although she had not been comfortable with Viktor's suggestion any more than he was, Hermione glared at Snape for his rude comment.

"Why don't you take the day off, Winky," Snape said with a sly smile. "We'll call you when we are ready to come home."

"Thank you, Master Severus." She bowed graciously and disappeared with a pop.

"You give your house-elf time off?" asked Krum skeptically.

"I'm only one person, and mine is a modest home. She doesn't have enough to keep her busy there, so I let her do as she pleases with her free time."

"You are more generous than most, Professor." Viktor looked at Hermione and smiled. "I guess, since we will be going to lunch in just a few minutes, we can wait on the tea. So let's get down to business, shall we?" He motioned for the two of them to sit in the waiting chairs as he took his rightful place behind his desk.

Hermione looked around the office. Not nearly as impressive as Blaise Zabini's, its plain white walls and modest wood molding did not speak of huge incomes to be made here. But where fortune waned, fame definitely made up for it. On almost every available inch of wall space was a Quidditch photo, plaque, award or ribbon. And the huge bookcase strained from the weight of his many trophies. Hermione was never a big fan of Quidditch, so she had not followed Viktor's illustrious career. She had no idea just how big he had become in the world of Quidditch before the injury had forced him to the sidelines. The revelation that his office décor afforded took her a bit by surprise.

She barely noticed when Snape removed a large parcel from his interior robe pocket and passed it across the desk to Viktor. But she noticed with great irritation when he cast the Muffliato Spell between her and the two of them so that their short conversation would remain private.

"She doesn't know?" asked Krum with surprise.

"No, and I would like to keep it that way. In fact, if word gets out, and I can prove that you are the source of the leak, our contract will be null and void."

"Of course. I noticed you had added that clause to the contract. Oh, I hope you don't mind," Krum informed him, "but I took the liberty of asking Professor Moskovich to look it over."

"The Potions Professor at Durmstrang?"

Krum nodded.

"To be honest, I was hoping that he would consent to write the 'forward' if its contents meet with his approval."

"That's a great idea. I will ask him."

"And he is also not to know the true identity of the author."

"Yes, yes, of course. He won't hear it from me."

"Be sure to familiarize yourself with the fake biography I wrote about the pseudo-author, just in case he asks any questions. You don't think Moskovich has ever been to Armenia, do you?"

"Not that I know of."

"I'll have to take that chance. I picked a remote region of the country that no one in their right mind would want to visit, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Krum nodded in agreement, then pulled the contract from his desk drawer, all filled in and ready for Snape to sign. "This is the original. I sent you a copy to read over. I'm sure you will find everything in order." He pushed it towards Snape, along with a quill.

"I'm sure you won't mind if I look it over for any last minute changes, will you?" Snape asked with just a tad too much politeness in his voice.

"Not at all," replied Krum with a fake smile.

Since this part of the trip was obviously not meant for Hermione, she had taken the opportunity to get up and walk over to the bookcase to examine the many trophies more closely. His collection was indeed impressive. His celebrity status was obviously well established, but Hermione couldn't care less about his fame. He was a long-time friend who had drifted out of her life, and she was more than happy to welcome him back, especially since she was now free and needed all of the friends she could get. She had heard of his two failed marriages through the grapevine. She was sure that there would be no lack of subject matter to fuel their conversation at lunch.

Snape took his time and raked over every word to be sure that not so much as a comma had changed from the previous version that had been sent to his home a couple of days before. When he had finally satisfied himself that this was indeed the same in every way, he scratched his name across the bottom with a flourish and sat back in his chair.

Krum reached for the contract and added his name beside Snape's. A blue glow engulfed the document for a fleeting moment, then it faded.

"Time for lunch, then?"

Snape flicked his wand in the general direction of Miss Granger, and the Muffliato Charm was lifted. "Lunch would be lovely."

"Finished already? That was fast," she said with a smile as the two men stood, and all three of them headed for the door.

"Miss Leystova," announced Krum as he herded his guests out of his office door to the hall towards the lift, "I should be back in time for my two o'clock. Owl everyone else after that, and reschedule them for later in the week for me."

"Yes, Mr. Krum."

As they headed out the door, Krum took Miss Granger's arm and left Snape to bring up the rear, putting him immediately in the "third wheel" position. They took the lift down to the lobby and walked outside and down the street about a block, to a quaint little restaurant that served the traditional Eastern European fare. Krum suggested that they share a bottle of wine "to celebrate," but Snape and Miss Granger both declined. It was too early in the afternoon for them to start drinking.

Small talk dominated the conversation for the first few minutes but, just as Snape feared, the dialogue soon turned to reminiscent tales of the Triwizard Tournament back during their school days. That had been when Miss Granger had first met the already famous Mr. Krum. Walnut Brain hadn't even bothered to ask her to the Yule Ball, and Krum had worshiped the ground she had walked on. As Krum began to describe his feelings at their first meeting, Miss Granger seemed to glow. At that moment, Snape truly wished that he had been an Animagus so he could simply transform and crawl away unnoticed. He contemplated making his excuses and calling Winky, but he didn't want to appear rude. So he suffered through the torture of watching those two make goo-goo eyes at each other as he picked at his Soujouk sausage and Shopska salad.

Every once in a while, Miss Granger would make a feeble attempt to include him in the conversation. She mentioned that Snape had come to Hugo's rescue by manufacturing his potion, and she explained that Snape and Potter had come up with the brilliant plan to convince the whippet to let her see her children. But Krum always quickly and skillfully steered the conversation back to the two of them.

Mercifully, the conversation finally began to wind down and Krum began to check his watch so he wouldn't be late for his 2:00 appointment. He insisted that lunch was on him, and Snape didn't bother to argue. His ego had been so completely deflated for the past two hours that he wanted nothing more than to get away from the bulky man with the thick accent and the unbrow. But he had a sickening feeling that Miss Granger was not nearly so anxious for their time together to be over. And his nightmare scenario came true when, as they all got up to leave, Krum made a suggestion.

"You know, this two o'clock shouldn't take very long. The preliminary work is done. Why don't you two hang around, go shopping or something, and I can meet you back here in 45 minutes. I can show you the city. It's a beautiful place in summer. All of the flowers... The river is close by..." Krum looked at Miss Granger hopefully.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that Snape was not really included in this invitation. From the look on Miss Granger's face, she didn't care if Snape stayed or not. So, as painful as he knew it would be to leave her there alone with Krum, he decided that it was the polite move to make. They obviously had a lot of catching up to do. And Krum had suffered through two divorces. Snape had never even been married. When it came to those sorts of subjects, Snape simply had no advice to offer.

"I'm sure it's lovely this time of year," he said regretfully to Krum, "but I have a lot of work to do." He then turned his attention to Miss Granger, whose disappointment obviously splashed itself across her face. "Miss Granger, don't feel that you must leave with me. I'm sure Winky won't mind coming back to get you at your convenience." This bit of news seemed to restore some of her glow, so they made their way out of the restaurant and to a nearby alleyway where passersby would not notice them. "Winky!"

The little house-elf appeared with a pop. "Winky at your service, Master Severus, sir."

"Are you sure you won't stay?" asked Krum politely.

"Please?" pleaded Miss Granger with, in Snape's estimation, mock sincerity.

He shook his head. "You two enjoy yourselves. Winky, I would like to go home now, but would it be possible for you to come back later to retrieve Miss Granger?"

"Oh, yes, Master Severus. Winky will be glad to transport Miss Granger anywhere she wishes at any time. All she needs to do is call Winky's name, and Winky will come immediately."

"Alright, Winky. Thanks." Miss Granger looked up at Snape with just a hint of bewilderment. "Then I guess that's settled."

Snape bowed his head slightly towards Krum. "Mr. Krum."

Krum nodded. "I'll be in touch, Professor."

Not to be outdone, Snape tried one last time to leave his mark on Miss Granger's memories of the day as he reached for her hand. He gently brought it up and placed his lips on the first digits of her fingers as he took a deep breath, savoring that familiar and coveted mixture of aromas - her skin and Secret Recipe.

Hermione blushed slightly as she gazed into his intense black eyes. Did she see a hint of sorrow and regret in them just now? The instant he let go of her hand, he and Winky Disappeared, so she thought, perhaps, that she had imagined it.

"If you walk down that way a couple of blocks, you will find some interesting clothing stores," Viktor explained. "My favorite sells crossover clothes. The Muggles call it 'goth,' but it is a nice blend of wizard and Muggle. You should check it out."

Hermione nodded her approval. "Sounds like a little shop that used to be in Diagon Alley. See you back here in 45 minutes, then?"

"I'll be here." He smiled at her and then hurried back to his office.

Hermione thought about the lunch conversation as she wandered down the street in search of the "goth" clothier. Why wouldn't Professor Snape stay with her? She knew that he wasn't that busy. Did they make him feel left out at lunch? Did they give him the impression that they wanted him to leave? Perhaps Viktor did, but she didn't at least she didn't mean to. Now she was alone in a big city, and she would be spending the afternoon with a man who she had not seen in years, a man who she really didn't know all that well. A famous man with a bit of a reputation for... *Oh, come on, Hermione. He's an old friend. What do you have to worry about?*

As she crossed the street, the store that Viktor had recommended came into view. "The Eclectic Clothes Horse." Hermione chuckled at the name. But when she ventured inside, the place seemed vaguely familiar. The fashions, the styles, the layout, the decor... She had seen it all before in Diagon Alley. And she understood her feeling of *deja vous* the instant the shopkeeper came out of a back room to offer his assistance.

"Good day, ma'am. May I help you find something?"

"Otto Steingold!" Hermione couldn't believe her eyes.

"Do I know you, miss?"

Hermione glanced around to be sure that no one else was in the shop before she whispered. "Diagon Alley."

Otto's eyes grew wide, as he too glanced frantically around. A scowl came across his face and he suddenly grabbed her arm and pulled her into his storage room. "Everyone here either thinks I'm a Muggle, or, if they are from our world, they know that I'm Muggle-born. So if you've come to blackmail me again, you can stuff it!" he growled in her face.

Hermione recoiled with fear and reached for her wand but didn't draw it out. "I don't know what you're talking about. I never blackmailed you. I've never blackmailed anyone. Why would you say something like that? I used to buy your clothes. I didn't run you out of town. I liked your store. And I am also Muggle-born, so why would I care that you are?" She felt completely bewildered and offended by the man's aggressive attitude.

He let her arm go, obviously quite embarrassed. Then he heaved a heavy sigh. "Sorry." He relaxed into a heap on a nearby chair. "It's just that, for the past year, I have been expecting for that bloody blackmailer to find me here and the nightmare would start all over again. But I can stop him in his tracks this time. I'm on my feet now, I've nothing to hide except from the Muggles, of course. But that's not against the law."

Now he really had Hermione's attention. "You mean that you left London because you were being blackmailed?"

"No, I left because I stopped paying the blackmailer. It was shortly after I refused to pay him another knut that the articles began to appear in the *Daily Prophet*. The part about my being a Muggle-born was true, but all of the other stuff was crap lies! I tried to tell them, but nobody would listen. I always make a good product. I always take great care in my quality. The lies took my business away. I had no choice but to move on."

"Who was blackmailing you? Why did you think it was me?"

"I never actually saw the person. I would get an owl with a note attached until a small drawstring bag. I was instructed to put the blackmail money into the bag and send the bird back."

"What did the bird look like?"

Otto shook his head. "It was always a different bird."

"Did you keep a sample of the person's handwriting?"

"He would cut the words out of a newspaper until I stuck them to a piece of parchment. He must have worn gloves because I couldn't pull a fingerprint off of anything. Until I tried for years."

"Didn't Rita Skeeter break that story about you, the very first one exposing you as a Muggle-born?"

"I believe so, ja."

"Well, then, she must be the blackmailer."

"No, I don't think so. She came to me and apologized for the article before it came out. I don't think she would have done that if she was the responsible one. I could never prove it was anyone. But I would bet you 100 Galleons that she knows who it is."

Snape did nothing but pace his study as the hours ticked slowly by. How much time did she need to be with Mr. Unibrow? As Winky whiled away her time in his kitchen preparing their dinner, Snape picked up book after book, absentmindedly turning their pages, but saw nothing but a picture of what Miss Granger and Krum might be doing to occupy such a long period of time. A stroll by the river... a romantic walk through some formal gardens somewhere in the city... an intimate dinner in the moonlight... and...

Snape plopped himself down heavily onto his threadbare sofa and sighed. If he kept this up, he would go insane. There had to be something he could do to keep his mind off the fact that it was almost dinner time and Miss Granger had not yet felt the need to call Winky and be rid of the bastard. He had no one to blame but himself. Why, oh why did he ever think to invite her along in the first place?

Winky meandered into the study with a double firewhisky straight up on a tray. "You are psychic, aren't you?" It was more of an accusation than a question. Winky simply smiled and disappeared back into the kitchen.

By the time he had downed the drink, Winky announced that dinner was served. She sat with him in the kitchen, which was their custom when it was just the two of them. The food smelled heavenly and looked delectable as always, but Snape simply couldn't concentrate on food at the moment.

"What could possibly be taking so long? What on earth could they be doing?"

"Probably eating, just as master should be doing."

Snape glared at Winky. Winky snickered back at Snape.

He forced himself to down a few bites of food, just to please her, then excused himself and went upstairs to see what sort of distractions that the computer had to offer. After about an hour of surfing the net, he heard Winky's telltale pop of Disapparation and sat back in his chair with great relief. *Thank Merlin, she at least didn't spend the night with the bastard.* Of course, he thought with disgust, *that doesn't necessarily mean that they didn't have sex.* The mere thought made him nauseous.

After several minutes had passed, Winky had not yet returned. At first this seemed merely a curious circumstance to him. But then, as the clock kept ticking, Snape began to genuinely worry. Would Winky have dropped Miss Granger off and then gone somewhere else without first telling him? Most likely not. So why wasn't she back yet? Perhaps she had returned and he just hadn't heard the pop. With that thought, he jumped up from his chair and headed downstairs, but his search revealed no sign of Winky. He even called for her outside which was absurd, because she never went outside in this Muggle neighborhood, not even at night.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, Winky Apparated back to Snape's kitchen. He had settled on his sofa in the study so it would be easier to hear her when she popped back. He jumped up in anticipation and stalked into the kitchen, determined to hear every detail, no matter how painful.

"What took you so long? Why was she still there so late? Did something happen? Tell me everything you know!" The words poured out of him like water over a waterfall.

Winky's face betrayed her worry as his words rained down on her sensitive, bat-like ears.

"Winky, what happened?" Snape's pulse skyrocketed as he saw Winky's reaction. "What's wrong? Is she alright?"

She slowly shook her head "no." But her lack of words sent his anxiety level through the roof. He stooped down and grabbed Winky firmly but gently by the shoulders, with great concern in his eyes and his voice. "What happened?"

"Winky does not know. Miss would not tell Winky."

"Then how do you know that she's not alright?"

"Miss was quite upset when Winky went to fetch her."

"Upset? Why?"

"Miss would not say."

"Was she hurt? What did she look like? Was Krum with her?"

Winky began to tremble as Snape's urgency rose to levels that she had never been exposed to before.

"Just tell me everything you saw when you picked her up and all that was said when you took her home. Everything. Please." At this point, Snape was frantic.

Winky proceeded slowly and with great caution. She felt as if her master might explode at any moment, and she didn't want his wrath to be aimed at her. "Winky popped to Miss Granger's side in what appeared to be Mr. Krum's living room."

Well, at least she wasn't in his bedroom he thought with relief. "How did they look? Were they both fully clothed?"

"Yes, but Mr. Krum was lying on the floor, apparently suffering the effects of a Jelly-Legs Jinx."

Snape raised an eyebrow at this, but it didn't serve to calm his nerves. "And how did Miss Granger appear?"

"Miss' clothes and hair seemed a bit disheveled, but she was still standing. She seemed very angry with Mr. Krum."

"Did she say anything to him?"

"As she tried to sort out her appearance, miss simply said, 'MEN!' in an angry voice. Then she retrieved her cloak from the hook by the door and asked Winky to escort her home."

Then a horrible thought crossed Snape's mind. "Did he he didn't do you think that...?"

Winky looked at him in total confusion.

Snape lowered his voice to almost a whisper, but Winky could still see the terror mixed with rage hiding just beneath the surface. "Did he...*violate* her?"

"No." The little elf shook her head emphatically.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Winky could tell if miss had been violated. Mr. Krum did not go that far."

Snape let Winky go and stood slowly. With great restraint he quietly asked, "How far did he go?"

"A bit farther than miss wanted him to, Winky suspects, sir."

Snape strode from the kitchen, through his study, and began to reach into the closet for his traveling cloak.

"Where is master going?" Winky asked tentatively.

"To check on Miss Granger, of course."

"Winky would not advise that at this time, Master Severus. Miss is very angry with master right now."

"Mad at me? Why? What on earth did I do?"

"Master left miss alone with Mr. Krum. Miss thinks that master wanted to get rid of her."

Snape put his cloak back on the hanger and turned to Winky with an anxious face. "What did she say to you once you took her home? Tell me everything that happened, everything that she told you."

"Miss would not let go of Winky's hand. We sat on the couch in the family room for a few moments, and miss started to cry. Miss kept asking Winky why master had left her there with Mr. Krum. She would rather have been with master than with him. Miss finally let go of Winky's hand, and Winky served miss a glass of firewhisky to calm her nerves, but Winky could not answer her question."

Snape sat down on the sofa in his study with a thud. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She would rather have been with him? Well, she certainly had an odd way of showing it at lunch today. He turned back to Winky. "And then what happened?"

"Miss continued to cry. Winky tried to comfort miss and asked what else Winky could do. Then miss asked Winky what was so wrong with her that master would not want

her. Winky could not answer her. Winky does not presume to speak for master."

Snape could hardly believe his ears. Miss Granger thought that she wasn't good enough for him. Was she insane? He felt the exact opposite. It was he who wasn't good enough for her. Merlin's maelstrom, how could he have let this happen? He buried his face in his hands as Winky continued.

"Winky suggested that miss take a hot bath to relax, and then Winky went upstairs, found the tub, and filled it with water and soothing bubble soap for miss. Then Winky came back downstairs, took miss by the hand and led her up to the bath. Winky patted miss' hand and told miss that things would work out for the best. Then Winky came home."

"So, when you left, she was about to get into the tub?"

Winky nodded.

"And you don't think I should just show up there and try to apologize?"

"Not tonight. Miss needs her space."

Snape stood abruptly and began to pace the room. He had way too much energy to simply sit around and do nothing. "This is all Krum's fault. If he has harmed a hair on her head, I swear, I'll kill him." Snape reached for Winky's tiny hand. "Can you take me back to the exact spot where you picked up Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir." And with a pop, they were gone.

They Apparated instantly into Viktor Krum's living room. The Jelly-Legs Jinx had worn off, and they found Krum sitting on a love seat, enjoying a glass of red wine, as he stared out of a large picture window. The romantic background music wasn't loud enough to mask their entrance. At the sound of his intruders, he whirled around and reached for his wand. But Snape's wand was already drawn, and he immobilized his host with a silent hex. "You IDIOT! You MORON! You SELFISH AMOEBA!" he ranted as he closed the gap between them in two strides. "What in bloody HELL did you think you were doing?"

Krum sat still as a statue, since the only things he could currently move were his eyes. He looked confused and terrified, like a wild animal suddenly caught in a trap. Snape viciously grabbed his jaw and held his face still as he stared into the Bulgarian's eyes. *Legilimens*, he silently commanded.

The memory he sought was just below the surface. Miss Granger and Krum had enjoyed each other's company all afternoon. Dinner seemed to progress amicably. An intimate conversation after dinner in Krum's living room was augmented by exquisite wine and quiet music. All of the ingredients were there. Snape could tell what Krum was thinking, what he had planned and hoped for. But his hopes were dashed when, as he leaned in for a kiss, Miss Granger stood abruptly and announced a desire to go home.

Krum smiled through his disappointment, but decided to try just one more trick. He wrapped his arms around her for a friendly goodbye hug. They separated just enough for him to look into her eyes. "For old time's sake," he had said with a dreamy look. She didn't fight him, so he kissed her just as he had done so many times that year at Hogwarts, the year of the Triwizard Tournament. When he met no resistance, his hands began to wander from their respectable place at her waist. His right hand moved up to fondle her breast while the left traveled down to her bum. He didn't seem to notice when she began to squirm a bit. Instead, his left hand dug into her bum and pulled her tighter as he ground his pelvis into hers. She turned her face away from the kiss, but his lips simply traveled to her exposed neck.

"Viktor, no!" came her quiet plea.

But he only held tighter as his privates began to harden against her crotch.

Then suddenly, with a bang, his legs turned to jelly as he lost his grip and fell to the floor.

"Winky!" he heard her cry. The little elf appeared. "MEN!" she exclaimed in disgust. Some words were exchanged between Miss Granger and Winky which Krum could not make out, and then they were gone.

Snape withdrew from Krum's mind in a rage. "You STUPID FOOL!" he chided. "She needs friends right now, not some Neanderthal attempt at romance!" He absently flicked his wand to remove the immobilization hex. "She is going through a divorce. She has suffered a horrendous custody battle for her children. Weren't you paying attention at lunch today? What were you thinking?"

"She's a woman, I'm a man. What was I supposed to think?"

"You're beyond incorrigible."

"Look, women don't spend all day with me to have me shake their hands at the end of the evening."

Snape's glare blended disbelief with pity.

"They want bragging rights. They want to be able to tell their friends that they slept with me. I'm a famous Quidditch star, remember?"

"I don't give a damn who you are," Snape growled. "If you ever touch her again, so help me... I swear on the grave of Albus Dumbledore..." He thrust his wand right under Krum's chin. "I will hunt you down and personally remove your testicles!"

Krum seemed relatively unintimidated by Snape's threat. He shrugged. "Then don't bring her with you next time we have a meeting," he commented with a touch of arrogance.

"Perhaps I should see to it now and get it over with." He aggressively pressed the tip of his wand into Krum's jugular vein. But Winky placed a gentle hand on his forearm. When Snape looked down at her, she was slowly shaking her head.

So Snape lowered his wand and took her hand in his. "You're right, Winky. He's not worth risking Azkaban. Take me to Miss Granger's front hallway. I want to be sure that she is alright."

"But Winky can't do that. Winky promised Miss Granger."

"Then how about her front porch?"

"Your house-elf disobeys a direct order, and you don't reprimand her?" asked Krum in astonishment.

"Oh, shut it!" Snape spat with great indignation. Then, with a flick of Snape's wand, Krum's eyes fluttered closed, and his head fell forward.

"Master Severus!" exclaimed Winky with a horrified look. "What did master do that for? Now who will negotiate master's book deal with Malfoy Publishing?"

Snape smirked at her. "Don't worry. He's only asleep. The spell will wear off in about ten minutes and he'll probably wake up and assume that this was all a bad dream."

Winky nodded in relief.

"As I was saying before Mr. Unibrow so rudely interrupted me... Can you take me to Miss Granger's front porch so I can knock on her door? If she refuses me entry, then you may take us home."

Winky nodded again, and they left with a pop.

Blackmail Epidemic

Chapter 18 of 35

Hermione and Harry find out that Otto is not the only person being blackmailed.

As always, I would like to thank the people that have helped me so much, JENGEORGE, NervousAboutAngels, and the staff at The Petulant Poetess. They keep me on my toes with their constant vigilance! Thanks to you all.

I make no money, I take no credit. It all belongs to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 18

Blackmail Epidemic

When Snape and Winky Apparated to Miss Granger's front porch from Viktor Krum's living room, the sky was pitch black, the dim streetlights flickered in a hopeless attempt to illuminate the immediate landscape, and none of the surrounding homes had any but the faintest of lights glowing from behind the window blinds. That was all about to change as Snape vigorously employed the brass door knocker.

When no response was forthcoming, he resorted to his fist. Bang-bang-bang! "Miss Granger!"

A dog began to bark in the distance as two of the windows in houses across the street lit up.

Snape persisted. Bang-bang-bang! "Miss Granger, open up. It's me, Severus Snape."

More lights came on, this time from the house next door. Winky decided it would be prudent to Disillusion herself.

"I just want to be sure that you are alright, Miss Granger. Please let me in."

One of the neighbors opened his second story bedroom window to watch the scene as another onlooker became visible.

Snape ignored his growing audience. Bang-bang-bang! "Miss Granger, PLEASE!"

A woman joined the first neighbor at their window. "She doesn't want to talk to you, you stupid PRAT!"

"It's after midnight," shouted another. "Shut up and go home, why don't ya?"

Snape turned on his heels and glared at the crowd. All he could see were curious silhouettes in the windows, but he knew that they were right. Now was not the time or place for this desperate display of emotion. "Come on, Winky," he said under his breath. And they walked down the street to a nearby park, where they could Disapparate undetected.

Once home, Snape felt dejected and foolish, but most of all, he felt shame for his desire to wallow in self-pity. He had been so determined to feel sorry for himself that he had left Miss Granger in a vulnerable position with a man of questionable character. He had put her in potential danger, all because she had hurt his feelings? No...much worse! Because he had *perceived* that she had hurt his feelings. What a callous fool he had been. And now she blamed him for what had happened with Krum. Would she ever speak to him again? How was he ever going to mend this rift between them?

Snape fell onto the sofa and buried his face in his hands. He didn't look up until he heard the clank of a glass on the table beside him. "Please, don't say 'I told you so,' Winky," he implored as he reached for the firewhisky. Then he sheepishly added, "Any advice for the village idiot?"

Winky's face reflected a wisdom and compassion that Snape had never noticed before. "Miss knows that master tried to apologize. Miss just needs time. It is very scary when someone stronger tries to take advantage. Miss needs to learn to trust again. It will not be easy, but miss has a brave and forgiving heart."

Snape's eyes narrowed as he soaked up Winky's advice. How could she know so much about Miss Granger's situation? Unless... The horrible possibility struck him. "Winky, did it happen to you? Did someone force himself on you?"

What little color Winky's face possessed immediately went into hiding. She turned away from Snape. "Long, long ago," she whispered to the bookcase, "when Winky was young and beautiful."

"Another house-elf?"

She shook her head ever so slowly as she continued to stare at the wall to wall books. "Winky's first master... Jonathan Crouch, Barty Crouch's father."

Snape noticed that her ears had begun to quiver. He gently placed his index finger under her chin and turned her face towards his. Tears streamed down her little cheeks in torrents. She didn't have to say another word. Her eyes told the whole story. Unlike Miss Granger, Winky would have faced death if she had dared to use a defensive spell on her master. She had had no choice but to succumb. The notion that anyone, man or elf, could treat her that way infuriated him beyond words. Too bad the bastard was already dead. Snape would have taken great pleasure in making him suffer a horrible fate.

His fingers left her face and found her tiny hand. He took it in both of his very gently and looked deep into her eyes, begging her to understand what he was about to say. "You know I would *never* hurt you, Winky. Don't you?"

She nodded. "Master Severus would never hurt Miss Granger, either. Winky knows that, but Miss Granger must be made as sure as Winky is. It will be hard for her, master. Please be patient with miss."

"Will you help me? Help me make her understand beyond a shadow of a doubt?"

"Winky will do whatever is asked of her," she insisted.

"Yes, but I don't want you to do anything that you are not comfortable with. You know what she is going through. I simply can't imagine. Will you make suggestions as to what I should say and do to make things right?"

"Master wants Winky to tell him what to do?" she asked in surprise. No master had ever asked that she give the orders before. House-elves were always told what to do and expected to obey without question. Although she was a free elf and her current master had always given her much spare time to spend as she pleased, he had never before asked her to be in charge. And all of her former masters would have scoffed at such a notion. "Winky is honored that Master Severus would value Winky's opinion." She freed her hand from his grip and bowed low to him. "Winky will be happy to help master win back Miss Granger's heart." Her tears had begun to dry, thank Merlin, and she was now quivering with excitement.

"So I should just leave her be for a while? How long? How will I know when to try again?"

"When miss appears on the computer again, miss should be ready to talk."

Hermione's fingers and toes had begun to prune up from her extended stay in the bath. She scrubbed and scrubbed herself until her skin became raw, but somehow she still felt dirty. She had read about this type of reaction from rape victims, how they would try to wash the horrible memory away, the feeling of being permanently soiled. She had not been raped thank Merlin, but she felt soiled just the same.

How long she remained there, she could not say. At one point, she could hear Professor Snape banging on her door, but it was his fault that she found herself in this position in the first place. He had made it plain that he was trying to get rid of her when he had dumped her in Viktor's lap. So why should she listen to him now, just to appease his guilty conscience?

Snape, Krum, Ron, and the entire lot of Weasley males bastards all! She was better off without any of them. Harry and Hugo were the only two that she would give a rat's arse for. The rest could all go to hell!

When she awoke the next morning, Hermione reluctantly dressed and headed for work. She had already given her notice, but instead of the usual two weeks, she had told them four. She had two weeks of paid vacation time coming to her, and since she would lose it if she didn't use it, she imagined many different ways she could spend that time preparing for her new job at Hogwarts and enjoying the company of her children.

Lunch time approached, and with it an owl from Lisa Turpin-Belby requesting a meeting. It seemed that Rita Skeeter had not shown up for work today, and an inflammatory article by her had appeared in today's *Daily Prophet*.

Hermione quickly scanned her copy, which she had brought from home but had not yet bothered to read. She found the ludicrous story on page five.

SUSPICIOUS STATIONERY?

By Rita Skeeter

As the summer progresses and parents begin to plan their back-to-school shopping, many will surely make a stop at Quintsky's Fine Quills and Stationery. Established in 1989, located at 1603 Diagon Alley in London, Mr. Quintsky claims to sell the finest parchment and quills, plain and enchanted, domestic and imported, in all of Great Britain.

But can he be trusted? This reporter has recently learned from a reliable source at the Ministry of Magic that Mr. Quintsky is not who he claims to be. His name is real, but his supposed birthplace and pureblood status are not what his loyal customers have long been led to believe.

Purporting to be descended from a long line of purebloods from Poland, it was recently discovered that Mr. Quintsky is originally from Russia, and is actually of Muggle heritage.

If he had lied for years about his bloodlines and place of origin, one can only speculate as to other possible falsehoods he may have woven into the fabric of his business dealings. For example, the origin and genuine quality of his 100% papyrus. Is it truly from Egypt? Is it precisely 100% pure? And what about his finest inkwells? Are they really goblin-wrought as he claims? His enchanted octopus ink, does it actually change color? And if so, is it really extracted from those spineless eight-legged creatures of the deep?

The reader must be compelled to ask, "If he can't trust me with his true identity, how can I trust his products?"

Hermione scowled at the paper as she angrily folded it back to its original size and shape. Then she tucked it under her arm and marched out to meet Lisa. As she made her way to the lift, her mind sifted through the last several years. How many merchants and business people had Rita exposed like this? People who had lied about their blood lines, but had otherwise been hard-working, law-abiding citizens? Did any of them stay on? Did any of them survive these character attacks? She could not think of one who was still in Britain at least not living in the magical world. No, they had all either moved on or gone back to live in the Muggle world.

She thought about Otto Steingold how he had claimed that he had been blackmailed yesterday afternoon as an excuse to manhandle her in his storage room. She couldn't help but wonder if this newly exposed Muggle-born suffered the same fate?

When she and Lisa had settled themselves at Salicia's Diner and placed an order, Hermione relayed her alarming encounter with Otto from the previous day, being careful to exclude any mention of Professor Snape or Viktor Krum.

Lisa became immediately intrigued with this new bit of information, and she vowed to help Hermione in her quest to expose the blackmailer and bring him to justice. They both suspected Rita right from the start, but since her involvement could not be proven, they knew their work would be cut out for them.

"If you could research the Prophet archives for me for any story about exposing Muggle-borns, I would bet ten Galleons that they were all written by Rita."

"I can see if any of them hint at the identity of her 'reliable source at the Ministry.'"

"Or if she claims any other sources," Hermione reminded Lisa. "Perhaps she has an accomplice."

"If she only cites Ministry sources, do you think you could use your remaining time there to research who her possible source might be?" asked Lisa hopefully.

"I don't see why not," Hermione admitted. "I haven't worked on anything interesting or worthwhile for over a year."

"Merlin, that must be frustrating."

"Feeling utterly useless does not exactly do wonders for one's self esteem," Hermione conveyed with a touch of disdain.

"No wonder you're so anxious to get out of there." Lisa shook her head. "Hogwarts will be good for you."

"Yeah." Hermione smiled broadly. "It'll be great. I'm really looking forward to it."

Two days later, Lisa delivered a list of all the Muggle witches and wizards who had been exposed and driven out of the British wizarding world since the second fall of Voldemort over twenty years previous. There were thirteen names on the list. All had moved here from someplace else, but only about half had actually hailed from where they had first claimed. And all turned out to be Muggle-born but had tried to pass themselves off as purebloods.

And, according to Lisa's research, in each article, Rita had claimed to get her information from a "reliable source at the Ministry of Magic."

So, now it was Hermione's turn. She first tried to find out where each of them had disappeared to, but it seemed none of the victims wished to be found at least not by the wizarding world. That left the Muggle world. And at home, sitting on a desk in her family room, was the perfect Muggle research tool her archaic computer.

But she knew that if she turned it on and went online to research the names, she would face two problems. Number one: the contraption was very outdated and slow as molasses in January, and number two: Professor Snape would see her screen name in his buddies list box and probably try to IM her. She wasn't sure if she was ready for that possibility.

Well, she could take care of the first problem easily enough. After a congenial telephone conversation with her cousin, his help was easily procured to buy a new computer with all the necessary hardware and software to accomplish her research goals. His enthusiasm took her by surprise. He turned out to be quite the computer geek, and the next best thing to buying new equipment for himself was to help someone else do that very same thing. He was a wealth of information and happy to take her and the kids out in his Muggle car to the biggest computer store in Knottingly.

By Sunday afternoon he had her new, state-of-the-art system set up and running. Hugo and Rose watched in amazement as Hermione magically clicked from screen to screen with no waiting time for the pages to load.

"Isn't that Professor Snape's screen name?" asked Hugo as his finger touched the seventeen-inch flat screen in the proper spot.

"Yes," Hermione admitted. "That must mean that he's online." She was quite relieved when he didn't send her an IM. Perhaps he was surfing different websites and didn't even realize that she was also online. Although she knew deep down inside that she would not be able to avoid him forever, she decided for now to pretend that he wasn't there.

"We studied dinosaurs in school last year, Mum," Hugo informed her. "My teacher encouraged us to use our computers at home to research our dinosaurs. We had to give a written report. I picked the Triceratops, but since Dad wouldn't let me come visit you, I only had a couple of library books to use. So my report was pretty lame. Can we do a search on your new computer and see what comes up?"

"Alright," Hermione beamed at him. She typed in Triceratops and over 100,000 choices came up. "My goodness!" she exclaimed with delight.

"WOW!" shouted Hugo. "This is way better than those dumb ol' library books I had to use."

Once Hermione had Hugo sorted at her computer, she set about cooking dinner for the three of them. A few minutes later, Hugo ran excitedly into the kitchen. "Mum, Mum, Professor Snape sent you a message!"

Hermione felt a sharp pain go through her heart. "What did he say?" She tried to appear relaxed and unconcerned, but Rose noticed her stiffen slightly and raised an eyebrow.

"He just said, 'Hello, how are you?'"

Hermione let out a quiet sigh and closed her eyes. "Tell him I'm fine, but I'm busy making dinner. You can tell him how you're doing if you like. I'm sure he'd love to talk with you instead."

"Can I invite him over to eat with us?" the boy asked excitedly.

"No company tonight, love. We've all had a busy day and I'm tired."

Hugo's face fell, but he seemed to understand as he turned to go IM Professor Snape.

"Why won't you talk with Professor Snape, Mum?" asked Rose suspiciously. "I thought you two were friends."

"I thought so, too," Hermione replied quietly so Hugo couldn't hear. "But I'm not so sure anymore."

Something in her mother's tone told Rose to drop the subject, and when Hugo's appetite for dinosaurs had finally been satiated, Hermione summarily turned off the computer, ignoring the last IM from Snape that beckoned for her reply.

The next morning, Hermione took the kids to Molly's house via Side-Along Apparation. But instead of heading for work, she Apparated back home, where she wasted no time, turning on her new computer to research the thirteen names on Lisa's list.

Otto Steingold's name came up with several choices for information. His clothing store had its own website. His name, address and Muggle phone number were all listed. She could even reach him by email through his store's website if she wanted to!

She discovered that his designs had won a couple of awards at a local fashion show the previous month. And he had been written up in a Bulgarian Muggle fashion magazine six months previously. He certainly didn't seem to miss or need the wizarding world. Hermione couldn't help but smile. If the best revenge is to have a good life in spite of what others try to do, Otto Steingold had most certainly exacted his revenge.

Well, she already knew his story. So she systematically researched the other twelve names on Lisa's list and compiled the information she would need to contact each one. Some had stayed in Britain, rejoining the Muggle world. Others had left the country altogether. But they were all traceable, having kept some form of Muggle identity and profession to fall back on. How sad, Hermione thought, to spend the rest of their lives living a lie. Some of them had even married Muggles. She wondered if their spouses knew the truth.

Approaching any of these people would be very tricky. She was going to have to use discretion and, after what had happened with Otto, extreme caution. So she decided that the easiest person to start with was the newest person to suffer from Rita's Quick-Quotes Quill. But she felt that, for her own safety, she would need a backup. She would have to go into the office after all, to explain her plan and hopefully enlist Harry's help.

Just as she was finishing up, Snape's screen name appeared in her buddies list. She turned off her computer so fast she didn't have time to read the IM that briefly appeared on the screen.

Snape groaned as he helplessly watched Miss Granger's screen name disappear from his buddies list and his IM go unanswered once again. "WINKY!"

She appeared by his side with a pop.

"She was there a moment ago, but she wouldn't talk to me!"

"Wait, Master Severus. That's all that master can do. When miss is ready, miss will talk." She patted his arm patiently.

"But I feel so helpless. Can't I do something?"

"Perhaps," Winky offered thoughtfully. "Does miss care for flowers?"

Harry read Hermione's interoffice memo with great interest. "Do you know anything about this blackmail thing, Ron?" he asked his best friend. "You've seen a lot more of her lately than I have."

"She hasn't mentioned it to me," Ron replied snidely. "Why don't you ask Snape?"

As Harry glared at Ron, he inwardly thought that Snape might very well know more about it than Ron did. But since Hermione had requested his presence after work today, he would not have time to pursue that avenue of investigation.

She was standing in the Ministry lobby, waiting patiently, when he stepped out of the lift.

"This is fascinating, Hermione," Harry admitted. "How on earth did you stumble onto it?"

"Lisa Turpin-Belby and I were talking, and we began to realize that a pattern had emerged in Rita's stories, so we thought that if Otto Steingold was being blackmailed, perhaps the others had been as well. If that's the case with Quintsky, perhaps we can get to the bottom of it before he is forced to close up shop and move on."

"I don't know. I'm sure that article cast quite a bit of doubt in his customers' eyes. Something like that takes a long time for the public to forget. Even if all of his products are genuine, I know I will have a hard time trusting him, knowing that he has been lying to us all these years. Won't you?"

Hermione looked thoughtful as they made their way through the front doors and into Diagon Alley. "But I can't blame him for lying about his identity. He arrived here before the second downfall of Voldemort. He knew that there were still quite a few Muggle-born haters out there. And if he hadn't faked his ID, he would have been rounded up and sent to Azkaban by that Muggle-born Registration Commission headed up by Umbridge during Voldemort's second rise to power. He probably fled blood persecution in his native Russia. Is the desire to succeed and be respected a bad thing? At least as long as a person is honest about every other aspect of his life and business dealings?"

"I guess not," Harry shrugged. "I never thought about it that way."

By now the two had reached 1603 Diagon Alley. Normally, during this time of day in mid July, the place would have been bustling with activity. But when Harry and Hermione pushed the door open, they found that they had Quintsky's Fine Quills and Stationery all to themselves.

Mr. Quintsky looked up anxiously from behind the counter, his face harboring hope for a potential customer. But when he spied Harry, his eyes betrayed a touch of panic. "I haven't broken any laws!" he announced unprovoked. My goods are genuine, just as I advertise them. Please, don't arrest me, Mr. Potter. I have a family to support."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other with great concern. This man had obviously felt immense pressure for some time. He was wound so tight he looked as though he could snap at any moment. Hermione felt especially thankful that she had thought to bring Harry along.

"We're not here to arrest you, Mr. Quintsky. You're right. As far as I know, lying about your identity is not a crime, although it would have been about twenty years ago. I would like to think that the wizarding world would have risen above blood prejudice by now."

The man immediately let out a sigh of relief. Then he seemed to almost magically transform himself as he went into full salesman mode. "Well, then may I interest you in one of my finer quills, Mr. Potter?" Quintsky tried to lead Harry to a display case by the front window.

"No thanks." Harry kept his feet planted firmly where they were, but Hermione followed the owner and began to peruse the contents of the glass case. She spied an ostrich feather quill not very practical, but lovely to look at. It billowed in an ornate and stately fashion from its upright position in a solid gold, goblin-wrought inkwell. "What about you, Mrs. Weasley?"

"It's Miss Granger, now, actually," she replied awkwardly. "And, no, I'm not in the market at present. But I'll keep it in mind."

The man's demeanor changed again to one of worry. "Then why, may I ask, are you here?"

"We wanted to ask you some questions...don't worry," Harry tried to calm him as he took in a panicky breath. "As I said before, you've done nothing wrong. We have our suspicions that someone has been taking advantage of you, perhaps for a very long time, and we were wondering if you could shed some light on that possibility."

Mr. Quintsky's eyes almost popped out of his head as he stared first into Harry's face and then Hermione's, searching, no doubt, for signs of deception. Then his eyes narrowed. "Taking advantage how?"

"You tell us," Hermione replied. "That way we'll know if our suspicions are correct."

"Suspicions of me?"

"No, no," Hermione explained. "We can't tell you what has happened to others unless the same thing has been happening to you. It's confidential. You see, over the years there has been a pattern developing, and we have our suspicions as to who might be behind it. But we can't prove it. We need to know if you have become another victim. We're not accusing you of anything."

Mr. Quintsky looked a bit confused at Hermione's explanation. Harry interjected. "Has someone been taking advantage of you, and you couldn't risk going to magical law enforcement because of your blood status?"

Suddenly, the man realized what his well-meaning would-be customers were getting at. "Oh! You mean the blackmail?"

Harry and Hermione let out a collective sigh. "Yes!" they said in unison.

"Can you give us any details? When did it start?" asked Harry.

"How much have they been asking for? Any idea who's behind it?" interjected Hermione.

The man fell into his chair behind the counter. "You know about the blackmail?"

Harry nodded. "We know of at least one other who was also blackmailed but couldn't come forward without revealing his blood status and therefore appearing to be untrustworthy."

"That's it. That's exactly why I have never told anyone. I knew that if word got out, my business would dry up and I would have to leave town. Why do you think I chose to fake my ID in the first place?"

"I know, Mr. Quintsky. I am Muggle-born, and I feel the prejudice, too. I am even considered a war hero of some notoriety, and I still sense that many people look down their noses at me like I'm some kind of second-class citizen."

Harry turned to Hermione, sincere surprise on his face. "Do you really feel that way?"

"Sometimes. Look at what Ron did to me with our children. Look how I've been passed over for promotion at the Ministry. Look how you and Ron have both received the Order of Merlin, First Class, and I had to settle for Third Class. I suffered just as much, and I fought just as hard as either of you two did. I should have gotten the same thing."

"Yeah, I agree." Harry's eyes left her face and gazed at the floor for a moment. He felt ashamed of the world that he had tried so hard to protect, that so many people, Muggle-born and pureblood alike, had died to protect. The idealism that had followed the immediate downfall of Voldemort soon gave way as the old prejudices had crept back in to take their place. And although the injustices didn't run rampant, they were still practiced in subtle ways.

"Look at Samantha Frey's Quill and Stationery shop," Quintsky used as an example. "She is a native of Britain, she is a known Muggle-born, and her business has always been slow. I heard that when this shop came up for rent back in 1989 she tried to rent it, but the owner refused on the basis of her bloodlines. But when he thought that I was a pureblood, he was happy to rent me the space. All she could get was that old, run-down place in Nocturn Alley. She sells quality products, just like I do. But she has never done more than scrape by."

"I wonder how she's faring these days?" Harry wondered out loud.

"After that article in yesterday's paper, probably a little better," Mr. Quintsky admitted. "But I bet a lot of my old customers would rather order their products via owl post than buy from her. Just because she's Muggle-born. What a bunch of hypocrites."

"So, the article in the paper yesterday said that you've been here since 1989. When did the blackmailing start?" Hermione glanced at her watch. She knew that Harry would like to get home before too long, so she tried to speed things up a bit.

"Not until He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named came back, and his people had control over the Ministry. I was terrified that Umbridge would find out who I really was, and I would end up in Azkaban. I thought about fleeing the country, but then I knew that I would never be able to come back, so I just stuck it out. It was during that time that someone started sending me those little notes."

"Little notes?" asked Harry.

"Yeah, made of words cut from a newspaper. At first they didn't ask for anything. They were only used to terrify me. They said things like, 'I know who you really are,' and 'you'll keep your head low and obey orders if you know what's good for you,' stuff like that."

"And how long did that go on?"

"Up until about six months after you defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Things had just begun to settle down, and my business had started to build back up again. Then came the demands for money. Just a little at first, but as my business picked up, they began asking for more."

"And how often did the requests for money come?" Harry kept up the pace of the interrogation.

"At the start of every month, like clockwork."

"Would it have been enough for someone to live off of?" asked Hermione curiously.

"No, not at first, at least. They either didn't want to be greedy, or they knew somehow that I couldn't afford to pay more than what they were asking. It was as if they had access to my account at Gringotts and they knew exactly how much I took in every month. Why bite off the hand that feeds you, right?"

"Right," agreed Harry casually.

Hermione scowled. To her, this was all so very unfair. "So how long did it go on like this?"

"Until the start of July, this month. The owl came with the usual request, but instead of filling the little bag with the 700 Galleons that was demanded, I sent back a rather rude note expressing my refusal to shell out another Knut."

"So it took almost two weeks for the article to appear in the paper?" asked Hermione, somewhat bewildered.

"Well, actually, a couple of days later, another owl came with a reminder that I would be very sorry if I didn't pay up. But I sent back another ill-tempered note. So it had been about a week since that second note."

"It must be Rita Skeeter!" concluded Hermione.

Harry shook his head. "Not necessarily."

"But in every case, she has written the articles," Hermione insisted.

"I may be wrong, but I don't believe that it's Miss Skeeter," Quintsky interjected. "She's one of my best customers. She helped me to build my business by promoting my Quick-Quotes Quill. She's always in here buying my products."

"She could be helping to build your business so she can justify charging you more," Harry suggested.

"No, I don't think so," insisted Mr. Quintsky. "Right before the article came out, she snuck in here just before closing when she knew no one else was here. She warned me that the article would be in the morning paper and that she was sorry that it had to happen, but she was under pressure to write it. She didn't mention who pressured her, but she seemed very sincere with her apology."

"There's not a sincere bone in her body!" announced Hermione in disgust.

"I still bet she knows who's behind it," declared Harry.

"Rita's been good to me over the years, brought me a lot of business. Please don't harass her over this. If she has anything to do with it, she is being forced. Perhaps the blackmailer has something on her as well," the shopkeeper offered.

Hermione couldn't quite stifle a chuckle. "I imagine that Rita Skeeter has quite a few skeletons in her closet."

That statement gave the other two a chuckle as well. But then Harry's tone turned somber. "Blackmail is a serious offense, Mr. Quintsky. If we can find the person who's behind it, would you be willing to testify?"

"If there is any way I can help, I would be glad to. But I must admit that he has pulled off the perfect crime."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry, puzzled.

Hermione gave him his answer. "Because Mr. Quintsky, and all of the others before him, have now been publicly disgraced and exposed as liars. Their credibility will be in question if they were ever to testify. We would have to get an overwhelming number of victims to come forward in order to build a convincing case."

"Exactly," Quintsky agreed.

Harry sighed. "I hadn't thought of that."

"That's why I never told anyone. It would have exposed me as a liar where my bloodlines were concerned, and no one would believe me anyway."

"And so we've come full circle," Harry concluded. "Well, Mr. Quintsky, we've taken up enough of your time. I've got a family of my own to go home to." He smiled at the shopkeeper, then he and Hermione headed for the door. "Take care. And, by the way, you'll still have my business."

"And mine!" Hermione joined in.

"Thank you." Mr. Quintsky smiled halfheartedly at them as they left. But they all knew that it would do no good. He would be out of business before school started in September.

The next morning, Hermione met Harry in the lobby after spending the first couple of hours in her office filling out a report on her interrogation of Otto Steingold. This hunch seemed to be leading somewhere, and as with any bureaucracy, the proper paper trail had to be generated. Then they headed out to the Muggle part of London through the back alley behind the Leaky Cauldron. This time they were looking for a candy shop owner by the name of Emily Stonington. According to the information that Hermione had acquired from her web search on Monday, the shop was only a few blocks away and within easy walking distance. It was a breezy summer day, and the two friends enjoyed each other's company.

"So, how are Ginny and the kids?"

"Oh, you know... Same ol', same ol'. They drive her crazy all the summer through. She pines for them all year, and then about three days after they get home, she tells me she can't wait 'til they go back!"

Hermione laughed.

"And of course James and Albus fight like cats and dogs. I don't know how the teachers can stand them at school! You know, I was so upset when Albus ended up in Slytherin, but now I think it's for the best."

"Do you?" Hermione could hardly believe her ears. "You were so upset about it after it happened. You even went to see Headmistress McGonagall to see if you could have it changed."

"I know, but the hat's decision is final. Besides, could you imagine the trouble they would get into if they were both in Gryffindor? Anyway, it suits him. He's not a backstabbing git like some of the Slytherins we grew up with, but he is ambitious and has a real streak of cunning in him. And he can manipulate even the most stubborn adversary to eventually get what he wants."

"He sounds Slytherin through and through." Hermione nodded in agreement.

The conversation lulled for a bit. Then Harry broke the silence. "So how are you and Professor Snape getting along?"

Hermione's brow knitted tightly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know. Have you seen much of him lately?"

"Not really. We had lunch last week, but other than that..." Her voice trailed off and she shrugged.

"I thought that you two were best buds now. What happened?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted with a disheartened tone. "I get the distinct impression that he's trying to get rid of me."

Harry's mood darkened. He knew it was none of his business, but Snape's promise of friendship when she needed him most kept ringing in his memory. It was happening just as Harry had feared it would. She was misinterpreting Snape's need to keep her at arm's length as a desire to cut her off. He didn't want to interfere. He knew that to betray Snape's secret would be the end of what hinted at a budding friendship between them after years of animosity. But Hermione had to be his priority this time. She didn't deserve to feel dejected and hurt when Harry knew better.

"Perhaps he wants to put some space between you for your own good."

"What are you talking about?"

"Maybe he's afraid of ruining your reputation."

"My reputation?"

"Yeah, he's a convicted felon, remember. And you're about to start a job teaching other people's children at a boarding school. Pretty big responsibility, you know. If you were seen in public consorting with a convicted felon..."

"People would get the wrong impression, jump to the wrong conclusion, and my new job might be in jeopardy before it even starts." Her lip stiffened as she realized the potential consequences of being seen with her former potions professor. "Damn that conviction. It's just not fair!" She thought about the fact that Snape had come to her house that night when Viktor had tried to force himself on her. She felt a wave of shame and guilt for not answering the door. He had left her with Viktor in hopes that she could find a friend that she could safely spend time with. He wasn't trying to get rid of her. He had been trying to help her. How could she have been so blind? *Idiot!*

They had reached the candy store, and as Harry opened the door for Hermione, she cast a spell to repel Muggles for the next thirty minutes. They entered, and Harry quietly pointed his wand at the customer at the counter. She had a small child in tow and was about to make a request, but suddenly remembered an urgent appointment and turned to leave. She seemed dazed as she dragged the strongly objecting child with mouth watering and eyes streaming over promised, but as yet unpurchased, candy.

"Oh, that was cruel," Hermione snickered. "You could have let her buy something first."

"I wanted to cheer you up," Harry grinned. "She'll come back later. I promise."

"May I help you?" floated a soft and timid voice from behind the beautifully decorated display case. The aroma of fine chocolates mixed with tantalizing spices filled the air. Each piece of candy was a work of art in itself, with an elaborately decorated surface, fancy shape, and frilly lace cup that doubled as a seat for presentation.

The instant Harry looked at her, the woman gasped. "I know you. You're from my past life, aren't you?" she whispered. "Harry Potter... I read about you in school. You're famous, even in South Africa where I came from. You killed Lord Vooldymort, right? Of course, that was all before my time." She had begun to babble on a bit, apparently from nervousness.

"Are you Emily Stonington?" Harry asked politely, since Hermione was unsuccessfully attempting to stifle a giggle.

"Why, yes," admitted the young woman with wide blue eyes. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, no. Nothing's wrong. We're working on a case, you see. This is my associate, Hermione Granger. We're with the Ministry of Magic."

"I read about you, too. You helped him kill Voldymort."

"Voldemort," Hermione corrected her as she tried to keep herself from laughing. The young woman's long, blond hair had been tied up in a tight bun and captured in a hair net, as was the custom with anyone in the Muggle world who worked around food. Was it her imagination, or did this girl remind her of Luna Lovegood? The thought made it even harder for Hermione to keep her composure.

"Would you mind if we asked you a few questions about why you left the wizarding world and returned to live with Muggles?" Harry pressed on.

"No, I don't mind."

Harry waited for her to start talking, but after several uncomfortable moments of silence, it became apparent that she needed to be prompted. "So, why did you leave?"

"Leave what?"

Hermione suddenly felt the need to walk to the other side of the room and inspect a case full of pastries.

"Leave us to go back to the Muggles."

"Oh. Well," Emily glanced up dreamily at the ceiling, lost in thought. "I scraped together just enough money to get here from South Africa and start my own business. A candy business just like this one. You never came into my shop when I was located in Diagon Alley. I wonder why?" She looked into Harry's eyes, obviously searching for an answer.

When she remained quietly staring at him, he looked away, but came to the conclusion that he would have to answer her before she would continue her story. "I dunno. I'm a big fan of Honeydukes, so I usually shop there. Been going there since my days at Hogwarts." Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry."

She seemed satisfied with that answer and continued her story. "In spite of your preference, many people seemed happy that they no longer needed to Disapparate to Hogsmead for their candy, and I became an instant success." She paused and turned her attention to Hermione. "Did you ever come into my store?"

Hermione flushed from embarrassment. "No, I'm afraid not."

"And why not?" the girl insisted.

"Like Harry, I'm also hooked on Honeydukes."

"So why did you leave, if you were such a big success?" Harry began to grow impatient.

"What good is working hard and earning lots of money if you have to give it all to someone else?"

"No good at all. But why do you say that?"

"Well, someone sent an owl every month asking me to pay up or they would reveal my big secret."

"You mean the secret that you were passing yourself off as a pureblood when you were really a Muggle-born?"

"That's right. That's the one."

Harry was curious. This scatterbrained girl didn't seem to be the type to come up with a lie like that on her own. "So why did you lie about your blood status in the first place?"

"I didn't want to, but my older brother talked me into it before I came here. We had both learned all about your history in our wizard school. He said that just like the Muggles in South Africa still have certain feelings about skin color, even though most of the blood prejudice is gone, there is still a stigma attached to blood status here in Britain. He said that I would be instantly well-liked if I passed myself off as a pureblood witch. And since South Africa is so far away, who would ever find out?"

"Do you know who did find out? Who exposed you?"

"Well, Rita Skeeter wrote the article, of course. But I don't think she was the blackmailer."

"Why not?" Hermione felt totally perplexed. She wanted so much to blame this on Rita. But none of the blackmail victims had felt like Rita was a willing participant, much less the perpetrator.

"Well, she was so nice about it, so apologetic," Emily replied dreamily, as if she were remembering the incident. "She came in, almost in tears, and told me that she was under intense pressure, that she always liked my candy, and she promised that she would keep coming in as long as I was still in business."

Harry and Hermione exchanged sideways glances.

"She really seemed sincere, but I suppose there's always the possibility that I could have been mistaken. You may find this hard to believe, but people have taken advantage of me before."

Harry finished up the interview by verifying the things that the others had told them and pinning down the important dates in the case, and a promise from Miss Stonington to testify if the case ever went to trial. But when he turned to leave, Hermione had other ideas.

"None of your candy is enchanted or hexed, is it?" she asked with an impish grin.

"No, ma'am. Not any more," Emily replied wistfully.

"That's just as well. I'll take a pound each of your pecan milk chocolate turtles, and your dark chocolate turtles, in separate boxes, please. And then, I would like an assortment of your dark chocolate liquor laced truffles in your finest gift box."

Harry grinned. Somehow he knew that this last request was for Snape.

Hermione paid with Muggle money, which surprised Emily. "I'm a Muggle-born as well," she explained with a smile.

After they were well out of earshot and half-way back to the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione handed Harry the box of dark chocolate turtles. "Here. I know it's a couple of weeks away, but Happy Birthday, Harry."

"What? You mean I don't get the liquor-laced truffles?" He pretended to act insulted.

Hermione smiled devilishly and clutched the fancy gift box to her chest. "No, not this time."

"Be patient with Snape," he advised with a fatherly tone. "He cares for you deeply. His intentions are good, but he most definitely has a lot to learn where women are concerned."

"He's been sequestered from the rest of the world for so long; I'm surprised that he even remembers how to socialize at all."

"He is a bit of a social misfit. Always has been, from what I remember of his memories. Merlin, he was completely inept with my mother. She must have had the patience of a saint!"

They both started to laugh as they made their way through the tavern to the back alley.

By the time they got on the lift to return to their respective offices, Hermione had forgiven Professor Snape completely. She could hardly wait to give him the chocolates. As she pushed open the door to the Magical Creatures Liaison Office, she gasped. There, on her desk, sat a huge open basket with a high-arching woven handle. In the basket lay a beautiful bouquet of elegantly colorful, fragrant flowers. And attached to the red ribbon that tied it all together was a note.

Draco's Dilemma

Chapter 19 of 35

Snape receives an offer from Draco, an offer that is too good to refuse.

Disclaimer: As always, the characters and wizarding world within remains the property of the formidable J. K. Rowling. I bow at her feet.

Accolades go to my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for all of their hard work on my behalf. I would also like to thank the great staff here at The Petulant Poetess for their constant vigilance as well.

A/N: In the midst of this chapter, I jump back and forth between two conversations that are going on at the same time but in two different locations. I hope it does not get too confusing. You will understand why I feel the need to present it that way as you read.

As always, I anxiously await your wonderful responses. If you are not an author on this site, you may not realize what a thrill it is to read the reviews and know that the work is appreciated. The readers here are intelligent and insightful. Your reviews are always a joy. It really does mean a lot. Thanks to all who have been following along.

Chapter 19

Draco's Dilemma

With trembling hands, Hermione untied the note from the floral bouquet and flipped it over. To her disappointment, the pale gray, single sheet of parchment was sealed with a black Durmstrang wax stamp. Viktor... She contemplated throwing it directly into the rubbish bin, or better yet, using it for target practice, but curiosity got the better of her, and she decided to open it.

My Dearest Hermione,

I do not know how to adequately express my regret for my inappropriate behavior the last time we were together. I am truly ashamed of myself and feel that I simply must make it up to you. My business has brought me to Great Britain for the next few days. I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me, or at least to keep your mind open long enough to let me show my remorse in person.

If you are willing to give an old friend a second chance, I will gladly meet you at the public place of your choice and spend as many Galleons on food and drink as you will allow. In the mean time, please accept these flowers as a token of my sincerity to turn over a new leaf. I promise that all I seek is your forgiveness, and perhaps your friendship, and that I will not so much as touch your hand to bid you a farewell, if you do not desire it.

I am free this evening, and I anxiously await your reply.

Most Sincerely Yours,

Viktor Krum

Hermione gazed at the gorgeous flowers and the elegant basket that held them. She reached for one of the red carnations and brought it up to her nose for a whiff *just a hint of fragrance*. She very much preferred long-stem red roses, but there wasn't a rose in the bunch. *Oh, well... they'll still look good on my desk for a few days.* She conjured a tall glass vase. "*Aguamenti*," she said and watched as water poured out of the tip of her wand to fill the vase.

"Aren't you the lucky one?" asked her office mate, Agnes Garmand, as she peeked around the partition of her cubical. Upon seeing the beautiful flowers, she stood and joined Hermione by her desk. "That's funny, an owl delivered a single rose earlier. It must have been charmed to turn into this grand assortment after it reached its destination."

Hermione nodded as she considered Viktor's offer.

"So, who are they from, if you don't mind me being nosy?"

"Um... Viktor Krum." Hermione shrugged as if receiving flowers from a Quidditch legend was an everyday occurrence.

"Viktor Krum?" asked Agnes, obviously in awe. "Why would a famous bloke like Krum be sending you flowers?"

Hermione really wasn't in the mood to explain her ties with Viktor to anyone, least of all a star-struck fan who would no doubt pester her to get his autograph. "I have no idea," she lied. "He's a friend of Harry's."

Agnes continued to hover, seemingly unsatisfied with that answer. So Hermione quickly plopped the flowers into the prepared vase, grabbed the note and some parchment to send her reply, and headed for the door. "If anyone needs me, I'll be doing some research in the Ministry Records Office."

When the lift door opened, there was no one inside, thank Merlin. Hermione slipped through the doors and watched them close in silent relief. Her head was spinning so fast from the day's events that she almost missed her floor. But she hopped out just in time and walked down the short hall to what appeared to be a small office hiding behind an unspectacular door. Upon inspection, she found an ancient and cavernous chamber. It held over 1000 years of records, all on parchment and most written in long-hand. The Ministry Records Office was set up a bit like a library, which was a good thing, because otherwise the clerk might never have been able to find what she wanted. Hermione could view anything that her top-secret security clearance allowed, but she was required to sign each item out before she could take it to the one lone inspection table, and nothing was allowed to leave the room.

When she entered the office, the old witch behind the counter looked up unenthusiastically. "Good day, dear. What can I get for you?"

Hermione's mission today was to see if she could figure out who at the Ministry would have been in a position to discover a foreign arrival's true bloodlines. She desperately needed some quiet time to collect her thoughts, however, before she could clear her mind and proceed. But she needed to at least appear to be busy, so she requested a list of current Ministry titles and job descriptions. As she waited for the woman to hunt down her request, her thoughts turned to Viktor Krum's note.

So, Viktor wanted to apologize, eh? Only a few hours ago, she hoped and prayed that she would never lay eyes on him again. The thought of doing so suddenly sent a shiver down her spine. Her mind drifted back to her fourth year at Hogwarts, how his bravery in the Triwizard Tournament had swept her off her feet. She thought of the many hours they had spent alone together that year and how his hands had explored her body on more than one occasion. They had never actually made love, but... No wonder he had assumed that she would be more than willing the other night.

But things were different now, very different. She didn't feel romantic towards him in any way. No, her feelings were now most definitely tied up with a certain Potions master... But, perhaps it would be good to clear the air between herself and Viktor. Could she forgive him? Could he really behave himself? His note said that she could choose the place and the circumstances. Salicia's Diner had some outdoor seating. In late afternoon with the shade of a rather large oak that grew alongside the building, the atmosphere could be quite pleasant and, best of all, very safely public.

She hastily scribbled her reply to Viktor, then stood up, wrote a quick note to the clerk that she would return shortly to review the requested reference book, and took off down the hall to find a Ministry Owl.

Severus Snape sat at the desk in his bedroom and lazily surfed the internet. He knew that Miss Granger wouldn't arrive home for at least another hour or two, but he couldn't help himself. He hoped against hope that she would respond to his overtures somehow, a letter, an IM, or at the very least, an email... Nothing.

Then suddenly, his heart skipped a beat as a small screech owl flew up and began tapping against his window. Was the note from her? Since Gomez stayed here most of the time, the possibility pushed his pulse rate through the roof as he opened the window to let the owl enter. He hastily untied the note with trembling hands, then sent the bird on its way as Gomez dove towards the window in full attack mode.

"He's not here to hurt you!" Snape shouted at the angry barn owl. "Let him be!" He glared at Gomez as he flew back up to the eaves and the nest that he and Snape's bird, Morticia, had constructed over the summer. No denying it now, Morticia sat quietly on the nest as Gomez stood guard. Snape chuckled. Then he quickly turned his attention back to the note in his hands. As he put it up to his nose, he realized, with a grimace and a sneeze, that the note was unfortunately not from Miss Granger.

The back was sealed with Slytherin green wax, and the full-color Malfoy crest sat proudly at the top of the page.

Dear Severus,

I hope all is well with you. It was indeed a pleasure to see you a few weeks ago, after so many years of silence. I do hope that our rekindled friendship can continue, this time uninterrupted, for many more years to come. It is in this friendly spirit that I write to you today, for I am in need of your potions expertise, and I have a feeling that you will enjoy the task that I am about to put to you.

I have a business proposition for you. I would be much obliged if you could stop by my office first thing tomorrow morning, say around 8:00 a.m. I will explain further then, if you chose to take me up on my offer. I know this is short notice, but I only found out about this particular project this morning and I am under a tight deadline. If you will at least try to accommodate me, I will make it well worth your time.

I do hope that, whatever you decide, you will no longer be a stranger.

Please let me know if you can accommodate my schedule as soon as possible.

Best regards,

Draco Malfoy

Snape quickly put two and two together and allowed a gratified smile to spread across his face. Draco needed his help to evaluate the manuscripts that Krum had just delivered. His potions textbooks' manuscripts. This was going to be rich, delectably, delightfully, rich. He hastily penned an affirmative reply and called for Gomez to deliver it.

Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon in the Records Office and came to the conclusion that anyone in the "Greater Wizarding World Liaison Department" would have had the opportunity to travel to foreign countries and do the necessary digging to uncover the truth about a newcomer's bloodlines. By then it was after 5:00 p.m. and she had agreed to meet Viktor at Salicia's at 5:30, so she headed to the loo to freshen up, then out the door to the diner.

Viktor was already there waiting for her. He had procured them a table and looked as if he had gotten a head start in the cocktail department. A small crowd had gathered around him, begging for autographs. He patiently supplied each with his name and a short dedication, but as Hermione pushed her way through the crowd, they politely dispersed. She was grateful for their lingering stares, but even more grateful for some distance and the subsequent privacy it provided their conversation.

"So good of you to come," Viktor stated sincerely. "I thought that perhaps you wouldn't be willing to give me the time of day, and honestly, I wouldn't have blamed you. Your heart is bigger than mine." He smiled sheepishly at her and waited for some response.

But she only gave him a cold and silent stare as she studied his every breath, his every move, the nuances of his facial expressions, his body language, searching, no doubt, for even the tiniest hint of insincerity.

Hermione's silence reduced the burly Quidditch hero to rubble. His lower lip began to quiver. His eyes began to mist up. He reached for her hand, but stopped just short of touching her as he remembered both his promise to her and Snape's promise to him at the same time. "What do you want me to do? Get down on my knees?" He shifted in his chair as if he was readying himself for a physical display of culpability, but Hermione stopped him.

"Please don't. People are already staring. Let's not give your minions bad theatre on such a lovely afternoon."

Viktor couldn't help but chuckle at that thought. "You know, sometimes, I feel like my whole life has been played out on a stage for the entire wizarding world to see. Bad theatre indeed!"

"Couldn't be much worse than my life." Hermione was also chuckling now. "I feel like these days I'm living a soap opera, and my early days were spent in an action movie!"

They both giggled and chortled as the waitress brought Viktor a refill on his firewhisky and asked Hermione what her preference would be.

"I'll have some oak mead, thanks."

An uncomfortable silence passed between them as they waited for the waitress to return with Hermione's mead. Then Viktor leaned in over the table so his words would less likely be overheard. "When Snape left us alone together, I assumed that the two of you had prearranged the whole thing. I figured that you wanted what every other woman wants from me."

Hermione pursed her lips and furrowed her brow. But before she could speak, Viktor continued.

"I guess I had forgotten over the years, just how different you are from every other woman. When Snape showed up and reminded me of the nightmare that your husband has recently put you through, I felt like such a selfish idiot."

"When Snape showed up?" Hermione's scowl was quickly replaced with a puzzled look. "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

Hermione shook her head.

"I guess his elf tattled on me after she took you home. He came to my house, put me in a Full Body-Bind Curse, used Legilimency to see exactly what had happened between us, and gave me this long speech about how you needed a friend right now, not a Neanderthal attempt at romance. Then he threatened to hex... well, let's just say he threatened me if I ever laid a hand on you again."

Hermione's face went slack with stunned, shocked silence. She couldn't believe it. Severus Snape had defended her honor. And he had used Legilimency, so he knew exactly what had transpired. No wonder he had come to her door that night. He must have been worried sick about her.

"What was it like?" she finally managed to ask, after a moment of silent wonder at this new bit of news.

"What was *what* like?"

"Being under his Legilimency spell?"

"Well, I was taught that if you try to fight it, it can be very painful if the caster has great skill. He can even cause brain damage if the memory he seeks is well hidden. Voldemort left several of his victims in such a state. Since Snape's skills are legendary, I didn't fight him. I could tell he was determined to get the memory out of me, so why risk great pain and possible injury, right?"

"But that must have been pretty frightening."

"At that point, I figured I deserved whatever he wanted to dish out, I was so ashamed of myself. Besides, he didn't do anything I wouldn't have done if someone had tried to force himself on the woman I loved. I'm lucky to be alive, really."

*

Snape had just about given up on ever seeing Miss Granger's screen name on his buddies list again when a knock came at his front door. He took it as a hopeful sign and turned off the bloody contraption as Winky opened the door and greeted their unexpected guest.

"Good evening, Harry Potter." Winky bowed low to him as she stepped aside to allow his entrance.

"Mr. Potter!" exclaimed Snape as his unbounded enthusiasm waned and he descended the stairs one at a time. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I'm sorry to bother you like this, Professor, but I need to talk with you. It's about Hermione."

Snape tried to remain calm, but his pulse quickened and he could feel a bead of sweat beginning to form on his forehead. "Please, do sit down, Mr. Potter. Would you care for something? Firewhisky, perhaps?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

Winky retreated to the kitchen to fill two glasses.

"Look, I know it's none of my business, but..."

Snape raised his eyebrows and gave Potter an intimidating look.

"I know you said that you wanted to keep her at arm's length, but..."

Snape crossed his arms on his chest and leaned forward.

"And I understand your reasons behind that decision, but..."

Snape's eyebrows came back down and furrowed together in a scowl as his eyes narrowed.

"I know you think that it's for her own good, but..."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Potter, just spit it out. I don't have all night!"

Presently, Winky returned with the drinks. Snape took a delicate sip while Potter downed his in one gulp. He then proceeded to choke, sputter and gasp to the point that Snape feared he would have to escort the man to St. Mungo's.

Winky quickly brought Potter a glass of water and some butterbeer. Potter gratefully sipped the water and began to regain his composure, but it took several more moments of sputtering before he could put together a coherent sentence.

"I'm sorry. Please excuse me." He sighed and his shoulders slumped. "It's just that, even after all these years, facing Voldemort, the war, other Death Eaters, you can still intimidate the crap out of me!"

Snape was flummoxed. "What the bloody hell did I do?"

"Nothing! But that's the wonder of it, isn't it? You never had *todo* anything. Just *looking* at me was enough."

Snape snorted and shook his head. "Perhaps if I stared at the bookcase or the coffee table."

"No, no. I'll get over it. I just have to get used to being around you like this."

"Like *what?*" Snape was back to glaring at Potter.

"Like *this*." He gestured around the room. "In your house, in a casual atmosphere, no classrooms, no battles to be fought, no crisis to resolve. It feels...*weird*."

Snape's scowl disappeared and his face was touched with sadness. Is this how everyone saw him? Is this how Miss Granger saw him? His eyes focused on the bookcase, not so much for Potter's sake, but for his own. He couldn't face those intense green eyes right now.

"I believe you came here to speak with me about Miss Granger," Snape finally said quietly.

"Right..." Potter studied Snape's face. He had seen that look before, hopeless and remorseful. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. "You're breaking her heart, you know."

Snape immediately took on a defensive posture. "That's impossible. I haven't led her on. I haven't let her get close enough to care that much."

"Then you don't know her as well as you think you do," Potter replied with a touch of resentment in his voice.

"Oh?" Snape immediately picked up on this new air of hostility. "Pray enlighten me, Mr. Potter," he said with a cynical smile.

"I may be going out on a limb here, but I think she's falling in love with you."

*

Another shockwave hit Hermione square in the face. "Woman you *love*? You think that Professor Snape is in love with me?"

Viktor smiled broadly and nodded his head. "Without a doubt. Can't you see it in his eyes? The way he looked at you all through our lunch together, the way he talks about you, defends you..."

"Then why on earth would he leave me alone -- *with you?*"

"The man is a convicted felon, Hermione. He probably thinks that you are better off without him, and he doesn't want to stand in the way of your happiness."

She looked at him in shock. Harry had tried to tell her the exact same thing just this morning.

*

"Have you gone daft?" Snape asked Potter incredulously. "Did she actually *tell* you that she loves me?"

"No, she didn't come right out and say it, but I know her. The way she talks about you, the way she defends your actions and your honor, the faraway look in her eyes when the subject of Severus Snape comes up in conversation. And this morning, she..." Potter bit back his words. He didn't want to spoil Hermione's surprise chocolate truffles. "I mean, well, she told me this morning that she is crushed right now because she thinks you're trying to get rid of her."

"I merely encouraged her to make friends with other people, people with a more secure standing in wizarding society. I most certainly am not trying to get rid of her."

"Well, that's not the way she sees it. You know how a woman can be when she loves you," Potter tried to confide.

"No, I *don't* know, Mr. Potter. No woman has ever been in love with me. Thank you *so much* for reminding me of that fact." He sneered resentfully.

"She's much more sensitive to the things *you* say or do than to what anyone else might say or do."

"You think I don't know that she's sensitive? I figured that out on her first day in my classroom. Are you quite finished with your diatribe?"

"No, as a matter of fact. Doesn't she make you happy? Even a little bit?"

"Look, Mr. Potter, I'm losing my patience. We've been over this. I would not be good for her."

Like a bulldog, Potter would not let go. "When was the last time you felt true joy?"

Snape narrowed his eyes and thought the question through. "My fifth year at Hogwarts. Your future mother had just called your future father a 'useless toe rag.' You might recall that little scene from the memories I had given you on what should have been my death bed. Am I correct?"

Potter shot him a disbelieving glare. "Is that really the last time you felt truly happy?"

"Of course not," Snape admitted with a chuckle, "but I couldn't resist just one little dig."

Potter snorted. "So when else have you felt true joy?"

"I believe the next time was after I got out of Azkaban, when Winky came to stay with me."

"Why, Winky is flattered, Master Severus," Winky called in from the kitchen. "By the way, will Harry Potter be staying for dinner?"

"That would be gr..."

"Absolutely NOT!" Snape interrupted. "And my happiness is none of your business. I believe that this conversation has reached its end."

"So, Hermione *does* make you happy." Potter's smirk was so obnoxious that Snape considered hexing it off his face. But he managed to restrain himself.

"Of course she does. But it's *her* happiness that I'm worried about." Snape could see the unabashed determination in Potter's eyes, so he continued. "Would it make you feel better if I promised to tell her *why* I am treating her this way?"

"I suppose so," Potter finally acquiesced. "You know how she is. She always wants to know *why*."

Snape couldn't argue with that.

"Run along, then. I think I hear your wife calling," he said with a sneer. The two men stood, shook hands, and Snape gave Potter the bum's rush out the door.

"Bye, Winky," he called over his shoulder. The door closed quickly behind him.

*

"Don't you see?" Viktor tried to convince a skeptical Hermione. "When you love someone completely and unconditionally, you would sacrifice your own happiness for theirs. I know. I gave my second wife everything. I didn't have the heart to fight her. I only hope that the bastard who stole her away makes her happy. He better hope so,

too, because if he hurts her, I'll kill him."

Hermione forced a laugh, but somehow she knew that Viktor meant every word.

The rest of their dinner went by in a blur. No matter what direction their conversation took, Viktor's previous words continued to ring in her ears. Severus Snape was in love with her. Severus Snape. In love. With Hermione Granger. Unconditionally in love.

Those words became her mantra.

And that night, they invaded her dreams...

Severus Snape's long, silky black hair fell over his eyes and danced along the surface of Hermione's bare skin. She giggled. "That tickles, you fiend!"

"Does it now?" he teased in a velvety baritone. "How about this?" And he lowered his face to her bare breasts where he nuzzled, licked and kissed first one and then the other, back and forth, slowly, softly. He would wet a spot with his tongue, then blow lightly across it and watch with glee as the goose-bumps formed.

Hermione brought her hands up to either side of his face and pulled his lips to hers for a passionate kiss. His slender, naked body slid warmly over hers, brushing against all of her sensitive spots as their kiss deepened.

"Please, Severus..."

"Please?" He beckoned. "Please what?"

"You know," she insisted in a husky voice.

"Yes... my love. Indeed I do," he whispered in her ear as finally he gave her what she had been waiting for, longing for, aching for. She arched her back in ecstasy as he plunged into her over and over, slowly at first. Then, as if he could read her every whim, he moved with the grace and rhythm of her perfect mate, sending her over the edge at the exact same moment that he spilled himself into her. It was utterly satisfying in every way. Beautiful. Perfect.

After a few moments of blissful quiet, quivering in the afterglow of their mutual climax, Severus rolled to the side and their arms wrapped around each other. With their noses and foreheads almost touching, Hermione gazed lovingly into the depths of Severus' eternally black eyes.

"I love you, Severus Snape," she whispered with all the emotion she could pour into the statement.

He closed his eyes and smiled upon hearing those cherished words. Then his eyes popped open, and she could see all the love she felt for him reflected back at her. "I love you too, Hermione Snape."

Hermione released her soul into the joy that that simple phrase brought to her. She felt truly united with him at that moment. She pushed her shoulder up into the crook of his arm and nestled her face into his chest. The perfect fit. The home she had always wanted. The special place she had always sought. In his arms. In his bed. By his side. In his heart. Part of his soul. Two lives intertwined, inseparable. As it should be.

They both fell easily into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Tap, tap, tap. "Master Severus, sir, time to wake up, sir. Master has an appointment this morning with Draco Malfoy."

Snape rolled over and groaned.

Tap, tap, tap. "Master Severus!"

"Yes, Winky, thank you. I'm awake, I'm awake." Snape opened his eyes and looked about the room. No stone walls, no stone floor, no four-poster bed, and worst of all, no Hermione Snape. *Damn! It was all only a dream. A wonderful, perfect dream.* Snape snorted in disgust as he threw back the covers. Well, his penis had thought it was quite a bit more than just a dream! He grabbed his wand. "*Scourgify!*"

As he headed for the shower, his mind recounted the night's experience. What a wonderful dream! He had dreamt of Miss Granger before, even of making love to her before, but never quite like this. In this dream they were husband and wife, living at Hogwarts. It felt as if they were both teachers, for some reason. And best of all, the love that radiated from her to him was almost palpable. It was as if she had read his innermost desires and then molded herself into his perfect mate. But the most wonderful aspect of it was the fact that, after the most perfect sex he had ever experienced, she had professed her love for him and fallen asleep in his arms. No one had ever done that. Not in real life, and no, not even in his dreams.

Could life really feel that good? Or was that something that he could never experience outside of his dreams? He quickly and sadly came to the latter conclusion as he got dressed, since he would remain a convicted felon and therefore would never let himself get that close to the woman he loved. If he truly loved her, he would keep to his original plan and not taint her reputation with his dark past. But, thanks to Potter's incessant ramblings from the previous evening, he would do his best to explain his sincere desire for friendship and the logic behind his decision to keep it from progressing any further. He just hoped that she would be willing to settle for a friendship. He didn't think he had the willpower to fight her if she insisted on a romance, and he didn't think he could live with himself if a relationship with him caused her professional life to fall into ruin.

Winky had prepared his usual breakfast of lightly toasted whole wheat bread, cereal with milk, two eggs sunny side up, and crispy bacon. He downed a glass of orange juice to top it off then headed out the door so he could Disapparate by the river as usual.

Draco's office was in London proper, but as with most wizard establishments, the front door looked like an abandoned storefront in a desperate state of disrepair. He slipped through the heavy, rusting, steel door, which could have fallen off its hinges at any moment, and made his way up the wide creaky staircase. At the top of the stairs, another shabby door lead into a beautifully kept waiting room, complete with oriental rugs atop the dark hardwood floors, richly colored walls accented with tasteful chair-rail and dental moldings, and exquisitely restored antique furniture. Of course, the place wouldn't be complete without a collection of promotional posters from all of Draco's biggest successes, including Harry Potter's unauthorized biography by Rita Skeeter.

Snape snorted in disgust as the young, attractive blonde receptionist looked up to greet him.

"Good morning, sir. May I help you?"

"Yes, I have an eight o'clock appointment to see Mr. Draco Malfoy."

She glanced down at a rather large, leather bound appointment book. "Professor Severus Snape?"

"In the flesh," he replied silkily.

She aimed her wand at her throat and mumbled something under her breath, then said out loud, "Professor Snape to see you, sir." Then she lifted her empty hand to her

ear and touched a small device that Snape hadn't noticed before. "Have a seat. He'll be right with you." She smiled benignly at him and then went about her work.

Snape glanced about the room and noticed the morning's *Daily Prophet* sitting on the waiting room table. Since he had been too pressed for time at home to read his copy, he reached down and picked up this one then claimed the chair just to the right of the entrance door.

He perused the paper lazily as his irritation with Draco grew. He didn't like to be kept waiting, and Draco had said in his letter that this was urgent. So why was he still sitting here after nearly two minutes? Then something on page three, along the edge in the gossip column, caught his eye.

QUIDDITCH HERO AND WAR HERO A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN?

By Rita Skeeter

Yesterday evening, Diagon Alley was graced with the presence of none other than Viktor Krum, famous Bulgarian Quidditch star turned writer, turned recently divorced literary agent. And, spotted with him for drinks and a romantic dinner in the twilight outside of Salicia's Diner, was Hermione Granger, third leg of the famous trio who defeated Lord Voldemort and also recently divorced.

This writer witnessed their relationship in its budding infancy over two decades ago, when Krum was chosen to compete in the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts. They attended the Yule Ball together and became almost inseparable for the rest of that school year.

Even though they went their separate ways when school ended, fate has a way of bringing star-crossed lovers back together. Fate, destiny, whatever one may wish to call it, those two certainly seemed to enjoy each other's company last night as they spent the evening making goo-goo eyes at each other.

Is there a romance in the offing? Stay tuned to this column and Rita Skeeter, the eyes and ears of Diagon Alley, to find out.

There was no photo to go with the story, thank Merlin, or Snape would have had to use Incendio on the paper and risk catching the waiting room on fire. But, just as his blood reached the boiling point, Draco's door opened and he entered with hand outstretched.

"Good morning, Severus, so good to see you again."

"And you." Snape attempted a smile, but contorted his face into a grimace instead.

"What's the matter? Are you alright? You don't look well."

"I'll be fine. Just something... that didn't agree with me." Snape patted his stomach to infer it was something that he ate.

"I was going to suggest some coffee, but..."

"No, coffee is fine, great, actually. That would help."

Draco eyed him skeptically then turned to the receptionist. "Melinda, could you bring me and Professor Snape here a cup of coffee?" He turned to Snape with eyebrows raised.

"Black," Snape informed her. "Just black. And if it isn't good and strong, don't waste your time."

Draco led Snape into the well-equipped office, which surprisingly contained a Muggle state-of-the-art computer, including a cutting-edge scanner, printer, and large flat screen. Snape wasn't sure if he should be impressed or suspicious. He decided to play dumb. "What's that Muggle contraption on your desk?"

"You've never seen one of these? Merlin, you're as bad as Father. It's a computer. Bloody handy thing, too. I must admit that wizards don't have everything over Muggles. For instance, jet planes, cell phones, and electricity... and those things called movies that you watch on TV -- quite entertaining."

Of course Snape had heard of, or had first-hand experience with, all of those things. But it seemed quite odd for Draco to be aware of, much less take advantage of, anything Muggle. "If you don't mind my asking, who introduced you to all of this... this Muggle paraphernalia," he asked, almost as if the items mentioned were vile and should be made illegal.

Draco laughed at Snape's reaction. "I take it back. You're worse than Father! My wife, if you must know. She's from Germany, and unlike us, they are quite intrigued with the Muggle population and their inventiveness. The school she attended encourages wizards to incorporate Muggle contraptions into their daily life. If they make their lives easier, I mean, why not? It's a no-brainer, really. Owl post takes forever, and I can just pick up my cell phone and call Wilhelmina at the touch of a button. We can talk directly to each other, or text, or leave a message. It's great. And last month, we went on holiday to Egypt, so I could buy my 100% papyrus direct in bulk and get a huge discount. We flew down on a Muggle jet. In only a few hours, we were there. It would have taken a couple of days to Apparate, and we would have been exhausted by the time we arrived."

For a fleeting moment, Snape contemplated informing Draco of the Apparation range of the average house-elf, but he quickly decided to keep that valuable piece of information to himself. Just then, Melinda entered with two mugs of coffee on a tray, one black and one with the cloudy look of added cream. She set the tray on Draco's desk and hurried out the door before anyone thought to thank her.

"Anyway," continued Draco, "this computer is amazing. Of all the equipment that I have, it has been the single biggest help to my publishing business. Everything would take ten times as long to proof and make ready for publication. Even an army of house-elves couldn't set type or proofread as fast as this thing does. And when it's done, it spits out all of the pages already set, arranged, and complete with photographs. Then a master binder constructs a beautiful leather cover with embossing and engraving as needed. Then the finished prototype goes to the house-elves to replicate."

Snape knew that his computer could do all of those things, but he had never tried to create illustrations or incorporate photos into his potions text. The necessary hardware and software would be easy enough to procure. The cutting diagrams and cross-sections of plants and animals that now anxiously danced through his head would have to wait until the revised and updated second edition.

"Anyway, this is where you come in," Draco continued. "I just got a new set of manuscripts in a set of potions textbook manuscripts. I sent rough copies over to Slughorn yesterday to assess, but I really don't trust him to scrutinize this series the way it needs to be. Krum brought it to me, and the way he talks, it's so cutting-edge that not only will the rising first-years at Hogwarts need a set, but every student will. And, once the parents get a look at it, they will want one for their home to replace the one that they still have from their school days."

"Really? That good, eh?" Snape pretended to be skeptical.

"Yeah. You're on the same page with me, I can already tell. I'm not so sure about this 'breakthrough' bull Krum is handing me, but..."

"Let me guess. You haven't brewed a potion since you left Hogwarts, and you no longer remember enough to tell a newt's toe from a toad's ear."

Draco's pale face flushed a slight pink as he smirked and shrugged. "You know me all too well, Severus."

"And you want me to look it over for you?"

"More than that, I'm afraid. I need you to test all the recipes for me. And I need it done in a hurry." Draco handed Snape a copy of the manuscript. "I'll give you four thousand Galleons if you can get it back to me quickly so that I can have it in stores in time for the back-to-school rush."

Snape flipped through the already familiar pages. "If you want me to be thorough, this is going to take some time."

"How long?" There was a decidedly anxious tone to Draco's voice.

"Well... Some of these, if you recall, will take a full moon cycle to mature. Veritaserum, for instance." His face grew grim. "Others have exotic ingredients that, I'm ashamed to admit, my meager lifestyle cannot afford me."

"I'll give you half up front to buy whatever you need. How long?"

"If you want me to test every single one, then I shall need a week to gather the necessary ingredients and another five weeks to run tests."

"SIX WEEKS?! School will have started by then! I can't wait that long. Look, perhaps you can just test the short ones the ones you already have everything to make. Just use your judgment and experience for the rest. Then how long would it take you?"

Snape's eyes narrowed. Draco had unwisely played his hand. He was desperate. "Seven thousand Galleons and two weeks."

"That won't do. I need it by Monday."

"Impossible. That only gives me four days." Snape carelessly tossed the manuscript onto Draco's desk.

"Ten thousand Galleons. I'll give you half up front and half when you come back with your full evaluation. But *must* have it by first thing Monday morning."

"Ten thousand Galleons?" Snape glared at his host in disbelief.

"Half now, half on Monday."

Snape continued his charade of reluctant submission, but inside, he had to concentrate to maintain his composure.

The two men shook hands, then Draco retrieved his checkbook from a drawer and quickly scribbled out the note. "Gringotts will honor it. I swear."

"You'd better hope so." Snape stuffed the note into his robe's inside left pocket. "You must think this book could make you a lot of money, if you are willing to go out on a limb like this."

"It could be huge." Draco became quite animated at this point. "If it is half as revolutionary as Krum thinks it is, every wizarding household in the world will want one. I already have translators for all the major languages in Europe, but this book could reach much further."

"Really?" Snape's interest intensified. "But how do you stop it from being plagiarized?"

"Oh, that's easy. Once we go into production, every book is shipped with an anti-plagiarizing charm on it. If someone tries to copy down a recipe from the book, the copied page will self-destruct after about thirty minutes. The exception to that is a chalk board. So if a teacher copies a recipe for the class to use, it will stay up there until it is erased."

"Excellent. No copyright infringement problems, then." Snape felt relieved at this information. He reached back down for the manuscript. "So, who is this author... Ari Shamamian?"

Draco hissed. "I was hoping you could tell me."

"Never heard of him, but I have been out of circulation for quite a while. Didn't you meet him?" Snape tried to sound surprised.

"No, Krum said that he wanted to stay out of the limelight. He's from Armenia, I think."

"Sounds a bit isolated. Well, I'd better get to work." He shook Draco's hand. "I'll give it all I've got for the next four days."

"I knew I could count on you, Severus."

"Let me know what Slughorn thinks, will you? I'm just curious."

"Will do."

Snape took a swig of his coffee and swept from the office. He took the note and headed straight for Diagon Alley and Gringotts Bank, where, thanks to his hooded cloak and goblin discretion, he managed to cash Draco's note and deposit it into his account without drawing attention to himself.

When he arrived home, he found Winky up to her eyeballs in laundry, but in quite a happy mood.

"Miss Granger stopped by, Master Severus."

"Did she really? How interesting," he drawled.

"Miss left master a box of chocolates. Winky thinks miss is ready to forgive master now."

Snape's lip curled slightly as he reached for the box. "Ah, yes, Winky. But the question is, am I ready to forgive *her*?"

Truth Revealed... Well, Sort Of

Chapter 20 of 35

Snape and Hermione finally talk face to face.

A/N: As always, many thanks go out to my betas, JENGEOGE and NervousAboutAngels, as well as WriterMerrin here at The Petulant Poetess, for all of their hard work on my behalf. Their corrections and improvements are greatly appreciated.

And also as usual, all the credit and money goes to J. K. Rowling. Like Forrest Gump cutting grass, I enjoy it so much, I do this for free!

Chapter 20

Truth Revealed... Well, Sort Of

Hermione's stomach churned endlessly as she stepped off the lift and made her way to her office. What if Professor Snape had read that article? Winky told her that he had left home this morning in a hurry, but he would surely read the paper when he returned. Hopefully, the chocolate truffles she had left for him would soften the blow.

Hermione wanted to strangle Rita Skeeter with her bare hands for writing about her and Viktor Krum. Goo goo eyes indeed! He hadn't so much as touched her hand. Where did she get off starting such rumors? But what irritated Hermione most was the fact that Rita had been able to spot them in the first place. She should have still been at home suffering the effects of the curse Hermione had inflicted on her for writing inflammatory articles. It had been less than a week since her story on Quintsky's Stationery had appeared in the *Prophet*. Perhaps the curse was already beginning to wear off.

Well, at least the vixen hadn't gotten close enough to hear their conversation. The only thing that would have angered Professor Snape more than the article that did appear would have been one in which the true nature of their conversation had been revealed. Viktor had convinced Hermione that Professor Snape was in love with her, and although she was afraid to believe it, she wanted it to be true with all her heart.

Well, what's done is done, Hermione thought to herself. Her time as a Ministry employee was fast coming to an end, and she had some serious digging to do if she was to uncover the mystery blackmail artist. So she stuck her head into her office just long enough to tell Agnes that she would be in Ministry Records again and exited before her curious co-worker could grill her on the previous evening's events. No doubt the woman had read the *Prophet* and jumped to the wrong conclusion, just as everyone else had done.

When she entered the lift, Ron was there to keep her company. She cringed as her stomach did somersaults.

"So... Viktor Krum." Ron nodded thoughtfully. "You could do worse, I suppose."

Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed. "That hag has it all wrong," she insisted angrily. "I have no desires for Viktor, and I absolutely, positively, did NOT make goo goo eyes at him, for Merlin's sake."

Ron couldn't help but snicker at his ex-wife's predicament. "Sorry." He held up his hands as if to surrender. "I had nothing to do with it. I was with Mum and the kids last night."

"Aurrg!" was all she could manage as her floor was announced and she stepped off the lift. She could hear Ron's fading laughter behind her as the lift door closed. Great! Now the rumors would be flying fast and furious about her and a man who she considered a bottom feeder. And the one she really wanted was probably sitting at home, reading the article with steam shooting out of his ears.

Merlin! What next?

The little old witch behind the counter in the Ministry Records Office tried not to smirk as Hermione entered. "Good morning, Miss Granger," she said with a knowing smile.

"Good morning, Mrs. Oddfellow. Could I trouble you for hiring records for the Greater Wizarding World Liaison Department?"

"What time period would you like, dear?" Her smirk grew to almost comic proportions.

"I think the last twenty years or so should do it."

"Very well, dear." The old woman turned to retrieve the desired tomes.

"Mrs. Oddfellow," Hermione called after her.

"Yes, dear?" She looked around, still smirking.

"There is absolutely nothing going on between me and Viktor Krum, so you can wipe that simpering smile off your face." At this point, Hermione knew that her days at the Ministry were numbered, and she really didn't give a rat's arse who she pissed off.

The old woman glared at her and silently disappeared down one of the long rows of books. When she returned, she had levitating before her an armload of volumes. When she had made the request, Hermione had not realized what she had been asking for. Each country had its own set of representatives here in Britain, and British wizards had their own set of representatives in each country with which it had normalized relations. The number of employees was staggering. And the attrition rate for the lower ranks could be compared to the revolving main entrance of Harrods Department Store. Hermione had her work cut out for her.

When lunch came, Hermione requested that Mrs. Oddfellow let the books remain on the table so she could continue in one hour, but Mrs. Oddfellow wouldn't hear of it. She insisted on putting the books back in their rightful places on the shelves, and Miss Granger would need to sign them back out after she returned from lunch. *Some people simply jump through hoops and follow protocol to justify their own existence*, thought Hermione with a grumble as she made note of her place in each book and handed it over to the frumpy old witch.

She couldn't get out the door fast enough. Thankfully, the lift was empty when she stepped into it, and it stayed that way until she got to the lobby. She had to reach Professor Snape, hopefully before he reached page three of the *Daily Prophet*.

After Apparating directly to her living room, she hastily turned on her new computer and watched in relief as it hummed to life almost instantly. But Professor Snape's name didn't appear in her buddies list. So she Disillusioned herself and Apparated to the park by the river near Spinner's End. After becoming visible again, she made her way up the riverbank and to his nice, neat little house. She put knuckle to wood, but no answer was forthcoming. *That's odd*, she thought. *Winky should at least answer the door*. She knocked harder. Still no response.

Never one to give up easily, Hermione balled her hand into a tight fist. Bang, bang, bang! "Professor Snape! It's me, Hermione." Several silent moments passed. Bang, bang, bang! "Professor, please open the door. I need to speak with you."

"My goodness, woman!" exclaimed the next door neighbor who had been in the front yard weeding her garden. "What's all the fuss about?"

Hermione ignored her. Bang, bang, bang! "Professor, *please!*"

"Look, lady, I know it ain't none o' my business, but..."

"You're right, it *is* none of your business," Hermione rudely cut across her.

The Muggle neighbor stood and placed her hands on her hips, then she took several swaggering steps in Hermione's direction. "'e either ain't 'ome or 'e doesn't want to

talk to the likes o' you. But one thing I know for certain 'e ain't DEAF!"

Hermione's face turned beet red as she realized that the woman was absolutely correct. She let out a long and painful sigh as she placed her open palm silently on the front door. Perhaps Winky had gone to run errands, and Professor Snape had not yet returned from his morning appointment. She took a deep breath and turned towards the woman. "Sorry to have disturbed you, ma'am," she apologized meekly. But as she took a step towards the street, she heard the door open. With hope in her heart, she twirled on her heel to face Professor Snape. His look was not welcoming.

"Oh, Professor, thank goodness..."

"In spite of the fact that you didn't have the common decency to open *your* door when I came to your house last week, I will not return your rudeness in kind. But I am currently up against a deadline, so make it quick."

His voice mirrored his icy stare, but Hermione plunged forward. "Please don't tell me that you actually believe that article by Rita Skeeter?"

"I have previously witnessed everything that she described first hand, so why shouldn't I?"

"I don't know what you *thought* you saw last week at lunch, but it was most certainly *not* goo goo eyes!"

"Be that as it may, Miss Granger, the fact remains that the man accosted you and you were still willing to dine with him. One can only assume that you are either a naïve fool, or you have simply not yet come to terms with your feelings for him."

"I have no feelings for him whatsoever. I simply wanted to give him a chance to apologize for his appalling behavior."

"And what made you so sure that those were his intentions?"

"Because he sent me a huge basket of flowers with a note attached, declaring his intentions."

Snape nodded thoughtfully. "Ah, that explains it."

Hermione scowled at him. "Explains what?"

"That if one wishes to get your attention, a mere single, perfect, long stem rose of deep burgundy hue is simply not adequate. I'll keep that in mind, if ever I grow a foolish desire to send you something of a floral nature again."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Why, the rose I sent yesterday afternoon, of course. You seemed to find it so utterly distasteful that you destroyed it shortly after it arrived at your office."

Hermione stared at him in total confusion. "You sent me a rose?"

"Oh please, Miss Granger. Don't play the innocent ingénue with me. It doesn't suite you."

"I never saw your rose. I swear it!"

"My Tracking Spell never lies, Miss Granger. It indicated that the rose arrived at your desk in perfect condition, but it somehow met an untimely end shortly thereafter." His voice became impatient. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have a very important deadline to meet. Good day." Snape took a step back and began to close the door. "Oh, by the way," he added hastily, "thank you for the truffles." He then quietly closed the door in her face.

She stood there totally perplexed. He had sent her a rose? She'd never received it. But she knew by his attitude that she would have to solve that mystery before she could even hope for another audience with him.

Hermione quickly made her way back to her office and marched straight past the curious Agnes Garmond to her desk. It still held the glass vase, water, and Viktor's flowers from the day before, and the basket had not been moved. Agnes stood and joined Hermione as she surveyed the scene.

"So, how did your date go last night? Can we believe that rumor mill column in that rag that passes for a newspaper?"

Hermione completely ignored her co-worker's question. "Agnes, didn't you say yesterday that you saw an owl deliver a single red rose?"

Agnes' face displayed more than a touch of disappointment at having her question deflected. "Yes, but it must have transformed into these..."

"Did you witness the transformation?"

"Well, no. After I opened the window and let the bird make his delivery, I went back to my desk."

"And did you close the window after he left?"

Agnes had to stop and contemplate that one. She furrowed her brow and stared at the window with narrow eyes. After a moment, her memory returned. "No. I didn't close the window until I was about to leave for the day. I felt a blast of hot air and realized that it had been left open. I must have assumed that you would have closed it while you were putting the flowers in the vase. But I guess not."

"Could someone have switched the rose for the basket while you weren't looking?"

"No one else came in here all day, except you. But I did leave to go to the loo at one point. I suppose someone could have made the switch then."

Then a thought occurred to Hermione. She reached for the basket and grabbed the handle. "Or perhaps, no one took the rose. Perhaps it is still here." She lifted the basket and, sure enough, lying under it, with a distinctly woven pattern pressed into its petals, was a perfectly flattened rose, crushed by the weight of the heavy basket and its contents. "Damn!" she whispered, almost under her breath.

Attached to the rose with a satin red ribbon, was a note. 100% papyrus. Opalescent green antique Slytherin wax stamp. Professor Snape *Damn!*

Hermione felt the essence of her soul begin to shrivel.

"Two suitors in one day! My, my, must be nice."

Hermione flashed Agnes a hostile glare. "Do you mind?"

"Touchy, aren't we?" Agnes complained, half teasing, as she sashayed slowly back to her cubical.

Hermione opened the note with trepidation, not sure if its contents would lighten her heart with joy, or laden it with guilt...

My Dearest Miss Granger,

It seems necessary of late for me to continually apologize for my ineptitude and bad judgment. I made an assumption that Mr. Krum was an honorable man, and I was obviously mistaken. I never dreamed that you would fall victim to such unscrupulous behavior, for if I had known of his perverted proclivities, I would never have brought you along, much less abandoned you in such a vulnerable state.

I would gladly sell my soul to turn back the clock and extricate that most horrid of memories from your mind. But, alas, that is not possible. Even a Time-Turner would not erase the memory, and Obliviation would still leave some residual discomfiture. So I fear that we are both forever cursed with those indelible images. And although I can't imagine what such violation is like on a physical level, the Dark Lord took liberties with my mind on several occasions, so I do have an idea of the psychological toll that such an experience can take.

The shame I feel is only surpassed by my sorrow at the thought that you will never be able to forgive me for my insensitivity and misconduct. I certainly understand your anger and your desire to wash your hands of me. But if there is even the slightest modicum of forgiveness in your heart, I hope with all of mine that you will give me another chance. I promise never to leave you alone in the company of another man again, unless you specifically request it.

Please, Miss Granger. I beg your forgiveness.

Forever Yours,

Severus Snape

Hermione fell heavily into her office chair, and the tears began to flow freely. No wonder he had been so irritated with her when he finally answered his door. He had poured his heart out in this letter. To have it ignored, the rose destroyed, and the article appear in the paper filled with ridiculous lies, it was a wonder that he had bothered to speak to her at all. Somehow, she would have to make him understand that this was all just a huge misunderstanding. It wouldn't be easy, but she was determined to find a way.

She stood, rose in one hand and letter in the other, and headed for the office door. She stopped in the Auror department just long enough to talk with Harry.

"I need to do something this afternoon. Why don't you go interview our next blackmail victim without me and just let me know what you find out?"

"Have you been crying? What's wrong? Is this about that stupid article of Skeeter's from this morning's paper?"

"No, no, no." Hermione shook her head adamantly. "It's got nothing to do with that."

"Has Ron done something?"

"No, he's innocent, for once. Look, Harry, I really need to go."

Harry gently held her arm as she attempted to turn and leave. "Is this about Snape?" he asked accusingly. When she didn't answer, his lips and eyes narrowed. "Has he done something to hurt you?"

"Oh, no, Harry." She shook her head again. "It's just a big misunderstanding." She held up the rose. "He's mad at me because he sent this to me yesterday, and he thinks I destroyed it on purpose, but it was an accident. I didn't even find it until just now."

"Then why are you crying?"

Hermione's head shook slowly back and forth as she tried to fight back another onslaught of tears. "He's so sensitive. I really hurt his feelings because of this." She looked anxiously into Harry's eyes. "But it was an accident, I swear. I would never hurt him on purpose."

"I know you wouldn't." Harry reached for his friend's shoulder and pulled her closer so he could rub her back.

"I just hope he'll listen to reason," she said with a sniff.

"Well, if he doesn't, you just let me know. I'll *make* him listen." Harry smiled broadly at her and winked.

"Thanks, Harry," she whispered and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, then made a hasty exit before Ron, or one of the other Aurors, noticed her tears.

*

Minutes later, Hermione found herself once again knocking on Professor Snape's door. The next door neighbor was still squatting in her flowerbed and rolled her eyes as she readied herself for an instant replay of the earlier scene. But thankfully, Professor Snape opened the door almost immediately. Hermione thought she noticed that his icy cold exterior seemed to thaw just a bit when he spotted the rose in her hand.

"I found this only a few minutes ago. It seems that Viktor's basket arrived shortly after your rose, and his delivery bird..."

"Don't you mean, 'delivery *boy*'?" Snape asked as he shot a quick glance at his neighbor, who may or may not have been listening.

"Right, delivery *boy* sat the basket right on top of your rose. Look," she held up the rose for inspection as his face became skeptical, "See the weave pattern? It matches the bottom of the basket."

Snape raised a suspicious eyebrow.

"And, I found your note." She pulled it from her robe's pocket and searched his face for some sign of softening as he inspected its condition. "You see, the rose was accidentally pressed flat, but the note remains unharmed. Really, Professor, this has all been a big misunderstanding. I would never hurt you on purpose. Please believe me."

He raised his scowl from the note to her face and noticed for the first time that her eyes were puffy and red. Had she been crying? Well, those beguiling feminine ways were not about to soften his mood. "You seemed quite willing to hurt me last week when I came to your door out of concern for your wellbeing. So I must contest your claim. You have wasted enough of my time, Miss Granger. Now, if you will excuse me, I really do have a deadline to meet." He began to slowly close the door, but she pushed her way forward.

"Professor, please listen to me."

"Miss Granger, I don't mean to be rude, but you leave me no choice." He placed his hand firmly on her shoulder and attempted to push her out of the way so he could close the door.

Hermione was desperate. She had to say something that would throw him off guard, melt his cold exterior, shatter his protective emotional wall. She could think of nothing else, so the words spewed forth like water from a Muggle fire hydrant.

"Viktor Krum thinks you're in love with me!"

She immediately regretted the outburst and covered her mouth as her eyes grew wide with anticipation. She braced herself for the verbal abuse that she thought would surely follow, but she was totally unprepared for his reaction.

Snape stared at Miss Granger as her words penetrated his consciousness. He was reminded of immature first-years at Hogwarts as they accused each other of wrongdoing to get themselves out of trouble. His knee-jerk reaction was to put his hands on his hips and bellow, "Well, Harry Potter thinks that you're in love with me! So THERE!" But he managed to keep that thought private, since it would not further his goal of a platonic relationship. The image did conjure a laugh, however, a belly laugh that, for the life of him, he could not stifle.

Hermione was mortified. She had expected horror, anger, explosive fury anything but laughter. As her face turned beet red, she realized that his reaction was down-right insulting. She glared at him as her impending tears evaporated.

"So you think that's funny, do you?"

Snape held onto the door jamb as he attempted to regain his composure. "Don't you?" he asked incredulously. When her scowl began to morph into anger and embarrassment, he realized that she took the statement very seriously. He couldn't admit that it was true, but he also didn't want to lie to her. So he decided to go a different route, a more political answer, a non-denial denial.

He snorted loudly. "What so you rely on that Neanderthal jock's interpretation of love now, do you? Oh, please! That would be like Longbottom giving advice on how to achieve an 'Outstanding' on a NEWT level Potions exam." Snape continued to guffaw as Miss Granger's tears threatened to return. When he searched her face for a smile, he realized that he had not succeeded in lightening her mood, so he grabbed her upper arm, gently steered her into the house, and closed the door. They had supplied the neighborhood with enough free entertainment for one afternoon.

"I suppose I could use a break from my brewing," he admitted as he caught his breath. "But I can only spare a few minutes." He led her to the couch and they both sat facing each other. He reached into his frock coat and handed her his white linen hanky. "The last thing that I wished to do was insult you, Miss Granger. Please forgive me."

She nodded as she wiped her eyes.

"But you must see the absurdity of your statement, don't you?"

Her eyes remained fixated on the hanky that was now in her lap as her fingers folded and unfolded it into nice, neat rectangles.

"Krum is a low-life jock. He's been married twice, and he apparently goes through women like water through a sieve. How could he possibly know anything about love? And even more puzzling is the notion that a bright and beautiful witch such as yourself would put any store in his opinion."

She began to wring the hanky in her hands as she closed her eyes tightly. Hermione had never been one to shrink from confrontation, and they had been skirting around this issue for weeks. She simply couldn't take the suspense any longer. She thought she would go mad if they didn't discuss their feelings for each other and get things out into the open. So she swallowed hard, screwed up her courage, and whispered just loud enough for her dear Professor to hear, "I guess, I just wanted so much to believe it."

Snape's heart began to pound hard in his chest. She had just taken a huge gamble. Her cards were laid out on the table. It was up to him now. He stared in disbelief at her face, but she still didn't meet his gaze. What could he say to her? That Krum was right? That was out of the question. Wasn't it? She would fling herself into his arms, and her career at Hogwarts would be over before it even started. And a romance could mean that Weasley would have the right to permanently keep her children from her. No, a romance between them was out of the question. Even a friendship was risky with his current status in wizarding society. He couldn't bring himself to push her away completely, but he refused to cave to selfish emotional weakness. He had to be strong for her sake.

He took a deep breath and steeled his resolve. But as he opened his mouth to reply, their eyes met, and hers were full of tears. He hadn't realized how much time had passed since her quiet admission, but he realized from the look on her face that he had taken way too long to respond.

"Your silence speaks volumes, Professor," Hermione mumbled meekly. "I've ruined everything, haven't I?" She swallowed hard. "I shouldn't have come." She stood, shaking her head in disgust at her own behavior. "I'm so sorry."

Snape stood with her, but he had been reduced to speechlessness as he watched her maneuver around his coffee table and toward his front door. *Say something, you fool! Don't let her leave!*

As she reached for the doorknob, his hand covered hers and he finally found his voice. "Don't go," he whispered.

Hermione stopped in her tracks and stood motionless, her heart swelling with hope. But she was afraid to look up.

Snape's mind was a blur. He couldn't let her leave like this. She had suffered enough because of him. He also couldn't tell her the truth. He couldn't do or say what was in his heart. But he could be her friend. Her best friend. And somehow, they would find a way to keep that little detail of their lives under wraps so it would not cause her any more grief.

Snape suddenly had a revelation. *Change the subject... Redirect. That's it. Find something else to talk about.*

"Gomez and Morticia!" he blurted out.

"Gomez and Morticia?" repeated Hermione in complete confusion.

"Yes. Gomez and Morticia... Uhh... They've built a nest. I believe that they have eggs. Yes... Morticia sits there constantly while Gomez keeps watch. He is her protector, you see. He brings her food, he preens her feathers. It's quite endearing, really."

Hermione's mind began to race. What was he doing? Was he so uncomfortable expressing his own emotions that he needed to use the birds to illustrate them? Or was he just trying to let her down easy? She was dazed and confused. The pain in her heart had reverted to numbness. She had no clue as to his motives or goal, so she had no choice but to play along and hope that he would reveal his intentions sooner or later.

Her eyes finally met his, and she saw unmistakable hope there.

"A nest?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes, would you like to see it?" He raised his eyebrows with anticipation.

"I would love to." She dried her face with his hanky.

"Come. There's a vent in the attic that we should be able to look through." He helped her off with her traveling cloak and hung it in the front hall closet. Then he took her hand and led her up the staircase and around the corner to a closet in the hall. A built-in ladder was hidden there. He climbed up the first two steps, pushed the board that covered the opening out of the way, then climbed the rest of the way up and turned to extend his hand to help her.

The attic was cramped with a ceiling so low that neither of them could stand up straight. So they crawled in silence, on hands and knees, until they reached the far side of the hot, dark space. The only light was supplied by two louvered vents, one on each end of the room. Snape peered through the one that was now in front of them. "Yes. Good, I can see her. There's a ledge just below this vent. If you look down through the louvers, you can see Morticia sitting there. I have no idea how many eggs she has,

but I believe that the likely number for a barn owl is four or five. Here, have a look." Snape shifted to the side so Miss Granger could get closer to the vent.

Hermione had to sit up a bit higher than Professor Snape to get a good view, but she could definitely see Morticia's back and the top of her head. "Do you think she knows we're watching her?"

As if to answer her question, Morticia rotated her head 180 degrees, as only an owl can do, and looked directly between the louvers into Hermione's eyes. She seemed quite content, almost happy, if an owl can feel such emotion. Just then, she was joined by Gomez, who had been hunting. He presented her with a field mouse, then they nuzzled each other, just as they had done to Hermione at times when delivering messages from Professor Snape.

"They seem so happy together," Hermione mused, "so much in love."

"Yes, lucky birds. Their lives are so simple, no one to pass judgments on them, no one to doll out punishments." Snape peered over Miss Granger's shoulder so he could watch as well. From this close proximity, he could immerse himself in her scent mixed with her perspiration and Secret Recipe. The perfect blend of torture and ecstasy. He wanted nothing more than to bury his nose in her hair and lav her neck with his tongue. Merlin's masturbation! She was too close. Her pheromones seemed to ooze from every pore. He had to get her out of there before he totally lost himself in the moment and did something that he would regret forever.

Just then, Hermione twisted her body to face his. They found themselves nose to nose, almost touching. She thought she would burst from desire. She wanted him so badly that she imagined him taking her right then and there, in that musty, dusty, dirty attic. Did his eyes express desire for her as well? She thought surely that she was not mistaken. But there was something more... Was it fear? In an attempt to reassure him, she reached up and caressed his face with a trembling hand.

Snape's stare intensified as he covered her hand with his own and pressed it tightly to his cheek. Then he turned into her open palm as his quivering lips reached her skin. *Must... stay... calm... Keep... in... control.* He closed his eyes tightly and forced her hand away from his face, engulfing it in both of his.

"Miss Granger," he finally managed to whisper as his eyes met hers again and he took a ragged breath. "Need I remind you that I am a convicted felon?"

"You know that doesn't matter to me. The charge is bogus," she insisted stubbornly.

He shook his head and forged on. "I have a criminal record that, although undeserved, is frowned upon just the same. And although most parents will probably tolerate a casual acquaintance between us, I doubt that any of them will turn a blind eye to a serious romantic relationship."

Hermione tried to free her hand, but he wouldn't let go. "But Professor, we obviously both feel..."

"And a one-night-stand is out of the question. It would only leave us both... wanting more." The words caused pain to even contemplate, much less to utter out loud.

"No one has to know what we do behind closed doors."

"People have a way of finding out. Mark my words. It will not remain a secret for long."

"Professor, please. I just can't keep up this charade anymore. I lo..."

"Don't! Please don't say it, Miss Granger. Can't you see how hard this is for me already? If we let this happen, if we follow our hearts and throw caution to the winds, your Hogwarts career will be over before it has even begun. And the Ministry will probably refuse to give you your old job back. You will be forced to find work in the Muggle world to pay your bills. Walnut Brain will have an iron-clad excuse to keep your children from you, and you will eventually blame me for your troubles."

"I would never blame you. I'm an adult. I know what I'm getting myself into."

"Then look at it from my point of view. I will have ruined yet another life that I hold dear. And the guilt would weigh so heavily on me that, eventually, I would be no good for you. I doubt that even Winky would stay with me."

"I will never leave you. I swear."

"You don't know that. You forget what a completely *miserable* human being I really am. You bring out the best in me now, but if a romance between us ruined your life, my best would become worse than you've ever witnessed. Trust me. Our relationship would be doomed from day one."

Hermione could hold back the tears no longer. She loved him so much. She wanted him so badly. How could this be happening? But deep down, she knew that he was right. Why in *bloody hell* did he always have to be right?

As he watched the tears roll furiously down Miss Granger's face, Snape's heart ached. This life of theirs was so horribly cruel. He let go of her hand and wrapped his arms around her, gently rocking her back and forth.

In the hope of appeasing her sorrow, he made a suggestion. "If it's any consolation, I can still be your best friend. We can keep in touch with emails and instant messages. By mid September, the owl chicks should be well on their way to becoming independent, so at least Gomez will be free to ferry notes back and forth between us. And I'll always be good for a hug, as long as we're behind closed doors." He could feel Miss Granger nod into his chest. "But I'm afraid, that's as far as I dare let it go, for both our sakes." He felt her nod again.

"That doesn't mean that I have to like it," she said with a sniff and a glare of mock irritation.

As she turned her tear-stained face up to his, he felt an almost uncontrollable urge to kiss her. Would that be such a sin? Just one *glorious* kiss? He brought his hand up to cup her cheek. He could feel her pulse-rate skyrocket beneath his fingers. He closed his eyes, and with a leaping heart, he leaned in, opening his lips ever so slightly.

POP!

Winky appeared in the attic beside them. She immediately covered her eyes when she realized just what her abrupt arrival had interrupted. "So sorry for the intrusion, master, but Mr. Draco Malfoy is here to see you."

"Shit!"

"Master!" Winky squeaked. "Such language in front of a lady!"

"Sorry," he mumbled. Then he turned to Miss Granger and looked longingly into her desperate eyes. "It just wasn't meant to be." He choked on the words through his obvious regret and sorrow. Then he kissed her on the forehead. "He mustn't know that you're here. Do you mind staying put until he leaves? I'll try to get rid of him quickly."

Miss Granger nodded yet again.

"Thanks, I'll let you know when he's gone."

Winky left with a pop, and Snape crawled back down through the attic access to contend with his anxious publisher.

More Truth Revealed

Chapter 21 of 35

Snape placates Draco and tries to explain himself to Hermione.

A/N: Hello everyone, so sorry for the long delay in this chapter. Real life kept me too busy for words, and I didn't want to rush through it when I finally did get the time. I hope you can forgive me. Although my summer is shaping up to be quite busy, I should be able to post with a bit more speed than this last time.

As always, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for such a fantastic job at keeping me on message, and the staff here at The Petulant Poetess deserves the credit for catching all of the grammar and spelling mistakes that I make a monumental task, to say the least.

I take no credit for the characters or their circumstances. I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story. It all belongs to the amazing J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 21

More Truth Revealed

Snape bounded down the stairs two at a time as he brushed the dust from his frock coat. Draco stood by the front door, looking rather puzzled. "Please forgive my appearance," Snape hastily fabricated a lie. "I was in the attic, searching for silverfish. I have some dried in my store closet, but they have been there so long I cannot guarantee their effectiveness. Fresh ingredients are ever the best, you know."

"Right." Draco seemed dismayed and disgusted. "Any luck?"

"Surprisingly, no. Winky's cleaning spells are so efficient there wasn't a bug in the place. I hope to have more luck in the basement. Surely I'll scare up a few earwigs which can sometimes be used as a substitute. Care to join me?" Snape decided to have some fun at Draco's expense.

"Absolutely not!" Draco exclaimed, his distaste quite evident by the look on his face. "Next you'll be asking me to hunt for dragon dung beetles in your greenhouse."

"As a matter-of-fact..."

"This is a 500 Galleon suit, Severus. If you think I'm going to go traipsing around after dragon dung beetles or pushing my way through a moldy wet basement, you've gone daft in your old age."

Snape feigned disappointment. "Well, if you're not here to assist me, then to what do I owe the pleasure? I've only been back for a couple of hours. You can't possibly expect me to have accomplished much by now."

"Of course not, but you must have had time to brew at least a couple of the more common recipes." Draco's hands wrung together nervously. Snape hadn't seen him this anxious since the night that Dumbledore was killed. "Haven't you finished even one?"

"I only have room for ten cauldrons in my kitchen," Snape began with a touch of irritation in his voice. "I started three with longer brewing times so that they could be completed and tested by the deadline. The other cauldrons all contain potions that can be finished quickly, within an hour or less. I'll save the ones that need to simmer for several hours for overnight, so they can finish while I'm sleeping. Then I'll start the process over again tomorrow."

Draco's patience waned. "You plan to take time out to sleep?"

Snape's glare morphed into a smirk. "Would you rather have me so tired that I make foolish mistakes?"

Draco ignored his snide remark. "But don't you have anything finished yet?*Anything?*"

Snape stifled a snicker. He so enjoyed having the upper hand when it came to the Malfoys. "Yes, Draco, you will be especially pleased that I had kept all of my sample potions from my teaching days at Hogwarts, therefore I already had something to compare the new results with. Quite a time saver."

"That's great news, so you do have something to show me already." Draco's demeanor relaxed a bit.

"Of course," Snape admitted with a touch of indignation. To assume otherwise would have been an insult on Draco's part. He led Draco through the kitchen, past the many simmering cauldrons, and stopped in front of the storeroom door. Snape had thought this through thoroughly. As soon as he had returned from Gringotts, he had retrieved several of his quick and easy test samples and dusted them off to look like new. Then he had arranged them in a box alongside the appropriate original recipe sample which he left in its well-earned dusty, grimy state. He knew Draco well enough to realize that an inspection of his progress was only a matter of time. But even Snape was taken aback at Draco's early appearance at his front door. He thought surely the young man would have given him at least twenty-four hours. It now became crystal clear to Snape just how important this project was to Draco. As if he had had any previous doubts.

*

Hermione shifted her weight from one butt cheek to the other in an attempt to get comfortable. Who knew how long she would have to sit here in this cramped little dusty, dank space before she was granted a reprieve? And what could Professor Snape be doing for Draco Malfoy that would precipitate his appearance at Spinner's End? And Merlin's meltdown it was hotter than Hades up here!

She could see from her perch that the professor had kindly left the closet door open in hopes of bringing her some much needed relief from the heat, but it didn't help. Thanks to the open door, she had been able to make out snippets of their conversation while they stood at the bottom of the staircase, but now that they were in the kitchen, she couldn't hear a thing. She glanced around in the semi-darkness. Just to the right of the louvered vent, a pipe shot up through the ceiling below and continued on through the roof. If she recalled the layout of Professor Snape's house correctly, the kitchen was located directly below her, two stories down. Could this pipe vent the kitchen sink? A copper pipe would be an excellent conductor of sound waves. It was worth a try. She pulled out her wand hopefully and touched the tip to the pipe.

"*Sonorus*," she whispered.

"...and as you can see, the color and clarity are much improved. I have found this to be the case with each that I have tested thus far. And not just the appearance, but also the effectiveness. Take the boil curing potion, for example. I tested it on myself. It not only gets rid of the boil, it erases any scarring. And it works both as a topical agent and when taken internally. The taste is even tolerable."

Hermione thought she could hear Draco laugh, but she wasn't sure. "The old recipe is vile to the nose as well as the pallet. I'll never forget the taste. My mum forced me to take it once when one of my cousins hexed me. It was horrible."

Hermione giggled at the thought of Draco with a large boil on the tip of his nose.

"I've never seen anything this good at curing boils," Professor Snape continued. "If all of the others are this much improved over the traditional recipes, you'll have a revolution in potions education on your hands. Even St. Mungo's staff will want to throw out their old books for this one."

"Excellent! This is just what I was hoping for. I feel confident enough to start scanning the pages into the computer now, so I can proof the copy and format the book. What a pain. I wish to Merlin that he had just given me the entire thing on disc. It would have saved me a day and a half of prep-time."

Snape stored that info in the back of his mind for his revised second edition, but decided to play dumb. "Given it to you on disk?"

Draco regarded him with disdain. "That's right, I forgot. You're a techno-dinosaur like Father. For that matter, he could have sent me the entire thing via email."

Snape continued to feign ignorance.

"Don't worry about it. It's not your concern, I was just thinking out loud. But hey, if you're still this enthusiastic tomorrow afternoon, I'll get the master binder started on the covers. By the time you give me the final analysis on Monday morning, I'll have the finished product ready to move into production."

"And not a moment too soon," Snape observed. "School will be starting before you know it."

Hermione felt quite guilty for having eavesdropped on their conversation. She had heard enough to know what was going on and why, so she removed her wand from the pipe, and the voices dissipated. Only a few moments later, she heard Draco exchange pleasantries with Professor Snape, and with a promise to return tomorrow, he was about to walk out the door, but stopped just short. She could just make out their final exchange from the hole in the attic floor.

*

"Wait, I forgot to tell you something this morning."

Snape raised his eyebrows, "Oh? And what would that be?"

"I stopped by the pub last night for a drink after work, and that sod, Weasley, was in there crying in his mead."

"And why should I find this interesting?" Snape asked with impatience as his thoughts turned to Miss Granger melting in his stifling attic.

"It seems that Lavender Brown wanted to marry him now that he is a free man, but he refused her."

"So why would that drive him to tears? Could he find no one else to shag?" Snape spat out spitefully.

"Not if Lavender has anything to do with it. He said she threatened him. She said that no man uses her then tosses her aside and gets away with it."

"That sounds ominous," Snape mused. "What do you think she might resort to for revenge?"

"Oh, this is the rich part she's already done it. She marched into the pub while I was there and announced to the room at large that ~~she~~ *he* broke up with *him* because... how did she put it? Oh yeah, 'because Weasley's weenie is too teeny.'" Draco began to giggle. "She said that his weenie was so teeny that he couldn't keep her satisfied." Draco's chortle turned into a guffaw, and Snape smirked in spite of himself. "She said that her favorite phrase during sex with him was, 'Is it in?'" Draco's sides shook in silent laughter as he struggled to breathe. "Needless to say, he stood in defiance and argued that his weenie wasn't teeny," Draco was now laughing so hard that he could barely get the words out, "I thought he might whip it out right then and there, just to prove himself, but the damage had already been done." He paused to wipe a joyful tear from his eye. "Then he turned three shades of red you know how colorful those Weasleys can get when they're angry and stormed out the door." Draco clung to Snape's doorway for support as his sides stitched. "Of course the whole place went into hysterics the instant he left."

Snape could no longer stifle his amusement. Served the bugger right.

"She apparently also announced it at the spa, because when I finally got home, Wilhelmina told me that she had heard it there as well. I imagine every witch in Britain knows by now."

"Indeed," agreed Snape with a snicker. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

"And did you see the *Prophet* this morning?"

"It was in there, too?" Snape felt shock that such lecherous gossip would make the paper, but the *Prophet* had been known to stoop quite low of late.

"No, no, nothing about Weasley and Lavender...Granger and Viktor Krum. Talk about adding insult to injury! Now not only will he have to resort to Muggle females if he wants a good shag, his ex gets to parade around town with the most famous Quidditch player who ever lived. Boy, she rubbed his face in it, didn't she? I'll have to grant her that. I don't know what's worse."

Snape's eyes grew dark as the humor left him. "Weasley deserves it after what he did to her. His behavior was disgraceful."

"That's what he gets for marrying a Muggle-witch in the first place, if you ask me!"

Snape's disgust was aimed squarely at Draco, but he knew that Draco would interpret it as disgust for Miss Granger, so he didn't even attempt to hide it. "As entertaining as this little tale is, Draco, I'm sure you'll agree that I should get back to my brewing."

"Oh, right. Wouldn't want to waste your time and my money. Hop to it, then. I'll come round tomorrow."

Snape nodded. "Good day," he said as he closed the door. He leaned against the solid oak planks, took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. "Finally," he whispered in relief. Then he rushed up the stairs to retrieve Miss Granger. He wondered if he should mention the conversation that he had just had with Draco about her ex-husband. He wondered if she had been able to overhear the conversation. He thought perhaps that, if he said nothing, she would hear the story through the grapevine of her own accord, and he could avoid the subject all together, which would be his first preference anyway. So he decided that if she didn't mention it, he wouldn't either. It was cruel to find amusement in someone else's pain. He had practiced that lifestyle for years as a Death Eater, but his heart was never in it. He felt a touch of shame for finding Weasley's predicament amusing, but he reminded himself that, in this case at least, the punishment fit the crime.

"The coast is clear," he announced as his head popped up through the attic access.

He backed down the ladder and held on to her waist as she descended into the closet below. Her mind was filled with what she had just heard, and she felt dizzy from the heat, so she was not concentrating on the ladder as she made her decent. Her foot slipped off the bottom step, and she would have fallen if Professor Snape had not been grasping her strongly about the waist. When she had regained her footing, she turned, laced her fingers behind his neck, and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear. He quickly brought his hands up to grasp her face. His long slender fingers traced her papery lips then traveled up to brush a lock of hair from her eyes. It stuck to her skin from the salty sweat that should have still been pouring off her forehead. Suddenly her eyes, her throat, her lips felt dry and parched, and she became lightheaded.

"Oh, dear. You're dehydrated. Come quickly!" He pulled her hands from around his neck and led her downstairs to a chair in the kitchen. With a flick of his wand, a glass came from the cabinet to park in front of her on the dinette table. Another flick Summoned the pumpkin juice from the ancient refrigerator. He poured it without ceremony

and handed it to her. "Here, drink!" he commanded.

While she sipped hers, he summoned another glass and served himself. "Relax for a few minutes. You should rest before you try to go anywhere. Have you eaten anything? Winky could make you some lunch, if you'd like."

She wanted to stay. Truth be told, she could stay with him in this little house forever and be perfectly happy. She didn't need the job at Hogwarts or the Ministry. She didn't need anything but his company and the company of her children. But she imagined that with no job for the past twenty years, he could barely afford to feed himself, much less her and her two growing children. And he was right, if she kept his company, any reputable job would be out of her reach. She would be a burden on his already stretched finances. She wouldn't be able to live with herself. Bloody conviction... It always came down to that damnable farce of a bloody conviction. She felt like weeping, but there was not enough moisture left in her body to manage it.

Snape noticed the glazed look in her eyes and decided that she did indeed need some food. "Winky!" The elf appeared instantly from the laundry room in the basement.

"Yes, master Severus?"

"Would you mind taking a break from the laundry and fixing Miss Granger here a sandwich? I would do it, but I really do need to get back to my brewing."

"Of course, master. Winky would be honored to feed miss." She turned to Miss Granger who was still nursing the first glass of pumpkin juice. She noticed immediately that Miss Granger did not look well. She looked up at Snape with great concern in her tennis-ball eyes.

Snape's gaze met Winky's, and after a moment of silent communication, he nodded. "I agree. Pumpkin juice is not enough." He disappeared into his store closet and emerged with a dusty jar full of pale cloudy green liquid. Another glass floated from the cabinet to the kitchen table, and he filled it with the newly acquired concoction. He touched his wand to the glass to cool the beverage inside. Then he handed it to Miss Granger. She didn't seem to be able to focus on his face. This concerned him greatly. Had she really been up in the attic that long? He had tried to get rid of Draco quickly. Perhaps it had not been only the heat at play here.

"Electrolyte potion," he answered before she could ask. "Drink. All of it. NOW!"

This time she didn't hesitate. It tasted delicious, not at all like the potion she remembered from Madam Pomfrey's store closet. And the color was more of a neon jade than the hospital wing's turquoise potion had been. Was this some new recipe that Professor Snape had developed? Surely not the jar he poured it from looked old fashioned, and the dust... It hadn't been disturbed in years. No, this was not "new," but it was very different from anything she had seen or tasted before.

"Perhaps you should go lie down on the couch in the living room until Winky gets your lunch ready." He cupped her chin in his hand and gently turned her face up to his. The color had already begun to return to her cheeks, thank Merlin. "When was the last time you had something to eat?"

"Dinner last night with Viktor," she answered absentmindedly.

"What did you eat and how much?" He noticed that she was still having trouble focusing.

"I don't remember... not much," she replied honestly. All she could remember from last night was Viktor's revelation that Professor Snape was in love with her. The rest was just a blur, insignificant, miniscule.

She guzzled the last of her Electrolyte potion. Then Professor Snape grabbed her arm and gently but firmly led her into the living room. He Summoned a pillow and placed it at one end, then he delicately removed her shoes and helped her to swing her feet up at the other end. Winky followed with a wet washcloth to drape over her forehead, and the convalescent scene was complete. As they both retreated back into the kitchen, Hermione fell into a state of semi-consciousness.

After several minutes passed, she could feel the potion coursing through her veins, bringing her back to coherency. As the room came into sharper focus, her energy level soared, and she sat up. To the best of her recollection, she realized that she had eaten very little for over a week. Her diet had consisted mostly of coffee to keep her awake and alcohol to help her sleep, both diuretics. No wonder she had become dehydrated. So much had happened. Her stress level had been higher than usual, and at times like these she found it difficult to think about food.

Just then, Winky's head appeared in the doorway between the living room and the dining room. "Miss's lunch is ready," she announced with a big toothy grin.

Suddenly, Hermione felt very hungry. She gratefully made her way from the couch to the kitchen table, but noticed with disappointment that there was only a place setting for one. Professor Snape's back was to her as he busied himself with the next potion. "Won't you be joining me, Professor?" she asked.

"No, I had my fill before you showed up at my door. Please don't be offended, but, as you saw earlier, Draco is breathing down my neck on this project. I haven't a moment to spare."

Hermione tucked into the fish and chips in front of her and chased it down with another cool glass of that delightful Electrolyte potion. By the end of the meal, she felt quite back to normal. After thanking Winky, she stepped up to Professor Snape's side and peered over his shoulder to get a glimpse at the project that had so completely taken his attention.

"Don't you need to get back to work?" he asked as he shot a glance her way.

"I'll tell them I fell ill. It's not far from the truth, you know."

"You may put on some music and read on the couch while you get your strength back, if you'd like. But I really don't have time to entertain you right now." His voice was gentle, apologetic.

"I don't expect to be entertained," she replied, "but could I see what you're working on?"

Snape eyed her skeptically. If he didn't acquiesce, she would surely get suspicious. But if he told her what he was working on, she might surmise the truth. He quickly put together a scenario in his mind to explain away the visit to Viktor Krum's office, but decided only to explain that if she asked. If he gave her just the right amount of back-story, she might be fooled. "I am testing the recipes in a new potions text manuscript series. Draco wished me to proceed with the utmost secrecy. If this isn't all he hopes it to be, it could prove quite an embarrassment for him. However, if it is everything that Viktor Krum touts it to be, it could make all involved quite a bit of money. So he asked me to test as many recipes as I could in the next four days."

"Four days? That's not much time."

"He felt that I could get a sense of the book's authenticity by then, and be able to vouch for the expertise of its author."

"Who is the author?"

"No one I've ever heard of. Shamamian Ari Shamamian, I think."

"Sounds foreign."

"Draco said he's from Armenia."

"Does this have anything to do with your business with Viktor last week?"

Of course she would make that connection, you idiot. She is the brightest witch of her age.."Yes. He asked both his former potions professor at Durmstrang and myself to look it over before he approached Draco with the project. I assume that he didn't want to embarrass himself any more than Draco does. I was returning the manuscript to Viktor the day we all had lunch."

"But Draco wasn't satisfied with just a look-over." She didn't seem surprised.

"No, Draco needs concrete proof that the texts are all that they claim to be. He will have much more at stake, after all. I can understand his position."

"May I?" Since he was currently referring to the OWL level manuscript, she reached for the NEWT level manuscript underneath it. She noticed that Winky had already cleared her lunch dishes and wiped the table clean, so she settled at her previous location and began to flip through the pages.

The first thing that she noticed was the fact that the pages had been created on a Muggle computer and printed onto basic white paper with a Muggle ink-jet printer, not hand written on parchment as she would imagine a wizarding manuscript should be. She simply glanced at the recipes at first, but as she racked her brain to recall the recipes from her old school text, she began to recognize the subtle changes that this new author had made to improve each formula. Nothing major, just stirring patterns and ingredient preparation mostly. Occasionally she would notice the addition of a common Muggle herb, something that most wizards would never think to use in a magical potion.

On page thirty-six, she found the Electrolyte potion. The addition of ginger root and essence of citrus must have helped to improve its flavor, and this new recipe called for ground seaweed instead of chopped, which could have easily been responsible for the change in color. But from what she gathered from her eaves-dropping, Professor Snape had only just received the project from Draco this morning. The Electrolyte potion took two weeks to mature. And the jar he had retrieved from his store closet looked as if it had not been touched for years. What was going on here?

On the very next page, the answer came to her. The recipe for Draught of Living Death spread out before her eyes, and the memories of subtle changes from Harry's old text came flooding back to her like watching a Muggle home movie of her childhood. This new recipe called for crushing the sopophorous bean with the flat side of a sliver dagger to release the juice. It also called for adding a clockwise stir for every seven counterclockwise stirs to finish and achieve the almost crystal clear pinkish color.

These were the changes and refinements of the Half-Blood Prince.

She stared in amazement at the back of Professor Snape's head as he worked busily to keep up the charade that she was now privy to. Ever the bushy-headed busy-body, she could not keep her new-found secret to herself.

"Why are you bothering to re-test your own long-proven recipes?"

Snape's heart skipped a beat. How could she have possibly come to that conclusion so quickly? Was she psychic? Her revelation changed everything. As his heart raced, he turned slowly and feigned confusion. "I...I beg your pardon?"

She had a feeling that he would deny it. If he held any hope of actually selling the book to anyone, he would have to keep his identity a secret. Apparently, even Draco didn't know. She wondered how he could keep the truth from Viktor.

"The Electrolyte potion. I distinctly remember the turquoise color and a most dreadful flavor from the one in Madam Pomfrey's store closet back at school. The version you just gave me was delicious, a jade green, and it was much more efficacious than the old version. But yet, your jar was old and dirty..."

"You mean this one?" He had thought about the possibility that she would question his recipe while she was resting, so he had thoroughly cleaned the jar.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "It was dirty a half hour ago."

"You must be mistaken." He really hated himself for lying to her, but he couldn't risk his secret escaping.

"But it takes two weeks to mature, and you've only had the manuscript since this morning," she insisted stubbornly.

"Ah, so quickly you forget..." He smiled. He knew a way out of this. "When Krum gave me the manuscript to look over three weeks ago, I decided to try a few of the potions, just to be thorough. This," he lifted the sparkling clean jar in question, "just happened to be one of them." He smirked at her triumphantly. "Lucky for you, I'd say."

Hermione returned his smile with a scowl as her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "No." She shook her bushy head. "That's not all." She began to list them off. "Felix Felicis, Amortentia, Draught of Living Death, Polyjuice Potion..." She pointed enthusiastically to the plain white pages in front of her. "These recipes all have the mark of the Half-Blood Prince."

Professor Snape's face suddenly went blank. The antique jar and what was left of the Electrolyte potion slipped through his limp fingers and shattered on the hard tile beneath their feet. Hermione met the crashing sound with a gasp as her eyes found his. Only he wasn't looking at her but through her. His vacant expression seemed to convey that he had been transported someplace far away by her accusation. Someplace she could not follow. After she waved her wand to clean up the mess, she had no choice but to sit quietly and await his return. But as she sat there and watched his face transform from a blank canvas to one of stress and fear, she became afraid of what lengths he might go to in order to keep his identity under wraps.

"The Half-Blood Prince," he whispered, his face now stone-like, unreadable. "I have not heard that name in over forty years. How do you know of this?"

Hermione gripped her wand under the table and tried to sound casual, but her voice betrayed a hint of nervousness. "Well, for one thing, it's your screen name."

Snape breathed a huge sigh of relief, but it was short lived. "Certainly you don't think that I had anything to do the writing of..."

"Harry had your old textbook in sixth year," she interrupted him. "Didn't you know? You must have had your suspicions about it after he excelled at Potions and used one of your own spells on Draco in the girls' bathroom."

Professor Snape remained silent, but his face echoed the loathing he had once held for Harry. Hermione tightened her hand around her wand and took a deep breath to continue. "I studied it thoroughly before I discovered that it had belonged to you." Her head dropped in shame as she spoke again, but her eyes never left his face for fear of what he might do. "I was afraid that something bad would happen to Harry because of it. I thought that it was cursed with dark magic."

"And you remember what was written in its margins? After all these years?"

"Yes." Her chin shot up with pride in him. "You were brilliant, even back then."

Snape remained quiet for several moments, trying to decide how to proceed in order to protect his secret. "I appreciate the complement, Miss Granger. But I must ask, do you think Potter would remember? When the book is required reading at the school and his children come home with it, do you think he will also recognize the origin of its contents?"

Her eyes searched his and found suspicion and apprehension there. If his secret were to leak out, he would be ruined. Twenty years of his life would have been wasted. She had to find a way to still his fears so he wouldn't feel the need to Obliviate both of them. "Harry might figure it out, but he would be the only one. And he would never tell. I know he wouldn't. We'll both take the Unbreakable Vow if you want us to."

Snape's gaze found the greenhouse door, and he was lost in thought. He shook his head slowly as he contemplated how to implement damage control.

Hermione misinterpreted his look as a decision to cast the spell on her and deal with Harry later. Out of sheer desperation and self preservation, she silently cast the

Protego Charm.

Snape immediately felt the pulse of power from her charm, and he staggered backward in its wake. "Why did you do that?" he demanded, obviously offended.

"I can't risk Obliviation," she explained. "I won't allow you to take away one single minute that we have spent together. You may not be able to give me your affection, Professor, but at least let me keep my memories of you. They are all I have." Her look was defiant and pleading at the same time. "Your secret is safe with me, I swear it."

When she had first put up the shield charm, it angered him. But if he had been in her position, he probably would have done the same thing. And her only desire was to preserve memories of their time together. Memories he would no doubt cherish for the rest of his life. The fact that she also valued them enough to fight for them warmed his heart. A surprisingly pleasant notion, indeed.

"Miss Granger," he began in a low authoritative tone, "there is nothing to fear. I will not be stealing your memories away. Besides, to rob you of the last few hours would only erase what you have seen today. As soon as you peruse your child's new textbook, you will uncover the truth all over again. I could only erase the possibility of discovery by wiping out everything in your mind from now back to your sixth year in school. And as much as I may have enjoyed doing that to Potter in the distant past, I could never bring myself to put either of you through that now."

Hermione relaxed in her chair and let the Protego Charm fade. "Thank you," she said with watery eyes.

Snape nodded. "Please don't make me regret it." Then his mind suddenly came up with another problem. "Does Potter have the textbook now? My old textbook?"

"No."

A touch of panic gripped his soul. "Where is it? Is his oldest brat using it at Hogwarts?"

"No, no. Professor, don't worry." She stood and crossed the kitchen floor to place a soothing hand on his arm. "It's gone. No one will ever find it." His worried eyes betrayed his skepticism, so Hermione continued. "It was destroyed during the final battle of Hogwarts. Harry had hidden it in the Room of Requirement, and everything in that room was consumed in a Fiendfyre that night."

He heaved a heavy sigh of relief. Nothing combustible in existence could survive a Fiendfyre. Any evidence of the true authorship of these texts lay safely within the confines of his well-warded store closet. His eyes met Miss Granger's again, but this time all they contained were fatigue mixed with relief. "Could you speak with Potter, assure his cooperation? Just to put my mind at ease? I wouldn't want him to start rumors when the new text comes out."

Hermione gently patted his hand. "Of course."

Miss Granger left shortly after her reassurance, but just before she exited his front door, she had glanced back over her shoulder and said, "Oh, by the way, Ron's weenie is *not* teeny."

Snape felt a hint of blush stain his cheeks. "I could have gone the rest of my life without that bit of news, Miss Granger," he had chided her, but he had watched with amusement as she walked away giggling.

He had then gone on with his brewing until well into the wee hours of the morning. He had left several long-term potions simmering, with one in stasis, and he felt a healthy sense of accomplishment when his head finally hit the pillow. His bank account had grown considerably, he had convinced Draco that the project held promise, and he had made his peace with Miss Granger with regard to their relationship. And as a bonus, Snape could now talk openly with her about everything. That was a relief, to be sure.

As he drifted off to sleep, however, the images of that afternoon in the attic invaded his mind. There she sat in front of him, so close, so hot, with a healthy dose of pheromones hanging heavy in the air. He could feel the perspiration dripping down his spine as he watched it trickle down the side of her neck. But as he gazed lovingly into her eyes, the setting changed. Instead of the dark and dusty attic, he could feel bright sunlight on his shoulder and a cool ocean breeze on his face. It was still hot, to be sure, but dust and dirt had been replaced by sand and humidity. He and Hermione lay naked, face to face in a small cotton-rope hammock. The gentle rocking increased with each movement as he shifted his position to get more comfortable. He imagined that this particular hammock was only designed to hold one person at a time.

"I have an idea," Severus suggested in this luscious dream. "Why don't we see what happens when we use the motion of the ocean?" He struggled to free himself from the rope's clutches and finally got to his feet. He bent down to bestow a long, leisurely kiss on her mouth, then he couldn't resist the decent to her breasts by way of her neck and collar bone.

"First the hammock and now the ocean. My, my, you're full of surprises today, aren't you?"

Severus chuckled deeply, his lips tickling her left breast. "Isn't that what a honeymoon is supposed to be for, love? Exploring the possibilities?"

Hermione snorted. "Certainly wasn't Ron's idea of a good honeymoon."

"I'll have no talk of Walnut Brain today!" With that, Severus scooped Hermione up in his arms and began the march to the breakers. It wasn't far, and he was glad because the sand had grown hot in the afternoon sun. He reached the water's edge with a sigh of relief. But he didn't stop there. He carried her into the water, past the breakers, to where the swells rose and fell gently. They undulated from mid chest to his shoulders, and the water in their little private cove had grown warm under the tropical sun.

"This is like bath-water!" she exclaimed, sounding almost disappointed.

"How fortunate. Why do you think I chose this location?"

"I would have thought that you'd prefer it a bit cooler and more refreshing."

"Ah, yes, and under normal circumstances you would be correct. But, you see, if the water had been too cold... well, I'm afraid that my performance would shrivel into non-existence." He laughed an evil little laugh, then he dove his face beneath the water to blow bubbles on her bare belly. She kicked and squealed madly with delight.

When Severus let her legs go so she could stand, Hermione discovered that the water was at times over her head, which she used as an excuse to lock her fingers together behind his neck. He didn't seem to mind, and she noticed with great anticipation that there would be no shriveling here this afternoon.

Severus let his hands wander down to her breasts where he couldn't resist lingering as he watched them bob in the water. Such a sensuous sight. He ventured on to her hips and coaxed her thighs apart and up to be perpendicular to his vertical frame. They slid together easily. The extra buoyancy that the salty Caribbean Sea afforded them made it feel so natural to move with the undulating waves. The movements were slow and graceful but still erratic, which made the whole experience incredibly erotic. They slipped in and out of each other as the water swirled around them. And after they had both reached a delicious climax, they stayed there, locked in a deep and passionate kiss, swaying with the ocean's rhythm, basking in their embrace and the eternal warmth of their love for each other. So peaceful, so perfect. There were no words to adequately describe it.

Snape drifted from that blissful scene into a much deeper, dreamless sleep.

Likely Suspect

Chapter 22 of 35

Hermione's research leads her to believe that she has discovered the blackmailer.

Disclaimer: I take no credit for the characters or their circumstances. I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story. It all belongs to the amazing J. K. Rowling.

Kudos: As always, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for such a fantastic job at keeping me on message, and Writer Merrin here at The Petulant Poetess deserves the credit for catching all of the grammar and spelling mistakes that I make a monumental task, to say the least.

Chapter 22

Likely Suspect

Hermione stretched and yawned as her fuzzy mind began to focus. Without opening her eyes, she felt around on the other side of the bed but was met with disappointment when she only found cold, empty sheets. Rolling over to face the void, she opened her eyes and realized, with a stab of heartfelt pain, that her honeymooning days were only a dream. *But it felt so REAL!* she thought. The deep love for her that was reflected in his beautiful black eyes, his soft, gentle touch, and *Merlin*, the motion of the ocean! She could remember every deliciously exquisite detail. Could sex really be that good? It had never even come close to that with Ron.

Then Hermione's mind drifted beyond the dream to the realities of the previous day's events. She had almost managed to admit that she loved Professor Snape in his attic, but he wouldn't let her say the words. He had all but admitted that he felt the same way about her but would not allow a relationship due to his legal status. And yet, she felt surely that he was about to kiss her in spite of everything when Winky interrupted. Would he have kissed her? Passionately? Or would it have merely been short and sweet? She could only speculate.

But she could do more than speculate as to the true origins of those potions textbooks he was testing. He had written them and used a pseudonym in the hope of getting them published. Since he had lost his original textbook from school, he had needed to start from scratch to re-create the new and improved recipes from his youth. She had no doubt that, since he had taken twenty years, he had tweaked each recipe to perfection, building and improving on the changes she had seen in the Half-Blood Prince's potions book all those years ago. Now it was up to her to make sure that Harry didn't ruin everything for him. She knew that if she spoke to Harry before he saw the new texts, Harry would gladly keep Professor Snape's secret.

Hermione heaved a heavy sigh and rolled out of bed. Her time at the Ministry was drawing to a close, and she had a mountain of research to do if she could even hope to narrow down the suspects in the blackmail case. As she got dressed, a thought occurred to her. Perhaps, with Harry's help to acquire the Minister's permission, she could continue her research one afternoon per week, even after she began her teaching duties at Hogwarts. She would need to work out an accommodating teaching schedule with Headmistress McGonagall, of course. But she felt certain that, once Minerva understood what was at stake, she would surely give her consent.

With this idea in mind, as well as the need to speak to him about the soon-to-be-released potions books, she sent Harry an interoffice memo the instant she made it to her cubical, and then she headed to the Records Office to continue her research. She received his return memo shortly, agreeing to meet her for lunch at the Leaky Cauldron.

When lunchtime arrived, Hermione piled the Immigration Records books from the past twenty years up on the counter, signed the log book, and informed Mrs. Oddfellow that she would return in the afternoon. Then she headed to the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry was waiting for her. He had procured them a table in a quiet corner of the pub and was making short work of a bowl of chips when she slid into the chair beside him. She leaned in to kiss his cheek and whispered into his ear, "We need to talk somewhere with the utmost privacy."

As she pulled away, he knitted his brow. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

She nodded. "It's not about me."

"Snape?"

She neither confirmed nor denied his accusation. "We can't talk here," was her only reply.

"I already ordered. Why don't you get yourself something too, and we can take it with us." Then he smiled conspiratorially and asked, "Your place or mine?"

Hermione snickered. "Isn't Ginny home with Lily?"

Harry nodded.

"Better make it my place, then."

They waited impatiently for their food as she explained her desire to continue her research to uncover potential blackmail suspects. He felt that, under the circumstances, the Ministry would happily give her continued access to the Records Office. He might even be able to keep her on the payroll on some level. Hermione didn't get her hopes up, but she knew that the extra money would come in handy since she was taking a pay-cut to become a Hogwarts professor.

The reduction in pay would not have concerned her had it not been for her desire to keep her parents' house. Most of the Hogwarts staff called the school their permanent home. Since most professors remained on staff for decades, it didn't make much economic sense to keep a separate home. Professor Snape was one of the few in its history that had actually maintained a separate residence during his teaching years. His circumstances had been unique, of course, since he needed to maintain some privacy for his role as a double agent.

"I do have one concern, Harry," she added after they had received their food in "to go" bags and were making their way into the back ally to Disapparate. "I'm almost certain that the blackmailer is a Ministry employee. We must be careful to keep this investigation as low-key as possible so the offender doesn't find out and try to thwart our efforts."

"Right," Harry replied thoughtfully. "I hadn't thought of that. If whoever it is gets wind of what we're doing, they might undermine us somehow. They could even provide false evidence that could lead us to accuse someone who is completely innocent."

"Or discredit us so no one would believe our findings."

"We're going to need to be really sneaky."

Hermione smiled and nodded knowingly. "Just like old times."

Harry grinned and raised his eyebrows. "How about your kitchen?"

"The kitchen it is."

They both Disappeared on the spot and reappeared in Hermione's kitchen. The table beckoned, but they busied themselves retrieving napkins, plates, glasses and pumpkin juice from the usual hiding places before seating themselves to share the meal.

"Okay," Harry insisted, cutting to the chase. "What's wrong with Snape?"

"Nothing's wrong. But he has a favor to ask of you. And I really hope that you'll agree, for both our sakes."

Harry's face had become a big question mark at this point. But his mouth was full, so she continued on uninterrupted.

"If all goes as planned, when our children get their class descriptions and book lists in a couple of weeks, we will be required to purchase a new Potions textbook for each of them."

"Why?" he asked crossly. "I paid good Galleons for the ones they've got. Why in the name of Merlin would they need new ones?"

"When you read through the new ones, you'll understand why. The recipes are cutting edge and all vast improvements over their predecessors."

Harry scoffed. "They couldn't be that much better... could they?"

"I've seen the manuscripts. The author is brilliant," she stated flatly.

"That good, eh?" Harry began to question her judgment, but thought better of it. "Then I guess they'll be worth the money. And who is this brilliant author?"

"The book's cover had the name Ari Shamamian on it."

Harry let go an indignant snort. "Never heard of him."

"Neither have I, but the recipes are amazing, just the same. I think the write-up said that he was from Armenia."

"Never been to Armenia." After a moment came the obvious question that Hermione had been waiting for. "But what does all this have to do with Snape?"

"Can't you guess?" When Harry's face remained blank, she continued. "Your sixth year at Hogwarts, did you follow the book, or did you take the advice that was written in its margins by the Half-Blood Prince?"

"You know the answer to that as well as I do. Of course I took the Prince's advice. He was bloody amazing. His improvements were so simple, but so effective."

"If you looked through this new textbook and saw some of the same improvements, what would you think?"

"Dunno." Harry shrugged. "Maybe that gifted potioners think alike?"

"What if the recipe changes were *exactly* the same? The style, the flair, the finesse of this Ari Shamamian was a carbon copy of the changes you remember from your sixth-year textbook?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. Hermione could almost see the wheels turning in his mind. A smirk that Professor Snape would have been proud of slowly danced across his face. "Snape wrote it under a pseudonym because he's a convicted felon."

Hermione beamed at him.

"And he was afraid that I would recognize his style just as you did when you saw the manuscript."

She nodded slowly, still beaming. Then she reached across the table and covered his hand with hers. "Tell no one. Not your kids, not Ron. Not even Ginny... Please. If word ever leaks out..." She shuddered briefly at the thought. "He has been working on this project, tweaking and perfecting every recipe, even inventing some new ones, for almost twenty years. If the public finds out that he wrote it, they'll reject it, no matter how good it is."

"And what fools they would be," he said as he remembered how much better his potions had turned out his sixth year when he had followed the Prince's advice. "Tell him not to worry. I won't tell a soul."

"Thanks, Harry. It will mean a great deal to him."

They continued to eat in companionable silence for a while when Harry suddenly had another question. "Hey, did you and Snape ever straighten out that misunderstanding? What was it about...flowers or something?"

Hermione's mind briefly flashed back to the scene in the attic, and she felt herself blush profusely. Her eyes dropped to her food as Harry's eyebrows shot up.

"Is that a 'yes' then?" he joked. "Please tell me you two finally have something going on."

She rolled her eyes as she felt her shade deepen. "No. It's not like that. We're just friends." But she couldn't hide her disappointment.

"Talk to me," he insisted.

She took in a deep, steadying breath and let it out slowly. "I think he feels the same way about me that I feel about him, but he won't let anything happen between us because of his criminal record. He doesn't want to ruin my career at Hogwarts before it even starts."

This time his hand covered hers with a warm and friendly pat. "I'm so sorry, Hermione. If there's anything I can do..."

"I wish I knew who on the Wizengamot gave the one dissenting vote to not allow Dumbledore's portrait to testify in his trial. I just know he would have been exonerated. If they would just listen to reason."

"If we could only have Confunded them just for a minute while the vote was taken."

"Who on that court had it out for Professor Snape?"

"No one that I know of, although several of them have a real mean streak."

"Meanness is one thing. But who would be horrid enough to send an innocent man to Azkaban?"

"It would have to be someone really, really spiteful."

"Evil to the core."

They both barked out the same conclusion at the same time. "Umbridge."

"Toad!"

"Don't you mean *pink* toad with a *bow* in her hair?"

The two almost choked from laughter. "Nothing will ever change *her* mind about anything!" said Harry.

"Oh, I don't know," Hermione contemplated out loud. "What if we made her write, 'I will not send innocent people to jail' about a thousand times with one of those special quills of hers?"

"I doubt even *that* would change her mind. She has hated Snape ever since he wouldn't give her more Veritaserum to use on me that night she caught us in her office. She was pushing for a murder charge, but too many of her peers were against the idea."

Hermione's shoulders sagged in defeat. "Isn't there any way to bypass her and call for another vote?"

"No," Harry explained. "As long as she doesn't have a conflict of interest, she would have to die or voluntarily step down, or be forcibly removed for a vote to take place without her. I'm afraid that Snape is stuck with that conviction as long as she's a member of the Wizengamot."

Suddenly, another thought came to Hermione. She had been circling around this conclusion during her hours in the Records Office for days but couldn't quite see it. Now it jumped out at her like a jack-in-the-box. "You know, Harry, in all of my research, her name keeps popping up more than anyone else's. During the war she was head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission. It was her job to check up on everyone's background to make sure that they had the blood-lines that they claimed to have. Of course, the Muggle-born Registration Commission was dissolved just after Voldemort was defeated. But since then, she has gone from Foreign Relations Under-Secretary to Secretary, and then she was finally promoted to Secretary General a few years ago. That position would give her enough clout and connections throughout the wizarding world to double-check anyone's background."

Harry's eyes lit up with anticipation. "So you think Umbridge is the blackmailer?"

"At this point in time, the evidence seems to be pointing to her."

"But can you prove it?"

"Not at the moment. But if she travels on business for the Ministry, she has to file a report to get reimbursed for her expenses. That would require lists and receipts detailing where she went, where she stayed, the nature of her visit, perhaps even the names of the people that she talked with while she was there. If I can prove that she was checking up on people, that would be a start."

"Yeah, but there's no law against checking into someone's background. That would only be circumstantial evidence, and not enough to convict her."

"Did Quintsky say that the blackmailer's fee would rise as he made more money?"

"I believe he did mention that."

Hermione became more animated as she realized that they were close to a breakthrough. "What if I could prove that she was checking up on those people who were being blackmailed to see how much money they made? Would that be enough?"

"I don't know, but it would help us know for sure if we were headed in the right direction. But how can you prove that?"

She giggled at the fact that the most irritating aspect of dealing with the Records Office might actually help to put Umbridge away. "When you want to look at any book from the Records Office, you must *sign it out*. They keep a record of who checked out which record book and when. And you can't leave the room with the book. Umbridge could have gone in there every month and checked the sales tax payment records to see if the shopkeeper's income had increased. That way she would know when he could afford to pay her more. And we would have the sign-out log and the Records Office attendant's eyewitness report to prove that she did the research."

"Hermione, that's great," he said with reservations, "but I still don't think it's enough to convict her. We need iron-clad proof."

A determined line formed on her lips as she knitted her brows together. "What if I could tie every blackmail victim's arrival with a trip by her to their homeland, then regular visits to check on the tax rolls that coincide with the blackmailer's rates increasing? What if we could get deposit records from Gringotts that matched the amounts that she was getting paid?"

"All of those things put together *might* be enough, but there is one snag. She's on the Wizengamot, and it takes a unanimous vote by them to subpoena bank records from Gringotts. Although I'm sure she would not be included in the vote for conflict of interest reasons, who knows what sort of influence she might be wielding on the other members?"

Hermione sighed dejectedly. Umbridge was so highly regarded and so deeply entrenched in wizarding society that she would be almost impossible to bring down. They would have to catch her completely by surprise. They would need to dig deep into her past, and they would require utmost secrecy as they did so, or she would retaliate to such an extent that their lives would most likely be left in ruins.

"We may have a rough road ahead," she stated with a mischievous grin on her face.

He wagged his eyebrows at her and smiled. "That never stopped us before."

Later that night, Hermione IMed Professor Snape to relay Harry's promise of secrecy, which he was relieved to receive. But other than that, she heard nothing else from him for the remainder of the week. She assumed that Draco had continued to check up on his progress and that he had to at least appear to be brewing like mad every time he happened to drop by.

Snape had indeed been grateful for the news that Potter had agreed to keep his secret. Perhaps tolerating the boy was worth the trouble after all. In retrospect, he really wasn't nearly as infuriating as an adult as he had been as an adolescent.

Now he needed to placate Draco and get the texts into publication so his fortune could be earned sooner rather than later. He knew without a doubt that he had amassed enough proof that the new texts were indeed a breakthrough so that Draco would go to extremes in promoting them. He would never acquire the kind of money the Malfoys had, but he figured that by Christmas he would be rich beyond his own modest dreams of avarice.

And so he found himself with a folder full of carefully hand-written notes (he couldn't let on that he owned a computer) and a box full of phials, both archaic and modern, in Draco's waiting room on Monday morning. He was not kept waiting this time. In fact, Draco had been impatiently pacing his office in anticipation of his arrival and burst through the door as soon as Snape announced himself to the receptionist.

"Get us some coffee, Melinda. Severus, if I recall, you prefer yours black and strong. Come, come. Put this stuff down here and sit. Make yourself comfortable. Look!"

Draco handed Snape the prototype texts already bound in forest green leather with a moving photo that featured a scale, a silver knife on a teak chopping block, and a bubbling cauldron, all resting on a black marble-topped work-table. The Gothic letters embossed in silver across the top read, "The Art of Potion Making, Book One." Across the bottom, also embossed but in black letters, read the words, "By Ari Shamamian."

"Couldn't resist throwing a little Slytherin pride into the color scheme. The author didn't specify a design for the cover, so I felt free to use my discretion. What do you think?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Classy. Have you already started production?"

"No, no. I was waiting for you. What's the final verdict?" He sat perched on the edge of his desk, his eyebrows raised so high on his head that they almost disappeared into his hair-line.

Snape gazed with pride at the books in his hand. He caressed the leather bindings and carefully opened the one on top to the title page. But to see someone else's name there instead of his own brought him just a twinge of pain. He clenched his teeth and swallowed hard. No one would ever know of his brilliance, his hard work, his sacrifices. Just as with everything else he had ever done, he would remain anonymous, fading silently into the background.

Just then, Melinda came in with their coffee. Snape nodded his silent gratitude, but Draco ignored her, and she left as quietly as she had come in.

"Well?" Draco became impatient with his apparent lack of enthusiasm. "What. Do. You. Think?"

Snape took a sip of his coffee and sighed wistfully. He so enjoyed stringing Draco along. After a pregnant pause, he finally eased Draco's apprehension. "I wish I had had these when I was in school. Hell, I wish I had been able to teach with these. These recipes are far and away an improvement over the old texts."

"Yes, yes, that's what Slughorn said as well. And that professor from Durmstrang, what's his name..."

"Moskovich?"

"Right. Moskovich, raved about it also. This is marvelous... great news. I'll make a fortune on these books."

Snape had seen that look in Draco's eyes before. Greed, pure and simple. As if he didn't already have an obscene pile of gold in his Gringotts vault. But, in this case, Draco's greed spelled wealth for him as well. "You should try to procure world-wide publishing rights to these. Every house-hold should buy a copy. You should promote it that way. If you need proof, I brought along quite an assortment of..."

Draco sprang up from his desk and snatched the books from Snape's hands in one fluid motion. "I knew you'd come to that conclusion," he interrupted. His exuberance was infectious. "Marabell!" he shouted to the room at large.

Instantly, a tiny elf popped into the space beside Draco's desk. She bowed low and announced, "Marabell at your service, Master Draco."

As she straightened herself up, Draco shoved the two large tomes in her face. "Here, take these to production at once. I need twenty thousand copies ready to be delivered by the end of the week." With another pop, she was gone, and he turned back to Snape. "If they are well received at Hogwarts, we'll produce enough for all of the English speaking countries, and then I'll get them translated."

"They should be well received," Snape reassured him. "They are likely to revolutionize the Potions business."

"I imagine that even St. Mungo's will want several copies."

"Don't forget every wizarding Apothecary shop in Britain."

"If I approach the marketing aspect correctly, even people who don't have school-age kids will want a copy." Draco could hardly contain his enthusiasm. He clapped his hands together and rubbed in an almost sinister fashion, like a picture of the Muggle, Scrooge. Then he regarded Snape with a touch of pity. "I don't mean to give you the bum's rush, but, thanks to you, I've got loads of work to do. So..." Draco extended his hand, but Snape didn't reciprocate.

He raised an eyebrow at Draco's rudeness. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Draco's face went blank for just a split second, but then he smirked. "Right, right. The other half of your fee. Sorry. Honest mistake."

Snape only snorted as he gathered his notes and laid them carefully on top of his box of little glass phials.

Draco whipped out his checkbook and sprawled out the script that would allow Snape to make another sizeable deposit into his meager Gringotts account.

"That's more like it," he commented as he took Draco's check. This time, he gladly extended his hand to shake.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Severus."

Snape smiled. "Likewise. I trust you'll keep me in mind if Mr. Shamamian writes any more books?"

"You can count on it. And I'll send you a couple of copies once I have plenty to spare."

As the week progressed, Hermione and Professor Snape corresponded at night via email. They continued to skirt the issue of seeing each other face to face. But Hermione so desperately wanted to see him, to touch him, to feel his arms around her, even if the results were only a friendly hug. His mere presence in the same room brought her such joy that an actual romance would most likely give her heart failure. A friendship would be better... for both of them. Or so she kept telling herself.

Thursday night, their usual IM banter was in full swing when Hermione had an idea.

MuggleBornWitch: Now that you have a bit more time to spare, perhaps I can interest you in dinner at my place this Sunday evening.

Snape grunted as he read her message. He had almost kissed her that day in the attic. His heart ached just thinking about it. He couldn't put himself in such a predicament again.

HalfBloodPrince: After the incident in my attic, I'm not sure that dinner alone with you is such a good idea.

MuggleBornWitch: We won't be alone. My children will be here. Hugo keeps talking about you. He would love to see you again. And he is running low on his potion. Wouldn't you like to deliver it in person?

Snape sat in his chair and stared at the screen. If her kids were there to watch their every move, wouldn't that be enough to keep them from temptation? Or would he feel as if he was being tortured all evening because of her very presence in the room? He had promised to be her friend. If he was going to keep that promise, he would have to get used to being near her and keeping his libido in check at the same time.

HalfBloodPrince: As long as your children will be there, I guess no harm should come of it.

MuggleBornWitch: Is that a yes then?

HalfBloodPrince: When do you want me there?

MuggleBornWitch: How about 5:00? We can have dinner early and spend time with each other and the children. Besides, there is an important matter that I wish to discuss with you.

HalfBloodPrince: Oh really? And what might that be?

MuggleBornWitch: You'll find out when you come on Sunday.

Snape chuckled at her reply. For a Gryffindor, she certainly could display her share of manipulative Slytherin traits.

The Dark Mark

Chapter 23 of 35

Snape shows up at Hermione's house for dinner, but things do not go smoothly.

Disclaimer: I take no credit for the characters or their circumstances. I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story. It all belongs to the amazing J. K. Rowling.

Kudos: As always, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for such a fantastic job at keeping me on message, and Writer Merrin here at The Petulant Poetess for catching all of the grammar and spelling mistakes. You are all wonderful ladies. I couldn't have done it without you.

WARNING: Angst Alert!

Chapter 23

The Dark Mark

On Sunday afternoon, promptly at 5:00 p.m., an invisible Professor Snape rapped on Hermione's front door with a bottle of Ogden's tucked under his arm and a bottle of Hugo's potion in his hand. By now, she was used to opening the door to what appeared to be an empty front porch. As she stepped aside, her spine tingled when she felt him billow past her. With the door closed, he slowly came into view.

"Good afternoon, Professor. So good to see you again," Hermione said as a slight blush rose in her cheeks.

"Thank you for inviting me," he acknowledged with a proper nod.

As she removed his traveling cloak, her eyes widened in delight. She assumed that the summer heat had been the culprit, but she was indeed the benefactor. Instead of his usual frock coat with its high collar and endless buttons, the cloak had concealed only a heavily starched white linen shirt with the top two buttons left undone atop the usual black trousers. She had never seen him so casually dressed, at least not in real life. The sight took her breath away. She felt herself blush even deeper as he handed her the bottle of Ogden's and Hugo's potion. She attempted to focus on the two glass containers as she concentrated on regaining her wits and slowing her heart rate.

Snape watched her as she stared at the bottles in her hands and wondered if he had made a mistake in his choice of beverage. "If Ogden's is not to your liking, perhaps I can Apparate quickly and acquire something else."

Just then, Hugo came rushing to the door. "Professor Snape!" he yelled as he flung his arms around Snape's waist.

After the initial shock that always followed when Hugo showed him such affection, Snape responded in kind by picking the boy up off the ground slightly. He felt such a connection with this boy, almost as if he was giving himself a second chance at a happy childhood. "My, my, how you have grown! I won't be able to do this much longer." He set the boy down gently. "You'll be picking me up before we know it!"

Hugo laughed heartily as Snape smiled down at him. "Come, you must see our new computer!" He began to drag Snape by the hand towards the family room, but Snape resisted.

"You go on. I'll be right there." He turned to Miss Granger, who now met his gaze, but she somehow looked stressed. Her skin had begun to glow from perspiration, and her face looked several shades pinker than usual. And, of course, underneath it all wafted that delightful combination of her skin, salt, and Secret Recipe. He felt his pulse quicken. "Are you alright?" he inquired with genuine concern.

She swallowed hard and took a slow and deliberate breath to calm her nerves.

"Would you prefer mead? Elf-made wine, perhaps? It's not too late. I can be back in a flash."

"No!" Hermione finally came to her senses. *Oh Merlin, why does he have to look so sexy? He must think I've gone mental!* Ogden's is fine. I like it. Please, don't go." With those last words, she reached out and tenderly touched his arm, her eyes pleading. He had only just arrived. She couldn't bear the thought of him leaving already, even for a few minutes.

Snape could see the look of longing in her eyes. Would he regret his decision to come here this afternoon? He had been strong enough to resist his basic instincts so far. He knew that if he could get through tonight, spending time together would eventually get easier for both of them. He returned her gaze with a look of reassurance and touched her hand. "Ogden's it is, then." He slid her hand farther up his arm to the crook of his elbow, and they walked together into the family room where Rose and Hugo were watching a funny video on YouTube. As the kids showed off their newest addition to the house, Snape couldn't help but marvel at the computer's speed and graphics capability. "Impressive. That thing makes me hungry for an upgrade."

"Some of my friends at school get a new one every couple of years," commented Hugo.

"I have found that sometimes you have no choice," Snape added. "The technology advances so fast every year that the new software won't work on the older machines."

Snape looked on as the two kids laughed and made snide comments about the video that danced across the screen, an odd assortment of Lego toys in a clay-mation style animation that parodied the Star Wars movies. But since Snape had never seen the movies, the humor was lost on him. He glanced over his shoulder at Miss Granger. "Do

you, by chance, require assistance in the kitchen?" This time Snape's eyes held a pleading look, but not for the same reason.

Hermione smiled and cocked her head toward the doorway. "Come on."

Snape silently mouthed the words, "My hero," to her as she smirked and lead the way to the far end of her kitchen.

"I believe that my idea of internet entertainment differs a bit from that of your children."

"Oh? Let me guess," Hermione gave him a glare of mock incredulity. "Yours is more along the lines of whips, chains and a voluptuous blond scantily clad in a leather teddy?"

"I beg your pardon!?" Professor Snape scowled at her, but the deep crimson that colored his cheeks let Hermione know she wasn't far off the mark.

Merlin! Now she thinks I'm a lecherous old pervert! "I would never contemplate such a thing," he lied. "The horrid exploitation of beautiful young Muggle women... It's despicable!" Although Snape didn't make a habit of watching internet porn, he had, on occasion, viewed a random video or two, just out of curiosity.

"It's alright, Professor," she teased him. "After twenty years alone, you're entitled to watch whatever or whomever you like. You're an adult. It's none of my business really."

"How about a glass of that Ogden's?" he asked in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

She turned away from him to retrieve a couple of glasses and conceal her amusement at his obvious discomfort.

"You mentioned something the other day in our correspondence, something important that you wanted to tell me about," Snape continued to redirect the conversation.

"Oh, yes." Hermione had almost forgotten the pretense behind her dinner invitation. "Harry and I are working on a case, and I was hoping that you could give me some insight, perhaps a more objective viewpoint. I think I know who the guilty party is, but I don't want to waste a lot of time if I am mistaken. And I know that my dislike for this person might be coloring my judgment."

This time it was Snape's turn to tease. "Hermione Granger being judgmental? Jumping to the wrong conclusion?" He sneered at her. "What's the world coming to?"

"Oh, I think I'm a pretty fair-minded person," she haughtily came to her own defense. "Harry and Ron were always ready to condemn you, but I continually tried to steer them in a more positive direction. Although," she added thoughtfully, "after you made that rather cruel comment about my teeth, I stopped defending you for a time."

Although he remembered the incident perfectly, Snape gave her a puzzled look. Over his many years as a spy, he had learned to lie his way out of just about anything. "What cruel comment about your teeth?"

Hermione scowled at him. "Don't play dumb with me, Professor. You know full well what I'm referring to."

"Honestly," he shook his head in mock bewilderment, "I don't recall ever making a disparaging remark about your teeth. First of all, with a nose like mine, I would have no room to tease anyone about facial anatomy. And second, your teeth look perfect to me, so I can't imagine what there would have been to insult."

Hermione wondered for just a moment if she should drop it, but never one to shrink from confrontation, she forged ahead, determined to remind him of the unforgivable incident during her fourth year.

"Harry and Draco had been going on about the usual crap one day while standing in line for your class, and they both hexed each other at the same time. Well, the hexes met in mid air, then ricocheted off each other. One hit Goyle, the other hit me. My two front teeth had, up until then, always been a bit large. The Densauggeo hex that hit my face made them grow even larger. When you assessed the damage, your comment was – and I quote," she lowered her tone in an attempt to imitate Professor Snape's silky deep voice, "I see no difference."

Hermione dropped her gaze to the floor as those raw, painful memories came flooding back to her. She could feel the tension in the room growing. She knew then that dredging up this particular piece of their shared past had been a mistake. She paused for a moment, chewing on her lower lip, at a loss as to how to proceed.

"And then you ran up the stairs in tears." Snape broke the silence with a voice that was barely above a whisper. He took a deep breath as he stared into his glass of Ogden's. He had had his speech all planned out, but he couldn't bring himself to go through with it. She deserved the truth, and so much more. "I could claim that I meant no harm, that I made the comment as a comparison of what Goyle had suffered at the hand of Potter to what you had suffered at the hand of Draco... But that would be a lie."

He knitted his brow as their eyes met. Even after all of these years, they both remembered that incident with crystal clarity. But until now, he had never truly realized the impact it had had on her. "Those words were said with malice, as were so many other words I spat at you during your time at Hogwarts." He noticed tears begin to stream down her cheek. "Back then, as well as now, it seems that all I'm good for is causing you pain."

Hermione could see where this was leading. Her stubbornness had backfired in her face yet again. She could feel his defensive walls going up. "No!" she shook her head adamantly. "No, this is my fault. I shouldn't have brought it up. It was over twenty years ago. I would never hold it against you now."

Snape began to shake his head. "I don't deserve your forgiveness. And I certainly don't deserve your friendship, Miss Granger. Perhaps I should go." He set his glass down on the kitchen table and then turned on his heel and began to exit the kitchen, but she lunged forward and grabbed his left arm right where the Dark Mark lay hidden under his shirt sleeve. His skin was still sensitive there, and he stopped in his tracks.

"If you're truly sorry and you really want to make up for the pain you've caused me..." She swallowed hard before continuing. "... then you'll stay." Their eyes met again, and hers drilled deeply into his. She wanted him to use Legilimency on her so he could know without a doubt that she meant what she said.

But he didn't require the spell to see the sincerity in her eyes, so he relaxed a bit and turned back toward her. "You are truly a glutton for punishment."

With those words, Hermione threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. She buried her face in his chest and breathed deeply of his skin mixed with the smell of fresh linen, starch, and some heavenly cologne that she had never encountered before.

Resistance is futile, he thought as his heart melted, and his arms engulfed her as well. But his restraint held when she gazed up at him with parted lips and lust-laced eyes. It took all of his will power to calm his heart and his manhood as he felt her hand drift down to grab his bum. He took her arms gently but firmly and held her several inches away. Then he said in his sternest Head of House voice, "Miss Granger, if we are to be friends, I think there are a few rules we should discuss, a few lines we cannot allow ourselves to cross."

Hermione glanced down in embarrassment. "And I just crossed one, didn't I?"

"Don't you think it best that grabbing, groping, and copping a feel, as it were, should all be off limits?"

"You're no fun at all," she announced with great disappointment.

"We're supposed to be *just friends*, remember?"

Hermione glared at him in stone cold silence.

"Do you grab Potter's bum?"

"No."

"Does he fondle your breasts?"

"Of course not!" she exclaimed indignantly. "But we do hug..." She glanced up at Professor Snape through fluttering lashes, "...and kiss."

Snape sneered at her. "On the cheek, no doubt."

"Oh, alright," she conceded with a huff. "Hard arse!"

"Perhaps name calling should be off limits as well," he suggested with a raised eyebrow.

"Sorry," she muttered. He finally let go of her arms, and she wrapped them around him again, but this time they stayed in an honorable place around his waist.

After kissing her on top of the head, he redirected the conversation back to the case that she and Harry were working on, and she started to explain in detail. Without mentioning any names, she told him what she and Harry had discovered, how many blackmail victims they had located, how many they had interviewed, and the emerging modus operandi of the perpetrator. She told him of her research in the Records Office at the Ministry and offered to let him review her notes. He vowed to take them home and get them back to her as soon as possible.

Then their conversation turned to her upcoming teaching position at Hogwarts and the new adventures it was bound to afford her. As they put the finishing touches on dinner and began to transport everything to the dining room, he gave her some insight on the fun side of being on the staff.

"I always enjoyed roaming the halls at night in search of miscreants. Nothing brought me more pleasure than breaking up a couple snogging each other senseless in a dark alcove. It seemed all the more mortifying when they realized that I was the one who had caught them." Professor Snape began to chuckle. "I can remember once, catching one of the Weasley brothers with a girl in an empty classroom near Gryffindor tower." His eyes began to sparkle as he recalled the incident. "His pants were around his knees, and he was trying to slip a Muggle birth-control device on his willy, I think it's called a condom. She was sprawled across the teacher's desk, legs dangling, knickers hanging by a toenail..." He had to stop to catch his breath in between his giggles. "I could have just interrupted them, given them both detention and subtracted house points and the like, but I had never caught anyone that far along before. I had to teach them a real lesson. So I Disillusioned myself, then I went back out into the hall and Enervated a suite of armor to march in there, proclaim his ownership of the girl, and threaten to cut off Weasley's willy with the sword he was wielding." Professor Snape then began to laugh outright. "You should have seen the looks on their faces as they scrambled to get out of their predicament – priceless!"

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. Professor Snape had actually enjoyed hall monitor duty? He had always given her the impression that he had hated it. She found herself joining in his mirth as his words conjured the picture in her mind. "Which Weasley brother?" she asked when she regained her composure. "It wasn't Percy, was it?"

"Oh, Merlin, no! Head Boy Percy was so uptight I don't think he even kissed a girl until the end of his seventh year. No, it was either Fred or George. I could never tell them apart."

At this point, the table was set and dinner was ready, so Hermione called the children in. Professor Snape delighted Hermione by pushing her chair in for her. He then instructed Hugo to do the same for his sister.

"Why would I want to do that?" asked the boy innocently.

"Because that's what a gentleman does for a lady," Professor Snape stated flatly. "Just as he opens the door for her and removes his cloak hood or hat when he comes inside." Hugo gaped at him as if he were from another planet. "Didn't your father ever teach you how to act like a gentleman?"

Hermione bit back the snide remark against Ron that she had on the tip of her tongue. She decided months ago that she wouldn't disrespect Ron in front of their children. But Professor Snape took care of that for her.

"I suppose it would be difficult to teach something that one has never properly learned to begin with."

His comment was cryptic enough that it sailed over Hugo's head. Hermione tried to stifle a smirk by pretending to wipe her mouth with her hand, but Rose saw right through both of them. She knew that her father wasn't the most refined wizard in Britain, but she was still proud of his life and his achievements. She didn't like this tall, dark, long-nosed git showing him disrespect. "My father is a great man," she stated quietly, "and I would appreciate it if you would refrain from making any more insulting remarks about him in the future."

"Rose!" Hermione admonished, mortified by her daughter's rude comment.

"It's alright, Miss Granger. Rose is correct, of course. My comment was out of line. I apologize. It won't happen again." Snape nodded at Rose in acknowledgment of the girl's strength of will and family pride. He pondered inwardly at the fact that he had felt only disdain for his own father and had been rather ashamed of his mother for not standing up to his abusive Muggle father when he was Rose's age. For a fleeting moment, his heart knew just a touch of envy for Ron Weasley. A *very* fleeting moment.

In an attempt to smooth things over, Snape groped to change the subject. "Your mother tells me that you were in the top of all of your classes this past year. Tell me, do you have a favorite subject yet?"

"Arithmancy, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts," Rose announced proudly.

Snape smiled at her. "Following in your mother and father's footsteps, I see." He paused for a moment as he helped himself to the mashed potatoes. "My expertise is Potions and, of course, Defense Against the Dark Arts. So if you ever need help in either one—"

"I can ask *my father* for Defense Against the Dark Arts advice," she retorted. "He's an Auror, or didn't you know that?"

"Rose!" This time Hermione would not be placated by Professor Snape. "You apologize for your rude behavior this instant!"

"Miss Granger, please. It's alright. She doesn't know my life's story. I wouldn't expect her to trust me in such matters without knowing me first." He then turned to Rose and, with a look that would make any student shrivel, he added, "You are just... like... your... mother."

Rose's eyes became wider, and she sank deeper into her chair with each word. But she recovered quickly, having never been exposed to Professor Snape's wrath. "Mum and Grandma told us that you were in the war. They told us you were powerful. That doesn't make you any better at Defense Against the Dark Arts than my dad," she stated defiantly.

Before Hermione could admonish the headstrong girl or apologize to Professor Snape, he had stood up, leaned across the table and began to unbutton his left shirt cuff.

"Professor, this is neither the time nor the place—"

But Snape had reached the limits of his good graces. It may have been over twenty years since he had last faced a classroom full of students, but he knew an insolent child when he saw one, and he was determined to put her in her place once and for all. "If I am to be a part of your life, Miss Granger, she must learn the truth sooner or later. Now is as good a time as any. I will *not* be insulted by a red-headed, twelve-year-old *know-it-all*, not after all that I have seen and done in my miserable life." With that, he pulled his sleeve up and thrust his left forearm in Rose's face. "I assume that you know what this is?" he asked curtly.

She gasped and recoiled as did Hugo. Although it no longer moved and the stark black lines had faded to a pale gray, the formidable Dark Mark still stood out plainly against his lily-white skin. When they both looked up into his fierce face, Hugo's eyes reflected awe and respect, but Rose felt only fear. She hadn't learned about his part in the war in class yet, but she did know what the Dark Mark meant. He had been a Death Eater. He had known and done horrible things. Her friend Scorpius had confided in her that his father and grandfather had been Death Eaters. He had told her that, although his father had never done anything too horrible, his grandfather had spent time in Azkaban for his associations and actions on behalf of Lord Voldemort. The stories Scorpius had relayed had given her nightmares on more than one occasion. The man that stood before her was very dangerous indeed, and that knowledge drained the blood from her face.

"Professor," Hermione implored him through gritted teeth, "she's only a child."

Snape didn't take his eyes off Rose's face as he growled, "And did you get the sugar-coated version of life in the magical world during your childhood years at Hogwarts, Miss Granger?"

"You, of all people, know the answer to that question."

"I wonder... Have your children heard the stories?"

"No," she replied with quiet indignation.

"Then perhaps it is time you enlighten them," he suggested, still sneering at Rose as he watched her wilt into her chair. Snape's eyes drilled into hers, and when he spoke, his voice was hushed, his tone caressing each word. "I know more about the Dark Arts and how to defend against them than your father ever will."

"Yes, sir," Rose responded meekly. Then she stole a glance at her mother, who had been holding her breath. Snape sat back down and restored his shirt sleeve to its former condition but continued to glare at her, which made her very nervous. "Sorry," she offered.

Her apology seemed to placate Professor Snape, and Hermione let out a huge sigh. But the entire scene had cast a blanket of tension over the room. With the exception of Professor Snape, who seemed to be gorging himself, everyone picked at their food, and everyone including the Professor ate in silence. Finally, Rose could endure the charade no longer and asked to be excused.

"Don't you want dessert?" her mother asked. But she had already left the room.

Snape snorted. "It's my fault. You see, I told you that you should have let me leave. You're better off without me."

"No we're not!" exclaimed Hugo. "Please don't leave us just because of Rose. She was rude and out of line."

Snape's lip curled at the boy coming to his defense. At least he had one of Miss Granger's children in his corner. "She was only defending your father's honor, a very brave and noble thing to do. Gryffindor to the core, just like her mother." He glanced apologetically at Miss Granger who had stood to begin the process of clearing the table. Her son and guest joined her in that activity as Hugo continued the conversation.

"My Grandma has been telling me stories about you and everything you did for Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix. Rose didn't hear those stories yet. Don't worry. She'll come around." Hugo's statement helped begin to dissolve Snape's mental anguish over the incident, and he noticeably relaxed, which encouraged Hugo to continue as he transported an armload of dishes into the kitchen. "Maybe, if you spend more time with us and she gets to know you better, she'll even begin to like you. You should come round more often. Grandma likes you. Maybe you could come visit us there at lunch time on weekdays."

"I'm afraid that I keep pretty busy during the week," he replied in an attempt to get Molly off the hook. Snape's heart began to melt as the boy showed an obvious desire for his companionship. No other child, not even Draco in his youth, had ever shown such an interest in spending time with "the Bat of the Dungeons."

"I'll ask Molly to tell the same stories to Rose as she has to Hugo," Hermione said. "Then perhaps by next weekend she will be more relaxed around you. I was hoping that Sunday afternoons with you and the children here could become a tradition. If we can smooth out things with you and Rose, it could be fun for all of us."

"Professor Snape here every Sunday afternoon? That would be wonderful," admitted Hugo, and he rushed over to give the Professor another big hug. "Please say yes, please, please, please!"

Snape couldn't help but laugh lightly as he returned Hugo's hug. Then an idea struck him. "Hugo, I know that you don't start your formal magical education until next year, but I see no reason why you can't learn a few basics about brewing potions, that is, if you are interested and your mother approves."

"May I, Mum?" Hugo asked anxiously as he followed his mother back out to the dining room with the dessert plates.

"I don't see why not."

"Perhaps I can teach you how to brew the potion that I supply you with. If you find that interesting, we can continue your training."

"WOW! That would be GREAT!"

They worked out the logistics of setting up a place in her kitchen to brew, acquiring some of the more unusual ingredients, and Hermione vowed to dig out her old cauldron and scales for Hugo to practice with. She seemed to recall that they were up in her parents' attic somewhere, but if she couldn't locate them, the cost of a basic potions starter kit was marginal, and Hugo would need one for school eventually anyway.

Dessert had been ingested, and Snape finally stood by the door with Miss Granger's blackmail case file in one hand and his wand in the other. He gave Hugo a sincere hug and kissed the top of his head, then he turned to Miss Granger.

"Go on up and get ready for bed, now," she told her son warmly. "I'll be up in a minute to kiss you goodnight."

"Goodnight, Professor Snape," Hugo said as he smiled and waved and started up the staircase.

"Goodnight, Hugo. Pleasant dreams," Snape replied.

Then he turned his eyes to Miss Granger. She was giving him one of her smoldering looks and closed the gap between them in an instant. He transferred her case file to his wand hand and then reached up to caress her face. "You're not making this any easier, you know." He swallowed back the emotions that were about to bubble to the surface as he felt his pulse quicken.

"Sorry," she whispered. Then she stood on her tiptoes and put her hand around his neck, pulling his face down to meet her lips, but he turned at the last moment and presented his cheek for her to kiss. "No fun at all," she muttered.

"Prudence and caution, Miss Granger," he gently reminded her. "Believe me; it's not that I don't want what you are offering."

"Then why—?"

"Because holding the moral high-ground is infinitely more important for your future than the satiation of my physical desires."

"I have desires, too."

"And why you wish to waste them on me is something I will never fathom."

Hermione's look grew dire. "I have always wanted you, and I always will." Her eyes penetrated deeply into his, and she gathered the courage to reveal what her heart was now screaming. "I have always lo—"

Snape quickly covered her mouth with his index finger. "You don't know what you're saying. You've just suffered a messy divorce. I'm here, I'm convenient. But later, you'll want more... more than I can ever offer. I'm damaged goods, Miss Granger. You saw how I was with Rose tonight. The next time it could be you that I lash out at or..." He shuddered at the thought. "... Hugo."

Hermione felt deep frustration at once again being thwarted in her attempt at professing her love for him. "You had a right to be angry with Rose tonight. I'll admit that you may have overreacted a bit, but you were also correct when you said that she would need to know about your past sooner or later." She searched his face for any sign that she might be getting through to him but was met with only skepticism. "Will I ever be able to convince you that you are worth loving?"

The words caused Snape's face to distort in physical pain. He swallowed hard again and pursed his lips. He grabbed her shoulders and pushed her away. As he tapped the top of his head with his wand and began to vanish before her eyes, she heard him say, "You're wrong. I'm not worth it, and I never will be."

Hope for Snape

Chapter 24 of 35

Snape realizes that perhaps he is worth loving after all.

Disclaimer: The usual "not mine, no money" goes here. You know the drill.

AN: And a great big thank you to my betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for keeping me straight. I must also thank Semptra for her flawless taming of my errant comma usage and the occasional grammar mistake that my betas miss.

Chapter 24

Hope for Snape

Hermione watched her front door close as Professor Snape's invisible hand pushed it shut. One lone tear meandered down her cheek as his final words rang in her ears: "*I'm not worth it, and I never will be.*" Was he really not worth her time or trouble? Although she knew the key highlights, the details of his life remained a mystery. For all the time they had spent together over the years, she really didn't know him that well. The largest percentage of that time had been in his tyrannically run classroom. And he had admitted tonight that the ugly words he had aimed at her back then were indeed spoken with malice, a realization that cut her to the quick.

But she continued to argue internally on his behalf. Their classroom time had occurred over twenty years ago. They had both grown and matured emotionally and mellowed considerably since then. Her stubborn streak had softened, and she more easily conceded an argument. And his words and actions had obviously become more kind and considerate. She thought about his reaction to her head-strong daughter's rude comments tonight and came to the conclusion that Professor Snape had let Rose off lightly. If the Professor Snape of old had been present to react to Rose's harsh insults, she would have been driven from the room in tears at the first sign of insolence, and he would have stormed out the door, probably reducing it to splinters in the process. Snape wouldn't be "Snape" if he was actually *nice*, but he had certainly evolved into a much *nicer* person than he used to be.

Perhaps Professor Snape's own assessment of his character was based on the few but very costly mistakes he had made in his youth that forever scarred his soul and tarnished his reputation: the verbal insult of Lily's heritage, joining the Death Eaters, and informing Voldemort of the prophecy that would later cost Lily and James their lives. But, like the teenage drunk driver who had killed Hermione's parents and walked away without any physical scars, Snape bore scars of a different type. The young man had done his six months for manslaughter and then gone on a crusade to lecture and educate young drivers of the perils of drunk driving. He had become the poster child of what not to do and what could happen if you did the wrong thing anyway. And although Professor Snape's repentance and crusade had been of a much more secret nature, he had risked his life every day and had been slapped in the face by the wizarding world for his trouble. After everything he had been through, it was no wonder he had such a low opinion of himself.

Hermione decided then that he was indeed worth loving.

Now came the hard part. Now she had to convince him.

"Winky!" Snape called out as he let himself into the front door.

With a pop, the tiny elf appeared at his side. "Winky is at Master's service, sir," she announced with a low bow.

Snape chuckled. "Winky, how many times have I told you that it is not necessary to bow in my presence?"

"One thousand two hundred and seventy-three times, sir, counting this time."

Snape smirked. "Let's *not* make it one thousand two hundred and seventy-four, shall we?"

Winky giggled. "No, sir."

"Did you enjoy yourself with Tolky tonight?"

"Why yes, sir. Lucius Malfoy gave Tolky so many chores that Winky had to help him finish."

"You two got no free time whatsoever?"

"No, sir. That's what made it fun, sir. We house-elves love to do chores, sir."

Snape shook his head in bewilderment. *Wouldn't it be wonderful if all it took to make me happy was to keep busy with chores?* He gave Winky a forlorn look, which she picked up on immediately.

"Did Master not enjoy dinner at Miss Granger's house?"

"Oh, dinner was decent, although her cooking doesn't hold a candle to yours. But things went a bit awry when I let slip a small insult against the children's father. I'm afraid that Rose didn't take kindly to my comment, and we had a bit of a row."

Winky's tennis-ball eyes narrowed as she stared at him intently. "But that is not what is really bothering Master Severus, is it, sir?" It was more of an accusation than a question.

Snape made his way over to the padded arm-chair by the fire and fell into it with a thud. He gazed sadly into Winky's green orbs. "No, it's not." There was a long silence while Winky went to fetch him a glass of firewhisky. He gladly accepted the glass when she returned, and he directed her towards the couch. She sat dutifully and waited for him to speak.

Over the past twenty years, Winky had not only taken care of the house and the cooking and the laundry, she had become Snape's friend. He could tell her anything and knew that she would rather die than to reveal even a morsel of their conversations. She knew his darkest secrets, his worst fears; she could see into his soul. She probably knew him better than any other living creature on the planet, and he knew that she would be honest with him if he asked her a question.

"Winky..."

She could see the hesitation in his eyes, the fear of what her answer might be. She smiled reassuringly.

"... I know that I am a brilliant Potions master and a great spy. I am unsurpassed in Legilimency and Occlumency, but what do you think of me as... a person?"

"Oh, Master Severus is a great wizard, to be sure!"

"Yes, yes, I'll concede that I am a very powerful and talented wizard." He rolled his eyes in an attempt to play down that statement. "But that is not the question. All of my magical talents aside, what do you think of me?" He clutched at his heart as he asked the question.

Winky finally understood. "What is in Master's heart?"

"Yes," he whispered with a nod.

Winky thought long and hard about her answer and chose her words very carefully as she spoke. "Winky watched closely as Master performed headmaster duties at Hogwarts for He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named. Never once did Winky see Master harm a student or order a student harmed. In fact, Master prevented such things on many occasions. Master even helped Harry Potter several times. These actions and decisions could have cost Master his life if found out, but he did them anyway. This showed Winky Master's brave heart.

"Winky has watched Master Severus treat the Muggle neighbors with kindness and respect, especially for the young man that helped with Master's first computer. Most wizards look down their noses at Muggles and treat them like dirt. But not Master Severus. This showed Winky that Master's heart is of good character.

"Winky has watched Master come from Azkaban where they should never have sent him. Even with all of his powers, he has not sought revenge. He has lived a quiet life, working on a book that will improve the quality of life for wizards, a book that he will never be able to get credit for, but he finished it just the same. He could have kept his improved recipes to himself, taken them to his grave, but he wished to share them with the world instead. This showed Winky that Master's heart is full of forgiveness and generosity.

"Winky saw Master come to Miss Granger's rescue when her son needed a potion and she had nowhere else to turn, even though there was nothing in it for Master. That showed Winky that Master's heart contains selflessness and compassion.

"And Winky has seen Master Severus suffer great emotional pain after things went awry with Miss Granger and his desperate need to make things right again. This shows Winky that Master's heart is full of love.

"Winky knows that Master Severus has a short temper. Winky has felt the sting of Master's words spoken in anger. But Winky has also seen the true nature of Master's heart and soul." With this last statement, Winky pushed herself off of the couch and walked over to Snape's chair. She covered his free hand with hers and gave him a light pat. "Winky loves Master, and Winky will do everything in her power to help Master find happiness. Master deserves that much and so much more."

Snape pursed his lips and furrowed his brow as he tried unsuccessfully to blink back his tears. "So you believe..." He choked on his own words and could not continue.

"... that Master is worth loving? Of course. Master deserves all of the goodness that life has to offer. Master has made up for his past mistakes ten-fold."

"But I'm still a convicted felon. I cannot, *I will not* sully her reputation..."

"Be patient, Master Severus. Do not lose hope. The future looks bright."

"The near future?" he asked hopefully. Winky's predictions almost always came true.

"Not as near as Master's heart desires or deserves, but near nonetheless."

"Thank you, Winky." He sniffed, then he stood up and threw back what was left of the firewhisky. "I'll be upstairs if you need me. Goodnight." He wanted to look over Miss Granger's case file tonight and see if he could figure out a plan to help things along. He wasn't sure what Winky could see in his future, but if it involved Miss Granger and happiness, he had a pretty good idea. Perhaps he was being too hard on himself. To hear her tell it, he deserved sainthood. He figured that reality probably lay somewhere in between. Perhaps Winky was right. He had repaid his debt to wizarding society. Was it so wrong to want happiness?

At 8 a.m. Monday morning, Hermione found herself sitting next to Harry in the Minister of Magic's office. As Kingsley Shacklebolt leaned back in his posh desk chair she and Harry took turns explaining their discoveries and suspicions in the hope that he would allow Hermione's continued employment and regular visits to the Records Office.

"... And you suspect someone from the Ministry to be behind this?" Kingsley asked, disgusted at the thought that someone he probably knew personally would abuse their power in that way.

"Perhaps even a member of the Wizengamot," Harry admitted sadly.

"The Wizengamot?!" Kingsley shook his head slowly in disbelief. "I can certainly understand your need for secrecy then. And how much longer do you think before you can gather enough evidence for a conviction?"

Hermione shrugged. "With only one day a week to research at best, it could take months if not years."

"Well, I'll be glad to approve it as long as I am Minister of Magic, but under the circumstances, I think you should know something."

"What's that, sir?" asked Harry as he and Hermione shared a quick worried glance.

"If you're not finished with your research by the time the new Minister takes office, you'll have to get his or her approval as well."

"New Minister?" Hermione's voice became rather shrill with alarm.

"What are you talking about?" asked Harry warily.

"I plan to resign on September first."

"Resign?" they both exclaimed at once.

"Why?"

"How can you do this?"

"Who could possibly replace you?"

"Now, now..." Kingsley held up his hands to quiet them both. "If you recall twenty years ago, I was only supposed to be ~~a~~ temporary replacement for Scrimgeour."

"But you've been the best Minister we've had since I've been a wizard!" Harry insisted.

Kingsley chuckled. "Well, almost anyone would have been an improvement over Fudge, and Scrimgeour didn't hold the post long enough to prove himself. Pius Thicknesse had been under the Imperious Curse, or so he claimed, so there really hasn't been anybody decent to compare me to."

"But why are you leaving? You're not being forced out, are you?" asked Harry suspiciously.

"No, no," Kingsley stilled his fears. "I'm tired. Politics is a nasty business. I just need a change."

"So what will you do?" asked Hermione curiously. "You're too young to retire."

Kingsley grinned and placed his hands behind his head as he pictured his "retirement." "I don't know for sure, but I've been toying with the idea of opening a restaurant ethnic food with magical qualities based on cuisine from cultures around the world." He suddenly threw his hands down on the desk and leaned forward towards Hermione. "I hear that you and Severus Snape have become friends. Do you think he would consider helping me come up with some recipes? I would need a good Potions Master to help me incorporate magical qualities into the food. He would only need to help with the initial creation of dishes. I would never expect him to actually work in the restaurant."

"You would want to employ a known Death Eater, a convicted felon?" Hermione inquired sardonically.

Kingsley scowled. "You know that conviction was a farce as well as I do. Besides, I would love to work with him. He's a brilliant and talented potioneer, and I'm a fabulous cook. I've travelled the world with this job one of the perks that I'll really miss and I've gathered my favorite recipes along the way. With Severus' help, I could come up with unique and delicious foods that satisfy the most discriminating palette that can also add a bit of adventure and excitement. I have so many ideas on how we can enhance the food magically. He's the perfect person to help me figure out how to do it."

"As long as nobody knows he's helping you?" Hermione's eyes narrowed accusingly.

Kingsley dipped his head and shrugged his shoulders sheepishly. "Yeah, I guess that would have to be part of the deal. The conviction is a farce, but most people still believe he's guilty."

"Well," Harry replied with a melancholy smile, "at least you're willing to give him a job. More than I can say for anyone else for the past twenty years." Then he started laughing. "I've never seen you so excited, Kingsley," he admitted. "You're like my son James on Christmas morning."

That got them all laughing.

"But seriously," Kingsley focused on Hermione again, "do you think you could put in a good word for me with Severus?"

Hermione smiled. "Of course, Minister. It sounds intriguing, and he's got more than enough free time." She stole a quick and knowing glance at Harry.

"So, do you know who's in line to replace you?" asked Harry as he attempted to steer the conversation back to the business at hand.

"Someone young and full of fresh ideas, perhaps?" Hermione suggested hopefully.

Kingsley rolled his eyes ruefully. "Don't I wish! Then I wouldn't feel so guilty about leaving. I put feelers out, hoping to find someone who wasn't already on the Wizengamot. But no one seems interested. This job pays fairly well, but most of the younger possibilities who would qualify already own successful businesses and would either be taking a huge pay cut or creating a major conflict of interest that the wizarding population wouldn't tolerate. No, unfortunately, it looks as if only the usual gray talking heads seem interested."

"Talking heads?" Harry's brow furrowed as he imagined the possibilities.

"Yeah," Kingsley laughed humorlessly. "Fudge would love to get his old job back. Seems he's not well suited for business."

"Fudge!" Harry objected strongly. "No WAY! After the way he ignored Voldemort's return and almost lost the war for us he was a disaster then. He'd be a geriatric disaster now!"

"Don't worry," Kingsley tried to placate him and Hermione, who, by the look on her face, objected just as much as Harry did to the prospect. "After his performance leading up to WWII, he would never be able to get the votes. But the only other person who seems interested is Dolores Umbridge."

"UMBRIDGE?!" They both yelled in unison. "She's WORSE!"

"She's evil!"

"She's horrid!"

"Not her!"

"Anyone but her!"

"Fudge would be better!"

"Well in that case, Harry, perhaps you would consider running?"

"Oh, right, I'm the consummate politician."

"I could almost guarantee you'd win, even against Umbridge."

Harry shook his head adamantly. "No. My kids are still young, Kingsley. I'm already too famous as it is. I want them to have a normal life, or at least as normal as possible.

When they're grown and on their own, I might consider it if there's no one decent willing to step up, but not now. We don't even have a house-elf. Ginny would kill me."

Kingsley chuckled as Hermione nodded her head adamantly to back up Harry's statement.

"Assuming no one of merit runs against her, when would Umbridge take office," Hermione asked with great trepidation.

"Well... there would be some campaigning involved to gain public support, but it is ultimately the Wizengamot's decision. I imagine that a vote for my replacement would take place by mid-January, and the winner would take office by mid-May."

"So we have nine months to build a case," Hermione reflected ominously.

Kingsley knitted his brow. "Now I know you don't think much of the woman, but I'm sure she would be as anxious as the next person to bring the blackmailer to justice."

Harry and Hermione exchanged wary looks but remained silent.

Kingsley put two and two together and his jaw dropped. "You don't think she's the blackmailer?"

"She's our leading suspect, I'm afraid," admitted Harry quietly.

Kingsley shook his head in dismay and then buried his face in his hands. "If you're right, it will take a mountain of evidence to convict her. And she will have to be taken completely by surprise. Otherwise, she will work covertly to discredit you and send your investigation in the wrong direction. You may end up looking guilty yourselves if you're not extremely careful."

"She would stoop that low?" Harry realized the ridiculousness of his question immediately as Hermione snorted so loud that she hurt her sinuses.

"She's the most cut-throat politician I have ever met," Kingsley admitted. "She almost managed to get my seat twenty years ago, but the Wizengamot decided that she didn't have enough public support because of her part in the Muggle-born Registration Commission. It had become too closely identified with Voldemort's destructive philosophy."

"Thank Merlin for small favors." Hermione sighed. "I guess memories fade over the years."

"Perhaps enough for her, but not enough for Fudge," Kingsley replied.

They both nodded in agreement.

"Well, then..." Kingsley stood and extended his hand to Hermione first. "... now that's settled, you'd better get to work."

"And this conversation never happened," Harry reminded him.

"What conversation?"

As Hermione and Harry made their way through the maze of cubicles and offices of assistants and secretaries that aided the Minister, Harry couldn't contain his curiosity. "So, how'd it go last night?"

When his question was met with a silent but sorrowful look, he knew that he would have to wait for the privacy of an empty lift for his answer.

Luckily, no one else met them as the lift doors opened, so Harry turned his full attention to Hermione the minute the doors closed behind them.

"Oh, Harry, I don't know. It didn't exactly go well, but it wasn't a complete disaster either."

"Tell me what happened," Harry insisted with raised eyebrows.

"Well, like an idiot, I brought up the incident about my teeth when you and Draco got into the duel in the hallway outside of potions class our fourth year."

"Oh, yeah, I remember. He reduced you to tears with one short sentence."

"Reminding him of his cruelty didn't exactly do wonders for his self esteem."

"No, I imagine not."

"And to make matters worse, at dinner he made some snide remark about Ron's lack of gentlemanly conduct, and he and Rose got into a row about it. He tried to apologize, but she was headstrong and rude and he lost his temper."

"Oh, for the love of Merlin what did he do?"

Hermione chuckled slightly. "Don't worry, Rose is still alive and well and got to keep all of her appendages."

Harry simply shook his head in amazement. "Lucky girl."

"Lucky, indeed. But he did pull up his sleeve and show her his Dark Mark. This horrified her, which was his goal, I suspect. He always ruled his classroom with an iron fist, striking fear into our little hearts from day one. But I had so hoped that Rose would grow to care for him like Hugo does, not fear him."

Harry sighed and placed his hand reassuringly on Hermione's shoulder. "This is Severus Snape we're talking about, Hermione. He's *not* a nice person."

She shrugged his hand off of her shoulder and glared at him. "He can be when given half a chance," she retorted sharply.

Harry's head dropped in embarrassment. He knew Snape had changed for the better. He had seen it himself. "Sorry. That was uncalled for... So then what happened?"

"Well, after Rose went upstairs, things calmed down a bit. But when he was getting ready to leave, he said that he didn't understand why I would want to waste my time with him because he wasn't worth the trouble."

"Not worth the trouble? After all he's done for the wizarding world?"

"He doesn't have a very high opinion of himself, I'm afraid. It tears me up inside when he says stuff like that. He's not used to being treated with kindness. He doesn't know how to react to it, although he does a pretty good job with Hugo."

"Yeah, I noticed that the day we kidnapped Ron. I could see by the way he looked at Hugo that he held a deep affection for him. And Hugo looks up to him, or *had*. Did that change last night, too?"

"No, in fact Hugo came to Professor Snape's defense after Rose left the table."

"Well, that's one good thing then."

"What am I going to do, Harry? How can I convince him that he's lovable?"

Harry laughed out loud. "A lovable Snape! You sure know how to give a fellow nightmares!"

"Oh, come on, Harry, you know what I mean!"

Harry tried in vain to quell his laughter. By the time he finally calmed down, they had reached the floor for the Auror Department. He turned to hug his friend, then he gazed sweetly into her eyes. "Just be patient with him. Make sure he knows how much he is appreciated. He needs to feel needed. It's been over twenty years since anyone has needed him for anything. No wonder his self esteem is non-existent. Give him time, Hermione. If anyone can convince him, you can."

Hexes and Cures

Chapter 25 of 35

Hermione has a talk with Dumbledore's portrait, and Snape teaches Rose another lesson in humility.

The usual disclaimer goes here: No credit, no money to me.

Thanks must always go to my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for all of their help. And WriterMerrin here at TPP keeps me on my toes as well. Punctuation is the Albatross around my neck. She saves me time after time.

Chapter 25

Hexes and Cures

On Tuesday afternoon at promptly two p.m., Hermione sat in a comfortable high-backed chair in Headmistress McGonagall's office at Hogwarts for their pre-arranged meeting.

"I wish you had come to me sooner, Hermione. Scheduling is a nightmare as it is, but to rearrange everyone's schedule to accommodate yours... Well, I'm not sure I can grant your request. This will only be your first year teaching here. I know you want to spend as much time with Hugo as possible, but Fridays off is out of the question. Even tenured teachers don't enjoy such privileges. Can you imagine the uproar this would create among the staff?"

She continued to rant and rave at the trials, tribulations, pitfalls, and accusations of favoritism that would ensue if she allowed Hermione to skip Fridays. But in the hope of keeping her real goal a secret, she had not given Minerva all of the information. It became plain to her as the Headmistress calmed down that she would need to be in on Hermione and Harry's secret project.

"I don't need Friday's off just for Hugo," she finally admitted. "I'm in the middle of an investigation with Harry, and he still desperately needs my help. He's great at gathering evidence in the field, but when it comes to research, he's a lost cause."

Minerva raised an eyebrow. "A research project for the Auror Department? May I ask the nature of the investigation?"

Hermione glanced past Minerva to the portrait of Albus Dumbledore above her chair on the wall. He appeared to be asleep, as did all of the other portraits, but Hermione knew better. "I'd rather not say here, Minerva. The walls do have ears, after all."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the portrait of Dilys Derwent.

"How uncouth!" remarked Armando Dippet's portrait haughtily.

"What do you expect from a simple-minded Mudblo..."

"Phineas, that's quite enough!" shouted Albus Dumbledore's portrait.

"Thank you, Albus," Minerva said with a slight nod and obvious fondness. Then she turned back to Hermione. "The portraits here exist solely as advisors and confidants to the current Headmaster. They serve in any way they are capable of, which includes, fortunately, keeping their mouths shut when necessary." She cast a chilling glare at Phineas Nigellus Black's portrait. He simply crossed his arms in front of his chest and huffed. Hermione thought perhaps that he would exit his frame in favor of the one at Harry's house, number twelve, Grimmauld Place, but he stood his ground. She finally concluded that he was too curious about her research project to leave until her intentions had been made clear. Minerva continued, "They are incapable of revealing my secrets to anyone. So anything revealed here today will not go further than this room for as long as I deem necessary."

"I apologize, Mesdames et Messieurs. I meant no disrespect." Hermione looked from face to indignant face. The only one still smiling was, of course, Dumbledore.

"Apology accepted, my dear," he said with his trademark twinkle.

"Speak for yourself!" spat Phineas waspishly.

"Don't worry." Minerva glared once again at Phineas. "You may speak freely here."

And so Hermione explained her saga, from finding Otto Steingold in a foreign city and relaying his story, to the research she was currently involved in, and the fact that a person of interest had been identified, but due to the nature of the charges and the Ministry clout this prime suspect had achieved, it was imperative that the investigation remain top secret.

"And you can't reveal who this person of interest is?"

"I'm sorry. It's not that I don't trust you, but if I'm wrong... I wouldn't want you to think badly of someone for something they haven't done."

Minerva nodded.

Just then, Filch's head appeared in the fireplace. "Headmistress, sorry to interrupt, but Professor Longbottom needs your assistance in the greenhouses right away."

"What has happened?" Minerva asked urgently as she stood and made her way to the fireplace.

"It's Peeves! He's throwing the new seedlings around and making a mess of all the hard work the Professor put in over the summer."

"Oh, dear!" She addressed Hermione. "Please excuse me for just a few minutes. Peeves takes such terrible advantage of Neville's good nature."

With a poof of floo powder, Minerva vanished and Hermione was left alone with Dumbledore and the rest of the portraits. His eyes twinkled at her, and she looked back up at him with love and admiration.

"So good to see you again, sir."

"And since you'll be teaching here in just a couple of weeks, we can have regular visits."

"I would like that."

"I was sorry to hear that you and Mr. Weasley split up."

"Yes, well, it's a long story, but let's just say that we're much better off under separate roofs."

"Thanks be to Merlin he lets you have access to your children."

"Yes, thank Merlin. What an unfair bit of legislation."

"Written by prejudiced pure-bloods, no doubt, as with so many other laws."

"I would have thought that laws such as those would have been overturned after the permanent fall of Voldemort."

"Perhaps you can introduce legislation?"

Hermione chuckled ruefully. "Somehow, I think it was easier to get time off for house-elves than it would be to get equal rights for Muggle-witches and wizards passed and enforced. Besides, I'll have my hands full with teaching and this project for Harry for a while."

"Speaking of which," Dumbledore said with a twinkle, "if you can give us any more information, perhaps we can help. Everard has a portrait at the Ministry as well."

Everard's eyes popped open at the mention of his name. "But Albus, you know that I cannot discuss what I overhear there anymore than I can here."

"Not even if you hear about unlawful behavior?" asked Hermione.

"You must understand, young lady, that we are not always privy to the entire conversation. Since we don't know the circumstances behind a particular action, we may jump to the wrong conclusion. Something may appear to be unlawful, but still necessary for the greater good."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps... But blackmail? What could possibly be the greater good in that?"

"She has a point there," commented Dilys Derwent.

"Do you know who the perpetrator is Everard?" Hermione pleaded her case for his cooperation.

Everard sighed heavily. "I did overhear a suspicious conversation... over twenty years ago. And if the person stands accused before the Wizengamot, I would be allowed to testify, but not until then."

"A great deal of evidence would be needed," added Albus. "The portrait's testimony could not be the only evidence, but it could be one nail in the coffin, so to speak."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Albus," contested Dilys Derwent. "I witnessed a murder in St. Mungo's once, and the guilty party was convicted on my testimony alone!"

"Really?" asked Hermione as her hopes began to rise.

"Your testimony and a mountain of motive and circumstantial evidence," Albus corrected her.

"Yes, but if portraits can testify, then why were you not allowed to help defend Professor Snape?" Hermione asked indignantly.

"That was a very different circumstance, my dear," Dumbledore explained. "You see, a portrait can be a witness to things he or she sees and hears as a portrait, but no portrait has ever given testimony as to the events that took place before he had become a portrait, much less during his own murder. I'm afraid that, as far as I know, I am the only living portrait in existence who was created by an act of violence. No one is certain how such a traumatic event would affect my memories as I transitioned from the living world to the portrait world. There is no precedent set. Therefore, the Wizengamot would require a unanimous vote to allow it for the first time."

"And, although I cannot tell you who spoke of blackmail in the halls of the Ministry all those years ago," added Everard, his voice barely above a whisper, "if the guilty party is convicted, perhaps Snape could be exonerated as well."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "I knew it! Oh, thank you, Headmaster Everard!" She turned to Albus, whose eyebrows almost disappeared into his hairline. "Now I know that I am heading in the right direction with the investigation." A low growl grew in Hermione's throat as she paced the room, thinking of all the horrible things she would love to do to Umbridge. When she stopped pacing, she looked up at Dumbledore, her eyes brimming with tears. "Professor Snape deserved the Order of Merlin, First Class NOT six months in Azkaban."

"I agree, Hermione."

Dumbledore's use of her given name startled her. She gazed into his crystal blue eyes and noticed if possible an extra twinkle.

"I'll see justice done if it's the last thing I do!" She promised to herself as much as to him.

"I hope so, my dear, for Severus' sake, as well as yours."

Hermione's short intake of breath betrayed her secret. "How did you know?"

Dumbledore smiled mischievously. "Severus came here in search of books to help you in your divorce case. We had a chat. No doubt, his feelings for you have only grown since then."

"Have they?" Hermione asked wistfully. "It's hard to tell with him."

"And you care deeply for him as well, yes?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Perhaps not to everyone."

"But he won't let anything happen between us."

"That's because he is not a free man, Hermione."

She knitted her brow and scowled at the painting on the wall. She had to keep reminding herself that the actual wizard wasn't really there. But he seemed so real. "What do you mean by that?"

"As long as the conviction hangs over his head, his life is not his own."

"I'll get it overturned I swear I will "

"Tread carefully, Hermione. The person you're after has long arms, very long arms indeed."

Hermione spent the rest of the week at Hogwarts going over her lesson plans and reworking her schedule. As the Headmistress had feared, complaints came pouring in from the other staff members, but McGonagall kept her secret and used Hugo as an excuse. She assured everyone that Hermione's workload was equal to theirs, with extra hall duty during the week to make up for her absence on weekends. She also reminded them that Hermione's schedule would become like everyone else's by the following year because Hugo would then be attending Hogwarts.

This explanation placated almost everyone, with the exceptions of Neville, who was never upset to begin with, and Filch, who would never be happy until he could see miscreants in shackles.

When Friday arrived, Hermione decided that she should establish her routine from the start, so after breakfast in the Great Hall, she went back to her office and floo'd to the Burrow. She knew that the school had sent out its required reading list and there were several tomes that Rose would need, including the new and improved potions text.

When she and the kids entered Flourish and Blotts, she was pleased to see the new text prominently displayed on a front table. But a few of the patrons were currently voicing their displeasure at being forced to purchase the book when they saw nothing wrong with the one from years (or decades) past. One of the parents even refused, saying that his old potions text would simply have to do and the child could take notes if methods of any real consequence came up in class. Hermione felt the need to intervene, knowing that pages and pages in the new text were dedicated to crucial instructions on ingredient preparation, as well as the subtle differences in each recipe and some new ones not even included in the old texts. Thankfully, this seemed to convince the stubborn tightwad to part with a few more Galleons for the sake of his child's education.

Hermione and her children then wandered across the street to the Apothecary shop to pick up an entry-level potions kit for Hugo and some of the more sophisticated ingredients that Rose would need for her second year.

"So, are you excited about starting at Hogwarts this fall, young man?" asked the elderly gentleman behind the counter.

"Well," admitted Hugo sheepishly, "I don't actually start until next year, but Professor Snape..."

"Actually," Hermione cut him off, "we were just going to practice a few simple potions so Hugo can get the hang of the mortar and pestle."

"It's all in the wrist," advised the old man as he mimicked the motion for Hugo and Rose to see.

Hermione smiled sweetly at the man as she laid her Galleons on the counter. But her smile faded as the old man's eyes narrowed. "Severus Snape?" It was more of an accusation than a question. "I don't know what you're up to, Mrs. Weas! sorry, Miss Granger," he whispered so only she could hear, "but if you care about them, you'll keep Snape away from your children."

With a glare and a huff, Hermione turned and hastily ushered her children out of the Apothecary. She was not about to listen to such tripe, and she didn't want to expose her children to it either.

When Sunday afternoon finally came again, Hermione busied herself with dinner preparation as Hugo begged her endlessly to set up the new cauldron and show him how to work the scales.

"Professor Snape will be here soon, love. He can show you how to set up everything properly." In reality it had been quite a while since she'd had any need to brew a potion. Although she was sure she could remember the procedure, she feared that she would never hear the end of it from her former Professor if she got anything wrong. Besides, this new book elevated ingredient preparation to an art form. She was anxious to watch him teach Hugo, and she hoped Rose could be persuaded to observe as well.

At five p.m. on the dot, the doorbell rang. Hugo ran to answer it.

"Remember he will be Disillusioned," she called after him.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape. So good of you to come," Hermione overheard Hugo say with a formal air. She could almost hear the grin in his voice.

"So good of you and your family to invite me," she heard Professor Snape reply.

"I didn't invite him," grumbled Rose, who was helping her mum in the kitchen.

"Come here, you." Hermione thought she could hear Professor Snape's smile now. "Are you taller? By Jove, I do believe you've grown a centimeter since I saw you last."

"Well, maybe a millimeter or two," Hugo admitted proudly.

"So, are you ready to brew your first potion?"

"No," Hugo admitted with a touch of embarrassment. "I wanted to set up my cauldron and have everything ready by the time you arrived, but Mum told me to wait for you. She said that you were the expert and I should learn the right way to do it from the start."

By then, they had made their way to the kitchen. Snape eyed Miss Granger suspiciously. "In other words..." He leaned over towards Hugo and lowered his voice with a pretense to keep her from overhearing. "... she doesn't remember what to do." He gave Hugo an exaggerated nod. Hugo mouthed an "O" as his eyes widened.

Hermione overheard, of course, just as she was meant to. She shook her head *Damned if I do and damned if I don't*. She dried her hands on the towel at the sink and turned to Professor Snape. Their eyes met, and she could tell that he was genuinely pleased to be here. "I'm so glad you came," she admitted sincerely as they exchanged cheek kisses.

"Wouldn't have missed it." He grabbed her hand and gave it a quick but gentle squeeze as his eyes drank in the warmth of her smile. "May I assist you in any way?"

"Oh, no. I've pretty much gotten it all taken care of, thanks to all of Rose's help." She gave her daughter a grateful nod.

Snape glanced at Rose, who was purposefully looking at anything but him. He smirked. "You're lucky to have such an efficient and knowledgeable assistant. Heaven knows I could have used one at Hogwarts, but the only ones that ever volunteered were dunderheads. They never lasted past their first day." He noticed Rose snicker. He wondered if it was because she had encountered her share of dunderheads at school already or if she felt that no one but a dunderhead would volunteer to help him.

"Actually," Hermione continued, "we were all hoping to see how much difference this new textbook makes."

"Speak for yourself, Mum," Rose said with belligerence. "I think Slughorn's methods are perfectly fine. I'm going upstairs. Call me when dinner's ready."

Hermione's face turned red with rage. She was determined to prevent a repeat of the previous week. "You get back here *this instant*, young lady!"

Snape raised his hand to calm her down. "Rose, have you acquired your new potions book yet?"

Rose scowled at him. "Got it Friday. It's upstairs."

"And where is your potions kit?"

"At Dad's house."

"No matter. Miss Granger, would you happen to have a cast iron pot you don't need for tonight's dinner preparation?"

"Why, yes, but what..."

"Good. Could you retrieve it for me, please?"

Miss Granger gave him a puzzled look, but stooped down to dig through her cabinet for the requested item.

"Rose, would you mind bringing me your new book?"

If looks could kill, Snape would have dropped dead on the spot. "Get it yourself," she sneered with such skill that Snape was impressed.

"ROSE!!"

Snape's face remained a wall of unreadable stone as he flicked his wand in the girl's general direction.

"OW!" Rose glared hatefully at Snape, but as the pain increased, she glanced down to see what was causing it. A boil was beginning to form on her inner right forearm. "What did you do to me?!"

"It's a boil hex. I thought you might need some incentive to insure your cooperation."

The girl snarled at Snape, then sent her mother a pleading look. Hermione simply raised her eyebrows. "I suggest that you do as you are told."

"UGH!" She turned and ran up the stairs. By the time she returned with the book, Snape had transfigured the cast iron pot into a cauldron and had it set up just to the right of Hugo's on the kitchen counter.

"If you turn to page twenty-three, you will find a recipe to cure boils. I suggest you get busy," he snarled threateningly.

Rose narrowed her lids and opened the book. "Oh, *please!* I learned this potion on my first day last year. This recipe is the same as the old book."

"The ingredients might be the same, but if you follow the instructions to the letter, you will discover improvements in both taste and efficacy. You can share Hugo's scales and ingredients." He placed the scales and box of little jars on the counter between her cauldron and Hugo's.

Rose snorted. "The old way worked just fine. I'm not changing a thing."

"I thought you might say that," Snape said with his own trademark sneer. He focused his attention on Hugo and left Rose alone to create her inferior brew. Some people just needed to learn their lessons the hard way.

"Now, Hugo, please observe the distance between the bottom of the cauldron and the flame. Some potions require added distance, some need less."

"Can't you just make the flame higher or lower instead of moving the cauldron?"

"Well, in the old book that is the only method taught, but this book shows the subtle differences between flame height, cauldron distance, and the actual surface area of the fire. All of these factors can change the outcome, sometimes in a subtle way, sometimes in a crucial way."

Snape thought he heard the word, "Rubbish," mumbled somewhere to his right, but he continued to ignore the source.

"Now, Hugo, when a recipe calls for crushing an ingredient to release the juices, always use the flat side of your silver knife, like this." He demonstrated for the boy. "And although an oak or cherry board will usually do in a pinch, a tropical hardwood such as teak or ebony has less absorbency and will give you a better yield on your juices." He noticed that the boy's new potion kits contained a standard issue oak board. "I think I have a teak one at home that I can spare. I'll bring it next week."

"Thanks, Professor. That would be great." Hugo gave Snape a big eager grin. He couldn't help but return the smile.

Just then, "Big deal," could be heard in a low grumble off to Snape's right.

Hermione had been watching Professor Snape and Hugo very carefully. She had no idea about the flame size and cauldron distance. And although she knew that the best way to crush most beans was the way the Professor had described, she had never realized that the species of wood in the chopping board could make a difference.

"There!" announced Rose. "Finished in record time."

Snape peered into her cauldron and raised an eyebrow. Hermione also took the time to inspect the contents of Rose's cauldron. "Looks good to me, love." She smiled at her daughter. Rose beamed with pride.

Snape sneered as he watched the girl decant enough for one dose and set it aside to cool.

Snape refocused on Hugo. "Try to crush this Adzuki bean."

The bean turned out to be tougher than anyone expected. The poor kid had to put the chopping board down on the kitchen table so he could get his weight behind him. As he pressed harder and harder, the bean finally popped out from under the knife and shot across the room, hitting Crookshanks in the butt. The cat yowled and hissed, then ran for the staircase. Laughter filled the room at the cat's expense, all knowing that only his pride was hurt. But when Snape turned back to Hugo, he immediately noticed a pool of blood forming on the oak board. The knife had slipped and sliced a deep gash in one of Hugo's fingers. He looked up at Snape, horrified.

"It's alright, Hugo," he cooed softly. "Here, let me see." He carefully took the boy's hand and turned it over. He lightly touched the injured finger with the tip of his wand and hovered it back and forth over the length of the cut as he softly sang the Latin incantation. He waved his wand over the bloody hand and chopping board to siphon off the blood. Hugo stared at his finger in amazement. It was as if nothing had ever happened.

Rose gasped in awe.

Tears began to form in Hermione's eyes. She had never seen such tenderness directed at a child from Severus Snape.

Hugo's face was beaming up at this surprisingly gentle man so full of special magic.

"Better?"

Hugo nodded.

Snape turned and reached out towards the errant bean, and with a silent, wandless spell, it flew through the air and into his waiting hand. "If you have that problem again, here's the solution." He carefully held the bean with his left thumb and forefinger. "If you are trying to crush a bean that has a tough skin, just carefully slice along the outer edge like this," he explained as he demonstrated, "so the outer skin will split." He handed Hugo another bean to try for himself. The boy carefully sliced the outer edge of the bean and then successfully crushed it under his knife. The juices pooled on the board, and he clumsily tipped the board sideways over the cauldron.

"Be sure to scrape the board with the dull side of your knife to get every drop."

"Yes, sir."

"What are you making, anyway?" asked Rose with a snooty tone, "Athlete's foot ointment?"

Snape ignored her rude comment. "Perhaps your potion has cooled off enough for you to test it," he suggested, his tone even and emotionless.

Rose shot him a resentful glance, but reached for the vial. She made a theatrical performance of holding her nose and throwing the potion back. Then she quickly chased it with some water. Everyone watched in anticipation as the boil on her arm began to disappear, leaving behind a faint scar just slightly paler than the surrounding skin.

"See?" she announced proudly, "It worked *just fine!*"

"But it left a scar," observed Hugo.

"So? Got rid of the boil, didn't it?"

"If you follow the instructions in your new text, not only will it make the scar disappear, but it will taste so good you'll want to come back for seconds." Snape informed the pig-headed girl.

"If you think I'm going to waste my time making that boring, old, simple, *first-year* potion *again*, you can take that new book and shove...OW!" Rose's hand flew up to her face as she felt a new welt forming on her cheek. "MUM!"

"Professor, you *didn't*?" Hermione scowled at her guest. "*Her face?* She's my daughter, for goodness sake. What have you done to her?"

Miss Granger's concern and growing irritation didn't phase Snape in the least. "*Evanesco!*" The contents of Rose's cauldron disappeared with a casual flick of his wand.

"What'd you do that for?" Rose bellowed. "You wasted a cauldron full of perfectly good..."

"*IM*perfect, *IN*ferior! A waste of good potion ingredients. You should apologize to your mother for wasting her hard-earned money that way."

Hugo tried without success to stifle a giggle. His sister had bullied him more times than he could count. It was fun to watch someone turn the tables on her for once.

"Ye of little faith." Snape raised an eyebrow at Miss Granger. "She plainly needed more incentive to cooperate."

"You conniving, vicious, hateful... GREASY GIT!" shouted Rose with as much venom as she could muster.

"Why, thank you," Snape replied with velvety smoothness. "Nice to know I haven't lost my touch." He turned to Miss Granger and smiled serenely. "Don't worry. Your daughter's face will be restored to its previous pristine beauty after she brews and consumes the *new and improved* version of that what did she call it oh yes, 'boring, old, simple, first-year potion.'" He then turned on his heel and pushed his formidable nose right into Rose's disfigured face. "Page twenty-three," he said with deathly quiet.

The girl swallowed hard and picked up her new text book, turning obediently to page twenty-three.

"And, my dear young lady," he added quietly, the threatening quality replaced with unmistakable playfulness, "if you are successful, I will teach you how to cast that boil hex *silently*." The last word was uttered just barely above a whisper.

Her mouth dropped open as she imagined all the people she would love to use that hex on. A feral grin spread across her face.

"On one condition," he added in an exaggerated attempt at false secrecy, "You don't tell your mother it was I who taught you."

"Me, too?" asked Hugo anxiously.

Snape nodded as he put his finger to his lips and shot Miss Granger a wary glance. Rose smirked. Hugo giggled out loud. Hermione gave them all a suspicious look out of the corner of her eye, then shook her head with a smile. Perhaps the evening would turn out well after all.

Sure enough, after Rose followed the new recipe to the letter, with a little coaching from Snape on ingredient preparation, the boil on her cheek disappeared without a trace and she didn't have to hold her nose to drink it.

After she took a minute to admire her handiwork in the bathroom mirror, Snape offered to teach her the boil hex.

"Actually, as many bullies and clueless losers as I would like to use that on, I think I would rather learn the spell you used to heal Hugo's finger." She looked up hopefully into Snape's black eyes.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. That was actually a very mature request coming from a twelve-year-old. He hated to disappoint her but... "I'm afraid that's a very advanced and powerful spell."

"But it looked so simple," she insisted.

"Looks can be deceiving. It takes a great deal of concentration and vivid visualization skill, and you must utter the words and melody with precision."

Rose set her jaw in determination. "I can do all of those things. Ask Mum. Ask any of my teachers at school."

"She's like I was, very advanced," admitted Hermione with a proud nod towards her daughter. "But it will have to wait. Now, it's dinner time."

Both kids groaned with disappointment.

"I'll teach you the boil hex after dinner," he promised in an attempt to placate them, "but the healing spell will have to wait until next week."

"And I'm afraid that you..." Hermione directed her gaze at Hugo. "... will not have much success with either until you get your own real wand next year."

"Awe *next year*? Why can't I get one tomorrow?"

"Wizarding laws against under-aged magic won't allow it," she informed him. "Sorry, but you will have to wait."

The table was already set, so each person grabbed a component of the meal and carried it into the dining room.

Everyone tucked into the steak and kidney pie, rolls, salad and iced tea. The conversation was sparse, but only because everyone was too busy eating to waste time with idle chit chat. After ice cream parfait for dessert, the table was cleared by all and Snape took the kids into the family room to instruct them in silent hexing techniques. He was pleasantly surprised at how fast Rose caught on, giving him a big welt on the end of his nose after only two minutes of practice. While using Professor Snape's wand, Hugo managed to inflict a small boil on the Professor's right hand, but he had to say the hex out loud to get it to work.

"Don't be discouraged, Hugo. The wand chooses the wizard. Next year when you acquire the one and only wand that is meant for you, it will be much easier. You'll see." Snape then steered the two children towards the computer and made a hasty retreat to the kitchen and Rose's new, improved boil cure.

"Merlin!" Hermione couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculous bubble at the end of Professor Snape's already over-large nose. After giving her a condescending glare which only made her laugh harder, he grabbed a cup from the cupboard, dipped it into the cauldron and drank heartily. After a moment, the boil popped and vanished, along with the one on his hand.

"I hope she doesn't get herself into trouble with that hex!" Hermione said with a wary look at the responsible party.

"I merely imparted the information, madam. What your children do with their newly acquired knowledge will be a direct reflection on the moral values you instilled in them during their formative years."

"Oh, *please!*" She rolled her eyes with mock incredulity.

They both chuckled.

By then, Hermione had finished tidying up, and they settled in at the kitchen table, each with a large snifter and two fingers of cognac.

Snape swirled the golden-brown liquid around in the glass and waved it under his nose. "Nice." His eyes narrowed as he took in the relaxed and content expression on his hostess' face. He thought about Winky's prediction. For a split second, he contemplated sharing it with her, but he decided that it would be cruel to give her false hopes, since even Winky wasn't infallible.

He decided to change the subject. He reached into his pocket and pulled out her shrunken case file, then he enlarged it and pushed it across the table.

Hermione looked up at him inquisitively. "So, what do you think?"

Snape shrugged. "Everything in here points to Umbridge."

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. "That's what Harry and I thought, too."

Snape kept silent for a moment. Finally he said, "If even Potter can see it, then it's too obvious."

Hermione scowled at his inferred insult to her friend's intelligence. "Then who?"

"Could be Umbridge. Could be she has an accomplice. Or... perhaps she is being set up."

"Who would want to frame her?"

Snape scoffed. "Can you think of no one who would like to see her rot in Azkaban?"

Hermione let out a sound that was supposed to be a sardonic laugh, but it sounded more like a grunt. "But most of them are Muggle-borns. I doubt that any Muggle-born would blackmail another just to make the 'Pink Toad' look bad."

"Perhaps this Muggle-born resents the others for denying their true blood-lines and decided to kill two birds with one stone."

"I don't know. I still think Umbridge is involved in some way."

"Perhaps. One thing is certain. You must gather your evidence in complete secrecy. If the guilty party finds out what you are trying to do..."

"I know. They would sabotage the investigation and probably ruin my and Harry's reputations in the process."

"I have an idea that may shed some light on the case and help you be certain that you are on the right track with Umbridge."

"Oh?"

"If you don't mind a bit of espionage on my part." Miss Granger's eyes grew wide with anticipation. "But I would require Potter's invisibility cloak to pull it off."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'd rather not say. It's not that I don't trust you, but if you don't know anything, you can't get into trouble if my plan backfires."

"How soon do you want it?"

"Could you have it here next Sunday?"

"Sooner, if you'd like."

Snape shook his head. "I'll have some preparations to make, so next Sunday will be fine."

Hermione nodded. "I'm sure Harry won't have a problem with loaning it to you."

They each held their snifters and tapped them together. "To espionage," Hermione suggested.

Snape nodded his consent.

They sipped their cognac in companionable silence for a couple of minutes before Hermione remembered her promise to Kingsley. "Oh, I almost forgot. I have good news and bad news. Kingsley is resigning next week."

Snape's face went slack and his jaw dropped. After a moment of shocked silence, he cautiously crafted his next question, already afraid of the potential answer. "And who, pray tell, will his replacement be?"

"Most likely Umbridge."

Professor Snape grimaced and pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he emptied his snifter in one gulp and slammed the glass down so hard that Hermione was amazed it remained intact.

"More, please."

She rose and retrieved the bottle from the cabinet. "Help yourself."

"You may regret that," he warned as he served himself a generous portion. "So you have until... next spring to crack the case?"

"She will likely take office in May if we can't build an air-tight case against her by then."

Snape eyed Miss Granger with disdain. "Please tell me that wasn't the good news."

Hermione's face lit up. "No, actually, the good news is that Kingsley wants to open a restaurant that serves food laced with magical potions that will enhance the dining experience."

"And why should I consider this good news?"

"Because he wants you to help him develop the potions that will be added to the food. He wants to offer you a job!"

Snape scoffed. "I would sooner live in poverty than work in a restaurant cooking food for the masses. Tell him to hire a house-elf."

Hermione shook her head and sighed in exasperation. "No, you wouldn't work in the restaurant; you'd help him develop undetectable potions that could enhance the food magically, and you would probably need to supply the restaurant with those potions. The chefs would then add the required dose to each entrée. You need never set foot in the place if you don't want to."

"Oh," Snape relaxed his defensive posture a bit. "Well in that case, I won't guarantee my cooperation, but it sounds interesting enough to meet and hear what he has to say."

Hermione beamed at him. "Kingsley will be very happy."

"He's almost too happy most of the time. I don't know how long I can stand to be around him, but I'll give it a try."

The Meeting

Chapter 26 of 35

Snape goes over the conditions of his participation with Harry and Hermione.

Disclaimer: All of the characters and their abilities, etc. belong to the glorious J.K. Rowling. I make no money, I take no credit.

A/N: Many thanks go out to NervousAboutAngels for all of her hard work on my behalf with this story and with my other fanfic, "The Potion Master's Assistant." For personal reasons she has had to withdraw her assistance, but I wish her all the best in her future endeavors.

My long-standing on-line friend and beta for both stories, JENGEOGE, is still hanging in there. Her input always adds insight and helps to improve my writing and keep me straight.

And I would be lost without the help of WriterMerrin here at TPP. My grammar mistakes are many. Their vigilance is constant!

Chapter 26

The Meeting

Monday morning found Hermione back at Hogwarts to continue developing her lesson plans for the coming term. Flitwick had been kind enough to leave her his well-used lesson plans, but she still felt the need to review them all and make changes to reflect her personal experience and expertise.

Hermione was also ferrying her personal hygiene items back and forth between her house and the castle, but she finally decided that if she planned to spend every weekend at home for the foreseeable future, she would need to purchase duplicate toiletries and some additional clothing as well.

The only other problematic detail about living in the heavily enchanted castle was the lack of electricity and everything else Muggle that required it, especially her new computer. And since her owl, Gomez, had taken up residence at Professor Snape's house, she had no choice but to hike up the endless steps to the owlery for a school owl if she needed to communicate with him, or anyone else for that matter.

After lunch, she sat at her desk and had begun composing a letter to Harry. The easiest way to ask if Snape could borrow his Invisibility Cloak would be to simply ask in the letter, but Snape had implied that his plan could involve unscrupulous activities, so she opted to request a lunch meeting with Harry instead. If the letter fell into the wrong hands, no one would think twice about the two old friends planning lunch together.

Once she finished her short missive to Harry, she retrieved another sheet of her personal stationery to write a quick note to Professor Snape. She figured that one trip to the owlery per day would give her more than enough exercise. She had been a parchment-pusher for too long, but she hoped that she would soon get back in shape just from navigating the castle's endless staircases.

She dipped her quill into the inkwell and had just touched the parchment when there came a delicate tapping at the glass behind her. She turned to the delightful sight of Gomez with an envelope tied to his leg. As a joyous smile spread across her face, she threw the window open wide and eagerly gathered the affectionate bird into her arms. He snuggled up to her, engulfing her shoulders within his broad wingspan in an obvious attempt at an embrace. Then he folded his wings and allowed her to hug him as well, his face rubbing tenderly against her cheek.

"I love you, too, Gomez," she admitted as she gently kissed the top of his head.

He hopped to her desk and stuck out his leg to remind her of his burden. "Oh, sorry. I almost forgot!" she admitted with a giggle. She didn't need to see the Slytherin green wax seal or the 100% papyrus to know who had sent it.

My Dearest Miss Granger,

I hope this letter finds you well and that you arrived at Hogwarts without incident.

I would like to extend my deep gratitude for your hospitality both yesterday and Sunday last. I apologize for not writing the proper letter of thanks last week. I hope you can forgive my faux pas.

I am also writing with the hope that this letter reaches you before you speak to Potter on my behalf. I only ask that you keep in mind the very delicate nature of my request and that such things are better taken care of in person where they can be kept confidential and private.

It is with this same idea in mind that I have an additional request of you which I would prefer to make in person. It has to do with your little problem of which we spoke. Would you have a few minutes later this week to meet with me? Say the same seedy place you took your friends during your fifth year at two p.m. tomorrow? The favor from Potter can wait until later as we discussed. Please bring any and all information you have gathered on said problem.

Once again, I thank you sincerely for the delightful meal and the entertaining company. Hugo is as engaging as ever, and I must admit that Rose is beginning to grow on me. I only hope that, in time, my unique personality will grow on her as well.

I anxiously look skyward for your response.

Forever yours,

S. S.

Hermione read the letter with a mixture of delight and irritation. Was he actually afraid that she would put his request to borrow the cloak in writing? Did he think her a naïve child?

But he'd enjoyed their dinner and signed it "Forever yours." She sighed deeply. If only it were true. And the "seedy" meeting-place he'd mentioned could only be a reference to the Hog's Head Inn where she and Harry met with other students for the first time to form Dumbledore's Army. Well, at least she would get to see him tomorrow! Her irritation at his earlier presumptions dissipated as she dated the blank sheet of parchment already in front of her and quickly penned her affirmative reply.

After tying both Harry's letter and the Professor's to Gomez's leg, she gave him a quick hug and a kiss. "Please come back to me!" she begged before scratching him behind his head and sending him on his way. "I'll have some treats waiting for you," she promised after his disappearing silhouette.

The sun hung low in the late summer sky by the time Gomez reached Snape's house. He still had both letters tied to his leg, and Snape could plainly see Harry's name on the other envelope, so he gave the overworked bird his pick of the dinner he was about to consume along with some pumpkin juice and sent him on his way.

What a lovely appetizer, Snape thought as he lifted the now-familiar peach envelope to his anxious nose. After taking a deep breath and holding it in for a long moment, he was pleased to see that she could meet him tomorrow at two. The more he contemplated her quest to uncover the blackmailer, the more he was convinced that she (and possibly even Potter) could end up in Azkaban without his assistance. At the very least, they could fall from public grace if they were not very, very careful. They had been the only two people in the wizarding world to lift a finger on his behalf twenty years ago. He couldn't let them fall victim to the blackmailer's manipulative ways. His spy senses told him that their every move would be watched if they got close to uncovering the truth. He shuddered at the possibilities. But if they left the spying to him, and if they both had air tight alibis when he was working behind the scenes, perhaps the true blackmailer could be caught completely unaware.

Noon on Tuesday arrived, but instead of joining the rest of the staff in the Great Hall, Hermione visited the elves in the kitchen and collected enough sandwiches, crisps, cookies and tarts to feed a small army. She then Conjured a picnic basket for the acquired food and a huge insulated jug for some pumpkin juice. She shrunk it all down to fit into her robe's pocket and headed for Hogsmeade. She needed a few items from the stationary store and figured it would appear more innocent if she stopped at the Hog's Head after an hour or so of shopping.

At two p.m. sharp, Hermione pushed open the door to the Hog's Head and stopped dead in her tracks. She had not set foot in the place for years and found that it was not the grimy, dark, miserable hole-in-the-wall that it used to be. She assumed that Aberforth must have retired, because she had no recollection of his death being announced in the *Prophet*, and he was nowhere to be seen. In his place behind the bar stood a lovely young woman with long blonde hair and a pleasant smile. Another girl, whose perfect almond eyes and dark hair and skin reminded Hermione of something from an Egyptian Hieroglyphic wall mural, was busy wiping down vacant tables. In short, the place was bright, cheery, and spotless!! Even the windows were clean. Hermione took two steps back to look at the sign outside just to reassure herself that she was in the right place. Once reassured, she entered and searched the room for a familiar face. Finding none, she sat at a booth across the room with a good view of the main entrance. The exotically dark girl quickly stashed her cleaning rag in exchange for a note pad and quill and made her way to Hermione's side almost instantly.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. Welcome to the Hog's Head. Would you like a menu, or do you already know what you want?"

"A menu? Here?" Hermione subconsciously patted the shrunken picnic basket in her pocket.

"The food is quite good, actually, now that Clementine has access to the kitchen." The waitress tilted her head towards the barmaid. "Mr. Dumbledore didn't want her to cook at first, but as the place became cleaner and brighter, the clientele changed. We're more family oriented now, as you can see." She motioned outward with a sweep of her arm. Hermione couldn't help but notice the collection of decent-looking, clean-cut citizens, some with children, that peopled the tables.

"Mr. Dumbledore? Does he still own the place? Is he here now?" Hermione knew that Aberforth had only been a few years younger than his brother, Albus, which would mean he was now close to 170 years old. She couldn't imagine that he had much energy left to run a business.

"He's in back stocking shelves. Would you like to say hello?"

Hermione glanced around again. No one else had entered so far, and she still didn't recognize a soul, although an attractive young man with fair hair and hazel eyes couldn't seem to stop smiling at her from across the room. There was something familiar about that look, that smile. She just couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"I would love to see him, but I'm waiting for someone, so I'd better stay out here where I'm visible," she explained to the girl.

"No problem. I'll see if he'll come out. May I give him your name?"

Hermione grinned. "Just tell him I'm an old friend."

The girl flashed a puzzled look, but nodded and disappeared through a door behind the bar.

While she was gone, the young man who had been staring finally got up the nerve to make his way towards her. She figured he had probably recognized her from a history book or the many news articles about her that had appeared over the years in the *Prophet* and the *Quibbler*, but as she watched his approach, she recognized something more... an intimate familiarity. His walk, his posture, the way his eyes danced when he looked at her, his sneer as he glanced past her towards the door... Wait *his sneer*? Hermione turned her head to see what might have made the young man's features distort and discovered Harry sneaking up behind her as he tried to surprise her with a kiss on the cheek.

"Drat! Foiled again," Harry exclaimed jokingly. He and Hermione exchanged hugs and kisses, then she turned to resettle at the booth only to discover the young stranger had already slid in on her side and had made room for her to sit next to him. He raised his eyebrows in anticipation as their eyes met and patted the space she had previously occupied.

How presumptuous! she thought. But her instincts told her to trust him, so she did as she was told. Harry slid in across from them. Then both men spoke simultaneously.

"Who's your new friend?"

"What's *he* doing here?"

Hermione's jaw dropped in shock as she glared at the young stranger. She was about to retort when she was abruptly interrupted.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in!" exclaimed the gravelly ancient voice of Aberforth Dumbledore as he approached the table.

"Aberforth!" Harry stood and vigorously shook the old man's hand. Hermione stood to give him a peck on the cheek. The young stranger nodded in his direction but barely lifted his derriere off the seat before sitting again. Aberforth gestured, and Harry slid towards the wall to make room for him.

"Merlin, it's been years, you two," he said, smiling at Harry and Hermione in turn. "And decades since I've seen you, Severus!"

"Shhh! Not so loud," the stranger beside Hermione snarled through his teeth in a very familiar voice. His glare softened a bit with embarrassment at being discovered so easily. "What gave me away?"

Aberforth laughed. "You can Polyjuice away that giant eggplant on your face and those corn kernels that are supposed to pass for teeth, but no potion can get rid of your irritating glare or your arrogant swagger!"

"I do *not* swagger," he denied defensively. "That trait is reserved for Potters!"

Before Harry could retort, Aberforth continued. "And if that sneer you gave Harry hadn't given you away, your voice *certainly* would have."

"I happen to like your nose," Hermione came to Professor Snape's defense.

"Merlin, love *is* blind," exclaimed Aberforth. Harry tried unsuccessfully to stifle a snicker as Snape's eyes narrowed at him.

"It suits your face. And Aberforth, I'll have you know that the Professor's teeth are much improved since his years at Hogwarts." She turned back to Professor Snape, beaming. "They sparkle now."

The young face blushed deeply as Snape studied the napkin on the table before him. It was a relief to know that his years of suffering at the hands of a Muggle dentist had paid off after all.

"But Aberforth is right, I knew there was something familiar about you the moment I first saw you," admitted Hermione. "Something about the way you looked at me. And your voice definitely gave you away."

Snape scowled. "I must be out of practice."

"I would imagine that as long as you disguised your voice, only your very best friends would pick up on your mannerisms, Professor," Harry added helpfully. "I hadn't a clue who you were until you spoke."

"The old geezer here knew me from across the room!" Snape growled. "And he's about as close a friend as Mundungus Fletcher!"

"Old geezer, eh?" snarled Aberforth. "You'll only *wish* you look this good when you get to be my age!"

"In your dreams, you old fart!"

"Listen, you sorry arse, I suffered your ugly mug at least once a week for what, fourteen years? Fifteen? I'd have known it was you if you had stolen a hair off Rosemerta's pretty head!"

Snape shot him a look of disdain. "Speaking of barmaids... How much are you paying your barmaid and waitress? They certainly aren't here because of your charmingly persuasive personality!"

"At least they agreed to work here. If you ran the joint, I bet with your ingratiating, sarcastic, abrasive wit, even ~~dag~~ wouldn't last through the first week!"

Harry and Hermione stared uncomfortably back and forth at the two men as the banter became more heated. But just as Harry felt that he might have to break up a brawl between them, Snape smirked. Then the two started laughing loudly. "You're probably right, old man... Although, believe it or not, Winky has stayed with me for over twenty years."

Aberforth leaned over the table towards Snape with an astonished look. "Has she really?" Snape nodded. "Well, I'll be damned." A moment of companionable silence passed as Harry and Hermione let out their collective breaths of relief. Then Aberforth leaned back and slapped the table. "She's a house-elf. She doesn't count!"

"She does, too!" insisted Hermione indignantly.

Snape reached out and lightly touched her wrist. "He's joking, Miss Granger. No cause for alarm."

Harry raised a knowing eyebrow as Snape's hand lingered, and Hermione rested the fingers of her other hand on his.

"Still defending house-elves, Hermione?" Aberforth prodded her playfully.

"I guess I can't help myself," she said with a sheepish shrug.

"Sorry to hear about you and Weasley..." He changed the subject as Snape extricated his hand from her grasp and discretely slid it off the table. Aberforth noticed that Hermione's face showed momentary distress until her hand also disappeared. When she met his piercing blue eyes again, her look was one of contentment. He could only

deduce that she had found Snape's hand under the table and was managing to hold onto it. "... But then again, maybe I shouldn't be too upset about it if you aren't." He wagged his bushy grey eyebrows at them and flashed a derelict grin that made him look decades younger.

Hermione felt the heat on her face and could only imagine what shade of red she was turning when the waitress returned with a round of oak mead for everyone.

"On the house," insisted Aberforth with a nod. "It's not every day that we are graced with three war heroes, even if one is thinly veiled."

Snape snorted as they all raised their glasses.

"To a peaceful life," toasted Harry.

"Here, here!" joined in the others.

As the mead was consumed, the time passed with updates on the escapades of Harry and Hermione's children. Snape remained conspicuously silent during this part of the conversation even when Hermione mentioned his tutoring in the new potions making methods.

"So was it you who taught them the boil hex then?" Harry asked.

"How did you know?" asked Snape.

"Under-aged magic is monitored by the Aurors' Office," he explained. "I was on call last Sunday, and I saw the alert. But if it's a minor infraction, we don't investigate."

"Yes, I imagine if you were required to look into every incident of under-aged magic that took place in wizarding Britain, you would need a much larger staff," Snape commented. "It was hard enough to control at Hogwarts." He glared accusingly at Harry. "Some of you were trouble the moment you arrived."

Aberforth chuckled. "Too bad you can't teach anymore, old friend," he reflected with a melancholy air. He reached across the table to shake Snape's hand as he stood to leave. "I've got work to do, unlike some people!" He glared teasingly at Snape. Then he shook Harry's hand as he backed out of his space in the booth and turned to Hermione for a hug. The trio watched Aberforth's retreating frame with obvious affection.

Just then, the waitress reappeared with her quill and note pad at the ready.

"Give us a minute," Snape demanded quietly. With a quick nod, she instantly made her way to another table. When he knew she was out of ear-shot, he leaned into Miss Granger's side and whispered in her ear. "I'm going out back to Apparate to the Shrieking Shack. After you two consume another round, join me. But don't mention to Potter where you are going, and use the tunnel from the Whomping Willow to get there. Be certain you are not followed. My disguise is about to wear off, and I can't be seen." He stood and motioned for her to move so he could leave. As she did so, he squeezed her hand discretely then walked in the direction of the loo, his cloak billowing behind him.

"Isn't that weird?" Harry observed. "Now that Aberforth mentioned it, I can tell it's him. It's like Snape, but with a mask on."

Hermione nodded as she waved the waitress over. "Two more meads, please."

"What about your other friend?"

"Oh, he had to leave. He had an appointment."

"But I thought he just went to the loo," Harry chimed in. "Isn't he coming back?"

Hermione gave him a motherly glare as if Harry were a misbehaving child. "No," she repeated gently but firmly, "he had an *appointment*."

"But I thought you said that he wanted to ask me something?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Then what the *bloody hell* did I come all the way out here for?"

Hermione closed her eyes and willed herself to calm. "Please, keep your voice down. And besides, what am I, chopped liver? Let's just enjoy our mead and not worry about him."

"But..."

"Drop. It."

"Whatever." Harry pouted and rolled his eyes as his stomach churned. Snape would always be Snape no matter how much Polyjuice Potion he drank. But, Merlin's monochrome, now it seemed his rudeness was beginning to rub off on Hermione!

The second round arrived and was consumed in an awkward silence. Then Hermione pulled out her purse and retrieved a few coins to leave on the table.

"Are we leaving already? I thought this was a lunch meeting. I'm starved!"

"Relax, would you?" She placed a calming hand on his shoulder. "I've got a picnic basket full of food in my robe's pocket. Let's go enjoy it, shall we?"

"Is the food from Hogwarts' kitchen?"

"Where else?"

Harry's annoyance instantly dissipated at the thought of consuming an elf-cooked meal from Hogwarts. His mouth was already watering. It had been too long.

They both stood enthusiastically, their sour moods forgotten, and headed out the door. She led him through the streets and down the long path back to the school.

"Wanna go sit by the lake?"

"No, actually, I have something else in mind."

"Where, then?"

"It's a surprise."

"What could be nicer than under a tree by the lake?"

"Nothing, I suppose. But this destination is not about pleasantness. It's about," she leaned in and whispered in his ear, "keeping secrets."

"Oh?" He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Well, I don't care where we eat, as long as we eat *soon*!"

Hermione laughed. "You're as bad as Ron."

"No, no. Ron would have insisted we eat before we left the Hog's Head."

"And he would have still eaten the picnic lunch when we got to our destination," Hermione added.

They both started laughing as she dropped the wards at the front gate. While glancing over her shoulder periodically, Hermione led Harry on a meandering path that finally ended at the Whomping Willow. Everyone had thought the tree to be a lost cause after the destruction it suffered during the final battle, but over the years, it had managed to make a comeback. It wasn't quite as large or magnificent as it had been in its glory days, but it could still wreak havoc on anyone or anything that got too close. And best of all, the knotted root that held the secret to stilling its rage was located in the same place.

Hermione turned 180 degrees around as she cast a silent Notice-Me-Not charm. Then she used her wand to levitate a large rock over to the knotted root and let the rock fall with a thud. After a disbelieving glare from Harry, they shimmied through the roots and down into the secret tunnel that led back to the Shrieking Shack.

"Are we going where I think we're going?"

Hermione remained silent.

"For lunch?! That's disgusting! I think I've lost my appetite!"

"*Lumos!*" was her only reply as she lit their way with her wand. They walked the rest of the way in angry silence, with the exception of some grumbling from Harry when the passage shrunk to the point he had to stoop.

"I'm too old for this."

"You'll live."

"Maybe, but I'd like to live with my back in good working order."

By then they had arrived at the end of the tunnel. A disintegrating crate had already been pushed aside in anticipation of their arrival. Hermione climbed out first, and she was pleased to find Professor Snape restored to his familiar self, even though he was still wearing blue jeans and a tan jumper.

"It's about time," he remarked with disdain as Potter also emerged. "What took you so long?"

"You told me to be sure we weren't followed, so I took the scenic route around the school grounds for a while before we made it to the Whomping Willow."

"Are you certain no one saw you?"

"No one could have followed us through the front gate, because I reengaged the protective charms as soon as we were inside. And although I doubt they are as extensive as Dumbledore kept them during the war, they are still formidable. Besides, I cast a Notice-Me-Not charm before we slid under the tree."

"Oh, is that what you were doing?"

Hermione nodded at Harry and then turned to Professor Snape. "So, why all the cloak and dagger?"

"I'm sure you recall the fiasco that ensued the last time I appeared in public?"

Hermione huffed. "If only Stan Shunpike hadn't opened his big mouth. Aberforth won't talk, though, will he?"

Snape smirked. "He knows I'll hex him into next month if he does. And, in spite of the way we both behaved, he is one of the few people I can truly call a friend."

"He reminds me so much of his brother," commented Harry. "Especially now that he's older and his beard and hair are much longer, like Professor Dumbledore used to wear his."

Snape turned abruptly to Miss Granger, his mood suddenly much darker. "So, I'll ask again. What *is* she doing here? I told you the cloak could wait for this weekend!"

Hermione stepped back in dismay as the waves of his anger washed over her. "I asked him to come," she replied defensively. "This investigation concerns both of us. Both our reputations are on the line if things go wrong. He has a right to know what the game plan is." She felt her pulse rate jump as her uncertainty grew under his stormy gaze. "Besides, I asked him to meet me for lunch one day this week on your behalf, and he suggested today, so I thought I would kill two birds with one stone. Since this all concerns him as well, I thought it was logical to have him here."

"Well, you were wrong!" Snape snapped.

"Look, Professor, I know I'm not your favorite person, but..."

Snape spun on his heel to face Harry. "This is not about a lack of fondness, Mr. Potter." His look softened considerably as he reminded himself that Potter was innocent of any misjudgments in this case, for once. "It's not your company I object to. It's the circumstances. Until this investigation is over, we must not, *under any circumstances*, be seen together. No one must know that I am working behind the scenes on your behalf." His two cohorts nodded in understanding. "From now on, I will meet with you both separately. Miss Granger, with you back at Hogwarts, this would probably be the safest and most convenient place for us to meet if we cannot wait for our usual Sunday dinner ritual."

"Oh, so it's a ritual now?" asked Hermione with a touch of sarcasm, still resentful of his anger.

"Why here?" asked Harry. "I thought this would be the last place you would ever want to come back to."

Snape raised a wise eyebrow as one side of his mouth curled. "Precisely."

As comprehension dawned, Harry nodded. "Brilliant." He began to glance around the room and noticed that, although the dust was as thick as ever, there was no trace of the huge puddle of Snape's blood that had once discolored the floor boards. He looked back at his former professor who happened to be steeling a longing gaze at Hermione as she reached into her robe's pocket to retrieve their lunch and conjured a table cloth to cover one of the dusty crates. Harry smiled. He had seen that look on a much younger Snape's face in the Pensieve so very long ago. Harry now knew beyond doubt that Hermione held his heart. He would kill for her. He would die for her. He would spend the rest of his life in Azkaban for her, just as Harry would for Ginny. Hermione was indeed a very lucky witch.

Snape's heart filled with both pleasure and anxiety as he watched Miss Granger enlarge the basket and arrange the food for three people. "Umm... I hate to admit this, but I already ate."

Hermione turned towards him, disappointment evident. "Dessert, perhaps? Pumpkin juice, at least?"

"An elf-cooked Hogwarts meal, Professor." Harry also attempted to entice him. "It doesn't get much better than that."

"A Winky-cooked meal is just as good," Snape insisted with a grin.

"If not better," replied Harry and Hermione in unison.

"I'll be sure to pass on your compliments to her. She will be pleased beyond measure." He watched intently as Miss Granger continued to remove the culinary treasures hidden in the picnic basket. When she unearthed the treacle tarts, his willpower faltered. "Come to think of it, lunch at home was hours ago. Perhaps a mid afternoon snack is called for after all."

Hermione was so delighted that he had changed his mind that her irritation with his earlier attitude dissolved. She had been afraid that he would get the meeting over with and depart, but his relaxed demeanor gave her confidence that this would turn out to be a very pleasant afternoon after all. She conjured them each a comfortable chair, and they gathered around the make-shift crate-turned-table.

"So, Hermione tells me that you have a favor to ask," Harry attempted to jump-start the conversation that had lagged as they all tucked into their food.

Snape glanced at Potter and then at Miss Granger. "So you didn't tell him... Good girl." He smirked as he watched her ire rise.

"I'll have you know that I would not have put the request in writing even before your instructions. I made it through a war, if you recall. I helped hide Harry from Voldemort for almost a year. I wasn't born yesterday, you know!"

Snape's amusement grew in direct proportion to her irritation. "The war took place a long time ago, Miss Granger. You have not been a practicing Auror all these years as Mr. Potter has." He gave Potter a cursory nod. "I couldn't take the chance that your instincts for secrecy had grown weak over time."

"We could all use a bit of honing on our covert under-cover skills, Professor," Harry came to Hermione's defense.

"Yes, Polyjuice isn't enough to hide some identities, especially one as distinct as yours," Hermione needed him.

Snape pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes as he realized he was being ganged up on. "Fair enough," he admitted as he reached for a raisin-spice cookie. "None of us can afford complacency or all of us will fall. But in spite of my slip earlier, I still must insist that I am more of an expert at stealth, secrecy and gathering intel than either of you." He cast an appraising glare at Potter. "There will be times when I must keep you in the dark as to my activities, and I'll wager that nothing I learn will be admissible in court, but I will be able to help you discover who the real culprit is so you will know if you are on the right track. And I should be able to direct your search for credible evidence as well."

"Why can't you tell us of your plans?" asked Harry.

"So you can answer truthfully if asked. I will make you privy to any helpful information I uncover, but it will then be up to you to prove it to the Wizengamot."

"What if you get caught?" asked Harry cautiously.

Snape raised a sarcastic eyebrow. "I won't. You forget to whom you are speaking."

"You're rusty, as you proved this afternoon in the Hog's Head," Harry reminded him.

Snape's brow furrowed with impatience. "What are you so worried about?" he asked viciously, "That I'll drag you down with me if I am discovered?"

"No!" barked Harry, obviously offended. "I'm worried what might happen to you. I understand your need for secrecy; it's to protect us as well as you. But if I don't know what you're planning to do, I have no way of helping if something goes wrong." He dropped his eyes to the floor and took a deep breath. His next statement was almost inaudible. "I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you... or if you ended up back in Azkaban for trying to help us *again*."

"Nor could I," Hermione readily admitted. When she dared a glance at Professor Snape, he seemed all too interested in his cookie. She saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed hard. But when he finally looked up, he searched for Harry's face instead of hers.

"As your mongrel Godfather was so fond of saying, 'What's life without a little risk?' My life had become almost unbearably boring," he admitted as he turned his gaze to Miss Granger, "and lonely, until you wrote to me back in February. If you must know, I miss the intrigue, the challenge. I've actually been looking forward to this. And don't worry..." He glanced back in Potter's direction and gave him a crooked smile. "... I promise not to kill anyone except in self defense."

"Of course." Harry grinned back enthusiastically. "We really could use your help. We're at a loss as to how to proceed."

"I have several ideas for you, but the most important thing you both need to do is to throw off the blackmailer. Let him think you've lost the trail. Investigate other people. Miss Granger, didn't you tell me that you must log out every book from the Records Office?"

"Yes."

"It's time you started logging out books that have nothing to do with Umbridge or her activities. If she is indeed the guilty party, it is very important that she has no idea she's being investigated."

"Oh, dear. If she looks at the log as it stands now, she might get suspicious."

"Exactly." Snape turned his attention back to Potter. "What is your next move?"

"Based on Hermione's research, I was going to visit every hometown of every immigrant who claims to be a pure-blood since just before the second fall of Voldemort, retracing Umbridge's steps."

Snape adamantly shook his head. "Bad idea."

"But we need to identify anyone else who might currently be paying off the blackmailer," he protested.

Snape sighed in impatient exasperation. "You're too famous. You'll attract too much attention if you go around asking questions, even in a foreign country."

"And you're not?" asked Hermione incredulously.

Snape turned to her and flashed his trademark smirk. "I have plenty of Polyjuice and hair from my next door neighbors."

"Is that who you were posing as earlier?"

"Yes, the eldest son. He's off to University now, but before he left, I asked if he could collect hair from his family for me to use as a weed stop in my greenhouse. I'll probably pose as the father most of the time when I go to ask questions. He looks like an authority figure, and his hair is solid white, so I won't have to worry about picking the wrong person's hair from the zip-lock bag."

"Zip-lock bag?" asked Harry with a laugh.

"It's a Muggle thing," explained Hermione. "You wouldn't understand."

"Excuse me?" Harry glared indignantly at her. "How many years did I suffer through the Dursleys? I know what a zip-lock bag is. I just can't imagine Professor Snape using one."

Hermione snickered. "Sorry, Harry. I had forgotten about the Dursleys."

"Merlin. Wish I could do that!" Harry rolled his eyes skyward as if asking permission to banish his horrid blood relatives from his memory.

"Can we get back to the issue at hand, please?" urged Snape impatiently.

"Right. So, I go about my usual Auror duties and you track down potential victims. Hermione checks out random books on Fridays and tries to throw Umbridge off track."

"Or whoever it is we're after," interjected Snape. "One must be careful not to form an opinion. When that mistake is made, the evidence gathered tends to mold itself to the theory and the true culprit could ultimately go unnoticed."

"You've seen the evidence. Who else could it be?" asked Harry stubbornly.

"Perhaps she's being set up," Hermione suggested, remembering her earlier conversation with Professor Snape the previous Sunday.

"I still say she's involved somehow," insisted Harry.

"And you're probably right," Snape reassured him. "Knowing her, she is working to help someone, but she will maneuver her position to appear the victim if she were ever to be discovered. If she had attended Hogwarts, I have no doubt that she would have been sorted into Slytherin."

Hermione looked confused. "What do you mean, 'if she had attended Hogwarts?' If not there, then where did she go to school?"

"I have no idea. I just know there is no record of her ever attending school at Hogwarts. Perhaps she was home-schooled."

"Or," Harry said suspiciously, "Perhaps she is an immigrant as well." He shot Hermione a sly glance.

"Right, another research project that will focus on Umbridge. I still don't like the idea of wasting my time every Friday just to throw her off."

"You don't have to waste your time," Snape explained. "Just check out a variety of books, some that help you, some that don't. If she looks at the logs, she won't be able to tell that your research involves her."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. Then she silently chided herself for thinking that he would ever want her to waste her precious research time.

"Professor, you never told me what it was you wanted me for."

"I apologize, Mr. Potter. I don't need you, exactly. I need your Invisibility Cloak. Just for a few days. Could you pass it to Miss Granger at the Ministry on Friday so she can give it to me on Sunday?"

"May I ask what you need it for?"

"Something you'd be better off not knowing about. And when I actually do the deed, you will both need air-tight alibis."

"But how will we know exactly when you're going to do it?" asked Hermione.

"You can't expect for us to surround ourselves with people for days on end." Harry scowled, exasperated.

"Patience, Mr. Potter. I'm getting to that. We will need a discrete and undetectable form of communication. Miss Granger, I do believe that during your fifth year, you came up with such a system for Dumbledore's Army, did you not?"

Before Hermione could answer, Harry blurted out, "The coins!"

"Of course!" she added.

"Only this time, may I suggest something we will be less likely to accidentally spend?" asked Harry. "Mine almost ended up in Madame Puddifoot's till several times."

"We could use Muggle credit cards. I get these fake cards in the mail constantly," Hermione suggested.

"As do I," admitted Snape. "Good idea. They fit easily into a pocket."

"They would survive the laundry," she added. "But they're only good for a very short message."

"Not a problem. There are only two messages I would ever need to send. The first is 'alibi,' which would mean that for, say, the next two hours, you would both need to be seen in front of several other people, and I would advise, in this case, the more the merrier."

"Perhaps the message should read, 'friends.' It sounds less suspicious than the word 'alibi,'" Hermione suggested.

"Good idea," Snape agreed. "The other message would be to arrange a meeting. To simplify matters, we could always meet here at two p.m. and the only thing that would have to appear on the card is the date."

"But two p.m. won't work for me once school starts. I'll have classes to teach."

"And I could be on a stake out or in a staff meeting or something. I can't always guarantee that I can make it here by two p.m. either."

Snape's lips formed a thin line as he appraised his two cohorts as if they were back in his classroom. "Oh*please!* When the Dark Lord Summoned me, I dropped what I was doing and Apparated. A couple of pathetic whiners, you lot!"

"You wouldn't curse us if we were late, would you, Professor?" asked Harry playfully.

"Don't try my patience, boy!" retorted Snape.

"What patience?" quipped Hermione.

Harry snickered while Snape ignored her comment. "We could use a series of numbers to convey a time as well as a date. If either does not suit you, you can set a different one that does and send it back to me. That is, of course, if Miss Granger can make the charm work both ways." He raised his eyebrows at her in challenge.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "I wouldn't be much of a Charms Professor if I couldn't, now would I?"

Snape smirked. "If we get into a bind, I suppose we could send our Patronuses."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Harry confided. "Your doe Patronus was publicized during your trial. Someone might remember and recognize it."

"Very astute observation, Potter, but that will no longer be a problem"

"Has it changed?" Hermione asked anxiously.

Snape nodded. "I cast it this morning for the first time since I used it to lead you to the Sword of Gryffindor in the Forest of Dean." Harry and Hermione both leaned forward in anticipation. "And I no doubt have you to thank for the change, Miss Granger."

"Is it an otter now?" Harry couldn't resist blurting out his hope.

"No, but it could still cause a great deal of commotion if I can't control it better."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry and Hermione in unison.

"It's a Phoenix."

The two former students gasped in awe. "Dumbledore's Patronus," whispered Harry.

"But why do you attribute its new form to me?" Hermione asked, obviously bewildered.

"I'll explain later." He gave her a look of finality which let her know not to press further. She should have known better than to ask such a private question in front of Potter.

"What do you mean by the control issue?" Harry reiterated his question.

"A Phoenix cycles from chick to dull feathered immature, to glorious adult, to decrepity aged, and after a good burn, back to chick. If I can manage to create a chick or an immature version of the Phoenix instead of the glorious adult that everyone once was familiar with, no one would realize what it was, and there would be no speculation as to Albus Dumbledore's possible resurrection."

"Yeah, a chick would be perfect," Hermione thought out loud.

"I don't recall anyone with a baby bird Patronus," Harry added jokingly. "First a doe and then a baby bird. The fierce and evil Severus Snape! No one would ever suspect." He and Hermione openly laughed at the thought.

"A very *large* baby bird!" Snape snapped curtly. But even he couldn't help but see the humor in its absurdity. "And I'm not sure yet if I can pull it off. Hopefully, it will never be necessary. But no matter what form it takes when it arrives, it will not deliver its message until you are alone and have cast the necessary charms to assure complete privacy."

"Of course, sir." Harry laughed as he tried to recapture his composure. He felt like he was back at school and had just gotten away with doing something naughty.

Snape looked intently at the mirthful Potter and Miss Granger in turn, lingering a bit longer on the latter as it pained him to release her from his gaze. Her laughter was like a tonic to him. Her eyes like the sun lighting his world. It pained him even more to make his next statement because he knew the afternoon's pleasantries would soon be over. "I believe that covers everything, yes?"

They both nodded. Hermione's entire demeanor sagged as she realized that their meeting was about to end and she wouldn't get to see her precious professor again until Sunday. And owls were so much slower than email.

"Oh, one more thing, Mr. Potter, how soon will you require your cloak back?"

"As soon as possible, if you don't mind. It comes in handy at work sometimes."

"Yes, I imagine it does. In that case I will hand deliver it to your home. I would like to avoid setting foot in the Ministry if at all possible."

Harry smirked. "Gee, I can't imagine why."

Snape began to turn in a circle and wave his wand systematically as he dropped the privacy and anti-Apparition wards. He could see Miss Granger's face fall with each flick of his wand. He had to admit, if only to himself, that the idea of going home without her did nothing to lift his spirits.

Harry sensed their need for a moment alone. "Well, this has been fun, but I've got work to do. My lunch hour was up hours ago." He quickly shook Snape's hand and gave Hermione's shoulder a squeeze. "I'll expect to hear from you," he said with a nod to Hermione, "when my credit card is ready." She nodded. "Later then." He stepped away and vanished with a loud crack.

"I really enjoyed today," Hermione admitted quietly as she closed the gap between them, "in spite of the fact that you got so mad at me for inviting Harry." She reached for the soft combed cotton of his jumper.

"You understand my reasons, don't you?" he asked as he placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Of course. But you could have just explained it to me. You didn't have to get so mad."

He gently pushed her back so he could gaze into her eyes. His stare was stern but kind. He needed her to see the sincerity in his next statement. "I have a short fuse, Miss Granger. You, of all people, should know that. And although the remorse I feel over the incident is genuine, I can say with certainty that no amount of remorse will prevent me from snapping at you again in the future. That aspect of my personality will never change."

She nodded sadly as she tried to snake her arms around his waist. "I know how you are, and I don't care. I only know that I miss you terribly when we're not together."

He finally relented and pulled her close. "I miss you, too," he whispered as he laid his cheek on top of her head. They allowed themselves a few moments of silent companionship. Then Snape kissed her forehead and extricated himself from her grasp. "Sunday will be here before you know it. Then school will start and you will be too busy to miss me. In the mean time, let's focus on the task at hand."

"Agreed," she pronounced with a determined nod. "But do you have time to explain about your Patronus before we go?"

Snape sighed heavily. "I suppose." He felt apprehensive about being left alone with her. He still didn't trust himself to keep his emotional or physical distance.

"What could a magnificent Phoenix possibly have to do with little old me?"

He delicately caressed her cheek as his eyes bore into hers. "Can't you see?" He smiled as he shook his head. "It's not out of deference to Albus Dumbledore the manipulative old coot! You pulled my body from the jaws of death in this very room, and you resurrected my soul with your letter back in February. I was withering away, Miss Granger. You and your children gave me a reason to remain among the living. These last few months I have felt like a Phoenix rising from the ashes. I was not at all surprised by the change."

Hermione's eyes grew wider with each of his words. Her heart soared as she could see the sincerity in his endless black eyes, hear it in his velvet voice. Tears began to well up in her eyes at the thought that she could have such a positive impact on this legendary man's tragic life.

At the sight of water in Miss Granger's eyes, Snape felt a surge of emotion that made his body react in a very embarrassing way. He dropped his hand from her face and took a step back. "Now," he began to hastily move the conversation in a safer direction, "I believe we both have some work to do. Should I send you a few bogus credit cards to charm?"

Hermione would have needed a surgically sharpened silver Potions knife to cut the thick sexual tension that stretched between them. One quick glance downward let her know what he was trying to do and why. But when the notion of shagging him right there on the dusty floor crossed her mind, she couldn't help but turn beet red and look away as she felt the heat surge from her face to her loins.

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes?" She gasped slightly as their eyes met.

"Credit cards... should I send you a few?"

"Oh, yes." She nodded absently, looking back to an empty spot on the floor with longing.

Although a woman's sexual desires don't manifest as obviously as a man's do, Snape could still read the signs. Her pulse, her respiration, her perspiration, her sudden lack of concentration... Caressing her cheek had obviously been a bad idea. It was not a gesture a friend such as Potter would have made. He had to get better control of himself around her or they would be each other's undoing. "Why don't you head back and I'll erase any evidence that we were ever here?"

Her face filled with disappointment, but she knew it was for the best. Besides, she wanted their first time to be someplace nicer than the dusty hard floor of the Shrieking Shack. And, by Merlin, she promised herself there *would be* a first time for them... some day. But she took a step in his direction because one more hug would certainly be a nice way to say goodbye.

"Into the tunnel *now!*" He threw her a mock scowl which quickly morphed into a smile. If he let her have her way, they might never leave.

"I'm going, I'm going." She climbed down through the hole and turned back just long enough to throw him a kiss.

Never one for sentimentality, he simply rolled his eyes then added, "GO!" with such authority, she instantly disappeared from his view. He stood in still silence for a few moments as he stared mournfully at the space she had just occupied. Then he took a deep breath and began to erase all traces of their presence, even their footprints in the dust. One last turn to double-check, then in an instant of silent spinning, he was gone.

The Spell

Chapter 27 of 35

Rose attempts the healing spell on Snape.

Disclaimer: Although I own none of this, I thank and bow to J. K. Rowling for turning a blind eye as I play shamelessly with her invention.

A/N: As always, I also thank my marvelous beta, JENGEOURGE, for her help in keeping my characters in character and my story coherent. I also must extend my gratitude to WriterMerrin and the staff here at TPP for their relentless pursuit of perfect grammar and punctuation.

I would also like to apologize in advance for the song lyrics. I used an on-line Latin translator. I know nothing about Latin, having never taken it in school. Sometimes there were several words to pick from to represent the English word, and I have no idea if I chose the best or the worst of the lot.

Chapter 27

The Spell

After what felt like months instead of days, Sunday afternoon arrived, and with it, Professor Snape. Hugo ran to the door and flailed his arms around until they grabbed hold of Snape's Disillusioned robes and anxiously dragged him inside.

"Gran has been telling Rose all about your part in the war," he announced excitedly. Then he whispered, "but I don't think my dad likes you very much. He didn't get very good grades in your class, did he?" asked the boy sheepishly as the charm's effects slowly dripped off and Snape's long, lean form came into view.

"What did he tell you?"

Poor Hugo turned bright red. "I'd rather not say, sir. It was very disrespectful." They Hugo pulled himself up to his full height and pushed his bottom lip up in defiance. "And I told him so!"

"Well, thank you kind sir, for your gallantry on my behalf. But I'm certain that your opinion fell on deaf ears," Snape remarked snidely.

"My father's not deaf!" retorted Hugo.

Snape couldn't help but snort with laughter. "No, Hugo, that means that he paid you no heed." Hugo seemed just as clueless as he had a moment ago. "He chose not to listen to you, or at least he didn't value your opinion of me."

"Ooohh." The boy finally caught on. "He pretended to be deaf."

"Precisely."

"Yeah, that's pretty much what happened."

"So is this your way of warning me that your sister still doesn't like me?"

"That's it in a nutshell, sir."

Snape nodded thoughtfully. Well, he was used to blatant loathing from his students and just about everyone else, for that matter. Miss Granger, on the other hand, greeted him in the hallway with a kiss on the cheek. Then she lead the way to the kitchen. After being told that there was nothing he could do to help with the dinner prep, Snape settled down at the kitchen table on this late Sunday afternoon in August and began flipping through the pages of Rose's new potions text to find a suitable recipe to coach the kids through.

"So, Professor, are you going to make good on your promise?" asked Rose in a persnickety tone.

"What promise is that?" Snape asked warily. At times she almost reminded him of a Slytherin with her high degree of manipulative skills.

"Don't you remember last week? You said you would teach me the healing spell you used on Hugo."

He sighed deeply with dismay at her question. It seemed that she had not forgotten about it as he had hoped she would. "I also told you it was very advanced magic and you may not be able to master it at your age."

"And I told you with certainty that I could!"

Snape put on his best sneer. He had been reserving it for her, after all. "Arrogance, although not exclusively a Gryffindor trait, does seem to run rampant in your particular house." He raised his eyebrow at her.

She responded with a stone face. "And what's so hard about this spell, then?"

"Well," he pondered as he contemplated just how difficult he would try to make it for her, "the incantation is somewhat long, and it must be memorized and recited with precision. There is also a melody that must be followed, and although the key is not crucial, the melody is."

"Mum says that I have a pretty good singing voice, so staying on key should be no problem, and I can memorize just about anything that I read in only a couple of tries," she insisted. "So it should be easy."

Snape narrowed his eyes. He most definitely didn't like her attitude and had an almost overwhelming desire to cut her sizable ego to shreds, but he also very much wanted to get on her good side. He felt that, until he succeeded in that department, Sunday afternoons would continue to be an emotional rollercoaster for all involved. "Alright, I'll teach you the words and melody, but that's the easy part. You said last week that you had powers of concentration well beyond your years. This spell will truly put them to the test."

"Oh, yeah?" Her countenance reeked skepticism. "How so?"

Snape felt that the girl's tenacity and determination were both admirable and infuriating at the same time. "You must *will* the patient to wellness, so to speak. You must be able to visualize the injury fully healed and the person completely recovered with full use of the damaged area. It takes a great deal of concentration and visualization skills..."

"I can do that," she boldly interrupted him.

"I'm not finished yet," he said in a deathly quiet tone. "And if you interrupt me again, this lesson will be at an end. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," she replied meekly, her ego finally somewhat deflated.

"You understand the principles of magic, yes?"

"That the energy from our willpower combines with the spells we use and is concentrated and directed by our wands to create the desired effects?"

Snape couldn't stifle his sneer. "Straight from the text." He pulled out his wand and began to caress it with his fingers. "But do you understand that, when you perform this particular spell, you are using your energy to direct and accelerate the patient's own body to heal itself?"

"Oooh!" Her eyes grew wide with wonder.

"This is why you must put your personal feelings aside. If you are too attached to someone, you could lose your objectivity and hence your ability to concentrate. If you hate someone, you might not want them to get well and the spell would be rendered ineffective. But you must still care about the person enough to want to heal them. You must tap into a higher type of caring... universal... unconditional. You must keep in mind that to heal this person, even if he is your worst enemy, is to heal yourself, because we are all connected."

Rose nodded thoughtfully. "Kind of like Eastern philosophy. We are all one drop in the great ocean of spirit."

Hermione glanced at Snape as Rose spoke. She knew that Rose had picked up a couple of books on world religion from the Muggle library over the summer for some light reading. Did she just see a look of astonishment cross his face? Or was she imagining it? Whatever it might have been, he was now wearing his usual impassive and inscrutable mask.

"That's the idea, yes," he admitted. "So, shall I teach you the words?"

"I'm ready when you are."

"It's rather long and in Latin. Perhaps a piece of parchment would be helpful."

Rose produced the necessary writing implements, and Snape went to work copying down the spell for her as he spoke.

"Oh Lumen Eternus,

Succurro mihi sano is vulnus.

Quis lace seorsum

Lunctum iterum.

Cum amor quo mea pectus,

Aufero poena do illae cruciatus animus.

"Roughly translated it means:

Oh Eternal Light,

Help me to heal this wound.

What has been torn apart,

Must be reunited.

With love from my heart,

Remove the pain of this tortured soul."

"That's beautiful," whispered Hermione. Professor Snape tilted his head toward her in agreement.

"And the melody?"

"It sounds rather like a Gregorian chant, but let's be sure you have the words memorized precisely first," he chided her.

Rose scowled at him. She felt that he was holding her back. "But wouldn't knowing the melody help me to remember the words?"

Snape scowled back. "This is the way I teach it. I don't need to explain my reasons to you. Do you wish to learn it or not?"

"Control freak," she mumbled.

"Rose!" Hermione admonished.

"I will say this only once, young lady," Snape stood and loomed menacingly over her. "If you wish me to teach you *anything* potions, spells, incantations, transfigurations," he growled through gritted teeth, "you must learn it *my way* or not at all. My methods are tried and true. They have stood the test of time. I *do not* need suggestions from a..." He stopped as he realized that his desire for an amiable relationship with her was fast rushing down the drain with each of his biting words. With great effort, he swallowed the scathing insult he was about to hurl at her. "... a young, inexperienced student," he finished. His lips stretched into a thin tight line as he breathed deeply and willed himself to calm.

Rose snatched up the parchment with the Latin incantation written in Snape's spiky handwriting and turned to leave the kitchen.

"Just where do you think you're going with that?" He barked.

"To the family room to memorize it," she barked back with her chin sticking out at him.

"Let me hear you pronounce it first. Pronunciation is just as important as the melody."

Rose rolled her eyes dramatically and huffed for added effect. Then she held up the parchment, cleared her throat, and began to recite the words slowly and dramatically. When she reached the word "mihi," Snape stopped her.

"This is not Shakespeare. And it's not 'myhigh,' you insolent little..."

"Professor," Hermione scolded him gently.

He gritted his teeth and steadied himself before continuing. "In Latin, the letter 'I' is pronounced 'ee,' so the word sounds like 'meehee,' not 'myhigh.'"

"Oh, so it is," the girl said with a flippant wave of her hand as if the mistake was no big deal.

"The slightest mispronunciation will render the incantation useless. It seems you require my help after all." His sneer made her uncomfortable, and she dropped her gaze to the parchment in her hand. After a moment of pregnant silence, he figured that perhaps she needed some encouragement. "Everything else was adequate up to that point," he admitted grudgingly. "By all means, proceed."

She continued with her recitation and managed to finish with no more corrections needed. Then she read it again from the beginning, and this time her execution was flawless. Finally, she lowered the paper and said it word for word, already memorized. Snape lifted an eyebrow and nodded his approval. "Acceptable, but let me hear it once more to be sure."

Rose repeated herself in what she obviously considered a needless exercise. "Could we start on the melody now *sir*?" she asked with overt politeness.

Snape shot a sideways glance at Miss Granger and caught her attempting to stifle a snicker. He was not amused. He turned his attention back to Rose. "Very well. As I mentioned before, it sounds similar to a Gregorian chant." He sang the first line and waited for her to repeat it. Then the next, and the next. The melody followed a typical Gregorian chant style with all words in a monotone until the dip at the end of the line. Although the longer lines were a bit more complicated, most of the incantation's melody was very basic.

She got it right on the second read-through. She could do it without his help and without sneaking a peak at the parchment on the third try. Snape kept his well-schooled, stony expression in place, but inwardly he couldn't help but be impressed with the precocious twelve-year-old.

"Good work, Rose," Hermione praised her. She knew from experience that Professor Snape would not tell her so, but a silent Professor Snape was usually a respectably impressed Professor Snape.

"Ah, yes, but now comes the hard part."

Rose moved closer to him, her wand held tightly in her hand. "How will I know if I can do it if I have no one to practice on?"

"Not a problem. I volunteer myself as guinea pig." Snape reached for his potions knife and spelled it clean with an antiseptic spell, then he carefully rolled up the sleeve of his left arm, revealing the ugly Dark Mark. Even though she had seen it before, it still made Rose shiver.

Hugo, who had been sitting at the table and quietly taking in the entire lesson, leaned in for a better look at the evil-looking tattoo. "Whatever possessed you to do that to yourself, sir?" he asked innocently.

Snape looked up into Hugo's sweet face, astonished at the question. As deep pain replaced his astonishment, Snape quietly answered the boy. "What, indeed, my young friend. I so desperately wanted to fit in at school, but I was a hopelessly inept social misfit. As a result, my choice of friends was somewhat limited. I listened to people who *claimed* to have my best interests at heart, and evil possessed me, Hugo, *pure evil*. I lost myself when I took that mark. And I had to lose the one person that meant more to me than anything in this world to realize the mistake I had made. Be careful the company you keep," he warned as he glanced back and forth between the two kids. "Don't let your peers talk you into anything that your heart and soul tell you are wrong. It is better to walk alone down the path of light than to walk down the path of evil surrounded by so-called friends."

Hermione and the children stared at him in shocked silence for what seemed like an agonizingly long time. Hermione had never heard him speak of his reasons for turning to Voldemort. But she knew what it was like to have no friends. She wondered at that moment just how different her life might have turned out had Harry and Ron not befriended her after the Troll incident during their first year. Her heart ached even more for Professor Snape.

"Now, on to more up-lifting things, yes?" They both nodded eagerly. "Here, Rose, let's see what you can do with this." With those words, Snape carefully sliced a short cut into his inner forearm lengthwise right through the skull of the offensive tattoo. He was careful not to cut too deeply, but there was plenty of blood to give a sense of urgency.

"Oh, dear!" Rose and Hermione both exclaimed at once. Hermione reached for a dish towel and placed it under Professor Snape's arm.

Snape found their concern amusing. "Don't worry. If Rose can't handle it, I can heal myself." He looked Rose directly in the eyes. "Now, remember what I said about the visualization and using your energy to direct my body to heal itself?"

"Yes, sir," she answered with a professional air. There was no arrogance in her voice this time as she dropped her gaze to the blood that was trickling from his arm to the

towel.

"Well, what are you waiting for? You want me to bleed to death?"

Her eyes met his again with an alarmed look. "Of course not, sir!"

"Then I suggest you get busy."

She took a deep breath, as did everyone else in the room, and placed her wand over his wound and closed her eyes. Then she slowly and deliberately sang the song as she waved her wand and knitted her brow in deep concentration. When she came to the end of the song, she heard Snape's voice.

"Again, and open your eyes this time."

"But..."

"Just *do it*."

Her eyes popped open and her demeanor immediately deflated. His arm was still bleeding just as much as before.

"I would have been amazed if you had succeeded the first time. Even your mother was not that extraordinary." He noticed Miss Granger blush out of the corner of his eye. "Try it again."

Rose sang the song with more vigor and volume the second time, but she kept her eyes open as instructed. Still no change. But she pushed her chin up and clenched her jaw. Then she sang the song again... and again.

After the forth try, Hermione finally intervened. "It's OK, Rose. Professor Snape did say it was a very advanced spell."

"And it doesn't help that she despises me," Snape added for good measure.

"I don't despise you, sir," she said with all the sincerity she could muster.

"Perhaps, but your father does, and I'm sure his opinion of me has colored yours."

Rose gave him a defeated and guilty look.

"That's OK, Rosy," Hugo announced. If you need to love the person you're healing, then you can heal me."

"Hugo, NO!" cried Hermione as Snape lunged for the boy, but before anyone could stop him, Hugo had taken Snape's potions knife and plunged it into his left forearm. The blood began to pour down onto the same towel Snape's arm had been staining, and as Hugo realized that he had cut himself dangerously deep, his heart quickened, causing the blood to squirt across the table.

"Oh, *Merlin*. Professor, do something *quickly*!" Hermione begged.

Rose stood in wide-eyed horror as Snape sprang into action. He conjured a short length of rope that he used as a tourniquet just above the cut on Hugo's arm. Then he transfigured the towel into a bowl and Scourgified the blood off the table. Then he turned to Rose who was still rooted in place by his side.

"Rose, *look* at me! You can do this. You have the tools. And Hugo's right. It's easier if you love the person. Tap into that love, and it will give you the power to heal him."

"But..."

"No buts. I know you can do it."

"Professor, please!" insisted Hermione, almost in hysterics. "This is not the time for experiments. HEAL HIM NOW! Before he loses the use of his hand."

Just then, a loud crash could be heard from the living room. Ron came bursting into the kitchen covered in soot from head to toe. "What in bloody hell is going on here? What's happened to Hugo?"

"Daddy?" exclaimed Rose in a shaky voice.

"I cut myself so Rose could heal me," Hugo admitted sheepishly, "but I cut a bit too deep, and I made a real mess of things. Sorry."

"Snape, *DO* something!" Ron joined in the fray.

"SILENCE! Both of you. How do you expect your daughter to concentrate with all this racket?"

"Rose can practice on somebody else, Snape! Heal him *NOW*!"

With a flick of his wand, Snape rendered Walnut Brain silent and immobile. He then turned his wand and his threatening glare on Miss Granger, but she had the good sense to cover her mouth with her trembling hands.

He turned to Rose, whose eyes betrayed her terror. He reached out with his still-bleeding left arm and touched her shoulder. "In battle you will face scenes much worse than this, with chaos all around you. Loud noises, people screaming in pain... But right now, we're safe in your mother's kitchen. Hugo's bleeding is under control; he's not going to die," Snape serenaded her with his velvety baritone. He could see the tension leaving her face; he could feel it ease away in her shoulder. "I won't let it continue to the point he loses use of his hand. But Hugo's right, as a beginner, you need to truly care about the person you are healing. You love your brother, don't you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

Snape nodded. "Then, you can do this, Rose. *I know you can* Now, have another go."

"Should I close my eyes or keep them open?"

"Whatever makes you more comfortable."

Rose placed her wand over Hugo's arm, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and began to sing the song. As Hugo and the three adults in the room watched with fascination, the cut began to knit itself back together, starting with the fleshy depths of muscle, veins and arteries.

"Again," he urged her gently.

As she sang and slowly waved her wand, she peeked through her lashes to witness the transformation. Snape could feel her excitement and the surge of magical power that it inspired in her. She opened her eyes fully as she neared the last line. But the cut still needed just a bit more coaxing to completely knit itself back together, so she repeated the song a third time. By the end everyone in the room let out a huge sigh and began to congratulate Rose on the amazing job she did, with the exception of Ron,

who was still stuck in Snape's Body-Bind curse.

Snape treated Rose to a rare smile and even rarer praise for her performance. "That was nothing short of amazing, young lady. I was nearly fifteen the first time I successfully performed that healing spell. You have a promising future... promising, indeed."

"Thank you, Professor, but do you think you could show your appreciation by letting my dad out of the Body-Bind curse?"

"What? Oh, right. Sorry, Weasley, but you were blathering on to the point of breaking her concentration." Snape waved his hand absentmindedly and Ron stumbled where he stood. Then he stood up straight and took a menacing step toward Snape, who proceeded to ignore him as he inspected the self-inflicted cut on his arm. "What in Merlin's name are you doing here anyway?"

"I could ask the same of you, Snape. I showed up here because I'm on call, and the alarm came through that an under-aged person was attempting a very powerful spell, so I was required to check it out. Imagine my horror when I came in here and my son's blood was squirting all over the kitchen! What are you playing at?" He turned to Hermione, enraged. "And you let him do it? What kind of a mother are you?"

"I think I liked you better immobile," Snape drawled. "And I thought your ex-wife had cut her fireplace off from the Floo Network."

"I added it back after Ron and I made peace. Perhaps I was a bit hasty in my decision."

"Dad," Hugo pleaded with his father to understand as Snape reached over and untied the tourniquet, "they tried to stop me from hurting myself, but I grabbed the knife when no one was looking. And, like I said before, I didn't mean to make the cut so deep. But Rose healed it, see? Good as new!" He flexed his fingers and waved his hand just to prove his point.

"You should be proud of our daughter," Hermione insisted.

"Indeed," agreed Snape. "Now, if you will give me a moment, I need to heal this cut." He picked up his wand and aimed it at the still-bleeding Dark Mark.

"Wait, Professor," cried Rose anxiously. "If you don't mind, I'd like to try again. I think I can do it this time."

"Oh?" He raised a skeptical eyebrow at her. "Have you grown so fond of me in such a short span of time?" His voice held just a touch of sarcasm.

"As a matter of fact, yes." The girl admitted with a coy smile. "You see, just now, you and Hugo had faith in me..." Her wide eyes moved from Snape's face to Hugo's with a grateful nod. Then her gaze turned to disappointment as it fell briefly on her mother and father before returning to the obsidian depths of Snape's unfaltering gaze. "They didn't."

Snape shot her parents a quick knowing glance and found them both studying their shoes, appearing dreadfully guilty. He looked back at Rose with his trademark smirk firmly in place, put away his wand, and extended his injured arm. "By all means."

The girl didn't even have to close her eyes this time. The song came out of her as a spiritual melody sung from her heart. Snape's cut was completely healed before she had uttered the last line of the incantation. The others clapped and cheered as Rose threw her arms around Snape's neck. His eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he gently patted her back. "Thank you, my dear. Well done."

Later that night, after the children had gone to sleep, Hermione nestled into her bed and looked back on the day's events. What a wonderful evening it had turned out to be, especially since Ron had to go back to work right after Rose had healed Professor Snape's cut. They enjoyed dinner immensely, and for the first time, everyone enjoyed each other's company as well. All three of them walked the professor to the front door, and after she handed him Harry's Invisibility Cloak, all three gave him a warm goodbye hug. Hermione wished for the day when her beloved professor wouldn't have to leave, when he would ascend the staircase with the rest of the family and help her to fill up the huge king-sized bed that her parents used to sleep in. She tried to picture it in her mind as she dozed off, her happy little family... her, Rose, Hugo, and Severus Snape...

"I still can't believe it," Hermione whispered into Severus' ear as she laced her fingers with his. They sat together on the stage where the faculty overlooked the graduating class in nice, neat rows of white chairs beside the lake at Hogwarts. It was Hugo's turn. He and Lily Potter had both graduated with high marks in all of their NEWTs.

As they looked out over the audience in the bleachers on either side of the graduates, they could see many friends and acquaintances, including the rest of the Potters, all of the Weasleys (including Ron and his new wife, Gabrielle Delacour), and Scorpius Malfoy sitting next to Rose, all watching their loved ones graduate. Hermione and Severus were required to sit through these rituals each spring as part of the faculty, but this time it felt different. This time her baby was graduating.

"Merlin, I feel old all of a sudden," she admitted to the love of her life as Minerva called Hugo's name and handed the boy his diploma. He was second to last in line, followed only by Blaise Zabini's daughter Annette, who was one of the few that year to earn an Outstanding in all of her NEWTs, as well as Head Girl status, and was therefore chosen to give the Valedictorian Address.

"If you feel old, what does that make me?" Severus asked sadly.

"You don't age, Severus. It's not fair!" Hermione complained as Annette used the Sonorus spell to amplify her voice for her speech.

"No? And what do you call these?" he asked incredulously as he picked out several gray hairs for her to gawk at.

"They match your dress robes silver for Slytherin. Don't you like your own House colors adorning your head?" she teased.

"SHHH!" Minerva swiveled around in her chair and glared at the couple as Annette droned on in the background.

Hermione and Severus stared back at Minerva with identical mock innocence. Over the years, they had spent so much time together that they had picked up each other's mannerisms, quirks and facial expressions. And they could read each other's moods so well that the other faculty members sometimes accused them of possessing ESP.

When the girl's speech finally came to an end, dozens of cone-shaped black hats with tassels were launched into the air, and a huge cheer erupted from the entire student body. Then the audience and faculty joined the students in their applause, and all rose from their seats to mingle and seek out family and friends. Hermione held tightly to Severus' hand. In years past he had used this time of mayhem to get lost in the crowd and escape to the quiet of their private quarters.

"Don't worry, love." He looked down at the iron-clad grip she had on his hand. "I won't disappear as I usually do. I love Hugo like my own son. I wouldn't miss this for the world." He wrenched his hand free and used it to pull her closer as they made their way through the crowd.

Ron, Rose and the rest of their party reached Hugo first. Back slapping and hand shaking were exchanged, a hug for Dad and kisses for all of the Weasley women. But when Hugo caught Severus' approach out of the corner of his eye, his smile broadened to one of mischief and he rushed towards the head of Slytherin House with a deep growl in his throat.

"Now, Hugo... Don't do it, Hugo, I'm warning you, young man..." But it was too late. "PUT ME DOWN, YOU INSOLENT BOY, BEFORE I HEX YOU INTO NEXT

TUESDAY!!"

The immediate group was treated to the spectacle of Severus Snape being lifted off the ground by his stepson. The resulting roar of laughter vexed Severus even more.

Hugo gently let him down and took a quick step back. "I'm taller and stronger than you, old man. Admit it!"

"Brute strength is no match against powerful magic, boy. Care to challenge me to a friendly duel?"

Hugo rubbed Severus vigorously on the shoulder. "Perhaps, after I complete my Auror training, old man. Then may stand a chance."

"Not likely," Severus grumbled.

Another round of hugs, kisses and handshakes were successfully executed, and the group formed an informal circle around Rose, Scorpius, Hugo and Lily. "So..." Hugo goaded his sister into talking.

"Today is about you, Hugo," she answered him in a hushed tone. "We don't want to steal the spotlight."

"It's alright, Rosy. I know you're bursting at the seams. Go on. Just say it!"

"Say what?" asked Ron in his usual clueless tone.

Severus smirked. He leaned in and whispered in Hermione's ear, "Look at her left hand."

Hermione gasped just as Rose flashed her hand in her mother's face. A huge, goblin-made diamond ring graced her finger. "Scorpius proposed. We're getting married!"

"Congratulations!" several people exclaimed at once. Rose practically threw herself at Hermione and Severus, wrapping her arms around both of them and kissing their cheeks each in turn. Then Scorpius moved to do the same, but he was cut short by a voice behind him.

"Oi!" Ron burst out angrily. "You're marrying a Malfoy? I thought I raised you better than that!" Everyone in the circle turned to him with wide, disbelieving eyes, and he cowered at their shocked reaction. "I'm joking, I'm joking. Can't any of you take a joke, for Merlin's sake?" He reached for Scorpius' hand and pulled him in for a hug. As they separated, Ron gave him a sheepish grin. "She'd have a hard time doing better than you, mate." Then he grabbed the boy's shoulder and turned him away from Rose. "A word of advice. You know that book Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches?" Scorpius nodded. "If your dad gave you a copy, chuck it in the fire straight away. Don't ever use the spells on her, or she'll kick you out on your arse!"

Scorpius threw his head back in generous laughter. "You needn't worry. Since her mum started teaching that class for witches only in their sixth year, the spells in that book seem to have lost their effectiveness. He doesn't even print it any more. He has ten thousand copies sitting in his warehouse because no one will buy it. I think he's started to burn them in his office fireplace in winter, if you want to know the truth of it."

Severus lifted an eyebrow and stole a glance at Harry, who returned his knowing look with a grin.

"And another thing," Ron felt the need to continue, "I got in a spot of trouble when I assumed that her mother would go along with keeping a witch on the side, so you best behave yourself in that department as well, or..."

"Or you'll have to answer to me!" Severus finished the sentence menacingly.

"And me!" added Ron.

"And me!" piped up Hugo, Albus and James all at once.

Scorpius' eyebrows disappeared up into his hairline. "Alright, alright. I'll behave. I promise." He raised his hands in surrender.

"So, have you set a date yet?" Lily asked Rose excitedly.

"I'll be finished with my apprenticeship at St. Mungo's by the end of August, so we were thinking sometime this fall."

"And where will the blessed event take place?" asked Harry.

"Well," Rose explained tentatively, "We're hoping for Malfoy Manor, but quite frankly I'm not sure if Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy will allow it."

Ron began to growl. "Bloody snobs!"

"Now, Dad."

"Father's working on them, Rosy. I'm sure by the fall they'll come around." Scorpius shook his head and glanced sadly at Severus. The unmistakable need for help was written plainly on his face.

"Perhaps I could pay your grandfather a visit."

"I would be most grateful, Professor. He and Grandma are still living in the Dark Ages with their blood prejudice attitudes. They're generous to a fault most of the time, but they have never approved of my relationship with Rosy. I'll marry her with or without their blessing," he admitted as he glanced at Rose lovingly, "but it would be nice to keep peace in the family."

"Understood. I'll do my best."

The happy couple made their way around the circle for congratulatory hugs and kisses, and the entire gathering began to move slowly towards the castle where an amazing spread awaited them in the Great Hall. Pumpkin Punch both virgin and spiked with elf-made wine sat in two huge punch bowls at the end of the staff table, which had been set up with an elaborate buffet. The long house tables had been replaced with many round tables which seated about twelve people each. But most people seemed to prefer to eat standing up so they could mill around and talk to everyone.

Severus clung to Hermione's side as the inane small talk and curious questions flooded his unwilling consciousness. After all those years of solitude, large crowds of people were difficult for him to endure for any length of time. Her close proximity was the only thing that kept him from slinking away or going insane. But for her sake, as well as his undying love for her children, he endured the social pleasantries.

"So, Severus," Arthur Weasley piped up, "How are you suffering through all of those dunderheads in your classrooms these days?"

"Actually, Minister, I..."

"Oh, Severus, don't be silly. Call me Arthur, just as you always have."

"Very well, Arthur," Severus agreed reluctantly. "I have the privilege of teaching only NEWT-level classes in both Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts, so the majority of my students truly want to learn what I have to teach. Quite a pleasant change from my earlier days teaching all grade levels."

"I imagine fewer and smaller classes might give you more time for research and development," suggested Scorpius. "Perhaps you could write a book. Give that Ari Shamamian fellow a run for his money. Father says he has a new book coming out soon. Something about a Healer's Handbook. Father says it's full of everyday potions and spells that just about anyone would find useful. He expects it to be a big seller."

"Does he now?" Severus asked with a smirk. "Why should I waste my time when it sounds as if he's cornered the market?"

"Just a thought, Professor," Scorpius admitted. "You are brilliant in your own right, you know."

"I appreciate your confidence, my young friend, but I assure you, I keep quite busy." He pulled Hermione closer and looked into her eyes with quiet longing.

She could tell he had had just about all he could take of this social scene. She glanced towards the door then back at him. "Go on," she said just loud enough so that only he could hear her. "I'll bring the kids round to say goodbye before they leave."

"Walk me to the door?" he pleaded. She agreed with a silent nod, and they turned to navigate their way through the throng of people.

But just as Severus was about to let go of her waist and make his escape, a strong hand gripped his other arm, and he turned to face Harry Potter. "Got a minute?"

Severus tightened his grip on his wife. "Both of us?" he asked defiantly.

"Of course. I keep no secrets from Hermione. I'd rather you both hear it from me first anyway."

"Hear what?" asked Hermione with concern as the three of them stepped out into the hallway and moved away from the door.

"Arthur has had his fill of the Minister of Magic post."

"He never wanted it to begin with," Hermione interjected. "But someone without any skeletons in their closet needed to step up."

"He only took the post because I promised that when all of my kids were out of the house I would run to take his place. Well, Lily just graduated and he's anxious to step down."

"You're running for Minister of Magic?"

"Oh, Harry, that's wonderful!"

"We'll see how wonderful it is. I don't exactly have the personality for a desk job. There's not a diplomatic bone in my body."

"Oh, I don't know. You did a fair job negotiating a peace treaty between me and Ron for years."

They all shared a chuckle at that thought.

"I really don't relish the idea, but I'll give it a try."

"Then, congratulations are in order, because I doubt that anyone will even attempt to run against you," Severus informed him.

"So, you like this idea?" joked Harry, "the bane of your existence becoming Minister of Magic?"

Severus shook his head and his look softened. "Yes, my friend. You'll have my full support."

"Well, in that case, could I have your support as my new Secretary of Education?"

Severus roared with laughter. "I am no more suited to a Cabinet position than I am to teaching nursery school."

A vision of Severus Snape, dressed in his austere black teaching robes, towering over a group of toddlers as they trembled at his feet came to mind, and Hermione covered her mouth as she unsuccessfully tried to quell her convulsive laughter.

"Care to share?" Severus asked incredulously.

"I'll tell you later," she managed to say between breaths as her mirth slowly subsided.

"Well, then," Harry continued as he tried not to laugh at his own vision of Snape teaching nursery school, "if I ask Minerva to fill the position, would you be willing to replace her as Headmaster of Hogwarts?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "She may have someone else in mind." He glanced at his wife out of the corner of his eye.

"But you're her Deputy. I would presume..."

"Haven't your many years of marriage taught you never to presume what a woman will do?"

Hermione slapped his arm playfully. "You know she'll make you Headmaster."

"And, if the Board of Governors approves my appointment, I will accept."

"Excellent. Thanks, Severus. I knew I could count on you." Harry patted Severus' shoulder. "Guess I'd better go find Minerva, then." Harry turned and made his way back into the Great Hall.

Severus let out a labored sigh. Then he stole a glance around to be sure they were alone in the Entrance Hall, and he pulled her into the nearest alcove to afford them a bit more privacy. "Harry Potter, Minister of Magic. Merlin's maelstrom, what is the world coming to?"

Before Hermione could think of a retort in defense of her oldest and dearest friend, Severus had cupped her face in his hands and captured her lips in his own. All thoughts

of politics melted away as his tender kiss warmed her heart. They had been married for almost seven years now, and the only seven year itch she had was still for him.

As his hands moved from her face to her shoulders, his lips began to travel down her neck to his favorite spot... that coveted place where Secret Recipe mingled with her skin. "Mmmm," he murmured. "So much more pleasant than inane conversation, don't you agree?"

"Hold that thought for later, love. You might be able to get away with disappearing, but if I go with you back to our quarters, you know they'll come looking for us. We won't have a moment's peace until they leave."

His hands moved to the small of her back as he pressed the lower half of her body into his. His excitement was obvious. "You want me to hold this thought 'til later?" he asked as he ground his pelvis into hers for emphasis.

"Yes."

"You wound me, witch!" He gasped and clutched his fist into his chest with mock sorrow.

"Oh, stop it." She rolled her eyes. "Wouldn't you rather we could take our time and enjoy each other?"

As if on cue, Hugo came running through the huge oak doors from the Great Hall. "There you are! What are you two doing out here?" As he eyed his mother and step-father, he realized that he had interrupted an intimate moment. "Oh. Sorry. I should have known. You two are worse than Rosy and Scorpius!"

Severus dropped his hands and stepped away with a smirk. "I needed a break from the crowd. Do come and see me before you leave." He quickly planted a chaste kiss on his wife's cheek. "Kill-joy," he muttered under his breath. Then he turned and sauntered down the stairs to the dungeons, his robes billowing behind him.

As Hermione took her son's arm and they passed back through the doors to the Great Hall, the scene faded, and she drifted into a much deeper, dreamless sleep...

The Toad

Chapter 28 of 35

Snape attempts to interrogate Rita Skeeter. Umbridge asks Hermione a few uncomfortable questions as well.

Disclaimer: Not mine, no money (drat!)

AN: Please, *please* forgive me for the long wait between chapters this time. My two teenagers are not quite old enough to drive, but their many after school activities are enough to drive me crazy!! Things are winding down now, so hopefully I will not be so busy from now on.

Thanks a million to my wonderful beta JENGEORGE for all of her valuable input. She really helps to make this a better story. And a big thank-you always goes to WriterMerrin and the staff here at TPP for their diligent work on the grammar end. How did I ever make it through Freshman English without them?

Chapter 28

The Toad

"One more time, Winky, just to humor me, please." Snape tapped his foot with impatience as Winky began to count on her fingers.

"Winky is to hide under Harry Potter's Invisibility Cloak and wait for Miss Skeeter to come home. Then Winky is to follow her into her house and wait for her to put her wand down. If she doesn't put it down soon, Winky is to immobilize her and then remove her wand anyway. Then Winky is to Apparate Miss Skeeter to the main room of the Gaunt house. Then Winky is to Apparate to the little room behind the magic mirror where Master Severus will be waiting. If Winky needs to speak, Winky will whisper. Winky will only refer to Master Severus as 'Number One' while Miss Skeeter is with us. When Master is finished with Miss Skeeter, Winky will Apparate back into the Gaunt main room and take Miss Skeeter back to her house where Winky will Oblivate her. Winky will then Apparate back to Spinner's End where Winky may then remove Harry Potter's Invisibility Cloak.

Excellent, Winky! That was perfect."

The worried lines of Winky's face did not relax with his praise. She wrung her hands together in obvious distress.

"There's nothing to worry about, Winky. Your memory of my instructions was flawless."

"Winky does not worry about remembering Master Severus' instructions. Winky worries about being arrested and sent to Azkaban!"

Snape threw his head back and laughed heartily. "They won't send you. You're a house-elf. If we get caught which we won't they will know you were only following orders. They would never hold you accountable."

"But then they would arrest Master Severus and send master to Azkaban. Winky is even more afraid of that possibility. What would Winky DOOOO?!!" The stressed out little elf began to weep and wail as she threw herself on the grimy Gaunt floor and wrapped her arms around Snape's ankles.

He stooped down to pat her back in the hope of comforting her. "Winky," he crooned as he coaxed her to stand and look at him, "don't you want to help Miss Granger and Harry Potter?"

She sniffed and nodded as her tennis ball eyes finally met his.

"Nothing bad is going to happen, I promise you."

"But what if she gets away and tells someone before Winky can Oblivate her?"

Snape sighed. He hadn't realized how upset this "secret mission" of theirs had made her. "That's why you must stay under the cloak and I will stay Disillusioned the entire time. If anything out of the ordinary happens, don't remove the cloak until you are safely back at home. And be sure to keep your voice to a whisper, and under NO

circumstances do you call me by name until we are safely back at Spinner's End. In fact, don't even call Miss Skeeter by name. Call her 'our guest' instead."

"Our guest... yes sir."

"Now, why don't you put the cloak on and go retrieve our guest. We may as well get this over with. She ought to be about ready to leave work now."

Winky nodded, felling much better after having her fears waylaid. She threw the cloak over herself and disappeared from view, a tell-tale pop signaling her departure.

Snape systematically put up the Anti-Apparition wards that only an elf could get through. Then he warded each of the doors and windows from a physical attempt to escape as well. He quickly took the charmed credit card from his pocket that Miss Granger had owled to him three days previously and encoded the word "friends" to appear. Once finished, he opened the door to the storage closet behind the magic mirror (which was really only a Muggle two-way mirror that he could see through from his side) and he tapped himself on top of the head, becoming invisible.

Now all he could do was wait.

*

Hermione stood in front of the mirror in her private bath at Hogwarts. The humidity during these last few days of summer wreaked havoc on her hair, and she had just begun to work some extra Sleekeazy into it when she felt the charmed credit card heat up in her robe's pocket. She pulled it out to discover the word "friends" stamped plainly on the surface. "Perfect timing," she mumbled as she made one last feeble attempt to tame her frizz.

The castle came alive with excitement as its grand front door opened and students began to pour in. Today happened to be September first, and she was due in the Great Hall for the start-of-term feast. She would have plenty of friends to testify as to her whereabouts for the next couple of hours.

*

Having seen his older children safely to the Hogwarts Express that morning, Harry had stayed late at work to make up for the lost time. He was just finishing the last of his paper-work when he felt the credit card burn in his pocket. He hastily pulled it out and discovered the message. He knew that Ginny's company might not be a good enough alibi, and Ron had already gone to pick up Hugo at his mum's. So he quickly sent a Patronus off to Ginny, requesting that she bring Lily and meet him for dinner at Salicia's Diner. Daylight would last for at least another hour. If he was lucky, someone might even ask him for an autograph.

*

After what seemed like an eternity but was in reality only about fifteen minutes, a loud pop focused Snape's attention to the mirror. In the next room he could see a very disoriented Rita Skeeter. Apparently, Winky had kept his earlier instructions under advisement, and she had immobilized the witch so she could remove her wand before transport. She still suffered the spell, and he feared she would fall over onto the floor, so he silently cast Wingardium Leviosa to ensure her safety.

Another pop signaled Wink's arrival by his side. "Number Two has brought our guest, sir," she whispered hoarsely.

"Excellent work, Number Two. But could you please remove the immobilization spell that you used on her? She needs to be able to move."

"Yes, sir."

No sooner had the words been whispered then Rita began to flail. Her disoriented look was instantly replaced by anger. Snape silently lowered her to the ground and released the spell then sat back on his tall stool to watch the show.

"Who are you?" Rita screeched. "Where am I?"

She turned on the spot to Disapparate but to no avail. "What do you want from me?" She began to try the doors and the only dirty window. When nothing would open, she rubbed at the glass in hopes of cleaning it and looking outside to discern her location. But her toil was for naught since an even thicker layer of grime coated the outside, and the bushes had become so overgrown that she wouldn't have been able to see past them anyway.

She growled in frustration and turned away from the window to survey the rest of the room. "Show yourself, you COWARD!" When no one appeared and silence endured, she beat her fist on the closet door. "What do you WANT?!!!" She kicked the door with her pointy high-heel shoe so hard that the impact threw her off balance and she landed with an undignified thud on her bum. A cloud of dust filled the air. Winky cringed, but Snape snickered silently. The woman was working herself into a tizzy, hair now out of place and make-up running from tears of anger and frustration. Rita was suffering a melt-down right before his eyes. Such an entertaining spectacle. After all the pain and suffering she had caused, she deserved it.

Rita pushed her hair back out of her face and sighed in a huff. Her breath drew heavy as she clutched at her chest. Then her breathing slowed, and her fingers fanned out on her sternum as she visibly calmed herself. Snape was almost impressed by her self-control. She picked herself up, dusted the grime off her bum, and she began to explore the room as well as her options, since no help or explanation seemed forthcoming. She ran her fingers across the dusty mantle piece, then she stooped to inspect the large masonry fireplace beneath it. The mortar holding the bricks in place had begun to crumble. A pile of ashes still lay in the center of the rusty grate, all covered with a thick layer of dust. She could tell that this place had not felt the warmth of a fire for at least a decade, perhaps many more. Snape was surprised to see her inspect the shoe-print patterns on the floor. He knew she would be able to tell that someone had disturbed the dirt collected there, but she would have no idea what they had been doing, or how many had been there.

He had glamoured the mirror to look cracked and dirty so it would seem to belong in the room like the rest of its dilapidated contents, but he knew that, given enough time, her vanity would draw her to it like flies to a carcass in the sun. And when she began to preen, he would immobilize her again so he could use Legilimency on her and peruse her memories at his leisure. Somewhere in that bees' nest, he was bound to find something useful to the blackmail case.

Finally, she noticed the mirror and took a few steps closer. But her eyes focused first on the ornately carved frame of ancient oak burl. He had mounted it with a Permanent Sticking Charm over the hole he had cut through earlier in the week, so he knew she couldn't pull it off the wall, but he feared for a moment that she might try.

Instead, she finally began to inspect her own reflection, putting curls back in place and wiping away an errant smear of makeup.

This was Snape's chance. He slid the stool over so he could lower himself to look her in the eyes without stooping, but the stool caught on a warped floorboard and slipped from his hands, falling with a loud clatter to the floor. Snape cursed under his breath as he reached down to retrieve the stool. When he looked up, Rita's face no long peered into the mirror. The noise must have spooked her. A string of quiet expletives escaped his lips. Merlin only knew how long it would take for her to come back to inspect her reflection.

As he settled himself once again and gave the mirror's view his full attention, however, Rita was nowhere to be found. He glared through it at every possible angle, even pushing his face against it in an attempt to see the floor beneath. He eventually concluded that she figured out that she was being observed through it, and she must be crouched on the floor directly below since that was the only blind spot in the room.

Snape's Disillusioned face distorted into a scowl. "Number Two." His irritation managed to seep into his gruff whisper.

"Yes, Number One, sir?"

"I believe our guest is crouching on the floor in the outer room. Could you please go silently convince her to at least stand up?"

"Yes, Number One, sir."

Snape heard Winky's exit pop. Then a minute later, another pop signaled her return.

"Win...Number Two could not find our guest, Number One. Number Two is afraid."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Number Two searched everywhere. It is a small room. Our guest is gone." Winky's voice trembled with apprehension.

"No need for alarm, Number Two. I'll find her." Snape knew he just knew that there was no way humanly possible to get out of that room.

But when he slipped through the door to inspect the outer room, he could not find her. He searched every inch of the floor. He cast detection spells to see if she had somehow Disillusioned herself without her wand. Nothing.

Rita Skeeter was gone.

*

After erasing all traces of their activities, Snape took Winky's hand and they Apparated home. It was only then that he felt safe enough to remove his Disillusionment Charm and allow her to remove Potter's Invisibility Cloak.

Winky was still trembling. "What if Miss Skeeter tells someone? What will we do? Winky had a premonition that something would not go right." She continued to ramble on fretfully until Snape finally had to gently admonish her.

"Winky, please be reasonable. We will *not* get caught. She has no idea who abducted her."

With the word "abducted," Winky shuddered.

"She was not injured in any way. When she gets back home, she will find her wand intact. And I assure you that there is no way any of the magic used would be traceable back to me. No harm done, really."

"Winky kidnapped a witch. Winky broke wizarding law."

"Winky," he pleaded, trying to calm her nerves and make her see reason, "you are already a free elf. What more could they do to you?"

Winky bowed her head in shame. "Master Severus could order Winky away."

"What? I would never do that. Why would you say such a thing?"

Winky looked, if possible, even guiltier than before. "Because Winky doesn't ever want to kidnap anyone ever again. Even if Master Severus orders me to, Winky will refuse." At that point, Winky threw herself on the floor and began to hit her head against the side of the coffee table, crying and wailing as she did so.

"Winky!" Snape lunged for her and pulled her away from the table. "Winky, look at me!" He turned her towards him as he stooped on the floor so she could look him directly in the eye. "You are a free elf. You work for me because you want to. I do not give you orders, I request things of you. You are free to refuse if you wish. The only condition of your continued employment is to keep my secrets. If you ever betray my trust, I will ask you to leave, but," he stared with great compassion into her huge, tennis ball eyes, "I hope that day never comes."

Winky straightened herself up to her full height and squared her tiny shoulders. She seemed fortified by Snape's admission. "Then master should know in advance that Winky will refuse to do anything illegal that master may ask of me."

Snape couldn't stop the smirk that smeared its way across his face as he returned to his feet. "Then I apologize. I should never have involved you in the first place."

"Apology accepted." She gave him a deep bow which, to her delight, he returned.

"So I guess that means that I have no further use for Potter's Invisibility Cloak then?"

"Not for Winky, sir."

"Very well. Since I can always Disillusion myself if need be, I don't require it either." Snape looked at the clock on the wall. It had gotten late, so he opted to wait until the next day to return the cloak to Potter.

The following evening found Snape standing in the middle of Harry Potter's living room, attempting to return his Invisibility Cloak. For some reason that Snape could not fathom, Potter was resisting.

"As I said, I feel honored that you would allow me to borrow this unique and valuable magical artifact, but I have no further use for it."

"But it didn't help you to gather any new information?"

Snape shrugged. "Unfortunately, no."

"Perhaps your surveillance techniques need some modernizing. We have a book on the latest methods..."

"It wasn't a matter of surveillance. I was attempting to interrogate someone."

"Oh, well then, what did you need the cloak for?"

"I didn't wish them to know who was interrogating them, obviously."

"Ah, so did you learn anything that could help us?"

Snape swallowed hard and gazed out the nearest window. "Must I keep repeating myself?"

"I take that as a 'no,' then. So, what happened? What went wrong?"

"I do not wish to discuss it further. The less you know the better." Truth be told, he was embarrassed that someone, especially the likes of Rita Skeeter, would be able to defeat his wards. The last thing he wanted to do was let an upstart like Potter help him analyze his mistakes.

"But perhaps, if you tell me what happened, I can make some sug "

"What part of NO do you not understand?!" Snape's patience had come to an end.

"Sorry." A space of awkward silence stretched between them. Snape pursed his lips. He had never been good at small talk, so he turned toward the door.

"Err... Gin and I were hoping that you'd stay for dinner. I won't bring it up again. I promise.

Snape turned back toward Potter. "I do not wish to seem ungrateful, Mr. Potter, but Winky is rather upset by this whole ordeal, and I shouldn't leave her alone for too long." Snape knew that, although Winky had indeed been upset the night before, she was over it now. He just didn't feel like Potter's company this evening.

"I understand, sir. Well, in that case, I have something for you. Kingsley Shacklebolt asked me to give this to you." Harry reached into his pocket and fished out a small envelope with Kingsley's personal seal stamped into Ravenclaw blue wax on the back.

"Do you know what this is about?"

"He didn't tell me, but I'm assuming it's about the restaurant he wants to open. I though Hermione mentioned it to you."

"She did, but I didn't want to presume anything." Snape stashed the object in question into his robe's pocket and bowed slightly. "Mr. Potter, give my regrets to your lovely wife."

"She'll be disappointed."

"Right." Snape's tone dripped with sarcasm.

"No, really. She hasn't seen you in years, and Hermione and I keep telling her how much you've changed. She is looking forward to getting to know you all over again."

Snape raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Sorry, Mr. Potter. Perhaps another time."

"Oh, and in future, I would prefer that you call me Harry."

Snape's look softened. Potter had consistently extended the hand of friendship over these last few months, and his efforts had not gone unnoticed. But... "I appreciate the gesture, Mr. Potter, but I don't think I'm ready for that just yet. You see, I still refer to Her... Hermione," he stumbled over her given name, "as Miss Granger. It helps me to keep her at arm's length. And I'm afraid that it would lead to some rather awkward moments if I continued to call her Miss Granger while referring to you as Harry."

"Right. I understand, sir. I hope with all my heart that someday that can change."

"As do I." Snape wistfully brought to mind the events of his most recent ethereal encounter just a few nights before. He had kept them a secret for months, and they were only becoming more real, more tantalizing. He had almost begun to hope that he would never wake up. "If my recent dreams are any indication, perhaps someday our situation will change for the better," he admitted with a shy smile.

"So you've been having dreams about Hermione? Do you think they're prophetic?"

"I'm no authority on dreams, but these seem different. They are so real, and when I awake, I recall every last detail. It's as if I am recalling a real-life event."

Harry grinned and wagged his eyebrows. "Anything you'd like to talk about?"

A rather prudish look crossed Snape's face. "Most of them are of a personal nature, but the most recent involved you."

"Me?" An image of the three of them in bed together flashed across Harry's mind, and his face involuntarily contorted as his body shuddered. *It's not that I'd mind doing it with Hermione so much*, he thought to himself, *but Sn...*

"What's the matter?" Snape yanked him out of his reverie.

Harry's face began to glow beet red. "Nnn... nothing," he stammered. "Just an overactive imagination."

Snape looked puzzled for a split second, but then comprehension dawned. He clucked his tongue as his head moved slowly back and forth. "Mind out of the gutter, Mr. Potter."

"Right. Sorry, sir."

"If you must know, Hugo and your daughter, Lily, had just graduated from Hogwarts, and you had decided to run for Minister of Magic."

Harry's eyes grew wide. Was that fear that Snape just saw? Or perhaps amazement?

"That's weird, Professor. Did Hermione tell you?"

"Tell me what? Are you running for Minister?"

"Oh, no." Harry shook his head vigorously. "Kingsley just asked me to run a few weeks ago when he gave Hermione and me the heads up that he was stepping down."

"She didn't mention it, so I had no idea. What was your reply?"

"This is the weird part. I told him that the kids were too young, but I might consider it after they were all grown and out of the house."

"Indeed! What a coincidence." Snape was astonished by Potter's admission.

"Perhaps there is something to this fortune telling after all," Harry offered.

"I wouldn't go quite that far," Snape insisted.

But as he and Potter parted ways, he couldn't help but hope that his dreams did depict some shred of truth about what the future held for himself and Miss Granger.

On Friday morning, after her usual breakfast in the Great Hall, Hermione headed to the Ministry of Magic to spend another day in the Records Office. But as she entered the lift, she didn't realize that her life was about to get much more difficult. She was alone when she stepped into the lift, but on the very next floor, the door opened, and in stepped the pink toad with former Minister Fudge in her wake. The witch was in top form with clipboard in hand and chiffon bow attached to the top of a hideous 1950's hairdo.

"Well, well, if it isn't one third of the Golden Trio. I thought you were now teaching our young people at Hogwarts," commented Fudge politely.

"Yes," added Umbridge, "Setting a good example for all of those Muggle-borns out there?"

"Good morning, Madam Secretary, Minister Fudge." Hermione's skin began to crawl.

"And what do they have you teaching these days? House-elf rights?" Fudge began to snicker at his back-handed question.

"How to make friends with the Giants and still keep you head in more ways than one?" Umbridge added her two knuts' worth and they both started to laugh outright.

"Charms, actually. I took Filius Flitwick's place."

"Charms..." Hermione knew what Fudge would say next. She gritted her teeth. "How charming." The imbecile was soooo predictable. The pair began to giggle disgustingly, like school-age children.

Hermione thought she might be sick. But the perfect come-back flashed through her mind, and the words escaped before she had time to lose her nerve. "I took a walk in the Forbidden Forest yesterday and happened upon the Centaur herd. Bane and Magorian send their regards." The mortified look that erupted on Umbridge's face almost made the elevator ride worthwhile until she heard the horrid woman's next question.

"And if you are indeed Hogwarts' newest teacher, then why in Merlin's name are you here on a school day?"

"Errr... Headmistress McGonagall was kind enough to let me have Fridays off so that I could spend more time with Hugo until he starts at Hogwarts next fall."

"So where is the boy?" Fudge asked with a chuckle. "Or does the Ministry teach primary school these days?"

"Of course not." Hermione could feel her face heating up. She knew that the nosy old farts would dig until they uncovered some version of the truth. She figured that if she told the truth straight out, it would diffuse Umbridge's need to snoop and perhaps Hermione could keep her real mission a secret for just a bit longer. "I am also helping the Aurors' office with a bit of research. You know those field officers," she said with a nonchalant wave of her hand, "always ready for action, but they wouldn't know how to look up a number in a Muggle phonebook." Hermione's attempt at humor fell flat as the pair in front of her stared, nonplussed.

"What, pray tell, is a foam-book, Miss Granger?" asked the toad.

"No, no. It's a *phone* book. Oh, this is my floor. Sorry, I'll have to explain another time." She slipped through the double doors just before they closed. It was the Auror Office floor. Even though she didn't really need to see Harry first, she just had to get out of that elevator, and she didn't want them to know her real destination. With luck, the kitten-obsessed toad would not find out the true nature of her research until it was too late.

Hermione leaned up against the wall and sighed in relief. After taking a moment to compose herself, she decided a quick visit to check in with Harry wasn't a bad idea after all.

After exchanging the usual pleasantries with his office mates, she and Harry sequestered themselves in his office for some privacy.

"Where's Ron this morning?"

"Dunno. He'll probably breeze in here in a few minutes. The man 'll be late for his own funeral."

Hermione laughed lightly. Then she relayed the conversation from her elevator ride. Harry took a deep and apprehensive breath then let it out in a bluster. "Oh boy. Now the fun begins."

Just then, a knock came on Harry's door and a tussle of red hair appeared. "G'morning, Harry. Just thought I should check in. Oh, hi, Hermione. Fancy meeting you here." Ron stepped in the rest of the way and closed the door. "Hey, are you really doing research for our department now?"

Hermione glanced at Harry out of the corner of her eye then looked warily back at her ex-husband. "Who told you that?"

"I was up in Dad's office before I came here, and I ran into Umbridge along the way. She said she had seen you and she wondered which case you were researching for us."

This time it was Harry's turn to look worried. "And what did you tell her, exactly?"

Ron tilted his head to the side. "Said I didn't know."

"And what did she say to that?" asked Hermione as her teeth worried her lower lip.

"She mumbled something like, 'that's odd.'" Ron raised his voice and scrunched up his face in an attempt to imitate the toad. "And then she scribbled something on her clipboard and walked away."

"Well, if she, or anyone else, happens to ask, just tell them that Hermione is doing general research. Many of our cases need background information that can be found in both Ministry and Muggle records offices, and she's the perfect person to do it since she knows how both systems work."

Ron may not have been as smart as Hermione, but he knew Harry well enough to spot a cover-up answer when he heard one. He smirked. "So what are you really doing here?"

Hermione smirked back. Then she glanced at Harry, not sure just how much they should be telling Ron about the blackmail case.

"We can't tell you. It's for Kingsley, and it's top secret."

"Sorry, Ron."

"It's alright." He shrugged nonchalantly. "You'll let me know if I can help with anything?"

Hermione nodded.

"Will do," replied Harry.

Ron disappeared back through the door.

"Merlin, you two are so much better off *without* each other."

"You have no idea," Hermione admitted. "So, has Professor Snape brought your cloak back yet?" she asked anxiously after Harry put a Muffliato Spell on the door.

"Yeah, he brought it back yesterday. I tried to get him to stay for dinner, but he said he didn't want to leave Winky alone."

"But he leaves Winky alone all the time. Why would last night have been any different?"

"Something went wrong, and he had said that she was pretty upset about it, so he didn't want to leave her alone for too long."

Concern spread across Hermione's face. "What happened?"

"Dunno. He wouldn't tell me. Said I was better off not knowing."

"Did he find out anything?"

"Nope."

"Damn. Now what do we do?"

"Well, I guess the next step for him will be to do a background-check on each person who has immigrated here and claimed to be a pure-blood. I will continue to interview all of the Muggle-borns who have been discovered and left town. Perhaps you can follow the money trail somehow."

"What do you mean? We can't get access to anyone's bank records without a unanimous vote from the Wizengamot. There's not much I can do."

"But don't you remember? All of the people we have interviewed so far have said that the payment demands went up as they began to make more money. So the blackmailer must have had access to each business' income records."

"Of course. Business income records are available to most of the mid-level Ministry officials, and each business must file a quarterly income statement with the required minimum estimated income tax."

Harry's face morphed into a fiendish grin. "And to look at a record book you must first..."

"... *sign it out!*" They both chanted in unison. Hermione returned his smile.

"Well, what are you sitting around here for?"

Hermione stood and reached for the door. "Later, boss!"

The Bees' Nest

Chapter 29 of 35

Snape investigates some present and former Ministry employees, and Rita contemplates her next move.

A/N: Thanks a million to my wonderful beta, JENGEORGE, for all of her valuable input. She really helps to make this a better story. And a big thank-you always goes to WriterMerrin and the staff here at TPP for their diligent work on the grammar end. I am a hopeless case. Merrin is a Saint!

Disclaimer: Same as always, it all belongs to JKR. (grumble, grumble...)

Chapter 29

The Bees' Nest

When Hermione met Snape at her door the following Sunday, she had very little to add to the evidence she had collected. Her search for the money trail seemed to grow cold since each quarterly report on business incomes in Wizarding Britain had been checked out by a different person. They were all mid-level personnel, and they all came from different departments within the Ministry. It would be next week before she could look at their files and see if there was any connection between them that might lead back to Umbridge. Snape gently reminded her that she needed to remain objective and stop trying to mold the evidence to fit her theory. He knew what it was like to be wrongly accused and thrown in jail for something he had been forced to do.

Snape and Rose continued to get along amicably, and Hugo continued to hang on Snape's every word. The boy had soaked up the art of preparing potion ingredients as if he were born to do so, and Snape couldn't help but beam with pride when Hugo produced his first successful burn paste. Rose practically begged him to teach her how to brew Skele-Gro potion even though it was way beyond the abilities of the average second-year student. But Snape relented. She had already proven to be advanced, just like her mother, and she could be as stubborn as Walnut Brain and Miss Granger put together.

The fact that Skele-Gro took over two weeks to mature didn't deter Rose in the least. She asked her mother if they could put the potion in stasis and transport it to her mother's quarters at Hogwarts so Rose could add the necessary ingredients at the precise days and times specified by the recipe in the new potions text. Hermione was willing to assist in any way possible, and they figured that perhaps Madam Pomfrey would be kind enough to consult on the project since Professor Snape would not be able to help again until the following weekend.

Rose got as far as she could on the potion that night. The rest of the ingredients would have to be added in stages over the next two weeks. Professor Snape taught her how to cast a Stasis Charm over the cauldron so it could be transported back to Hogwarts in the morning.

Hermione so enjoyed Professor Snape's company. She had looked forward to the moment she would see him again as soon as he had walked out her front door the week before. But they both behaved themselves. Having the children watching their every move was quite a good way to keep both of their libidos in check. But when they finally said their goodbyes at the door, she caught him off guard with a quick kiss on the lips. His lips felt soft and supple against hers. She could feel his body heat rise and his pulse race, just as her own had done. But he pulled away quickly, glaring accusingly at her through narrowed lids. "Careful, Miss Granger," he chided softly as he tapped himself on the top of the head and began to disappear.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Hermione continued to try and find the common denominator between the people who had checked out the income records, but she could find nothing. They all had worked at different departments at the time, and none of them were available to interview anymore. When she voiced her quandary to her dear professor, he suggested that perhaps that was it...the fact that they were no longer available. Where were they all now? Why did they leave their previous positions? Did they still work for the Ministry in some capacity? Were they still alive? Did they still live in Britain somewhere?

Hermione sighed. With only one day a week to work on this, figuring this out could take considerably longer than they had. Kingsley had announced his retirement, and the buzz was all for Umbridge. No one else even seemed remotely interested in the position.

In the mean time, Snape had completed background checks on two of the wizards on Miss Granger's immigrant list. Both seemed to check out as having told the truth when they had claimed to be pure-bloods. And Potter had found nothing new in his investigations either. Both of the blackmail victims he had questioned had told the same story as all of the others.

This investigation was getting them nowhere.

Rose's Skele-Gro potion had been completed with the help of both Snape and Madam Pomfrey. Rose jumped for joy when Snape inspected it on the Sunday two weeks after it had been started and announced that it was indeed perfect in every way in spite of the fact that it had gone back and forth to Hogwarts twice by then. Snape and Hugo helped her to decant it in the required dosages that the Hospital wing would need, and Snape conjured a wooden box to safely transport the vials in so Rose could take it to Madam Pomfrey in the morning.

Finally, Snape had confidence that Rose truly liked and trusted him.

But the following week, Rose didn't come home with Hermione for the weekend. "I've got an essay to finish, and I need access to the library here at school. Besides, I miss my friends."

"But what about Hugo, love?"

Rose huffed. "I went all of last year without seeing Hugo except during the hols, and he survived just fine without me."

"And Professor Snape was planning to teach you another potion from the Advanced book. Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"No, Mum. I really need to stay here." She gave her mother a look of grave concern.

"Rose, what's troubling you?"

"Nothing..." The girl shook her head. "Nothing."

Hermione eyed her daughter skeptically. She knew her well enough to see through the smoke screen, but she also knew that Rose would open up to her when the time was right.

And so Hermione left for the Ministry and didn't bother to come back at five to pick up Rose as she had done for the past several weeks.

At least her research this time was not a disappointment. With four income reports per year for over twenty years, there were over 80 people that Hermione had to research to find out where they had ended up. After working all day, she had only managed to locate eighteen people, but her findings were consistent across the board. The reason each person who had checked out the financial records of the companies in question was unavailable was because that person had either been transferred out of the country or had retired and moved out of the country. And if they had been transferred, the transfer papers had been signed by none other than Dolores Umbridge.

So she is behind it! thought Hermione in triumph.

She was so excited that she could hardly wait to tell Professor Snape on Sunday. She stopped by to see Harry before she left the Ministry just to tell him what she had found. She gave him a list of eighteen names she had researched so far, and their last known whereabouts, so he could investigate. But the list was long, and this was only the beginning. Perhaps it was time to enlist Ron's help after all.

"We can tell him who to find and give him a list of questions to ask them. Then he just needs to record their answers. Once he has interviewed them, he can use a memory modification charm so they don't remember the conversation. He doesn't need to know anything about our investigation other than the questions he needs to ask. And if anyone should ask him what he is investigating, we can compose a canned speech for him to recite that has nothing to do with the real investigation."

"Yes, I agree. The less he knows the better for all of us." Harry nodded his consent. "You're so thorough, Hermione. You should have been an Auror. You missed your calling, you know."

"Flatter me all you want, Harry. I love my new job teaching Charms, and to tell you the truth, I'll be glad when this investigation is over."

When Sunday arrived, Snape was obviously disappointed that Rose had felt the need to stay at school. But he happily continued to teach Hugo the delicate art of potion making so he could be at the top of his class next year.

After dinner, Hugo played on the computer while Snape and Miss Granger conversed in the kitchen. After she relayed what she had learned the previous Friday, she showed Snape the long list of names.

"Four people per year for over twenty years. That will be quite a challenge," admitted Snape. "These first few seem to be scattered all over Europe. Some even ended up in the States. And you say that Umbridge signed each of their transfer papers?"

"Yes, unless they were up for retirement."

"No matter what department they worked in?"

Hermione shook her head. "Everything from Foreign Liaison to Maintenance worker."

"But each retiree decided to relocate to a warmer climate, correct?"

"Each and every one." She nodded.

Snape raised a suspicious eyebrow. "I wonder if there isn't a bit of Imperius Cursing going on here?"

"Is there a way to cast a spell to find out? Or some counter-spell?"

"No, the only way out of it is to fight it."

"So if the person is directed to a warm and pleasant place, he is less likely to want to fight it."

"Precisely."

"And if he doesn't realize that he has been cursed in the first place..." she mused.

"It would never occur to him to try."

They agreed that the list needed to be divided up between himself, Weasley and Potter, so it wouldn't take so long. He felt that since Winky could transport him to the Americas and anywhere tropical with no trouble, he should be the one to investigate the people who ended up there. Weasley could do Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands since once he had made it to the Continent he could use the Paris branch of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes as a home base.

That would leave the Balkans and the other Eastern European countries to Potter. Potter and Krum had remained friendly since the tragedy that ended his fourth year at Hogwarts, and he could probably impose on Krum for a couch to sleep on, since they didn't want to rack up a Ministry expense account and create a paper trail for what they were doing.

Snape wasted no time finding his six people the following week. His goal was to find and question two people per day. Armed with Polyjuice Potion and a lock of his neighbor's hair, he took Winky by the hand and headed for America. Salem, Massachusetts was the first destination. He had used Google Earth to find a suitably deserted location to Apparate to; then he and Winky had Disillusioned themselves and had taken a somewhat extended squeeze-ride across the Atlantic. As uncomfortable as it felt, it was still much faster than Muggle air travel, and best of all, it was FREE!

The witch he was looking for went by the name of Elsa Astonia. She had been transferred to the British Wizarding Consulate in Salem, and her job now included helping British wizards and witches who found themselves in a difficult situation whilst visiting the States.

After they made their way into the Consulate, Snape downed the foul-tasting potion; then he and Winky became visible again, since it wasn't uncommon for a wizard to travel accompanied by his servant. She stood silently by his side as they waited their turn in line to speak with Ms. Astonia. The line moved along at a slug's pace and, unfortunately for Elsa, by the time they made it to the woman's desk, Snape was already at the end of his rope.

"Good afternoon," the perky brunette announced with a painted-on smile. "What can I help you with today?"

Snape flinched. "Where, pray tell, did you learn to speak like that?" Her voice sounded like a cross between the working-class of Boston and scrapings from the sewers of Trafalgar Square.

"Oh, you noticed my accent? Well, I'm from here, but I spent several years in England, and I only moved back a few months ago. I guess I haven't quite lost my British overtones yet." She smiled genuinely this time as she batted her eyelashes in a feeble attempt to look seductive.

Snape peeled his lips back to reveal his neighbor's straight, white teeth and looked down his neighbor's much shorter nose as he replied, "It is a veritable cacophonistic assassination of the English language."

"Oh my." Elsa blushed profusely as she brought a hand up to her breast bone. "Why, thank you, kind sir."

It was all he could do to keep a straight face as he gave her a slight nod. *How American can you get?* But as he opened his mouth to begin questioning her, she cut him off.

"Now," she said as she glanced behind him at the ever lengthening line of people who needed her help, "you do have your form filled out, don't you?"

"Form?" This question threw Snape off completely.

"Oh, yes. This is the line for lost or stolen items, usually types of identification, such as Apparition licenses, Muggle drivers licenses, Passports, etcetera." She pointed to the sign above her head. "But we also handle items of a personal nature, like luggage or handbags."

"No, I didn't..."

"You didn't see the forms back where the line started? That's okay, lots of people don't see it."

"But I'm not here for..."

"Here you go." She shoved a three-part form attached to a clipboard along with a grotesque, lavender, Muggle ball-point pen under his nose. "Now if you'll just step over to the counter," she instructed as she gestured to her right, "and when you're finished, just let me know so you don't have to stand in line all over again."

Snape rolled his eyes and took a deep breath. "That's very kind of you, but I don't need the form," he stated bluntly as he attempted to push it away with the tip of his wand.

She continued to wag it in front of his face as the person behind him grunted with impatience. "Sorry, sir, but I can't process your request until you fill out this form. It's standard procedure."

"I don't. Need. The bloody. Form!" Sparks escaped the tip of his wand with every word until finally a shower of sparks ignited the paper, and it burst into flames, scorching the clipboard in the process.

"Oh my!" This time, the woman didn't seem the least bit flattered. "Sir, please don't force me to call security."

Snape took a deep breath and tried to remain calm. He closed his eyes and counted to ten. But just as he opened his eyes, the man directly behind him in line had had enough.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, take the freakin' form. You're holding up the show here."

"Yeah," joined in several others as they waved their already filled out forms. "We don't have all day."

"If you must know," Snape growled at the crowd in a way that would have been much more effective if he had not Polyjuiced himself to look like his older, shorter, portly next door neighbor, "I am from the Ministry, and I need to ask her a few questions." He turned on his heel to face Ms. Astonia. "It will only take a moment of your time," he hissed through clenched teeth. He got the distinct impression that she was now terrified of him because her mouth hung slightly open as she stared at him with wide, frightened eyes. *Finally. Perhaps now I can get what I came for.*

"Am I in some kinda trouble?" she finally asked meekly.

"No." He shook his head in an attempt to clear it and calm himself. After a moment, he managed to spew out the canned speech that had been decided upon. "The attrition rate at the Ministry has been a bit high lately, so we are surveying the people who have recently left to see if there is a problem, say harassment by a particular individual, or a policy that you couldn't live with, that sort of thing." He swallowed hard. His next statement would be difficult to get out without laughing in her face. "We've lost too many good people like you," he crooned in his most velvety voice, "and we want to try and turn that trend around."

Her color deepened, and she began to flutter at him again. "Oh, well then, ask away."

Snape stifled his trademark sneer, but he couldn't quite keep the snark out of his voice. Luckily, she seemed to take his tone to be flirtatious. "So..." He pulled out a little notebook and leaned over the desk awkwardly. It would have been a graceful move in his own body. "Why *did* you leave us?"

She smiled demurely, eyelashes going a mile a minute. "Like I said, I'm from here. But I wasn't having any luck finding a wizard to call my own here, so I thought I'd go abroad for a while, you know... the grass is always greener. Anyway, after a few years, I still found myself alone. I finally realized that most of the wizards over there were just as prejudiced against Muggle-borns as they are over here. Perhaps even more so. So I decided to move back. At least I have my family here. I had no one over there."

For the first time since he had set foot in the place, he felt a touch of compassion for this woman, in spite of her ingratiating voice. His air of superiority and lack of sincerity evaporated as he continued his line of questioning. "Did anyone encourage you to make the move back?"

"Why, yes, Secretary Umbridge did. She was so kind. The only one, really. She could see I wasn't happy there. She even signed my transfer papers. I'm grateful to her. I might still be stuck in London if she hadn't pulled a few strings and gotten me this job."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Secretary Umbridge," he repeated her response as he took notes.

"The one and only," confirmed Elsa with a touch of pride.

"And a few months before you left, you checked out a book from the Records Office with reference to the quarterly earnings statements of several businesses in wizarding Britain. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir, but that's not a crime, is it?"

"No, as I said before, you are not in any trouble. But we would like to know why you did this since, according to our records, that is the only time during your entire employment that you looked into anyone's earning statements."

"That was the only time I did it. But I didn't do it for me. I did it because someone asked me to."

"And do you recall who it was that asked you?"

"An old retired fella named Stegman Belford. Said since he was already retired, he didn't have access to the records anymore, but he had had his eyes on several companies that he was thinking of investing in. He asked if I could look into it for him so he would know who would be the better investment. Slipped me ten Galleons for my trouble, and truth be told, I needed the extra cash."

Snape shrugged. "Sounds like a logical request. Tell me, do you by chance recall which companies he wanted you to research?"

"Let's see... MacKensie's Plumbing and Ductwork, Salicia's Diner, Belvedeer's Haberdashery, um... Quintsky's Stationary... Several others, but I don't recall the names. Sorry."

"It's alright." He gave the girl a genuine smile. "You've been quite helpful. I'll be out of your hair, now. Sorry about the clipboard." He aimed his wand and muttered a spell under his breath. The burn mark on its surface instantly disappeared.

"Oh, thank you." She returned his genuine smile, but as she turned to face the next person in line, he cast a silent Obliviate on her so she wouldn't recall the last few minutes of her life. It would be as if he had never stood in her line.

As he walked towards the front door with Winky at his side, he stashed his notebook, pulled a piece of parchment from his robe's pocket, and stared at the five remaining names. The very next one lived in the U. S. Virgin Islands. A retired gentleman named Stegman Belford. *How interesting*, Snape thought to himself as he tapped the top of his head and began to disappear from view. *I may have a few extra questions for him.*

Snape and Winky next found themselves in St. Thomas. From the photos Snape had pulled off the Google Earth website, he not only knew the address, he had a clear view of the house from the street. So once Winky had transported them to the island, he could Apparate them the rest of the way there. Then they hid behind some tall bushes in the front yard so Snape could take another dose of Polyjuice and become visible again. Since the man apparently lived in a Muggle neighborhood, they decided that Winky should remain invisible.

Snape rapped his knuckles loudly on the elegant front door. The magnificent home sat precariously on the side of a cliff overlooking St. Thomas Harbor. It seemed to be built into the side of the cliff face, so from the street it appeared to be only one story tall, but Snape suspected that looks could be deceiving. He wasn't disappointed, for when the door opened, he could see beyond the open foyer to a two-story space that was solid glass from top to bottom. The resulting view of the harbor was breathtaking.

"May I help you, sir?" asked a young ebony woman who must have been employed as a maid for the house. Her uniform consisted of a simple light blue cotton dress with white cuffs and collar and a matching white apron tied at the waist. Her accent was intriguing and much more pleasant than the previous woman he had just spoken with. But she obviously was not the man he was seeking. *Too bad.*

"I was hoping to speak with Mr. Stegman Belford. Is he available?"

The maid took on a puzzled look. "No one lives here by that name."

Snape glared first at her, then at the computer print-out in his hand. "This is 1863 Lookout Lane, is it not?"

"Yes, sir, but I know everyone's name here, and there's no one living in this house that goes by that name."

Snape's eyes narrowed at her suspiciously. *Perhaps Stegman changed his name. Perhaps he has something to hide.* "Well, then. Is the man of the house available?"

"I'll go check, sir. May I tell him who is calling?"

"Terrance Bennington from the Min...from England." He caught himself before saying "Ministry of Magic." He had a feeling that this girl was a Muggle."

"Thank you, sir." And she disappeared, leaving him to stare out the huge sheet of glass as the cruise ships and private pleasure boats busied themselves in the azure water below. He had never seen water so crystal clear. He had seen photos, of course, but he always thought they had been enhanced somehow. Nothing could be this beautiful in real life. But there it was, staring him in the face.

A couple of minutes later, a good-looking middle-aged man with short salt-and-pepper hair and a perfect tan appeared before him. "Terrance Bennington?" he asked with an obviously American accent.

"Yes," replied Snape hesitantly.

"I'm Jack Johnson. Nice to meet ya." He extended his hand for Snape to shake.

"A pleasure."

"All the way from England, eh? What can I do for you?"

Snape appraised the man from top to bottom. He didn't detect any magical residue, so he doubted there were any Glamour spells in use here. And this man was much too young to be a 102 year old Ministry retiree. "I am looking for a man named Stegman Belford. According to our records, this house is his last known address. We were not notified of his death, so I must assume that he sold or has rented this house to you?"

"Yes, he sold it to me about a year ago."

"That's odd. We should have been automatically notified if he had moved. Can you tell me where I can find him?"

"Why?" asked Mr. Johnson with a suspicious tone. "Is he in some kinda trouble?"

"No, no. I assure you, I just need to ask him a few questions."

Mr. Johnson nodded in relief and then smiled like the Cheshire Cat. "Well, I guess you weren't notified because his address is still the same. He just doesn't live in the house."

Now it was Snape's turn to be suspicious. "But if he doesn't live here, why is this still his address?"

"Oh, he still lives at this address; he just doesn't live in the *house* anymore."

"I don't understand."

The man laughed lightly. "Most people don't. I certainly can't fathom it either. If you ask me, the old coot's off his rocker. But hey, who am I to look a gift horse, *house*, as the case may be, in the mouth."

Snape shook his head slowly, still quite bewildered. "You've lost me."

"Let me start from the beginning." Jack gestured for Snape to enter. He had the feeling that Winky remained outside, which was the wise thing to do since these people were obviously Muggles. He led Snape down a spiral staircase to the elegantly appropriated room below and offered him an irresistible seat by the window. "When Stegman and his wife first moved here several years ago, he had me make some changes to this place for him. I'm a general contractor. So he knew me and knew how much I loved the place. We got along well, and even though he was a bit eccentric, I always treated him with respect. I never overcharged him for my services, and he always paid on time. We had a good working relationship. His wife had a never-ending list of renovations she wanted to have done here, and he just couldn't say no to her. They spent a ton of money fixing the place up."

"It's enchanting, really."

"And I did all the upgrades to withstand up to 200 mile-per-hour winds. We get a lot of storms through here, and this place is pretty exposed."

"I can imagine," Snape replied with a shudder. Although he had never suffered through a hurricane, he had seen the devastation in the news from time to time.

Jack tapped on the huge window beside him. "Bullet-proof glass. Cost a fortune. But when debris hits it during a category five... well, let's just say, 'no worries.'"

Both of Snape's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "Really!" *Whoever Belford is, he has deep pockets. Did he make his money by blackmailing the people back home?*

"Anyway," Jack continued, "back to Stegman. Two years ago, his wife died. He changed after that. Said he didn't want all this anymore. He wanted the 'simple life.' He sold me the house for less than half what it was worth. There were a couple of conditions attached to the sale that will pass along in the deed if I ever decide to sell it to someone else."

"Oh?" Snape commented. His interest had been keenly piqued at this point.

"Yes, he has life rights to the beach below, and when the weather is bad, he has the right to seek refuge in the house. In spite of its precarious location, it's one of the safest structures on the island."

Snape's expression turned to one of amazed disbelief. "You mean to tell me that he gave all this up to live on the *beach*?"

"Right there, under the tarp. See?" Jack stood up and pointed directly straight down where, about ninety feet below, a tan tarp could be seen tide between three palm trees. Other personal articles were scattered close by, but from this distance, it was difficult to tell what they were.

Snape glanced from the tarp to the man beside him and back to the tarp in stunned silence. He simply couldn't believe that anyone in their right mind would trade this magnificent living space for... *a tarp*. After a long moment, he looked back at Jack and sighed. "I still need to speak with him. Is there some way I can get down there?"

"Yes, there's a path." He appraised Snape's dragon-hide boots and apparently decided that they were sturdy enough for the trek. "But be careful; it's treacherous. I'd take you down myself, but I have an appointment in about fifteen minutes, so I don't have time."

"Don't worry. I am more sure-footed than I appear."

Jack's grin hinted of an adventurous nature. "Don't think badly of him. In a way, I can understand his point-of-view. This house, and the place in society that comes with it, is a big responsibility. I get tired of it myself sometimes, always another appointment to make or another problem to solve. Shaking hands and keeping up appearances. It gets old after a while. Quiet solitude... That's all he's looking for. His wife wanted the big house and high society. He never wanted those things."

"I have lived a simple life of quiet solitude for the past twenty years. I understand its appeal. Don't worry, I'm not here to judge the man, and he's not in any trouble. I am only here to ask him a few questions."

"That's a relief. I'd miss him if you had to haul him away," Jack admitted with a laugh. "Come on. I'll show you the way down."

Thankfully, they exited out through the front door, so Winky could see them and would be able to follow. After Jack opened the gate for him and said his goodbyes, Snape and a still-Disillusioned Winky carefully made their way down the zigzag path along the cliff face until they finally arrived at the beach. He took a few more swigs of Polyjuice along the way because he wasn't sure how long all of this would take.

Even though he had held her hand through every step, Winky was still trembling by the time they had reached the bottom. "Don't worry," Snape reassured her, "*wavill* Apparate out of here, I promise."

He looked around cautiously as he began to slowly approach the tarp. About ten meters from the bottom of the path, he thought he had felt a ward of some kind, perhaps an alarm, to let the old wizard know that someone was coming, but he wasn't sure because he had been concentrating very hard on each step he took to keep from falling at the time. Perhaps that was the reason for its location.

Snape pulled out his wand and cast several detection spells. There was a definite magical signature here. An antique wizarding wireless sat on a wooden crate under the tarp, but it was silent at the moment. Beside it sat an ashtray littered with the butts of what appeared to be hand-rolled cigarettes. A hammock swung in the breeze between two of the three trees that supported the tarp. A large bucket sat at just the right spot on the sand to catch any rainwater that might run off the tarp. A small make-shift fishing spear and crab net leaned against some nearby rocks. A feeble-looking fiberglass rowboat in desperate need of a new paint job floated in the shallow water with a line leading to an algae-coated cinder block on the sand. An old plastic lawn chair sat in the sun by the water's edge. Beside it stood a large plastic box full of old books. From what Snape could see, some of the books held magical titles; others belonged to the Muggle world. But most appeared to be of a philosophical nature. *Interesting*.

"Mr. Belford?" Snape called out in as friendly a tone as he could muster. "My name is Terrance Bennington. I'm here from the British Ministry of Magic," he lied. "You're not in any trouble. I simply need to ask you a few questions." He could tell from his detection spells that the man was close by, probably hiding behind some rocks or Disillusioned, or both.

"Not until you both show yourselves!" Snape could hear a distant voice. "My alarms tell me that there are two of you, but I only see one."

Well, at least he has a proper British accent and two brain cells to rub together. "Winky, show yourself, please. He's obviously a wizard, and if you stand under the tarp, no one from above should be able to see you."

"Yes, master."

As her tiny form appeared before him, he could see footprints forming in the wet sand, heading in his direction. By the time the footprints reached him, the man had become fully visible. What stood before Snape was a sight almost comical to behold. The skinny elderly man's silver dreadlocks hung down past his shoulders. His equally

silver beard shielded most of his face from the harsh tropical sun, but the rest of his skin was not so lucky. His leathery dark tan spoke of endless hours of unprotected exposure. Snape wondered if the man had access to any sunscreen either Muggle or wizard. His bare feet were calloused and gnarly. He wore cut-off jeans and a ratty faded red tee-shirt with an almost unrecognizable logo for Panama Red on the front.

"A house-elf, eh? What are you, some kinda pure-blood, stuck-up, high society stiff with your head up your arse?"

"I beg your pardon!" Snape glared reproachfully at the old man as he pulled out his little notebook.

"You Ministry officials are all alike. All think you're better than the rest of us just because of your *pure* blood. Well I got news for ya. I can take you down in a fair fight *any* day. Your magic's no better than mine. And you bleed red, just like I do."

Another Muggle-born who obviously wasn't happy in wizarding Britain. Is it my imagination, or do I detect a pattern forming here? Mr. Belford, I assure you that I am not a pure-blood. My father was a Muggle, and I understand your distaste for snooty high society types, having dealt with more than my share." The man immediately relaxed his defensive posture, much to Snape's relief. Perhaps now they could get to the issue at hand.

"What's this all about?"

Snape gave him the same canned speech that he had recited to Elsa Astonia. Stegman seemed satisfied. "Alright, then, ask away."

"When you retired, you were well below the customary retirement age. Was there a specific reason you chose early retirement?"

"Yeah, my wife comes from old money. I didn't really need the job. She was a pure-blood, but somehow she managed to fall in love with me anyway." Stegman's eyes began to mist over. "Since she was their only child, she ended up with all of her parents' money, even though they never really accepted me. I kept the job until after they died. I didn't want them to think that I was a lazy bum who only married her for the family fortune."

"So after they died, you retired."

"That's right. Is that a crime?"

"No, sir. As I said before, you are in no trouble. What made you decide to retire here?"

"Merlin, man," Stegman glared at Snape with irritation. "Look around you. What's not to like? It never gets cold here. The water is amazing. The people are all friendly. The pace is slow and easy. Nobody cares if you're Muggle-born, pure-blood, or anything in between. Nobody passes judgment here."

These next few questions were off the script, but Snape was curious at this point. He wanted to find out what made this man tick. "How did you convince your wife to live here?"

Stegman laughed heartily. "Oh that was easy. I had Dolores Umbridge on my side. And you know Dolores. She can be very convincing."

Umbridge again... Perhaps Potter and Miss Granger are right about her. "Do you remember what she said to your wife to convince her?"

"Oh, yeah, she said that she had been for a visit and it was the best of both worlds. Lots of servants to be had for a song, big fancy houses and high society, but a much slower pace that would appeal to me as well."

"So Dolores Umbridge convinced you to retire here?"

"I was all for it right from the start. But she did need to work on my wife for a month or two. In the end, she was happy to make the move."

"So, was it your idea, or Secretary Umbridge's idea."

"Mine," he replied immediately. But then he stopped, his conviction faltering. "Wait. Maybe she did suggest it first." He thought for a moment then shrugged his shoulders. "I don't remember. What difference does it make? I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yes. And you seem quite content."

"That's the point, isn't it?"

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

"I don't need to convince anybody. Are we finished yet?" Stegman appeared to grow agitated. A sign of someone who was attempting to fight the Imperious Curse.

"I'm afraid I have just a few more questions, if you don't mind."

"Make it quick, will ya?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you have so many pressing engagements to attend to," Snape mumbled sarcastically.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Just before you left the Ministry, you checked out a book from the Records Office that had to do with the quarterly earnings statements of several companies in and around London. May I ask why you did this?"

Stegman began to push the sand around with his toes. He didn't answer right away. Snape got the distinct impression that the man was growing nervous and uneasy. "I did it for an old friend of mine," he finally admitted. "He tried to slip me ten Galleons to look up some names, but I wouldn't take his money. Said he was looking to invest and he needed the information to guide his investment decisions. He had retired the year before, so he didn't have access to the record books anymore. That's not a crime, is it? Helpin' out a friend?"

"No, sir," Snape reassured him, "it's not a crime. Do you recall the gentleman's name?"

"Thomas MacGee."

Snape pulled the parchment from his robe's pocket again. *Nope, not on my list.* "Do you know where I might find Mr. MacGee?"

"Lost touch with him after that. I think he moved to the Mediterranean somewhere. But that's all I know."

"And do you, by chance, recall the names of the businesses that you were asked to look up?" Since they were all kept in the same large ledger, there was no way to tell from the Records Office logs which businesses someone had an interest in when they checked out the book.

"It was a long time ago. I'm not as young as I used to be, ya know... Let's see... Some plumbing contractor, a stationary store, one of the popular restaurants in Diagon Alley Salicia's Diner, that's it, and some candy store, but I can't remember the name. Sorry."

Snape nodded as he wrote furiously in his little notebook. "That's alright. This is still very helpful. We can narrow things down from here. Oh, and one more question."

"What's that?" The old man had reached around behind the wizarding wireless and pulled out a funny-looking, hand-rolled cigarette. This one had never been lit before. He held it to his mouth and pulled out his wand to light it. Then he took a long drag and held it in.

Snape cursed under his breath as the light breeze took a brief holiday while the smoke floated over and accosted his sensitive nostrils. "Mother of Merlin, man, ~~what's~~ that stuff?" he asked while coughing and waving his hand in front of him.

The old man started laughing lightly as he release the smoke. "It's weed. Wanna hit?" He held out the joint to Snape. "It'll help you relax, and from the look of ya, you could use some help in that department. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so uptight. I'd shrivel up and die if I was forced to wear those threads. Stay here with me for a week, and I'll have you so relaxed, you'll never want to go back."

"Ah... No thanks."

"No, I take it back. For you it would take at least a month to loosen up. You're wound tighter than a werewolf on a full moon!"

Snape gave the old coot his most intimidating sneer, but he remained unfazed, so Snape forged ahead. At this point all he wanted to do was get home. "At any point since your retirement, have you asked anyone at the Ministry to research the quarterly incomes of these same businesses for yourself or anyone else?"

"No," Stegman replied incredulously, "like I said, I don't need the money. Why would I want to invest? I've left it all to charities in my will. Let it sit in Gringotts and collect interest. What do I care? I certainly don't want to worry myself with buying and selling stocks in businesses. What are you? *Daft?*"

The old man had obviously taken personal offense by the question. "Sorry, sir," Snape attempted to smooth things over. "It's just that the previous person that I interviewed mentioned your name, so I thought that..."

"Well, he's *lying*...whoever he is. I didn't ask any favors, I didn't make any inquiries, and I most certainly didn't make any investments! Now, if you won't join me in enjoying the herbs of the earth," he wagged the funny cigarette in Snape's face, "I would appreciate some privacy!"

"Right," Snape agreed with great relief. "We'll just leave you to your simple pleasures, then. Winky!" She was by his side in an instant. He mumbled the memory charm that would wipe away their encounter with the old man; then they watched him wander down the beach, smoking his precious joint, oblivious to their continued existence.

They tapped themselves on the head and watched each other disappear from view. "Let's go home."

Rita Skeeter sat at her vanity mirror and gazed down at the compact in her hand. She had just emerged from her morning shower when she saw it on the vanity top and noticed that it had begun to emit a warm glow, signaling the arrival of a new message. She flipped it over and found two words: Hermione Granger.

Hermione Granger? she thought to herself, *but she's part of the Golden Trio*. She tapped her wand to the compact and mumbled the words, "No, Untouchable." They slowly replaced the previous message.

After a moment, they faded and the words, "Yes, Hermione Granger," reappeared.

Rita shook her head with worry. *But she knows things. What if she threatens to tell?*

Ever since she had moved from the States to Britain over thirty years ago, she had managed to keep her Animagus abilities a secret from everyone except Granger and a handful of others. But she had made deals with them, and they had given their word. And for the past twenty-two years, all evidence would indicate that they hadn't told a soul. If she began to dig up dirt about Granger and write scathing stories that stretched the truth, all of that would no doubt change. But if she ignored this assignment, she risked her other secret getting out.

Her other secret... Over twenty years ago she had received a beautiful, ornate box that contained the compact she now held in her hand. It had arrived by owl post, a generic owl from the Diagon Alley Post Office. The box also had contained a note composed of words glued together from newspaper clippings. It still sat in the box it came in, tucked safely away in a hidden drawer in her antique secretary desk. She hadn't read it since the day she had received it, but she never forgot what it had said...

Dear Miss Skeeter:

Please accept this compact with my complements. It never runs out of powder, and you can change the color to suit your complexion if need be. From time to time it will become warm to the touch. When you notice the warmth, turn it over and look at the bottom. You will see a name appear there. No matter who it is, you will dig up dirt on that person and write an article about them for the Prophet or whatever rag will accept your story. If you uncover no damning evidence, insinuate something. It will then be up to the target to disprove your claims. By then, the damage will be done.

You will accept these terms without question or complaint, for I know your muddy little secret. And if you refuse to cooperate, an article will be written about you, and you will never write for any publisher, be it rag or hard cover, ever again.

As long as you do your part to help clean up wizarding Britain, you will be allowed to stay, and your secret will be safe.

Keep the compact with you at all times. You never know when a new target will pop up.

There had been no signature, of course, and Rita was at a loss as to who had sent it. But she knew beyond doubt that she would be forever at their mercy. To be revealed as the Muggle-born witch that she truly was would ruin her credibility. No paper would buy her stories; no publisher would touch her manuscripts. If she had gone to the authorities for help, she would have been forced to tell them the truth. It was a no-win situation for her. She had no choice but to comply with the blackmailer's demands.

It was now Saturday morning. She placed the compact on her vanity top as the bees' nest in her mind continued to hum *The blackmailer will want dirt on Granger ASAP. So much for going back to Little Hangleton to see what I can dig up. Now I'll never find out who kidnapped me!* She began to dry her wet hair with a drying spell, and she shaped it as she went. *Gods, I wish I could just go to the authorities, but then I would have to explain how I escaped in the first place, and they would probably arrest me for being an unregistered Animagus.*

The evening she had escaped from that horrible house, she had fled up the chimney as fast as her little beetle wings could carry her. Without her wand, she could not Apparate, but she didn't even know where she had been taken. The sun had already dropped below the horizon. She had had to figure out where she was before she could know which direction home would be in. So she had flown towards the lights of the little town at the bottom of the hill. Luckily, there was a sign beside the road at the town's limits with the words "Welcome to Little Hangleton" sprawled in a graceful arch across the top. Once she had procured that bit of information, she needed only to fly close enough to London to catch the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley, and from there, her flat was a short walk away.

But she had never been abducted before. She had been terrified. It had taken her several weeks to get up the nerve to decide that, since she couldn't go to the authorities, she had no choice but to go back to the town to investigate on her own. This weekend was supposed to include her first visit back to the town and perhaps the shack where she had been taken, but that would all have to wait now. Miss Granger required her undivided attention.

Why on earth would anyone want to ruin Granger's reputation? I can't say that I'm particularly fond of the girl, but she kept her word after all these years, and that's enough for me. Now, if I don't dig up some dirt to smear her, I'll be exposed as a Muggle-born. If I do write an inflammatory article about her, not only will I break out in hives, she'll

probably expose me as the beetle that I am. She strode over to her ever-expanding wardrobe and began to peruse its contents to find a suitable outfit.

But what if my Animagus secret does get out? If I hadn't been able to change myself, I would probably still be stuck in that run-down filthy shack. No wand, no food or water. I was lucky to get out at all. Thank Nimue for chimneys. She plucked a pair of navy slacks and a white blouse from the rack as she reminisced about the moment she turned into a beetle and crawled up the chimney in that dank and dingy house.

Perhaps they would have hurt me if I hadn't managed to escape when I did. Perhaps they were saving me to use as a sex toy... yeah, that's it. She grinned devilishly to herself. *To play out their sexual fantasies with me. Tie me up, no wand, no way to defend myself* Rita gazed critically at her nude form in the vanity mirror. *Good Gods girl! Who are you kidding?* She flicked her wand and cast several Glamours over herself to perk up her boobs and butt, tuck her sagging jowls and eyelids, hide the gray in her hair, and erase the dark circles from under her eyes. *Well, perhaps if they were only to see me like this... Oh, don't be ludicrous!*

She began to don her bra and knickers. *Perhaps they wanted information about an upcoming story, or some piece of incriminating evidence that they think I might be privy to. Yeah, that sounds more like it. Not as much fun, but much more likely.* She reached for her blouse. *I could hear them talking, but it was only a whisper or two, not enough to recognize their voices.*

She had already deduced that the one who transported her was most likely a house-elf due to its tiny size. And from that she also had deduced that, since only the oldest pure-blood families had house-elves, her abductor was probably a pure-blood. She had also remembered the town's name from the information on Voldemort's past that the Ministry had recently released to the public. She had collected everything they had made available in hopes of someday writing Voldemort's biography. And the information on his parents' history led her to believe that the hovel she had been taken to was once the home of Voldemort's mother.

So who would have known about that house? she mused. *Death Eaters? High level Ministry Officials? The Order of the Phoenix? Bloody Hell, I still don't know who those people were. I only know for sure that it was headed up by Dumbledore.* She pulled her blouse off the hanger and buttoned it up the Muggle way. *Who would he have told? Harry Potter? His ugly old house-elf, Kreacher, died a few years back, so he doesn't have a house-elf anymore. What would he want with me, anyway? What would any of those Order Members want with me? So that leaves the Ministry.* She sat in front of the mirror and began to apply her make-up, including powder from the dreaded compact. *If I dig in the Prophet archives, I should be able to find out who did what back then. And if they still work there, they would have easy access to the same information I do.*

Rita let out a heavy sigh. She knew that to keep the blackmailer waiting would be a risky move that she could not afford at the moment. *So, I guess it's back to Granger. That article about her and Weasley breaking up mentioned that she had moved back into her parents' house. Should be easy enough to find the exact address in the Prophet archives.*

Rita checked herself once more in the mirror, grabbed her traveling cloak, and headed for her kitchen and the fireplace floo.

A/N: I want to apologize for what I am about to do to all of my loyal readers. Don't worry, I will never abandon this story as long as I can hold my hands to the keyboard, but I feel that, for the sake of the story, I must stop posting as I go along and wait until I am completely finished. I have several reasons for doing this, the most important being quality control. This is a very long story, and I have been re-reading it every so often to be sure I am not contradicting myself somewhere along the way. I have not had time to do that lately, and the continuity of these last couple of chapters has suffered for it. You all deserve my very best effort.

The rest of the story line becomes ever more complicated from here on out, and I would rather finish knowing that everything makes sense than to make a mistake and have to back-pedal later.

I must also admit just a touch of discouragement in not being nominated in any category over on LJ. It was supposed to be open to any story posted on any site, Having said that, I am not a member over there, and I am only posting this story here and at one other very small site. So I keep telling myself that lack of exposure played a part. But rather than feel sorry for myself, I want to strive to do better. This requires that I finish, revise and perfect the remainder before posting any more chapters.

So it may be a few months before you see my next post, but take heart in the fact that once I do start up again, I should be able to post the rest of the story quickly. This will help you, my loyal reader, to follow along without having to go back and review the previous chapter. So please have patience with me. There will be several more juicy dream sequences and lots of angst and desire. Mysteries will be solved and bad-guys will end up in Azkaban. I'll do my best to make the rest of the story worth the wait.

Life Is but a Dream

Chapter 30 of 35

Kingsley meets with Severus to brainstorm new potions for his restaurant.

Chapter 30

Life Is but a Dream

Author's Note: I want to apologize to all of you loyal readers who have waited so long for me to continue this story. After seeing the eighth movie, I had a very hard time getting past Snape's death. Alan Rickman was too good at his job, and I walked away believing Snape was dead and he could only ever have loved Lily. It took many years and many many well written works of SS/HG fan fiction to convince me to keep writing. But now it has been so long, I fear the story will have been forgotten. So please forgive me for keeping you all waiting so long. It is still not complete, but I am about half-way between here and the finish line. With a little bit of luck and some encouraging reviews, I'm confident that it will NOT take me another four years to finish.

I want to thank my beta, **JenGeorge**, for sticking with me after all these years. I would also like to thank my other beta **SheBringsMeWater**, for giving me a professional and more objective opinion. They both have added their insight and made it a much better story. SheBringsMeWater was a Quarter Finalist in the NaNoWriMo competition a couple of years back. Her novel "Parisian By Heart" is available for sale on Amazon.

Of course, it all belongs to the amazing J. K. Rowling. I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story.

The following Saturday evening found Kingsley and Snape sitting face to face in Kingsley's living room as he tried to get Snape interested in helping him open his dream restaurant.

"But what if the word gets out that I'm helping you?" asked Snape as he sipped the cognac that Kingsley had so generously provided. "Your business would dry up faster than an alcohol-based potion over a high flame."

"We'll just have to keep it a secret."

Snape rolled his eyes.

"And you were a spy for how long?" Kingsley couldn't resist a little poke. "Look, you don't have to set foot in the place. You just have to develop the potions. They can be delivered by owl. No one need ever know who my supplier is."

"Actually, I have an idea that might solve that problem," Snape admitted with a sly smile.

"If anyone can come up with a good cover story, you can."

"If anyone asks, tell them that your contributor is a published author who wishes to stay out of the limelight. The author of this new Potions text at Hogwarts fits that description. I imagine that many people will assume that he is your mysterious Potions expert. If you don't elaborate, they will be none the wiser."

"And if memory serves, I won't be lying. Are many people aware that you had several articles published in the trades when you were at Hogwarts?"

"You have an excellent memory, Kingsley. I'm impressed. But I imagine that most people have forgotten such trivia after all these years."

"Let's hope so, for both our sakes."

"Now that a suitable cover has been devised, what sort of potion effects did you have in mind?"

"Well, for starters," Kingsley elaborated with a flourish, "they would all have to be odorless and colorless, of course."

"Do I look like a mountain troll to you?" Snape barked with great irritation. "Of course, odorless and colorless."

Kingsley smirked. He so enjoyed yanking Snape's chain. "And all of the effects would need to be temporary so that if a customer likes the effect, he will keep coming back again and again."

"You want to get people *hooked* on your food?" Snape glared in alarm. "I refuse to make anything addictive. That would be completely illegal. One stint in Azkaban was quite enough, if you don't mind."

"Quite so." Kingsley raised his hand in a calming gesture. "But a pleasant and enjoyable effect does not have to be addictive for someone to want to experience it more than once. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose."

"Just like a fine wine or rich chocolate."

"You still haven't given me any specifics."

"Well, I'm not sure. I don't know what the possibilities are."

Snape's patience was wearing thin. "Tell me what you want and I'll tell you if I think it's possible. Just keep in mind that I'll need time to devote to the developmental stage."

"How about some sort of energy potion like Pepper-up?"

"Why would you need me to come up with something that already exists?"

"Pepper-up has a strong flavor. The trick would be to make it odorless and colorless."

"No problem. What else?"

"Perhaps something that would make someone funnier, give them a better sense of humor, make them the life of the party."

Snape shrugged as he swished the cognac around in his snifter. "It's possible, I suppose, although it would be more efficacious to dose all in attendance with a mirth potion of sorts."

"That would only be possible if the party happened in the restaurant." Kingsley furrowed his brow, deep in thought for a moment. "I know how about a potion that would have a delayed reaction to take away the appetite for a few days to help the customer lose weight?"

"Only a moron would open a restaurant that would discourage people from eating."

Ignoring Snape's jibe, Kingsley forged ahead. He was on a roll, and even Snape couldn't douse his excitement. "Or something to help improve vision?"

"Why don't you ask me to find a cure for the common cold while I'm at it?"

"What about a penis enlargement potion?"

"Why would someone want to pay for a potion when they could use an engorgement charm for free?"

"I see your point. How about a penis stiffening potion?"

"An erectile dysfunction eradication potion?"

"If we give it a name like that, no one will buy it because they won't have a clue what it is."

"A Stiffy Potion, then." Severus snorted. "So much for the family dining experience."

"Did I say I want this to be a family establishment?"

"Sex sells better than anything else, I suppose."

"Actually, my goal *is* to make money," Kingsley rubbed his fingers against his thumb suggestively.

"Then why don't you skip this whole restaurant idea, become a Madam, and open a brothel?"

The soon-to-be-former Minister kicked back his head and let loose a deep guffaw. He slapped Snape on the shoulder. "And deprive myself of your pleasant company and congenial sense of humor? Never."

"Perhaps I could become one of your regular customers." Snape raised his eyebrows and tilted his head slightly in an effort to look suave.

Kingsley raised his own eyebrow, gave his long-time friend an appraising look, and let out a snort. "Somehow, I just can't picture you with a..."

"A whore?" Snape's voice dripped with disdain.

"I was going to say a 'lady of the evening.'"

"You needn't mince words with me, Kingsley."

"But," poked the Minister playfully, "I *can* imagine you with one particular bushy-haired, former student."

Snape's demeanor immediately swerved into hostility. "What's it with you people?! Does everyone at the Ministry assume that there is something going on between us? We are FRIENDS. End. Of. Story."

"Calm down, Severus." Kingsley placed a reassuring hand on Snape's shoulder, but it was instantly and summarily shrugged off. "We care about you. That's all. Believe it or not, there are still people in this world who would love to see you happy. Hermione especially. She cares deeply for you."

Snape's look softened. He took a slow and steady breath before replying. "And it is because I return her feelings that friends are all we can ever be. Now, shouldn't we be focusing on the task at hand?" A touch of impatience had returned to his voice. "There are more subtle ways to enhance the sexual experience than a what was it? Oh, yes, a Stiffy Potion, you know."

Kingsley shook his head in defeat. The man could turn his emotions on and off like a Muggle light switch. "Yeah." He pondered for a moment as he refocused his mind on the restaurant. "Could you come up with something that would perk up a lady's breasts?"

"A glamour spell can achieve that already."

"That only changes the appearance," Kingsley reminded him, "not the actual feel of the breast."

"You sound as if you speak from experience."

"None of us are as young as we used to be, Severus, not even you."

Snape pretended not to hear his host's comment. "Speaking of feeling... a heightened sensitivity of the nerve endings has the potential to do wonders."

"Heightened nerves? Could you localize the effect?"

"Perhaps. I would need time to experiment."

"Well, if you need a pair of guinea pigs for that one, just let me know. I'm sure I could talk my wife into sacrificing herself in the name of science, especially if I sacrificed with her." Kingsley laughed heartily as he conjured the scene in his mind.

Snape cringed as a similar scene invaded his vivid imagination. "We could banter ideas about like this for hours, and as much as I enjoy your company," he drawled with just a hint of sarcasm, "I must admit that I have more important matters to attend to. Make me a list, and I'll see what I can do."

"Okay. If you don't mind, I'll ask a few friends for ideas. It might be good to get input from future customers."

Snape nodded.

"I should be able to get back with you in a few days, Severus."

"Just send me an owl," Snape said with a flip of his wrist as the two men stood, and Snape headed for Kingsley's Floo. "Oh, and thanks for the drink, old man."

"Anytime, Severus, anytime."

Snape spent the remainder of the afternoon coming up with his own ideas on interesting and entertaining effects his potions could have on Kingsley's customers. He also researched ways to hide and counteract the more offensive flavors that some potion ingredients produced.

As he slid into the bed that night, he closed his eyes with a sense of anticipation that he had not felt in a very long time...

"Let's dine in tonight, shall we, love?"

"Ooo, does this mean you have perfected your latest concoction for Kingsley's restaurant?"

"That is precisely what I plan to find out, with your permission, of course."

Hermione grinned devilishly at her tall, dark and devious husband. "By all means, let's dine in tonight."

A few minutes later, Winky had laid out a beautiful spread before them in their private quarters in the dungeons at Hogwarts. Severus sprinkled several drops from a phial of his secret potion over each main dish, then they gobbled up their food, anxious to experience its effects.

"How long will it take?"

"Well, since I didn't want the customers stripping naked while still in the restaurant, I had to add a time delay element so they could get home."

"So what does this one do, exactly?"

Severus wagged his eyebrows at her as his lips sculpted themselves into an evil smirk. "Let's just say that in a few minutes, the idea of clothing will become almost irresistibly distasteful, and the lighter my touch, the more it will drive you wild with pleasure!"

"A nerve stimulating potion, then?"

"Yesss," he purred as he leaned over to nuzzle her neck. His nose took in his favorite scent of her skin mixed with Secret Recipe. The potion had already begun to work and he relished the coveted combination even more than usual. He could actually feel his nose hairs sway back and forth as the air moved through his formidable nostrils. He could almost sense the olfactory receptors filling with her scent. Amazing!

As he exhaled against her neck, Hermione giggled. Then she tugged at the collar of her blouse. "These clothes aren't just in the way. They have become downright offensive!" She stood as her hands began to release the buttons that held her body captive. Severus followed suit as he watched his wife with growing desire. Then they

made their way to the bed chamber and closed and warded the door in case Winky came back to retrieve the dinner dishes.

"Lie down on your back," Severus instructed her. He wanted so much to grab her and feel her soft skin under his ultra-sensitive hands, but he knew she would enjoy the experience more with a much lighter touch, so he restrained himself. Instead, he climbed over her on his hands and knees, hovering, but not touching. He slowly lowered his lips to her nose where he bestowed a gentle kiss. She began to respond, but he pulled back. "No!" he admonished her. "You mustn't move. I must have complete control."

"But that's not fair!" she objected strongly.

"Oh, you'll get your turn. I promise. The effect lasts at least an hour or two." Hermione continued to scowl, looking skeptical. "What's the matter?" he drawled in a voice like liquid silk. "Don't you trust me?" He smirked with satisfaction as she shivered beneath him. His voice had always been able to make her shiver, but tonight, the power of his voice had grown exponentially.

Slowly, and with agonizingly exquisite precision, his fingertips explored her body. He found that, with his heightened awareness, his hands could discern the difference between her skin and the peach-fuzz hair that covered most of its surface. And her gasps and shudders increased if he only touched the peach fuzz. When he mixed his lips and tongue into his ministrations, she began to beg for mercy.

"Severus, please! I don't think I can take much more of this." She sucked a quick breath in through clenched teeth as his tongue lightly teased an intimate spot.

"So, does this mean that you're ready for me?" he cooed.

"Merlin, yessss! I need you inside me NOW!"

"With pleasure," he whispered into her ear.

He positioned himself at her entrance, and the sensation was almost too much for him. He hesitated, fearful that he would not be able to last long enough to bring her to completion.

"Severus, please, this is torture!"

He took a deep breath and slowly eased himself inside her, marveling at the smooth texture of her inner walls, every contour, every squeeze. Such subtle details had been lost to him before now. It felt exquisite beyond words.

In mere heartbeats, she was over the edge. Two heartbeats later, he joined her.

As he lay by her side in the aftermath, he decided that this was the most delicious sex he had ever experienced.

"Thank you," she whispered as they both caught their breath.

"Don't thank me, thank Kingsley. It was his idea."

"Yes, but you created the potion, and best of all, you knew how to maximize its potential."

Severus couldn't help but smirk smugly.

"Know what?" Hermione turned to eye him with a coy smile. He raised his eyebrows, beckoning her to continue. "I predict that this potion will become Kingsley's best seller!"

"So, does this mean that it meets your approval?"

"Well, I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Didn't you enjoy it just now?"

"Of course I did, but we're not through with the experiment."

His brows knitted together in puzzlement.

Hermione's deviant grin gave her away. "Lie perfectly still." She rose up to her hands and knees and positioned herself over his body. "It's my turn now."

Sunday morning Hermione awoke refreshed and... satisfied from the most exquisitely erotic dream she had ever experienced. She lay in bed staring at the floating dust specks as they danced in between the shards of sunlight that peeked through her blinds. She loathed the idea of getting out of bed for fear of losing the details of her perfect dream. But as she lay there recalling her other dreams of Severus Snape, she could still remember every detail. It was amazing, as if she had lived it. No morphing of forms or dissolving from one scene to the next, no impossible scenarios or unimaginable creatures. The dreams she had with her beloved professor looked and felt like real life. They were so real in fact that she knew she had climaxed twice last night. No wonder she felt so satisfied, so loved, so treasured.

How would she ever face him at dinner this evening?

Sunday afternoon found Severus knocking at Hermione's door under cover of his Disillusionment Charm. Hugo greeted him as usual and led him into the kitchen to see his mom and decide which potion they would work on.

Snape found Miss Granger wearing dark slacks and a long-sleeve plain white blouse buttoned up to her neck line. Her hair was simply pulled back at the nape of her neck, and she only had the barest of make-up on. But she was still the most beautiful sight Snape had ever laid eyes on. The warmth in her eyes as she turned to greet him was unmistakable. Just like the warmth he had felt from her in his dreams.

How would he ever make it through this evening?

He took a deep breath to regain a modicum of composure. Then he leaned in to kiss her lightly on the cheek.

"Right on time as always." She smiled up at him.

"Punctuality was essential in my previous line of work."

"Teaching?"

"Death Eating."

"Ah, yes, I imagine that Voldemort didn't like being kept waiting."

Snape huffed. "Tardiness was severely punished, and if you didn't show up at all..."

"Let me guess, you had better be dead or in hospital."

"Precisely." They both chuckled.

"Well, at least you can joke about it now." Hermione smiled wistfully and gazed into his eyes. She thought about his endless sacrifices and his current standing in the wizarding world thanks to those very sacrifices. The injustice of it all made her shudder. She knew he didn't like to lament about his past. As her mind cast about for a change of subject, Professor Snape saved her the trouble.

"Speaking of not showing up, where's Rose?"

"She said that she needed the Hogwarts library to finish her assignments, but I think she just wants to spend more time with her friends."

"Her loss!" Hugo thrust his own copy of the new Potions book into Professor Snape's hand and grinned. "So, what are we going to brew this time?" he asked with unbridled enthusiasm.

Although Rose's voluntary absence weighed heavily on all three of them, they let the matter rest and enjoyed themselves. Pepper-Up was the assignment for today, and Hugo pulled it off without any mishaps, leaving Hermione beaming with pride over the contents of his cauldron.

"Perhaps we should bottle this so I can take it to Madam Pomfrey in the morning," Hermione suggested.

"She always did need a constant supply of that particular potion. Hogwarts students were famous for burning the candle at both ends," admitted Severus. "I guess some things never change."

"You want to take *my* potion to Hogwarts?" Hugo's eyes grew wide. "Do you really think it's good enough?"

"I couldn't brew better myself." Severus smiled at the boy.

"Wicked! I'm actually good at something. Something magical. And I don't even have a wand yet!"

"I'm proud of you, son." Hermione mussed his hair. "You'll do fine at Hogwarts."

They all helped move the finished food into the dining room and enjoyed the meal. Then Hugo occupied himself on the computer while Professor Snape helped Hermione clean up. She had been watching him all through dinner. His delicate hand movements... his lips as he chewed and talked. Oh, how she wanted to feel those lips explore her body! She tugged hard at her high collar. She was thankful for the distraction of dirty dishes, and she decided that she should occupy her hands so he wouldn't see them shaking from the nerves that were now strung so tight they could snap at any moment. Oh, if only Hugo weren't here. She would have taken him right here on the kitchen table consequences be damned!

As she stood over the sink, washing the pots and pans in the Muggle way, he couldn't help but covet her exposed neck. Even though her loosened collar still sat high, that special spot just behind her ear stood exposed. A few tendrils of hair had escaped their tie but not enough to obscure the view or, he imagined, the scent.

His voice had made her shudder in his dream last night. Would it work here, now, in the kitchen? He knew he shouldn't. Hugo was just in the next room. What would he think if he saw them? He resolved then and there that he wouldn't actually touch her, but he just had to find out.

Slowly, with a stealth honed from years of spying, Snape crept up behind Miss Granger and leaned down close to her ear. He inhaled slowly, deeply, blissfully enjoying the scent. "You could use magic..."

Suddenly, soap suds, hot water, a sponge and a blue china plate sailed into the air, and Hermione let out a shriek to wake the dead. The plate hit the floor and shattered as she spun and grabbed Professor Snape's lapels. She glared at him with mock incredulity, her face covered in red blotches. "Don't ever sneak up on me like that! You scared the CRAP out of me!"

Snape tipped his head back and laughed a deep, relaxed, joyous laugh, and wrapped his arms around her in a light, comforting manner. When their eyes met, they were both smiling. "I apologize. It won't happen again."

Just then, Hugo came running into the room. "What was that? I heard a scream and a crash?" He looked down at the shattered plate. "What happened?" He stared wide eyed at his mother wrapped in Professor Snape's arms. "Mum, are you alright?"

Snape awkwardly loosened his grip and stepped away. So much for romance. In a way, this little incident was a good thing. It broke the tension that had been building between them all evening. At least now, he could relax and be himself again.

"Professor Snape snuck up behind me and startled me, that's all, love." Hermione pulled her wand from her sleeve and repaired the plate, then she levitated it back into the sink. "No harm done." She used a still sudsy hand to ruffle his hair.

"Aw, mum!" Hugo ran back into the family room.

After quietly finishing the dishes, Miss Granger and Snape sat at the kitchen table and talked about the case. He filled her in on the information he had gathered from his interviews with various people. They came to the conclusion that Umbridge was looking more and more like the culprit with each new bit of evidence. But something in Snape's gut told him that there was more here than appeared on the surface.

Since they still didn't have enough to convict her, they would just have to keep digging.

As Snape got up to take his leave, he mentioned his meeting with Kingsley. As he did so, his delicious dream from the night before replayed itself in his mind. These dreams he had been having with Miss Granger were always so vivid. And his memories of them never faded. It was as if he were living two separate lives with her. In one he kept her at arm's length, in the other they found comfort, passion, and most importantly, love in each other's arms. He much preferred the dream reality and wondered with great angst if the two would ever merge.

His heart ached with the thought as he donned his traveling cloak. He stooped to give Hugo a hug. Then he rose and gazed into Miss Granger's hungry eyes. Oh, how he longed to claim her with his lips, his hands, his body.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly in another attempt to regain his control. But with the memory of his most recent dream right on the surface of his consciousness, he couldn't help but reach his hand up to her face. He kept his touch feather light, trying only to make contact with the peach fuzz on her cheek. It was almost more than he could bear.

Hermione felt her heart almost explode in her chest as Professor Snape reached up to caress her cheek. When his fingertips just barely grazed the surface, she inhaled

quickly, and her eyelids fluttered closed. *Just like that dream I had last night... that exquisitely real dream.* Her hand rose up to join his, but he was already pulling away. Her eyes popped open as she silently begged him to stay, but he had already begun to disappear before her eyes.

The door creaked open just enough for him to slip through, and he was gone.

Outside, unnoticed, a rather large beetle clung to the window frame beside the front door, watching the scene play out.

Consorting with Felons

Chapter 31 of 35

The rumor mill at Hogwarts gets Hermione into trouble.

A/N: As usual, I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story. J. K. Rowling owns anything and anyone you recognize. I just enjoy playing with her characters.

I want to thank my wonderful betas, **JenGeorge** and **SheBringsMeWater**, for all of their help in taming the commas and adding their suggestions. I didn't always follow their advice, but I do always value their opinions. And **lyn_f** here at TPP advised me on my illogical punctuation and capitalization. They all helped me iron out the rough patches. Thanks, ladies.

Chapter 31

Consorting with Felons

In her animagus form Rita Skeeter had flown from window to window all evening in an attempt to gain entry into Granger's home, but to no avail. *Must be an insect repellent charm of some kind*, she thought as she had finally given up on entering the house and made her way to the kitchen window for a better look.

Wooden blinds covered the window most effectively, but she had managed to find a gap between the slats that she could peer through. Not much to see, just three people cooking and brewing a potion. But no matter how hard she tried, she had not been able to hear a word anyone had said. *Perhaps a privacy or silencing charm*, she thought. *And a very effective one at that. No wonder she took Flitwick's place as Charms professor.*

Rita had been frustrated beyond measure but was determined to find something untoward to write about before the evening's end, so she had stuck around until the moment when Snape was donning his travelling cloak and saying his goodbyes. The sliver of a window beside the front door didn't afford much of a view. Snape's back was to it, and she couldn't see his face. She could barely see Granger's eyes and the top of her head thanks to Snape's broad shoulders blocking her view.

Then he raised his arm just as he shifted his weight to the other foot. *Damn! Now I can't see anything. Is he touching her arm? Her face? Her hair?* But as Rita flew to the top of the window to get a better look over Snape's head, the moment had passed, and he had cast the Disillusionment Charm.

When the door cracked open, Rita tried once again to gain entry, but the insect repellent charm successfully redirected her. The door closed with a whoosh that sent her tiny beetle form twirling through the air. Then the spin of Snape's Disapparition sent her toppling into the shrubbery. When she finally regained her sense of balance, she flew off in a huff. One meeting between the two was not really newsworthy, so she would have to do some more digging. A trip to Hogwarts seemed in order, and she knew from past experience that the school did not have an insect repellent charm around it. She could easily slip into someone's pocket at the front gate to get past the magical barriers, and once on the grounds, she could go wherever she pleased.

Somehow, she would find a way to make a mountain out of a mole hill.

Hermione made it back to Hogwarts the next morning just in time to deliver Hugo's potion to the hospital wing and still catch the end of breakfast in the Great Hall. She slipped into a seat on the end of the staff table beside Madam Pince as the librarian was finishing up her second muffin.

"Good morning, Irma. How are you this morning?" asked Hermione politely.

"So far, so good," the old spinster chuckled, "but the day is young. And how was your weekend?"

"Splendid, thank you. And yours?"

"Rather quiet, actually. No major projects coming up soon that require immense amounts of research, I suppose."

Hermione snorted. "You mean my daughter hasn't been driving you to distraction in the library every weekend?"

Irma knitted her brow in concentration. "No... no, I don't believe I've seen her in the library *any* weekend so far this year. And that's saying something, since it is already mid-October."

"Really!" Hermione found this news alarming since it meant that Rose had been lying to her. "Does she come in at all?"

"Oh, of course, dear. She's smart and studious, just as you were. But I must say that she isn't nearly as bookish as you were at her age. She is popular with the other students and she has quite the social life."

Hermione's astonishment was evident by the wide-eyed look on her face.

"Of course you would know this, *if* you had bothered to stay here on weekends like the rest of us *are required* to do!" Madam Pince pushed her chair away from the table and stood abruptly. "Good day, Hermione."

Hermione knew that her need for weekends away from the castle would cause resentment with some of the other staff members, but this was the first time anyone had actually voiced those feelings to her face. She sat in stunned silence for a moment, wondering just how many other teachers shared that same sentiment.

Just then, she noticed Rose readying herself to leave the Gryffindor table as Scorpius Malfoy came up behind her. They walked beside each other to the door, talking and

laughing like she used to do with Ron and Harry. She wondered how Lucius and Draco would feel about that little scene. Then Hermione remembered that Rose had been lying to her and felt the need to speak with the girl right away so it wouldn't nag at her and distract her from her teaching duties.

With this goal in mind, Hermione jumped up from her chair and walked briskly toward the door, catching the two children just as they made their way into the entrance hall. "Rose, darling, may I have a word?"

"Oh, hi, Mum." They shared a brief hug. "Go on, Scorpius. I'll see you in class."

Hermione grasped Rose's hand firmly and pulled her into a nearby alcove. Rose gave her a worried look. "What's the matter, Mum? Is everything alright?"

Hermione wanted to simply blurt out what Madam Pince had told her, but she knew that she would get much more out of Rose with a softer approach. "Nothing. I just haven't seen you for a few days and I was wondering how your other classes are going."

Rose eyed her mother suspiciously. "Everything's fine, Mum. And since I don't want to be late to Potions, I had better get—"

"And how's all that extra research going in the library?"

"Uh... fine." Rose shrugged her shoulders, still not sure where this was leading.

"Finding all the books you need for your research? Anything you would like me to buy or borrow for you?"

"No, Mum. Look, I really need to get going. And don't you teach a class during First Bell as well?"

Rose was right, of course. But Hermione felt a keen need to get the truth out of her. She could tolerate many transgressions from the people she loved, but lies were not among them. "My teaching schedule is neither here nor there, young lady." There was no more time for beating around the bush. "Rose, Madam Pince has informed me that you have not been in the library *once* in all the weekends since school started. Why have you been lying to me?"

The girl turned a violent shade of scarlet that would have matched the Hogwarts Express. "I dunno, Mum." She shuffled her feet in an attempt to stall while she manufactured a graceful way to get herself out of this pickle. "I just wanted to be with my friends. We're so busy during the week with classes and studying. The weekend is the only time I get to have fun with them." She continued to glare at the floor as she scuffed the bottom of her right shoe on the flagstone.

"Then why didn't you just tell me the truth?"

Rose finally looked up and met her mother's stern gaze. "I guess I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"I'm afraid there's quite a bit more to it than that, Professor Granger," Headmistress McGonagall interjected as she walked up with Kathleen Finnegan in tow. "I need to see both of you in my office. But first, Rose, please go deliver this note to Professor Slughorn, and retrieve Mr. Malfoy. He's part of this, and he should come along."

It wasn't until then that Rose and Hermione both realized that the Headmistress held Kathleen's shoulder with an iron grip. It seemed that Seamus' daughter had something to do with all of this as well.

"But what about my class?" asked Hermione.

"Professor Longbottom is free first period. He will cover your class until you can return. With any luck, we'll get to the bottom of this in short order."

A few minutes later, a very confused Hermione sat in Headmistress McGonagall's office, along with a guilty-looking Rose, Scorpius Malfoy, and Kathleen Finnegan. "What's all this about, Headmistress? I can understand why Rose would rather spend the weekend with her friends. I just wish she had been truthful with me about it to begin with."

"As I said, it's not just about being with her friends, Professor Granger. Is it, Rose?"

Rose was studying her shoes intensely. "No, ma'am."

Hermione felt her pulse rate skyrocket. "What in Merlin's name is going on here?"

"Perhaps you should tell your mother the real reason you chose to stay here on weekends."

Rose looked at the headmistress pleadingly, as if begging for a different course of action to choose from. When none was offered, she looked at her mother with a knitted brow, then desperately at Scorpius, then through narrowed lids at Kathleen. When she finally met her mother's eyes again she spoke softly. "I'm afraid of Professor Snape."

Hermione couldn't believe her ears. "You're *what*?"

Rose's Gryffindor courage finally began to surge forth and spur her on. "He's done horrible things, Mum. Unforgivable things. You shouldn't spend time with him either. And you *certainly* shouldn't expose Hugo to him!"

"Look, Rose, I know he was a Death Eater, but he's changed. He fought for our side in the war. We've been over this."

"That's all well and good, Professor Granger, but we have a growing problem due to your association with Professor Snape." McGonagall interjected.

"A growing problem? Why should anyone care what I do or who I spend my time with when I am away from the castle?"

"You are a teacher at a boarding school, Professor. You are responsible for other people's children. Surely you can see why the parents have a right to know if you are associating with unsavory characters."

"*Unsavory*? Oh, please, Minerva, you of all people—"

"The truth about Severus is not widely known, *Professor*," the Headmistress gently admonished Hermione for the use of her familiar name in front of the students. "And I must respect the parents' wishes in this case."

"How did they find out in the first place?" Hermione glared at her daughter.

"You never told me to keep it a secret!" Rose declared in her own defense.

"I have received several letters over the past couple of weeks from concerned parents."

"What exactly are they so concerned about?" asked Hermione warily.

"They are justifiably concerned that a teacher here would be consorting with a convicted felon."

Hermione deflated into her hard wooden arm chair. Professor Snape had warned her that this might happen. "How did these rumors get started?"

"The answer to that question lies with these three children. That is why I have summoned you all here this morning. I need to know how this started and what precisely was said, so we can nip this problem in the bud before it gets out of hand."

"Scorpius and I were having a *private* conversation while standing in the queue waiting for Potions class to start," Rose offered through gritted teeth, "when she butted in—"

"He's a *murderer*, he is!" Kathleen blurted out. "He should be in Azkaban!"

"Should not!" yelled Scorpius and Rose simultaneously as they glared at Kathleen.

"Should, too!" insisted Kathleen.

"Children, I think—"

But all hell broke loose as the three tried to out-shout each other, ignoring the Headmistress completely.

"He saved my father from Azkaban."

"He's a DEATH EATER!"

"Not any MORE!"

"He was a SPY for Dumbledore!"

"He MURDERED Dumbledore, and he should ROT in—"

"SHOULD NOT!"

"SILENCE!" McGonagall's shrill Scottish brogue rattled the rafters. "This is an office, not a school yard. Now, if you will please calm down, children, perhaps we can try this one at a time."

"Minerva, may I make a suggestion?" An ancient voice that sounded like a grist mill floated down from the portrait above the Headmistress' desk.

"Of course, Albus." Minerva smiled warmly up at her predecessor's two-dimensional facsimile. All eyes turned to the old man in the frame, and the children took in a sudden breath as one when they realized who was talking.

"Perhaps one of the students would be so kind as to share his or her memory with you, so you and Professor Granger can view it in the Pensieve. And while you two are occupied, I shall take the opportunity to explain the truth about Severus Snape to the children, so they can go forth and tell a more accurate tale."

"Excellent idea, Albus. Thank you." Minerva turned to the children. "Mr. Malfoy, you seem a bit more objective than the two girls. Not that that matters for Pensieve memories, of course, but would you be so kind as to share your memory with us?"

"I'd be happy to help, ma'am. But... w... will it hurt?"

Minerva chuckled. "You won't feel a thing. I promise."

Minerva stood and walked around her desk, past the side table where Albus' delicate silver instrument collection sat whirring and sputtering, and approached the cabinet that held the Pensieve. Everyone joined her as they stared into the basin at the glowing silvery liquid in a constant state of flux. Hermione and the children, having never seen it before, found it mesmerizing.

"Now, Mr. Malfoy, concentrate on the incident in question; bring it to the forefront of your mind."

His eyes closed, and his eyebrows came together as he concentrated hard. She placed the tip of her wand on his temple and muttered something under her breath. Then she pulled her wand away, and it was followed by a silvery strand. After she had placed it into the Pensieve, she motioned for the wide-eyed children to return to their seats. "Don't worry, Mr. Malfoy. After Professor Granger and I have viewed the memory, I shall return it to you intact."

"Thank you, ma'am. I wasn't worried."

"Now, Headmaster Dumbledore has a story to tell you while Professor Granger and I get to the bottom of this."

Hermione and Minerva both plunged their heads in at the same time and found themselves standing in the dungeon hallway leading to the Potions classroom. About fifteen second-years had lined up, waiting for the door to open. More were trickling down from the Great Hall as breakfast had just ended. They could hear low voices in semi-private conversations and made their way over to listen in on Rose and Scorpius.

"This stuff Slughorn is teaching us right now is so booooring. I wish we could go on to the more challenging stuff, like Polyjuice," Rose bragged to Scorpius.

"Polyjuice!" exclaimed Scorpius, "That's NEWT level! You couldn't brew that any more than I could."

Rose smiled like the Cheshire Cat. "I'll have you know that just this morning I gave Madam Pomfrey a dozen phials of Skele-Gro that I brewed myself over the course of the last few weeks. And my mum successfully brewed Polyjuice Potion during her second year here. So if she can do it, I can too!"

Scorpius couldn't conceal his skepticism about the accuracy of her claims. "And what makes you such an expert in Potions all of a sudden?"

"Well, if you must know... Mum has this friend who comes over every Sunday for dinner, and he's been teaching both me and Hugo how to brew. He knows all the methods outlined in these new textbooks, and he's an expert Potioneer."

"Oh yeah?" Scorpius' interest was piqued. "What's his name?"

"Severus Snape. He used to teach here a long time ago. I bet your dad had him for a teacher."

"I've heard the name. Severus Snape..." Scorpius raked through his memories.

"Wasn't he a Death Eater?" asked Sally Thomas, who happened to be standing in front of them.

"He isn't just a Death Eater, he's a *murderer*!" stated Kathleen flatly, who was standing just behind them.

Rose scowled at this. "He is NOT!" she insisted.

"Is, too, you bushy, red-haired, know-it-all!" Kathleen taunted. "*Hemurdered* Headmaster Dumbledore, the greatest wizard of all time!"

Rose was incensed. "How *dare* you speak of him that way! He's a respectable man. He's smart, he's very powerful, and he's *my friend*!"

"He's nothing but a criminal, and he should have been thrown in Azkaban for LIFE! That's what my parents tell me."

"Well, your parents DON'T KNOW SQUAT!" Rose drew her wand in a furious attempt to shut the girl up permanently, but Scorpius pulled on her arm just in time.

"Rosy, calm down," he said in a soothing voice. "I hate to say this because my dad and grandpa do speak highly of him, but Kathleen's right. Severus Snapedid kill Albus Dumbledore."

Rose recoiled from Scorpius with this revelation. "No. It can't be true." She shook her head in shocked denial. "My mum would never make friends with a killer."

"I'm sorry, Rosy, but it *is* true. My dad was there. He saw it happen. Snape used the Avada Kedavra on Dumbledore."

Kathleen stepped closer to her classmates. "You mean to say that you and your mum have been spending your weekends schmoozing up to a Death Eatingmurderer?" Her eyes narrowed menacingly. "And she's my Charms teacher! Wait 'til my dad hears about this!"

Now Rose had tears welling up in her eyes. She grabbed the girl by the shoulders and begged. "No, Kathleen, please... please don't tell your parents. He's changed. He's a good and decent man now. Otherwise, my mum would never let him near me or my brother. You've got to believe me."

"I'm telling," the Finnegan girl stated with a raised chin as she shrugged out of Rose's grip, "and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

Just then, the classroom door flew open and Slughorn's voice floated into the hall. "Come now, children, time for Potions class."

They all shuffled in, Kathleen with her head held high, and Rose with an obviously heavy heart.

The next moment, Hermione and Minerva landed feet first back in Minerva's office as Dumbledore's deep voice droned in the background.

"... so you see, children, Severus Snape is no more guilty of murdering me than Harry Potter would have been had Severus not gotten to me before the potion from the cave killed me. To be honest, I would have expired in a month or two from the curse I brought upon myself by foolishly wearing Marvolo Gaunt's ring. The ring's curse combined with the potion had placed me in excruciating pain. Severus did me a huge favor by keeping his promise and putting me out of my misery. Don't condemn him; thank him, for all of his many sacrifices."

Rose's eyes were filled with tears for the harsh man who had won her over by teaching her the healing spell. Scorpius felt awe and admiration for the man his father and grandfather had spoken so fondly of over the years.

But Kathleen was still skeptical, having apparently heard nothing but negative stories about Snape all through her childhood from her parents and their friends. She still felt contempt for the man and defiantly asked, "So why did he end up in Azkaban for manslaughter?"

"The Wizengamot, in their infinite wisdom," Dumbledore patiently explained with a note of resentment in his voice, "would not allow my testimony on his behalf. The memories Harry viewed were considered hearsay and were also not allowed into evidence. A shame, really. Severus Snape is an outcast in a society that he sacrificed everything to protect. I should have done more for him. I should have planned for his survival." The old man hung his head in shame as he reached into a side pocket to extract a lavender-laced hanky.

"Now that you know the truth, children," McGonagall announced, "it's time to get back to class. If you would all be so kind as to spread this tale with the same zeal with which you spread the previous one, perhaps the parents' fears will be quelled and things can return to normal. You are dismissed."

The children all departed with a promise to spread Dumbledore's tale of Severus Snape. But before she left the room, Rose turned to her mom with pink cheeks. "I'm sorry I ever doubted him, mum. Or you. Please forgive me."

Hermione shook her head. "It's okay, love. You stuck up for him. Until I found out the truth, I had my doubts about him as well."

"We all did," added Professor McGonagall. "Your reaction was only natural. Now run along."

"Yes, ma'am." And the girl joined her friends as they ran down the spiral staircase.

"Thank you, Minerva. Thank you so much." Hermione made a move toward the exit.

"Just a moment, Hermione. I must warn you that good news never spreads as fast or as far as bad news. I'm afraid the damage has been done and I will only receive more letters from concerned parents as to your association with Severus. Perhaps you should rethink your relationship; cut down on your time together. At least make it less predictable."

"I still don't think it should be anyone's business as long as I take good care of their children."

"I understand your point-of-view, but I also must answer to both the parents and the Board of Governors. If there is too much disapproval... "

"I understand." Hermione nodded solemnly. "I'll keep that in mind."

Hermione awoke the next morning to a tapping noise on her bed chamber window. She sat up as she rubbed her eyes and looked around the room before she realized that an owl was the culprit. When she let the strange little fellow in, he dropped the envelope into her hand and hastily flew back through the window. A heartbeat later, she understood why. It wasn't just a letter, it was a Howler, and Seamus Finnegan's harsh voice began to assault her eardrums.

"Hermione Granger, you should be ASHAMED of yourself, sneaking around and meeting with such a HORRIBLE GIT as SEVERUS SNAPE! Did he put you under the Imperius Curse, or have you GONE MAD? Merlin knows what sort of DESPICABLE ideas he's been putting into your head to pass along to MY DAUGHTER! If you want to keep your JOB, I suggest that you develop BETTER TASTE IN FRIENDS! Leaving Ron was STUPID, but leaving him for SEVERUS SNAPE was down-right MENTAL!!"

As the last horrendous shout faded in the brisk morning air, the envelope burst into flames. Hermione let out a bursting sigh and slumped back down on the bed. She felt deep dismay at the thought that most of the wizarding world felt the same way about her beloved professor as Seamus did. But she was also puzzled. Hadn't Kathleen believed what Dumbledore had told her yesterday? She seemed to have changed her mind by the time the children had left the office. Perhaps the girl was just too busy yesterday to owl her parents and tell them the story. Perhaps once she did write to them, everything would be smoothed over. But just in case, she decided that she would try to find Kathleen at breakfast this morning and see if everything was alright.

When Hermione entered the Great Hall, the din seemed at a higher decibel level than usual. She scanned the Gryffindor table and found Kathleen. As she approached the girl, a hush fell over the room and all eyes turned to watch. Hermione glanced around and scowled. Did the whole school know about this Howler?

Kathleen turned to Hermione with a contrite look as she shook her head. "It wasn't me, Professor. I swear. I didn't have time to write my parents yesterday. I was going to do it this afternoon. I had nothing to do with this."

Hermione smiled at the girl and patted her shoulder. "It's alright, Miss Finnegan. It was only a Howler. I've heard worse, believe me."

"Howler?" Kathleen asked her with a blank look. "What Howler?"

"You didn't know that your father sent me a Howler?"

Kathleen shook her head adamantly.

"Then what are *you* talking about?" asked Hermione, thoroughly confused.

The girl turned back towards the table and pointed to an older student's *Daily Prophet*. "This."

Just then, a Great Horned Owl swooped down from an open window near the enchanted ceiling and dropped her own copy of the *Prophet* into Hermione's hands. As she unfolded it, comprehension dawned, along with absolute horror. The story graced the top half of the front page.

WAR HERO CONSORTS WITH WAR CRIMINAL!

By Rita Skeeter

Most readers know that war hero, Hermione Granger, took Filius Flitwick's place as Charms Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry when he was forced to retire due to his battle with Alzheimer's Disease. But what only a few are aware of is that since the break-up of her thirteen-year marriage to fellow war hero Ronald Weasley, she has been seen regularly in the company of convicted felon and Death Eater, Severus Snape. Snape has been lurking in the shadows for the past twenty years since his release from Azkaban. Many readers will remember his conviction for manslaughter in the death of Albus Dumbledore. Although most believed him guilty of murder, the compassionate pleas from Harry Potter helped to get the sentence reduced. But the circumstances surrounding Dumbledore's death have remained dubious at best.

Most parents have found the notion alarming that someone in charge of and close proximity to their children would expose herself to such an unsavory character on a regular basis. Does he have her under the Imperius Curse? Are they plotting to poison the minds of the students and create another evil uprising? Or is Miss Granger simply showing poor judgment in her choice of friends?

Here is what some of the concerned parents are saying about the situation:

"I don't like it, not one little bit," admitted Joyce Thomas. "He was a greasy bat when he taught school there. I always knew there was something evil about him. Now he's poisoning Hermione's mind and she's liable to poison the minds of our children as well. Merlin knows what she's been teaching our kids. She needs to stay away from that git or find employment elsewhere."

"What was she thinking, spending time with a man like that? Wasn't he a Death Eater?" asked Melanie Doolittle. "My son, Aaron, is in her class. I shudder to think what sorts of things she might be teaching him."

"I knew Hermione in school," admitted Seamus Finnegan. "I always thought she was smarter than that. She, Harry Potter, and her husband – oh, right, I mean ex-husband, Ron Weasley, hated Snape in school. We all did. Why she would want to spend time with him now is beyond me. She should stay away from that greasy git if she wants to keep her job. The school will be hearing from me, if you know what I mean. That's all I have to say."

So there you have it, dear readers. The parents are in an uproar with this bit of news. A letter writing campaign for Professor Granger's removal is already in the works. Would you trust her with your child?

This was lower than low, even by Skeeter's standards. How could she write such drivel, especially when Harry had given her an exclusive twenty years ago on what he had seen in Professor Snape's memories?

Tears of anger welled up in her eyes as her face reddened with rage. As she stormed towards the staff table, Rose reached out to her. "I'm so sorry, Mum." The tears were already streaming down the poor girl's face.

Scorpius had abandoned his Slytherins to sit next to her as soon as he was aware of the contents of the article. "Rose didn't mean any harm, Professor."

"It's okay, I know you didn't." Hermione patted Rose's shoulder as her bottom lip began to quiver. "We'll sort it out... somehow."

Isolation

Chapter 32 of 35

Hermione finds herself feeling very much alone.

A/N: Thanks again so very much to **jengeorge** and **shebringsmewater** for their fine beta work. And I wouldn't get far without the help of my hard-working Admin **lyn_f**. You ladies are the best!

And, of course, I make no money from the writing and sharing of this story. It all belongs to the amazing JK Rowling.

Chapter 32

Isolation

Although that horrid article by Rita Skeeter had stolen Hermione's appetite, she made her way to her assigned seat at the High Table in the hope of forcing down some breakfast. As she approached, McGonagall waved her over. "You have third period free, if I recall correctly, Professor Granger, do you not?"

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione choked out. She was trying her best to maintain her composure in front of the entire school, but it was indeed difficult.

"Come to my office then."

Hermione nodded obediently and made her way to her seat. She knew it was necessary, but it was the last thing in the world she wanted to do.

As she sat at the table in a feeble attempt to eat breakfast and put on a brave face, she received two more Howlers and four more letters from angry parents. She also noticed, much to her chagrin, that the Headmistress also received several owls, and from the look on Minerva's face, none of them were friendly.

It was all Hermione could do to make it through her first class of the day, double Charms with the fourth-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. When the bell finally sounded, her mind was so stressfully consumed with thoughts of the upcoming meeting that she forgot to assign the class any homework. She absentmindedly straightened papers on her desk as they all quickly filed out, in a rush, no doubt, to exit before she changed her mind. After the room had emptied, she closed and warded the door and headed for Minerva's office.

"Hermione," Minerva began apologetically, "I know this is a most unfair situation, and I know as well as you do that Severus has done nothing to deserve such wicked treatment, but the fact remains that he is a convicted felon and therefore inappropriate for you to keep company with."

"But Minerva..."

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but my hands are tied in this instance. I must answer to both the parents and the Board of Governors, and they are all calling for your resignation if you do not put an end to your association with Severus."

"But I'm the only friend he has!" she insisted. "I can't abandon him now. He cares deeply for my children, and they for him. He needs us!"

"And from everything I've heard, you need this job. You can't have it both ways, Hermione. I'm afraid you will have to choose between Severus Snape and your career here at Hogwarts."

"Please don't do this to me, Minerva. I can't bear to break his heart."

Minerva's eyes narrowed as she studied her former pupil. "Is it his heart or yours that will be broken?"

Hermione sniffed and stared at her shoes as a lone tear meandered down her face.

Minerva moved around the side of the desk and placed a gentle hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Do you love him, child?" she asked with a touch of wonder in her voice.

Hermione nodded as the tears began to flow freely.

"And what are his feelings in this matter?"

"He has never actually said as much, but I believe that he cares deeply for me."

"Oh, dear. This does complicate things. The decision would be easy if he could afford to support you. But you and I both know that's not possible in his present situation. Perhaps someday... But for now, I must insist..."

"NO!" Hermione glared at her former head of house. "I will NOT abandon him. The entire wizarding world turned its back on him when it should have heralded him as a hero. I refuse to do the same. I'll take a Muggle job to support myself if I must. But I will not throw his friendship back in his face. To hell with the rest of the wizarding world. If this is how they treat their heroes, perhaps I'd just as soon wash my hands of the lot."

"Hermione, you don't mean that," Minerva pleaded.

Hermione had stopped crying, her tears having been replaced by sheer rage. "Do what you must, Minerva, but I will not turn my back on Severus Snape!" With that, she turned on her heel and headed for the spiral staircase, teaching robes billowing defiantly behind her.

"You leave me little choice, child," the headmistress called after her. But Hermione disappeared through the door in an irate huff.

"Ah, love's sweet sorrow," commented Dilys Derwint's portrait in a soft, calm voice.

"She is right, you know," Phineas Nigellus Black added with his chin held high. "He deserves an award, not condemnation."

"Don't you think I know that?" Minerva snarled back at him. "But my hands are tied."

"Perhaps we should ask Severus for another alternative," suggested Albus gently. "If he cares for her the way I believe he does, he'll do what's best for her."

Friday morning found Hermione back at the records office at the Ministry of Magic. She had suffered through a number of glares on her way through the corridors, and one employee had even had the gall to mutter Professor Snape's name and tsk at her as she walked by. She tried to ignore the insults and innuendos, but Mrs. Oddfellow's comment was the last straw. She had given the woman instructions as to which records she needed for the morning, and the woman had just returned with a pile hovering behind her. Hermione thought she was going to get off easy, but the old biddy just couldn't keep her thoughts to herself. "Gads, woman!" she announced as she waddled to the front counter. "You had Viktor Krum in the palm of your hand, and you turn him down for that scum, Snape. Have you lost your MIND??"

In a fit of wandless magic, sparks flew out of Hermione's hand as she pointed her finger in the old fuddy-duddy's face. "Severus Snape is a hero," she growled. "Somehow, some day, I'll prove it. But until then, if I ever hear you speak ill of him again, so help me, I'll turn you into a NEWT PERMANENTLY!!"

The stuff-budget snorted like the pig that she was. "Well, I never! Such rude behavior." She hobbled away to the back of the room and didn't emerge for the rest of the time that Hermione remained there.

Thank Merlin for small favors. As she cleared her mind and concentrated on her work, Hermione discovered that every transferee that had put in a request to leave the country had been a Muggle-born, and each of their transfer papers had been signed by none other than Dolores Umbridge. The circumstantial evidence was finally beginning to build up against her.

Hermione left the Records Office that afternoon and headed straight up to the Auror Office in hopes of catching Harry to give him an update, but Ron informed her that Harry was away on assignment and wouldn't be back until Wednesday at the earliest. He offered to relay a message, but she declined his offer. Since she didn't dare put her findings in writing, she would just have to wait until he came back.

"Sorry about that article, Hermione," Ron admitted with trepidation. "I know Snape doesn't deserve what he got. And neither do you."

"Thanks, Ron." Hermione gave him a melancholy smile. It was the first kind word she had received since breakfast that morning.

"Hogwarts couldn't ask for a better teacher than you. If they can't see that... well... then they don't deserve you."

"Perhaps you could write a letter to the editor? It might not do much good, but you never know."

"You know writing is not my strong suit, Hermione. But I'll try. I'd tell you to move back in with me and keep on seeing Snape on the side, but after spending so much time in France, I started dating Gabrielle Delacour, and somehow, I don't think having you living there would help my chances with her. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, no, Ron. I don't mind. I want you to be happy."

"As long as it's with someone else." They both chuckled, and she reached up and gave his shoulder a friendly pat.

"Thanks for telling me. I'd rather hear it from you than through the grapevine."

After retrieving Hugo from the Burrow, Hermione made her way home. But her computer beckoned and repelled her simultaneously. She wanted desperately to IM Professor Snape, but she was so afraid of what he would say. Would he refuse to see her anymore, claiming it was for her own good? She had not received an owl from him all week. She knew he must have been stewing over that damnable article. Curse that Skeeter woman!

After a quiet dinner and seeing Hugo to bed, she finally decided to face the music. She held her breath as the screen hummed to life. She was disappointed to discover that he wasn't online. But sure enough, an email awaited her from HalfBloodPrince. When she opened it, her heart sank.

My dearest Miss Granger,

I regret to inform you that I will no longer be able to attend dinner at your home on Sunday evenings or any other evenings for that matter. Although it pains me to do so, I'm sure you can see that it is in the best interest of both you and your children. Words cannot express my sorrow in coming to this decision, but it has become unquestionably necessary. A Slytherin at times can ignore his moral fiber in such instances, but in the end, I decided to channel my inner Gryffindor.

We both know it's unavoidable. We both know it is the right thing to do. Please do not attempt to sway my decision. It is final.

I feel that we should keep in touch, however, until such time as the powers that be deem even friendly letters inappropriate. We can stick to emails and IMs on weekends and owls during the week. If you need to relay anything important that has to do with our little project, I suggest that you relay the information only via email, since it is undetectable by the wizarding authorities, or employ the emissary skills of Mr. Potter.

I will be available tomorrow afternoon if further correspondence is needed. Look for me online anytime after two o'clock.

Once again, please forgive my decision. To say it was difficult is an understatement in the extreme.

I am, as always, forever yours,

Severus Snape

Well, there it was in a nutshell. McGonagall must have gotten to him... appealed to his inner Gryffindor. One of the few times she wished he wouldn't have been so gallant. She would wait until tomorrow to IM him about the case.

When Sunday afternoon finally came, Hermione dutifully corresponded with Professor Snape about the case as requested. After going back and forth about her findings, they determined that they still didn't have enough to convict Umbridge. Professor Snape asked if she had discussed her findings with Potter. She told him what Ron had conveyed to her the previous Friday afternoon about Harry being out of town on assignment. Snape told her not to worry. He would get the information to Potter during the week. He had an idea as to how to proceed, but he couldn't elaborate at the moment because it was something that she was better off not knowing about. He was attempting to end the conversation when Hugo came into the room.

"Tell Professor Snape that I miss him, and I think Rita Skeeter should be thrown in Azkaban for telling lies about both of you! I can tell the people on the Wizengamot what a great guy he is if he thinks it will help."

Hermione laughed. "I'm afraid they can't throw her into Azkaban for telling lies, love. But here, I'll spell the computer to respond to your voice, and you can tell Professor Snape yourself."

"That would be GREAT! If he can't be here, this is the next best thing." The boy waited patiently while his mother informed Professor Snape of the change and cast the necessary spell.

Snape stared sadly at the computer screen and waited for Hugo's message. He managed a half-smile at the notion that Hugo was willing to testify on his behalf. Such a pure soul. Such a brave heart. He would end up in Gryffindor for sure.

After a short conversation, Miss Granger came back on.

MuggleBornWitch: I echo Hugo's sentiments. I miss you terribly.

HalfBloodPrince: Don't dwell on it. You'll accomplish nothing and only cause yourself pain.

MuggleBornWitch: Easier said than done, I'm afraid. Rose is really sorry, by the way. She blames herself for all of this. She feels that if she hadn't been bragging about having you for a private Potions tutor, none of this would have happened.

HalfBloodPrince: Poor girl. Please reassure her that I do not hold her responsible. Someone would have discovered our friendship sooner or later. I'm actually flattered that she would want to brag about her association with me. No one has felt the desire to do that for many years.

MuggleBornWitch: No one knows you like we do.

HalfBloodPrince: Thank Merlin.

Hermione chuckled.

HalfBloodPrince: I have work to do. I suggest you spend some quality time with your son. Give him a hug for me.

MuggleBornWitch: Will do. Owl me?

HalfBloodPrince: Of course.

Hermione couldn't quite bring herself to say, "goodbye."

MuggleBornWitch: Until later, then.

HalfBloodPrince: Later.

Apparently, neither could he.

Although Professor Snape had promised to owl Hermione during the week, by Wednesday she had yet to receive anything but more angry letters from parents.

McGonagall had given a press release to the *Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler*, which hit the newsstands by that same day, announcing that Professor Granger had ceased socializing with Severus Snape, in the hope of quelling parental objections. So the volume of negative owls finally began to subside. But Hermione knew that suspicions would linger indefinitely unless she could find a way to clear his name.

It all boiled down to convicting Umbridge, finding her guilty, and having her dispelled from the Wizengamot. Then, and only then, would an appeal to prove Professor Snape's innocence have any hope of bearing fruit.

Whatever Professor Snape had up his sleeve, she hoped and prayed it would work.

Wednesday evening, Hermione felt the credit card heat up in her pocket. She had just left the Great Hall after dinner and was heading up to her quarters when she noticed it, so she stepped into a nearby alcove and discreetly pulled it out. It read, "S to P only. 7-12-7p." She knew from the message that Harry and Professor Snape would meet the following evening at 7:00 p.m. She knew the rules: if she was caught, she would probably lose her job. But her heart ached so badly from missing him that she just simply had to go. So she pushed herself to get all of her grading done early, she offered to take a later hall patrol, switching with a grateful Madam Hooch, and tried to look nonchalant as she strolled about the castle grounds the following evening after dinner.

At 6:45 p.m., she managed to end up right by the Whomping Willow. She leaned against a large boulder and pretended to be winded as she scanned the castle windows for curious on-lookers. But it was December. Daylight had made its escape hours ago. And the overcast sky made visibility almost impossible save for the dim light coming from the castle windows. Since no direct light illuminated anything this far away, she needed nothing extra to conceal her activities, but she cast a Notice-Me-Not charm for good measure. Then she Levitated a large rock over the knotted root and let it drop. Just as the tree stilled, an orange fur ball shot through the shadows and into the hole between the roots. Crookshanks! *Harry and the Professor will just love this!* she mused.

As Hermione and her half-kneazle made their way through the cramped tunnel towards the cellar entrance to the Shrieking Shack, she could feel the anticipation and anxiety growing. *Will he be angry with me for showing up uninvited? Will he Disapparate away on the spot? Oh, Merlin, I hope not. Just one hug, Professor, please, please, please? Then I'll leave, I promise.*

She continued to practice pleading with her beloved Professor and second-guessing her decision to crash their party until she finally arrived at the end of the tunnel. But as she glanced up, she noticed that there was no light, no sound, no signs of life. She checked her wristwatch. *Just before 7:00 p.m. Perhaps I'm a bit early.* She Levitated the crate off the opening and lit the end of her wand with a silent *Lumos*.

She blew the dust from the crate with a loud gust of breath and sat down. Then she decided that the light might attract attention from anyone who happened to pass by, so she extinguished her wand and waited patiently...

Crookshanks leaped up onto her lap and made himself comfortable. She gently stroked his fur as he began to produce a purring sound so loud it could scare away any mouse within fifty feet. The minutes ticked by with an aching lack of speed or enthusiasm. Finally, Hermione glanced down at her watch, whose hands and numbers glowed in the dark. 7:03. *I've only been here for five minutes? God, it feels more like fifteen!*

She continued to stroke Crookshanks' fur. At this point he had rolled over and was presenting his expansive tummy for inspection. "Professor Snape is never late, Crooks," she pondered out loud. "Now, Harry is quite another matter."

After only about fifteen minutes, but what felt like hours, she finally began to worry about them. "Where could they be, Crooks? Why aren't they here?"

She reached into her pocket and retrieved the credit card. The message from the day before was still emblazoned on its surface. "S to P only. 7-12-7p." No change. A change would have shown up and stayed there, even if she had not noticed the card burning. She glared at her watch. 7:30 p.m. If they were coming, they would have been here by now.

As the tears rolled down her contorted face, she felt soft paws knead her shattered heart. Then her familiar stretched up to put his front paws on either side of her neck, and he silently licked her tears away. "Is this why you came, love, to comfort me? How did you know?" She cradled the flat-faced fluff-ball in her arms and buried her nose in his soft belly. "How did you know I would need you so much?"

The Talking Toad

Chapter 33 of 35

Snape gets some long-awaited answers from Umbridge.

"How did my Patronus appear to you, Mr. Potter?" asked Snape.

"I don't know what you did to control it, but all I saw was a very large and awkward baby bird, quite a sight when it began to speak in your voice. I almost didn't catch what it was trying to tell me because I was laughing so hard."

Snape's eyebrow elevated with irritation.

"Sorry." Harry attempted to placate the dour man. "I meant no disrespect, but it really was too funny."

Snape huffed but continued as if Harry hadn't just poked fun at him. "And where were you when you saw it?"

"My office."

Snape snorted with impatience. "Was anyone with you? Did they suspect it was from me? Answers, Mr. Potter. I'm not standing here at your mother's gravesite for my health, you know. I took quite a chance in sending it to you, since I didn't know how it would appear once it reached its destination."

"About that why did you want to meet here? I thought we had worked out the Shrieking Shack location."

"Have you been hiding in the Chamber of Secrets for the past week? I must avoid Miss Granger at all costs. And you know as well as I that she is probably sitting there right now, wondering where we are."

Harry sighed as he kicked the dirt with his shoe. "Knowing her, she probably got there early."

Snape nodded his agreement. "Back to my Patronus."

"Oh, yeah. As I mentioned before, it arrived as a baby bird, but it remained silent until I could shoo everyone out of my office. Then I still had to cast Muffliato before it would talk, so no one had any clue who might have sent it."

Snape smirked. "Excellent."

"An awkward, bumbling, but oh-so *cute*, baby bird... So the real you finally emerges," Harry added with a twinkle that would have made Dumbledore proud.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for *cheek*, Mr. Potter," Snape said with a stony glare that would have melted the most hardened juvenile miscreant.

Harry only snickered. He had finally begun to understand Snape's Saharan sense of humor.

The two men then proceeded to discuss the case and Hermione's latest findings. After some deliberation, they came to the same conclusion that Hermione had: they were both sure at this point that Umbridge was involved somehow, but they didn't have enough to convict her. They needed more information. They needed to question her. But that would be impossible without alerting her to their investigation.

As usual, Snape had a plan. But also as usual, he couldn't tell Harry what he was up to.

As they wrapped up their meeting, a silver otter appeared in front of them swirling and dipping as if swimming gracefully through water. "Harry, where are you?" it asked in Hermione's anxious voice.

"What a surprise." Snape raised an eyebrow.

As the otter faded, Harry cast his own Patronus. "We're safe. I'll owl you later." He sent it to deliver his message; then he turned to Snape in exasperation.

"She's probably sitting there in that hell-hole all alone, pining for you..."

"Although, I can't imagine why she would waste *onesingle moment...*"

Harry glared at his companion. "...and her heart *isbreaking*."

Snape could take no more of this guilt trip Potter was attempting to send him on. He was already at his wit's end worrying about how his feelings for Miss Granger would likely lead to her professional ruin, not to mention the unfairness of it all. The article by that horrid Skeeter woman had been bad enough, but Potter's attempt to laden his soul with even more guilt was the last straw. He finally exploded at Potter in a fit of rage. "You think I have no feelings in this matter?" He growled through gritted teeth.

"No! *You* probably think that I take some kind of *perversive pleasure* in keeping myself from her."

"I never said th..."

"My heart is breaking as well, Potter," he spat. "She and her children have become very dear to me, the only bright spot in my otherwise hideous existence." Snape balled his hands into tight fists and stuck his over-large nose in Wonder Boy's face. "But it's not enough that the wizarding world took the first fifty-eight years of my life. It seems they want the rest of it as well. I can't even choose my *own friends*." As Snape snarled out the last two words, he turned on his heel and stalked away. "This meeting is over!" he barked over his shoulder as he disappeared into the darkness.

Harry stood there with a gaping mouth for a few moments before he turned to the gravestones of his mother and father. "How did you ever make friends with him, Mum?" he grumbled. "He is the most stubborn, complicated, *impossible...*" Harry stopped himself, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, before adding in a whisper, "... and *passionate* man I have ever met."

Just as Snape had promised, he readied his plan to interrogate Umbridge. He had saved the invitation to tea from Draco Malfoy, complete with Malfoy crest and Draco's signature. It would be easy enough to Vanish the body of the letter and replace it with one of his own, retaining the original crest and signature. He was sure that an appeal to Umbridge's massive ego, and the assumption that she would become the next Minister of Magic, would be eagerly embraced. So he invited her to tea at Malfoy Manor, claiming an interest in negotiating a triple book deal: her life story pre-, during-, and post- her years as Minister of Magic. All he needed now was a few of Draco's flaxen hairs and the Malfoy family travel plans for the Christmas hols. Winky could get him in since she spent so much time there helping Tolky with his chores that the Manor recognized her. She knew Malfoy Manor almost as well as Spinner's End. Tolky had already agreed to help in any way he could, including divulging the family's travel plans and the necessary collection of hair from Draco's brush.

Tolky had easily discovered that Malfoy Manor would be vacant both the week before and after Christmas, as it was the usual family custom to spend their hols in Paris, with Draco and his wife in Berlin with Wilhelmina's family. Since their family travel plans were no big secret, Tolky felt at ease sharing the information with Winky and Snape.

After assuring Winky that Secretary Umbridge would be coming to Malfoy Manor of her own free will, and a promise from Snape that she would not be required to put the Veritaserum in Madam Secretary's tea, Winky finally felt comfortable enough about the situation to help him. She didn't mind distracting the woman for a moment while he accomplished that task, which was a good thing since it might have been difficult to manage otherwise.

So, the day after the Malfoy family's departure, he sent Morticia on her way with the fake invitation that was charmed to disappear one half hour after Umbridge was

supposed to arrive at the Manor. He would need to Oblivate her after she left, and he didn't want her to find any evidence of their meeting when she got back to her office. He also instructed Morticia to wait for a reply so the ridiculous woman wouldn't send her response to the real Draco.

Soon he would have the Toad eating out of his hand and happily spilling her deepest secrets.

Three days later, Snape found himself Polyjuiced to look like Draco, dressed in a set of fine robes pilfered from Lucius' closet, sitting in the Malfoy Manor library, sipping tea with none other than Secretary of Foreign Relations, Dolores Umbridge. Winky waited dutifully by the tea table and, as the elf offered the Secretary another crumpet from the side opposite Snape, he discreetly added three drops of Veritaserum to the woman's tea. Snape knew that it worked better if the victim was unaware she had been dosed.

Perfect.

Thus far, he had kept to small talk, but now that the potion was in her system, he knew it would begin to work almost immediately, so his questions began to get more personal. "Yes," Snape continued his interview of the pink toad, "I think the public would be fascinated to read about the life and times of Dolores Umbridge. For instance, you're clever like a Ravenclaw, have shown bravery in the face of adversity like a Gryffindor," he knew that was laying it on a bit thick, but he was determined to stroke her ego to soften her up "and shrewd in your business dealings like a Slytherin. I simply can't hazard a guess as to which house you may have been sorted into."

"What? No Hufflepuff loyalty traits?" she asked, pretending to be offended. Snape started at his slight, but even he couldn't bring himself to call her loyal when she had so easily switched sides depending on the political climate. He needn't have worried. The toad immediately began to laugh that irritating, high-pitched laugh that had driven him to distraction the year she had taught and tortured the students at Hogwarts.

He decided to play up to her joke. "Now, Madam Secretary, not even you can be all things to all people," he said with a simpering smile. "By the way, which house *did* you end up being sorted into?"

"I didn't attend Hogwarts, my dear boy. I'm from America."

Snape's eyes grew wide and he needed all his will power to recover before she noticed. He hadn't expected this.

"Oh, don't worry, Draco. My roots come from the best pure-blood families in Britain. I'll have you know that my maiden name is Selwyn and my mother's maiden name was Black."

"Impressive bloodlines indeed. Still," Snape added, "it's a good thing that the Ministry has no requirement that you were born here. It would be a shame if you couldn't run due to such a trivial technicality." Umbridge nodded in agreement. "So, did you graduate from Salem?"

"No, actually, a small school in the southeast: Possum Pouch in Pungo, Virginia."

Snape had to concentrate to keep from laughing at the name, but after a moment he decided that it was no worse than Hogwarts in Hogsmeade. "Is Virginia where your family is from?"

"Yes. My ancestors came to Jamestown in the 1600s and made a good life for themselves there."

"What brought you to England?"

"Truth be told, I wanted to get away from my family. They didn't understand me."

Snape knew that the Veritaserum's effects would only last so long, and there were more important matters to discuss. So, as much as he would have loved to hear about her misunderstood childhood, he decided to move on. "Well, I can hardly wait to read about that part of your life in the first book." He needed a graceful segue so she wouldn't realize that she was being interrogated. "So... What made you decide to get into politics?"

"My husband, Erasmus, encouraged me to enter the Ministry's diplomatic corps. Merlin, rest his soul. He's been gone over thirty-five years now."

"That's a long time to be alone, especially for someone of your youth and good looks who still has a long and promising future ahead of her." Snape felt the skin along his backbone crawl as he said these words, but he hadn't been sorted into Slytherin for nothing.

The toad fluttered her eyelashes at him and had the audacity to drape a limp wristed hand across his knee. He cringed inwardly. "Oh, Draco, flattery will get you..."

"Now, now, Madam Secretary." Snape picked up her hand with his thumb and index finger and removed it from his knee as he tamped down the nausea that had begun to rise in his stomach. "I am, after all, a married man," he chided. "And you are running for Minister, are you not? Think of your reputation!"

The toad's face turned a light shade of magenta to match her dress robes. She tried to hide her embarrassment by sipping her tea. Snape knew that in some cases, not only would a person tell the truth while under the influence of Veritaserum, she would act out deeply treasured fantasies as well, if given the opportunity.*

Interesting. Perhaps he should warn Draco...

Then again, perhaps not.

But the clock was ticking and he had wasted enough time. "Tell me, what are some of the most appealing aspects of your current job as Secretary of Foreign Relations?"

"My favorite part is the travelling, of course, and meeting so many new people. I'm a people-person, you know."

Snape raised a skeptical eyebrow but nodded anyway. Now he could determine if she was indeed the one who signed the transfer papers. "And do you help Muggle-borns find new locations if they desire a transfer?"

"Why, yes!" she answered, as if she had been aching to tell someone about this aspect of her job.

"And how do you help them, exactly?"

Umbridge wriggled her butt firmly into her cushiony chair and sat up very straight with pride. "I help them realize that they would be much happier in another country. Then I help them find a position there. Once it's all settled, I sign the transfer papers, and we have one less Muggle-born to muddy up the gene-pool here in Britain."

Snape was shocked by her blatant answer, but he managed to school his features. "And do you encourage Muggle-born retirees to emigrate as well?"

"Why, yes, of course." She leaned closer and whispered, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could get rid of all of them?" Her face was aglow with delight.

Disgust and nausea warred with each other to rise to the surface, but his years as a spy helped him manage to keep the expression on his face passive. After a moment, he continued, choosing his words with care. "Has someone coerced you into doing this, Madam Secretary?"

"Oh, no," she shook her head emphatically. "It's my duty."

"I see." There was still the question of who actually checked the tax records. "Have you ever Polyjuiced yourself to look like any of the individuals you encouraged to find

new positions?"

"No," she replied, puzzled. "Why on earth would I want to do that?"

He thought surely she would have done it. Could the Veritaserum be wearing off already? "Have you ever used Polyjuice to impersonate anyone?"

"Well, there was that one time back in school." She rolled her eyes and blushed a delicate shade of peach. "But that was decades ago, and besides, how else was I going to get into Basil's pants? He would never have given me a second look otherwise."

Too much information! Yes, the potion was still hard at work in her system. He had to steer her in another direction fast! He contemplated his next question. If she was manipulating Muggle-born Ministry employees, perhaps she was manipulating the Skeeter woman as well. "Do you have any influence over the stories Rita Skeeter writes for the *Daily Prophet*?"

"No," she shook her head with a thoughtful look on her face.

"You don't *ever* suggest that she write about anyone in particular?"

"No." Now the toad began to look offended.

"Do you ever *help* her to write her stories?"

"Of course not! I wouldn't lift a finger to help that trash!" Umbridge replied vehemently.

Again, Snape raised an eyebrow. So she had nothing to do with Skeeter's stories. Well, *someone* was telling her who to dig up dirt on. "Do you know of anyone who *does* tell her what or who to write about?"

"No. I have no idea, nor would I associate with anyone who associates with the likes of her!"

Snape raised both eyebrows this time at the level of venom Umbridge was so willing to fling at Skeeter. The Horntail calling the Ridgeback vicious, by his estimation. He thought surely that the blackmailer was manipulating Skeeter's stories. Perhaps Umbridge really was an innocent by-stander in all of this.

There was one more thing he felt compelled to ask her before the potion began to wear off. After years of contemplation, he had come to the conclusion that she was the most likely person on the Wizengamot to vote against Dumbledore's portrait's testimony. Ever since the night in her office at Hogwarts when he refused to supply her with more Veritaserum to interrogate Potter, he could feel the waves of animosity roll off of her whenever he had crossed her path. Could she have been the person guilty of ruining his life? He began to lead her in the right direction before it was too late to find out. "So you obviously hate Rita Skeeter. I can hardly blame you for feeling that way. But how do you feel about some of the other dregs of society... say, Severus Snape, for example?"

"Severus Snape?" She shrugged non-committally. "I feel nothing one way or another."

Snape's eyebrows knit together in bewilderment. "You don't despise him?"

"No. Why should I?"

He felt surely that, all those years ago, it had been her one dissenting vote cast just to spite him. And so he asked the question that had been burning in his mind for over twenty years. "Didn't you cast the dissenting vote to prevent Dumbledore's portrait from testifying on his behalf at his trial?"

"Of course not!" She shook her head with a scowl. "He's not my favorite person, but I was willing to hear what the portrait had to say. If what Harry Potter said was true, the man didn't deserve any jail time. It was sad, really."

These words of pity from the likes of a cold-hearted person like Umbridge took Snape completely by surprise. At first he simply could not believe his ears. And so, just to be certain, he caught her gaze and cast a silent *Legilimens*. There, just beneath the surface of her mind, was the memory he sought. She reached into a glass jar and retrieved a thin dowel of wood, just as the other members of the Wizengamot had done. Then, one by one, each person thrust his or her hand into a ceramic urn where they let the stick drop. If they wanted to vote "yes," they left the stick whole. If they wanted to vote "no," they broke the stick in their fist before letting it drop. When the vote was finished, the chief warlock would dump out the contents of the urn for all to see. If there was even one broken stick, the motion would not pass. As the memory played itself out, he felt her hold the stick in her hand as she contemplated his fate. With a heavy sigh, she dropped the stick into the urn unharmed. She had told him the truth. She had voted yes.

Umbridge was not the one.

But even though she was not the person who ruined what remained of his life, and she was not pulling Skeeter's strings, could she still be the blackmailer? Or could she, perhaps, be another victim of the blackmailer? Since the Veritaserum was obviously still working, he decided the easiest thing was simply to ask.

"Madam Secretary..."

"Oh, please, Draco. Such formality is not necessary between us." She leaned towards him, invading his personal space and fluttering those batty eyelids at him again. "Do call me Dolores."

"Right." Snape leaned back awkwardly away from her and tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace. "*Dolores*, are you currently, or have you ever in the past, tried to black..."

POP! Suddenly, Tolky appeared beside Winky, a look of terror on his face. Snape scowled at him. "Tolky, what are you doing here?"

Tolky quickly whispered into Winky's ear then turned back to Snape, still horrified, only now Winky's expression matched his. Snape felt a touch of anxiety at the looks on their faces which turned to full blown panic a split second later.

"TOLKY!" Lucius bellowed from somewhere down the hall. "Where the hell did you disappear to?"

Snape bolted out of his chair and grabbed a confused Umbridge by the hand, reaching for Winky's hand at the same time. "Tolky, please see to the tea service." The elf nodded frantically. "Winky, the front gate, if you please."

In an instant, they were standing by the ornately designed wrought-iron front gates of Malfoy Manor.

"Wasn't that Lucius I just heard in there?" the toad asked, thoroughly flustered.

"Uh... yes, it was." Snape rattled his brain to come up with a quick lie, just to get her through the front gates. He shot Winky a glance so she would open them.

"Then why did you whisk me away? I would love to have spoken with him."

"But do you think that wise, Madam Secretary," Snape explained smoothly, "considering you *are* running for the highest office in Wizarding Britain?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

It had been many years since Snape had seen the toad flustered. The Weasley twins' fireworks display during OWL exams came to mind. He found it quite amusing. He enjoyed the spectacle for a few moments while he came up with a suitable excuse for exiting the house so suddenly. "Well, my father's position in society is still quite precarious since the second downfall of Tom Riddle. And although I'm certain you would have both enjoyed this *private* conversation, in *his* mind it would have been viewed as an invitation to address you as an old friend in *public*. If you weren't running for office, it wouldn't be an issue, but do you really want to risk *perceived close acquaintance* with my father to sully your... spotless reputation?"

"Oh. Oh dear. Yes, I see what you mean. Yes, from here on out I must be much more careful with whom I associate. Thank you, Draco, for that sage advice. You may have just saved my political career." She smiled that fake, saccharine smile of hers as she fanned her flushed face with a pink lace hanky. Then she waddled through the gate that Winky had graciously opened for her.

Snape followed her out, took her hand in his and bowed over it like a nobleman of a by-gone era. He just couldn't bring himself to kiss it, however. He straightened up and smiled at her, his hands repositioning themselves behind his back. "Good day, Madam Secretary. I'll be in touch."

"Yes, Draco. Send me a contract and I'll have my solicitor look it over. I'm confident we can work out something mutually lucrative."

Snape nodded. *Turn and walk away, already!* he pleaded inwardly. He could feel the effects of the Polyjuice Potion wearing off and wondered if his hair had begun to turn black again. He could already feel his nose starting to grow.

Thankfully, she turned away, bidding him a good day over her shoulder. He tapped his head to disillusion himself, then he flicked his wand at her retreating form to wipe away all memory of the invitation to tea or the actual event. Finally, with a huge sigh of relief, he placed his hand in Winky's. "Let's go home."

*This statement is pure conjecture on my part. I don't believe there is anything in canon to support it, but nothing to dispute it either.

A/N: Pungo is a real place, part of the rural area of the City of Virginia Beach, Virginia. If you Google "Witch of Pungo" you will find information on a woman who was accused of Witchcraft and served jail time for her "crimes." She was later released and led a secluded country life. Southeastern Virginia, USA, where I live, was not big on prosecuting people for witchcraft. The government here had come to the conclusion that most accusations were the result of petty jealousy or vindictiveness on the part of the accuser, and more often than not, charges were dropped. Since Pungo has a magical reputation and had lax anti-witchcraft laws back in the day, I thought it would be a logical place for 17th century magical folk to start a school. And the 'possum is a marsupial, raising its young in a pouch, and a very common wild animal "in these here woods."

Research with Ron

Chapter 34 of 35

Hermione enlists Ron's help to solve the Umbridge puzzle.

Chapter 34

Research with Ron

Snape knew that he couldn't risk sending the information from his interview with Umbridge via owl post, so he opted to wait until the upcoming weekend to IM Miss Granger. He had sent another Patronus to Potter about planning a meeting, but Potter had responded that he was out of town. So as soon as Miss Granger's screen name appeared on his buddies list Friday evening, he began to relay his new information.

HalfBloodPrince: I had an enlightening conversation with our favorite toad earlier this week.

MuggleBornWitch: Somehow I imagine that there was Polyjuice involved.

HalfBloodPrince: You didn't hear it from me.

MuggleBornWitch: Might I also assume the use of an odorless, colorless, liquid that loosens the tongue?

HalfBloodPrince: Now, do I seem like the type who would do that to a lady?

MuggleBornWitch: Not to a lady, but you were talking to a toad, remember?

HalfBloodPrince: Ah, yes, of course. That's different.

MuggleBornWitch: Is she the blackmailer?

HalfBloodPrince: Unfortunately, we were interrupted before I could pry that bit of information from her.

MuggleBornWitch: So, what did you find out?

HalfBloodPrince: She is originally from America. Her father was a Selwyn and her mother's maiden name was Black.

MuggleBornWitch: So she's not a native Brit, but she can still run for Minister?

HalfBloodPrince: Apparently. The general public is most likely more concerned about her blood status than her birth place.

MuggleBornWitch: How old was she when she came here?

HalfBloodPrince: I don't know the exact year, but she indicated that she was misunderstood at home and wanted to get away from her family as soon as possible.

MuggleBornWitch: Perhaps she was as nice to them as she is to everyone else.

Snape snorted.

MuggleBornWitch: Did she mention when her ancestors settled in America? And what part? It's a big country, you know. And if I have to do any research on them, it would be easier to narrow down the search parameters.

HalfBloodPrince: They went over to Jamestown in the 1600s and settled in the area. And get this: she graduated from Possum Pouch in Pungo, Virginia.

MuggleBornWitch: Possum Pouch! That's hilarious. We're done with school for the Christmas hols, so I can research her family tree in the Archives next week to find out if they fled for some reason, or if they were just looking for a better life.

HalfBloodPrince: That would be helpful. You should also find out exactly what year she came here.

MuggleBornWitch: That should be the easy part.

HalfBloodPrince: I can't help but wonder if she is also being coerced in this.

MuggleBornWitch: So you really think she's just a pawn?

HalfBloodPrince: Perhaps, but we can't be sure until we check into her blood purity.

MuggleBornWitch: But she must be a pure-blood with parents like Selwyn and Black.

HalfBloodPrince: Not necessarily. I went to primary school with a lad named Selwyn, and there wasn't a magical bone in his body. Besides, pure-blood families always home-school their children. They would never willingly expose them to Muggles in such a situation as a public school.

Hermione tutted to herself. Of course, she knew he was right about that. Too bad. It could really help foster better understanding of Muggles by pure-bloods.

Just then, Hugo and Rose came down from upstairs where they had been playing.

"Are you talking with Professor Snape, Mum?" Hugo asked.

"Yes, love. We were just finishing up, if you want to use the computer."

"Wait!" pleaded Rose. "I want to say, 'hi.' I've missed him."

"I'm sure he'd love to talk with you." Hermione turned back to the computer to let Professor Snape in on what was about to happen.

Rose took the chair that her mother had just occupied with great enthusiasm and barked out her greeting.

MuggleBornWitch: Hello, Professor Snape. I've missed you so much. I have all Outstandings in Potions, thanks to you.

HalfBloodPrince: I'm so relieved to hear that my teaching abilities have not atrophied over the years. And, by the way, I've found Sunday afternoons to be almost boring without you and your brother.

MuggleBornWitch: I feel horrible about what happened. I ruined everything. I can't tell you how sorry I am.

Rose dropped her gaze to the keyboard as she awaited his reply.

Snape sighed and shook his head. He harbored no ill will towards the girl in spite of the rocky start to their friendship and all that had happened since. In fact, he cared for her deeply.

HalfBloodPrince: Don't blame yourself. Secrets have a way of getting out sooner or later. If you hadn't let it slip, someone else would have.

MuggleBornWitch: Still... If I had kept my big mouth shut, you would be here with us right now.

HalfBloodPrince: Let's not dwell on things we cannot change. If you wish to make amends, then study hard and beat your mother's OWL and NEWT scores. That will be the best apology you could ever give me.

MuggleBornWitch: It's a deal.

That night, Snape drifted off to sleep with images of Miss Granger, Hugo and Rose dancing through his head...

"So, my love, are you enjoying yourself?"

"What do you think? I just watched my beautiful daughter marry the most eligible bachelor in Wizarding Britain, my son has been accepted into Auror training, I have my dream job at Hogwarts, live in a dream home, and I am dancing with the man of my dreams."

"So, in other words, you're completely miserable!"

Hermione swatted Severus on the arm.

"Who wouldn't be miserable, dancing with the likes of you, Godfather?" Draco interrupted with a smirk. "Father wants to speak with you, Severus. Besides," he said as he lifted his chin, "I'm cutting in."

Snape narrowed his eyes in a mock threat. "Keep your hands where I can see them, Draco."

"Moi?" Draco feigned innocence.

"He'll behave, love." Hermione announced. "He knows I'll hex his balls off if he doesn't."

Draco raised his eyebrows in alarm. Then a feral grin crossed his face. "Come here, Granger." He grabbed her left hand in his right and snaked his left arm around her waist. Then Severus watched them dance away, laughing and talking. The father of the groom dancing with the mother of the bride. Well... they both had a lot to be proud of this evening.

He searched the room for Lucius and slowly weaved his way across their magically expanded living room.

"You've been keeping secrets from your old friend, Severus," Lucius accused him as Severus arrived at his side. "This place is a jewel. However did you come across it? And even more importantly, however did you afford it?"

"As to the former, quite by chance, actually. I came upon it during the Blackmailer investigation a few years ago."

"You helped with that investigation?"

"In an 'off the record' sort of way."

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

"Yes, I'm sure you would. And as for the second part of your question," Severus had no intention of elaborating to Lucius, so he quickly changed the subject, "Kingsley's restaurant chain is doing quite well. As I'm sure Draco has told you, we've even launched a Potions book full of recipes, and the restaurant now sells pre-bottled potions for customers to purchase and use at home. I've had to hire an assistant to help keep up with the demand."

"Yes, Draco did mention that. So you can finally afford something decent to live in away from Hogwarts. Thank Merlin! I hated visiting you in that hovel on Spinner's End. I always felt as if I needed a good cleansing spell when I left."

"Living there was no picnic either."

"The two don't even compare. Look at this place. Such a view! Surely this cove is a joy to swim in. And the seclusion... Why, you could swim naked and you wouldn't even need a privacy charm."

Severus glowed at the rare shower of compliments coming from his affluent long-time friend.

"But I must ask, what is the purpose of this tarp on the beach below? Wouldn't a quaint little gazebo be more appropriate? Really... the lovely home on the cliff and the make-shift tent below? I just don't get it?"

Severus scowled like a teenage wizard whose new broom had just been laughed at by his friends. "I'll have you know that I spent my honeymoon under that tarp!"

Lucius gasped like a gossipy old lady who had just become privy to a scandal. "Did Granger kick you out of the house?"

Severus began to howl with laughter. "Of course not, you idiot. She was down there with me! There's a cozy hammock under there. Besides, the water in the cove is like bath water." Severus waggled his eyebrows.

With that, a twinkle came into Lucius' eyes. "Ah, yes... The motion of the ocean."

"Precisely," Severus admitted with a satisfied smile. "Too bad Narcissa refused to join us for the blessed event today. You two could have stayed on and tried it out for yourselves."

"Yes, well, Draco and I both tried our best to convince her to allow the wedding to take place at our manor, but she still hates you too much, my friend. And she refuses to be seen in the same company as your wife. I'm afraid she may never get over it."

"Her loss."

"Indeed."

"You won't be offended if I don't lose any sleep over it, will you?"

"Of course not."

"At least you got over the idea of your grandson marrying a Weasley."

"Yes, and it was about as easy as getting over you marrying a Mud..."

Severus sent him a glare that could have melted steel.

"Sorry," Lucius offered. "It's just hard for an old man like me, so set in my ways, to get used to such modern ideas as Muggle witches and other politically correct Thestral hockey."

"It wouldn't seem like Thestral hockey if you were the brunt of the insult."

"Oh, I suppose you're right." Lucius sighed in resignation. "But I don't disagree with the idea of equality. I simply can't remember to use this new terminology. I'm so pleased with your union with Hermione, in fact, that I was wondering, now that the youngsters are out from under foot, will there be any new Snapes coming into the world? You've yet to hit middle age. And Hermione is much younger. Besides, you owe it to the wizarding world. We need the intelligent and talented offspring that you and your wife are bound to create."

"With frizzy hair and huge noses." Snape snorted in derision. "I think not."

Lucius became adamant in the face of Severus' lack of enthusiasm. "But think of it... If she and Weasley can create Rose and Hugo, think of the power your own offspring will no doubt develop as they grow."

Severus noticed a hungry gleam in Lucius' grey eyes that was almost never there unless he had something to gain. He pondered Lucius' words but remained silent, wondering what was in it for his old friend.

"Power and the intelligence to wield it wisely. Power that can change the world," Lucius purred.

"Perhaps even for the better," added Severus thoughtfully. "Why would you care one way or another if I have a child, Lucius? You'll have grandchildren soon enough to dote over."

"No one can see into my soul like you can, Severus." He gave Severus a nod, conceding that he had been discovered. "I've been stripped of my power and influence since the second war. Draco's success has brought me from the fringe back into decent society. This wedding is well on the way to helping me recover even more. But since you, poised to become the next Headmaster of Hogwarts, are my oldest true friend, and now you and Hermione are family... Well, let's just say, what's good for you," he spread his arms wide in a graceful gesture, "is good for all of us."

"So if we produce a child of legendary skill and power, it reflects well on the Malfoys?"

Another hungry gleam twinkled in Lucius' eyes. "It would reflect well on the entire family. And since we are now part of that family, I must assume..."

"You mean you would hope."

"Whatever!" Lucius straightened his jacket lapels. "That it would reflect well on all of us, Severus."

"Guilt by association?" They both chuckled.

"Call it whatever you like. If it furthers the Malfoy clan, then I'm all for it."

"Of course, there is another person to be considered in the decision. And she's already had two children. Child bearing is not easy on a woman's body. She may have no desire to do that to herself again. And I can't say that I would blame her if she didn't."

"So, you're at least open to the idea then?"

"Perhaps." Severus shrugged non-committally.

"Let me talk to her. I'll convince her that she owes you your own child."

"Lucius, I really don't think that..."

"I'll appeal to her sense of fairness. She'll be putty in my hands, old friend."

Just then, Draco returned Hermione to Severus' side and gave her a deep bow. "Thank you for the lovely dance, m' lady."

"The pleasure was all mine, kind sir." But as she turned back towards her anxious husband, another exquisitely manicured hand captured hers and she was turned toward Lucius' beaming smile.

"Would you be so kind as to grace me with your presence on the dance floor?" He gently brought her knuckles to his lips.

Hermione stole a sideways glance at Severus to assure herself that it was safe to dance with the famous former Death Eater.

"Lucius is an excellent dancer. You'll enjoy yourself." Her husband couldn't help but smirk at the two of them. He figured that he would find out soon enough if Lucius' little scheme had worked.

"Don't worry, Hermione." A devilish grin settled into his features. "I don't usually draw blood when I bite."

"Behave yourself, Father!" Draco called after them as they twirled into the crowd.

And Snape twirled into a deeper, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Hermione took a deep breath and stretched as she remembered her latest delightful dream. She had been dancing with her professor at her daughter's wedding to Scorpius Malfoy when Draco had cut in. He had actually been not only decent to her but charming. He no longer seemed to have a problem with her Muggle-born status. And he hadn't seemed to care that his precious little pure-blood son had fallen in love with a half-blood Weasley. Even less believable was her next dance partner, Draco's father. Not only had he been charming and delightful, he had tried to convince Hermione that she and Severus should have children of their own. She had made up her mind long ago not to have any more kids. But that was with Ron. As she searched her heart, she felt it open wide to the mere idea of making Severus a father. What a wonderful thought... to bear the child of Severus Snape. What kind of father would he be? Surely being a teacher for all those years would have taught him something about patience. And although he had never been nice to the other houses, he had always taken very good care of his Slytherin charges. If they both held positions at Hogwarts, there would be an army of house-elves to help her raise any new babies. Yes, the more Hermione thought about it, the more she liked the idea of Severus Snape as a father.

Hermione sighed. It was, after all, only a dream. Would Rose grow up to marry Scorpius? They certainly seemed to get along well at Hogwarts. Could Draco really change? Or Lucius? And would she and Professor Snape ever get together? *I hope so*, she thought to herself. *For the sake of the wizarding world, I hope so.*

But all the wishes in the world wouldn't get Hermione's work done for her. And now she had a problem. She needed to do extensive research on Umbridge's background, and she needed total secrecy to do it. If she signed out the ancient ancestral migration tomes from the 1600s, and Umbridge checked the sign-out book, she would surely get suspicious. Hermione was already in enough trouble with the whole debacle concerning her relationship with Professor Snape. She didn't need to be under any more scrutiny. She needed to be able to look at the books without signing them out. And the only person who could authorize such a need was Kingsley. It was Saturday morning. That old biddy, Oddfellow, would not be there after hours or on weekends. In fact, the Ministry would have very few people on staff from here on out through the New Year. Just like Hogwarts. The next two weeks would be the perfect time, if she could just convince Kingsley to give her permission.

Good thing that both of their homes were connected to the Floo network.

She waited until 10 a.m., just in case he liked to sleep in on the weekend. This gave her time to get the kids to Molly and Arthur's house, so she could go straight to the Ministry if the opportunity presented itself. Then Hermione stuck her head into her sitting room fireplace and called, "Kingsley Shacklebolt's home."

"Hermione!" Kingsley greeted her. "How nice of you to call. What can I do for you this morning?"

"Good morning, Kingsley, may I come through? I get dizzy if I try to carry on a long conversation like this, and I'm afraid this may turn out to be a long conversation."

"Of course. You're welcome any time." He stepped aside so Hermione could arrive in her entirety. In a moment, she had appeared and was employing a cleansing spell to her clothing.

"All ready for the holidays, I take it?"

"Not hardly," Hermione admitted. "The holiday break officially started today, so I haven't had a chance to do anything yet."

"Of course. How could I forget? You're back at Hogwarts as a teacher now. So, with only Fridays to work on our little case, how much progress have you been able to make?"

"That's what I was hoping to speak with you about, actually. I have come into some information that needs to be verified, and I'm afraid that if I go in and sign out the books as usual, my intentions will be discovered. As you know, it's imperative that we keep my real assignment under wraps as long as possible."

"Dare I ask as to how you acquired this new information?"

"Let's just say that I will have to verify all of it from a different source to make it admissible in court."

Kingsley snickered. "Let me guess... Severus?"

Hermione smiled but said nothing.

"And this information has to do with my Foreign Relations Secretary?"

"Right in one. But this time, there'll be no mistaking who I'm researching if I sign the books out of the archives in the usual way. I really need access to them when Mrs. Oddfellow is not around. It should be done in such a way that no one would ever know that I signed out the books."

"Yes, but then you still would not have a way to verify where you got the information, and it still wouldn't be admissible in court."

"Oh. I hadn't thought about that." Hermione furrowed her brow in thought. "What if you kept a secret book for me to use, and I had an Auror escort to witness me doing the research? Would that hold up in court? Or does it have to be Mrs. Oddfellow and her official Ministry Records Office Sign-Out book?" Hermione's voice rose about half an octave as she attempted to imitate Mrs. Oddfellow's irritating tone.

Kingsley's lips curled into a smirk. "I think we can work something out."

"I'll get with Harry. I'm sure he'd be glad to escort me."

"Yes, I'm sure he would, but I believe that he's in Ireland right now, and he'll be lucky to get back before Christmas. Would someone else do? Or can you wait until he returns?"

"Oh, dear. I'm afraid that time is of the essence. Perhaps Ron wouldn't mind. He's already been helping us by interviewing people. I guess he doesn't need to know what I'm looking up. He just needs to be a witness that I'm actually there using the books I claim to be using."

And so Kingsley conjured a Secret Records Sign-Out ledger for Hermione to use in the Ministry Records Office. Then he Floo'ed Ron's house personally and requested his assistance. Ron agreed, only too happy to help Kingsley. Then he gave Hermione the extra few security spells to get past the Records Office door, and she was on her way to meet Ron outside the Ministry.

Her assumption had been correct. Not only was Oddfellow absent, the Ministry was all but deserted for the holidays. As an Auror, Ron had security clearance to get them through the front door after normal business hours and, with the spells Kingsley had given to Hermione, they had successfully snuck into the Records Office in no time. It took a few minutes for Hermione to figure out Oddfellow's odd filing system, and even longer for her to find the books she needed.

As she made her way back from the depths of the archive room, Ron began to complain. "So all I'm supposed to do is sit here and watch you do research?"

"Yeah. It'll be just like back at Hogwarts."

"Very funny. No, really. You could be hours. What am I supposed to do with myself? Can't I help you somehow? *Can* read, ya know!"

"Yes, Ronald, I know you can read," she chided. "I'm just not sure it's a good idea to let you in on this case."

"Why not? Don't you think I can keep a secret?"

Hermione sighed and looked at him with empathy. "Look, I know you hate being kept in the dark. But I also know that if we don't convict the person we're after, it could go very badly for me and Harry, as well as anyone else that may be helping us. My reputation is already in question due to my friendship with Professor Snape. If you get involved in this case and it doesn't go well, we could both be ruined. Then where would that leave our children?"

"Jeez, Hermione, what have you and Harry gotten yourselves into?"

"We're going after a big fish, Ron. And if we're not careful, we could be the ones who get eaten."

"Then it sounds like you need my help more than ever." He smiled that 'I'm up to something' smile that used to always make her suspicious.

"Alright, I'll bite. What have you got in mind?"

"Well... I've already been helping you with the interviews, even though I have no idea what you're using the information for. What if you tell me what this case is about so I can give you opinions and ideas, but I keep doing things that make it *look* like I'm still in the dark about it?"

"Things like watch me do research?"

"Perhaps even help you do research so I don't go stir crazy while I'm sitting here?" he suggested hopefully. "A fresh set of eyes never hurt, ya know."

"You always were good at figuring out other people's strategies." Hermione pondered it over for a moment. "I've got an idea." She dug through her bottomless bag. "Here." She finally found what she had been looking for and handed it to him. "Here are all my notes on the case. Why don't you review these while I do my research? As I check out a book, I'll let you verify that the book I write down is actually the book I'm using. Then you can go back to your reading while I do mine."

Ron's face finally lit up like a Christmas tree in the Great Hall. "Thanks, Hermione. I won't let you down. You'll see. I'll help you and Harry crack this case."

Hermione showed him her first few reference materials, and he verified that what she had was what she wrote down, writing his initials in the margin. Then they both got to work.

It didn't take long for Ron to see who the obvious target of their investigation was. "Merlin's Mother, Hermione. Umbridge, a blackmailer? No wonder you've got to be careful. And she's up for Minister! Holy Shite! If she finds out what you're up to..."

"I *know*, Ron. That's why we have to be secretive about this. *Telho* one. Not your parents, not our children, not Gabrielle, not your pillow! Understand?"

"I bloody well do now."

As they both continued their reading, Hermione realized that the wizarding population hadn't been nearly as large in the 1600s as it is currently, so she easily located birth records for both Black and Selwyn families in the late 1500s and early to mid 1600s. Then she cross referenced the names with the names of Hogwarts students, marriage certificates, and death certificates, some living well into the 1700s.

But a handful of names never reappeared after birth. This puzzled Hermione. There was no death record, no Hogwarts student record, no marriage record. Had these people grown up to be Squibs? Ron was a pureblood. Perhaps he could help her with this mystery as well.

"Ron, what do purebloods do with Squib children?"

"Raise them as best they can, I suppose. They teach them the basics the kids need in the Muggle world, reading, writing, basic math. I haven't heard of anyone having a Squib baby in all my adult life, so I'm not sure what would happen now. Back in the old days, if a kid had a bit of education, he could make his way in the world. But now, with all the technology that Muggles use, he wouldn't be good for much if he didn't go to university, would he?"

"Now doesn't concern me so much as back in the 1600s. What did they do with Squib children then? They didn't kill them," she asked with a shudder, "did they?"

"Oh, no." Ron scowled at her. "Although many tried to cover it up, though. It was, and still is, a blemish on the family name to produce a Squib, but if a child is of their own blood, magical or not, they would care for him." He laughed and shook his head as he watched his ex-wife let out a sigh of relief. "Even the Malfoys would have cared for a Squib child. Then, when he was old enough, the paternal wizard would probably have approached a local merchant and gotten the boy an apprenticeship or, if it was a girl, married her off into a respectable family. Then the wizarding family would probably have distanced themselves somewhat due to the possible embarrassment, as well as for the sake of the secrecy laws. It's also for the safety of the Squib."

"For their safety? How do you mean?"

"Guilt by association. Witch trials, remember? Back then, if a Muggle witnessed magic, the witch or wizard responsible would just Apparate away, leaving any Squib behind to face trial and almost certain execution. So for the sake of the Squib child, the rest of the family would see to their security and then keep their distance."

"They couldn't use Side-Along Apparition to help the child escape?"

"If they did, the child would never be able to join Muggle society. They would be forever associated with the witch or wizard that they Disapparated with. The shame of it was, they usually ended up dead anyway because even if they were left behind, they would then be known to be part of a magical family, put on trial, and executed."

"That's so sad."

"That's also why there are such strict rules about using magic in front of Muggles. Too many Squibs lost their lives because of it. Even a few witches and wizards couldn't escape being burned at the stake."

"What a horrible way to die. Just because you're different."

The room fell silent for a moment. If Voldemort had won the war twenty years ago, Hermione could have suffered a similar fate just because of her blood lines.

"Ron, you said earlier that producing a Squib child would blemish the family name. Even if the immediate family loved and cared for the Squib child, how did other witches and wizards treat them?"

"Not well, from what I heard. They would be teased and taunted by magical children and scorned by the adults outside of the family. Sometimes the family would try to keep their Squib children a secret, locking them in dungeons or closets, convincing all involved that it was for the child's own protection. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them even died of neglect and were secretly buried by the families."

"That's horrible!"

"Not sure what's worse, being loved in a closet, or hated out in the open."

"That's not a choice I'd want to be faced with."

"As the child or the parent?"

"I'm sure it wasn't easy for either."

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about it now. Even if one of ours had turned out to be a Squib, look at Filch and that lady that was Harry's neighbor growing up."

"Mrs. Figg?" Hermione supplied helpfully.

"Yeah, that's the one. The kids tease Filch, of course, but both he and Figg still associate with the wizarding world, although she lives in the Muggle world. Squibs don't have to hide anymore."

"Perhaps these missing names were Squibs, then. That's why they never attended Hogwarts or showed up anywhere else in wizarding records."

"Either that, or they left the country before the age of eleven. From what the kids tell me about your computer, you might be able to find out by doing some research the Muggle way."

"Oh, yes. I'm sure if they did emigrate to America I could find their names on a ship manifest somewhere on-line." Hermione smiled at him. "I've never done genealogy research on the computer before. This will be fun."

Ron shook his head at her idea of fun. "Better you than me, love."

"But before I rush home and turn on my computer, I need to make a list of names that seem to disappear after birth, and then I must find out exactly which year Umbridge came to the UK."

Ron helped her to compile the names, then they located the books that would give the date of her immigration to England. Between the two of them, it didn't take long to find. "You said her maiden name was Selwyn, right?" Ron asked as he peered at the small faded print in the overly large tome.

"That's right."

"Then, I think I've found it. Says here that Dolores Jane Selwyn arrived at the Ministry of Magic to apply for citizenship on July 15th, 1965. Her status is listed as pureblood."

"But as we know from her very own research on other immigrants, she may not be telling the truth. Let's make a note of which book you have there." She marked the page then flipped the cover over and wrote it in Kingsley's secret ledger. Then Ron initialed beside her name. She wrote the info on Umbridge onto the parchment that she had been taking notes on all day, and they only needed to return the books to their proper places on the endless shelves to be finished.

"Thanks, Ron. You really were a big help to me today."

"Don't mention it. Do you think you could let me have a copy of your notes on the case? I have an odd feeling about this whole thing. It's too obvious. Umbridge is shrewd. She's smarter than this. If she were behind this, she would have covered her tracks better. I really don't think she's the blackmailer."

"Really? That's what Professor Snape thinks, too."

"You mean to say that Snape and I see eye to eye about *something*? Something besides how wonderful you are, that is."

"Thanks." She reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. "Are you sure you still want me there for Christmas Eve?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Gabrielle's OK with it. She knows you'll be bunking in with Rosy. And the kids wouldn't have it any other way."

That last comment made Hermione glow with pride. "I'll have copies for you then."

As they Disapparated their separate ways, Hermione contemplated her current relationship with Ron. She and Ron were so much better as friends. Sometimes she wished that they had never gotten married. So many years spent in turmoil that could have been spent in friendship. But then again, if they had never gotten married, what would

her life have been like? Who would she have ended up with and where? Would she have been able to wiggle her way into Professor Snape's life eventually? Or would she have ended up alone? He could be so stubborn... it most likely would have been the latter. But then she wouldn't have Rose and Hugo. And that was a reality she could not imagine. No, she did not regret marrying Ron and bearing him two amazing children. But she was glad they were no longer together. And their current friendship warmed her heart for him just as it had back at school.

A/N: I know some of you will be upset with me for letting Hermione still care for Ron, but I felt it was necessary. She needed to move on, and part of that process included forgiving Ron. He's not a bad guy, in spite of what he did. And I just wanted the goodness of Hermione's heart to show through. They have been through so much together. She can't just sweep all that aside and forget about it. And the kids are still a big part of her life. For their sake it is better if she and Ron are on good terms.

Boxing Day Beetle

Chapter 35 of 35

Hermione spends the Christmas Holiday with some of her favorite people.

AN: As always, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, **Jengeorge** and **shebringsmewater**, for their tireless work on my behalf. This story would have been kicked off the website without their help. Also, **lyn_f** holds my hand and helps me see the error of my wayward commas. She gives this story the polish it needs to look respectable. Thanks ladies, you ROCK!

Chapter 35

Boxing Day Beetle

Hermione sat in front of her computer comparing names of ships' manifests with names from her wizarding world research. So many of the names matched up she was flabbergasted. The average age for each passenger was twenty, and none of these people had shown up at Hogwarts. John Black, Symon Moody, Jacob and George Avery, Robert Crouch, John Crabbe, among others. There was even a woman named Martha Potter. And, of course, Alveryn Selwyn. She couldn't help but wonder about two additional names, Thomas Flavell and James Revell. Both were the right age and had given names that matched up to missing people on her possible Squib list. And she knew that sometimes, immigrants had changed their names slightly, or their names had been written down incorrectly in the ship's log. Flavell could have been Flamel, and Revell could have been Peverell. Although those names were not relevant to her case, it was fun to speculate.

As she continued to follow these names through marriage and death notices, property purchases and merchant advertisements, she realized that they were a resourceful and close knit group. They had all immigrated to Jamestown, Virginia in the early to mid 1600's. All had settled in the same area and seemed to marry each other's offspring. But John Black died after fathering only one child, a girl. So he was definitely not the ancestor of Umbridge's mother. Alveryn Selwyn, however, sired three sons. They all remained in the southern Virginia area, and they each married and had several children. But from everything she could discern about the family tree, it never produced anyone who disappeared without a trace as Muggle-born wizards sometimes do. Perhaps they continued to marry into the original group in the hope of producing magical offspring. Unfortunately, it seemed to have had the opposite effect.

Hermione knew from her divorce law research that a fourth-generation Squib was considered a Muggle, so anyone born into the Selwyn family after that would simply be thought of as a Muggle. So, if these people were indeed Umbridge's ancestors, she could be considered Muggle-born, just like Hermione... unless Umbridge's mother really was from a pureblood family. Then again, it was impossible to discern from her research if any of these people had turned out to be magical or not. It was possible, especially back then, to live with Muggles and pass oneself off as Muggle, but most chose not to, fearing possible discovery.

Hermione decided to take a different approach. She started by researching what she could find on Umbridge herself, starting with her birth record. She had been born in Isle of Wight County in southeastern Virginia to Thomas Alveryn Selwyn and Eugenia Black Selwyn on November 7th, 1948. After that, there was no Muggle record of her. Even in her mother's Muggle obituary in 1982, her father and two surviving children were mentioned, both males. But Dolores Jean Selwyn's name was significantly absent. Hermione knew from her Ministry Archive research that Dolores had come to Great Britain in 1965, but under normal circumstances, she should have been mentioned in the obituary.

The Selwyn family tree was beginning to seem more like a mulberry bush!

There was only one way to solve this puzzle. Someone would need to make the trip to Possum Pouch School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Pungo, Virginia. The school records should clearly show the toad's true blood status.

She desperately wanted to call a meeting with Harry and Professor Snape, but she knew the Professor would never agree to see her. So she brought him up to speed via instant messaging and arranged a face to face meeting with Harry through the use of her credit card. He had finally finished up with the disruptions in Ireland and was back home when he felt his credit card burn.

The following evening found Harry and Hermione sitting in the Shrieking Shack, eating sandwiches from the Hogwarts kitchen (Hermione had swung by there on her way to see Harry), and sipping pumpkin juice.

"So... Possum Pouch in Pungo. I guess it's no worse than Hogwarts in Hogsmeade. Do you really think they'll be able to tell us if she's a pureblood?"

"I would think so. When Hogwarts has a new Muggle-born on its roll, a teacher is sent to extend the initial invitation and explain the wizarding world to skeptical parents. This Possum Pouch is bound to have a similar policy. Wouldn't they?"

"Sounds logical. But how do we get in touch with them and let them know we're coming? We can't just show up and start asking questions."

"Perhaps Minerva can help us with that. She might even know the school's headmaster."

"Maybe they are connected via the Floo Network." Harry thought for a minute. "Should I go alone?"

"I would feel better if you took someone with you."

"Ron would probably be up for a quick trip to America."

"Ron has the subtlety of a Hungarian Horntail. I think you should take Professor Snape. He can see things from a different point of view."

"Yeah, the deviant's point of view."

Hermione scowled at him. "A teacher's point of view," she corrected. "He has dealt with students and teachers who try to cover up the truth for one reason or another. And he knows how to spot a lie better than you, I dare say."

Harry rolled his eyes at her. "From years of practice lying and covering it up, I dare say," he shot back with more than just a little sarcasm.

"I needn't remind you that it was all for the greater good."

"Not all of it, Hermione."

She knitted her eyebrows together, lowered her head and glared at him. "Let's not argue about this now. It all happened so long ago. Besides," she added as she lifted her chin, "I thought you liked him now."

"I wouldn't go that far, but," Harry admitted as he calmed back down, "he is easier to tolerate than he was back at school. How did he react when you told him you let Ron in on the case?"

"He seemed angry at first, but when I told him what Ron said about Umbridge being set up, he changed his tune. He conceded that perhaps Ron has more insight that he originally gave him credit for."

They both walked up to the castle after their meeting to ask Headmistress McGonagall if she could get in contact with the head of Possum Pouch. Luckily, Minerva was happy to help, saying she would Floo the school to set a meeting between Christmas and the start of next term. That way, the Possum Pouch staff would have ample time to answer any questions and go over any records that the Auror team might need access to.

And so the case was left hanging until everyone could get through Christmas, a holiday that, this year at least, Hermione just couldn't get excited about. Although she would be included in the traditional Weasley Christmas Eve festivities, the thought of sitting at home alone on Christmas night made her feel downright depressed.

She forced herself to go through the motions of gift buying in a feeble attempt to cheer herself up but to no avail. Finally, with only two days to spare, she had purchased something for everyone on her list save one very special, very hard to buy for, former Potions professor. She had racked her brain for something out of the ordinary, something he could use and yet still cherish, something that would make him think of her every time he looked at it.

After much deliberation, she finally settled on a gold-lined cauldron with a rose quartz crystal stirring rod attached to an ebony handle that wouldn't get hot as it sat in boiling liquid. Metallic gold and rose quartz weren't quite Gryffindor colors, but she figured he would get the general idea. She wished it could have been solid gold, but the six mil lining on this one cost her a full month's salary as it was. Now all she needed to do was figure out a way to personally deliver it. She had an idea, but she wasn't sure it would work.

Christmas Eve had been spent at the Burrow as tradition dictated. What Hermione had feared would be an awkward evening had passed with ease and enjoyment as Molly and the rest of the Weasleys welcomed both her and Gabrielle with open arms. They retreated to Ron's house after the kids began to drag and whine from fatigue, and Hermione shared Rosie's big bed, made even larger by the engorgement charm she cast on it.

Hermione felt as if her head had barely hit the pillow when Hugo had rushed in and jumped on both her and his sister, anxious to open presents on Christmas morning. After the kids' gifts were opened and the wrappings gathered up, another obscene amount of food had been served and consumed at Harry and Ginny's home. All in all, and against all odds, she had truly enjoyed herself with Ron, Gabrielle and her children. So as she gathered her things and readied her exit, it was no surprise to hear Ron's hearty objections.

"Hermione, this is ridiculous. You know you don't have to go." He crossed his arms and scowled at her, refusing to help her on with her winter cloak. "What's waiting for you at your parents' house? I'll tell you what nothing! Are you that anxious to play the martyr just to make me out to be the villain?"

"Ron, stop it. That's just silly. I'm thinking of you and Gabrielle, that's all. She needs some quiet time to get to know the kids without twenty or so people around. If you two are serious, and I see all the signs that you are," she added with a sly grin, "she needs time to bond with Hugo and Rose."

"But they want you around, too, especially on Christmas Day. At least stay for dinner. That would really make them happy." His face grew hopeful. "It would make me happy, too."

"Oh, Ron." She shook her head and chuckled as she walked past him toward the back door.

He cast a warming charm on both of them as they made their way outside and to the edge of the anti-Apparition shield. "I can't stand the thought of you going home all alone to an empty house on Christmas Day. I still love you, ya know."

Hermione reached out and squeezed his hand. She was so grateful they had rekindled their close friendship. "I love you, too Ron. But I have to go. I have one more present to deliver."

A puzzled look crossed Ron's face for a fleeting moment, then recognition dawned. "Snape." It was more of an accusation than a question.

Hermione shrugged. "You didn't hear it from me."

His face darkened. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Me, too."

"You could lose your job over this."

Hermione fidgeted with her magical purse.

"Does he really mean that much to you?"

"More," she whispered sadly.

"Well... If all else fails, you can move back in here. You can sleep in Rosie's room and you two can share when she's home from school."

Hermione rolled her eyes and laughed. "That'll go over big with Gabrielle, I'm sure."

"I'm *sure* I can talk Gabrielle into it," he insisted with confidence. "Whatever else we are, you and I are still friends, and friends help each other."

With that, Hermione wrapped her arms around her ex-husband and sighed. "Thanks, Ron. That means more to me than you can ever know."

And with that happy thought, she took a giant leap of faith that even Professor Snape could not be cold hearted enough to turn her away on Christmas Day, and she spun.

*

A few minutes later, Hermione found herself knocking gently on Professor Snape's door, hoping and praying to Merlin, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, and anyone else whose name she didn't know, couldn't pronounce, or just couldn't remember, that he would just open the door. She felt certain that, once he saw her on Christmas Day, he would let her in. But he had to open the door first to give her a fighting chance... *Open the door... What could be keeping him? He's bound to be home, where else would he be? Open the door. Please, please, please... Oh, bugger it all OPEN THE DAMN D...*"

"Miss Granger?! What on earth are you doing here? Have you lost your mind?"

"It's Christmas!"

"I don't give a bloody damn what day it is. What if you were followed?"

"I wasn't. I was very careful. After Apparating, I cast *Homenum revelio* and found no one. Then I waited several minutes, still under my Disillusionment Charm and cast it again. Still nothing. I also took a meandering path to get here, and I took several other precautions that..."

His stern, icy glare was not melting in the least. If anything, it was solidifying.

Once again she found herself standing in his doorway desperate for entry. The truth was as good an excuse as any. "I bought you a Christmas present, and I very much wanted to deliver it in person. So, here I am."

His anger melted into worry as he glared at her in silence, apparently trying to make up his mind whether or not to grant her entry. Then he glanced up and down the street. Seeing no one of consequence, he grabbed her arm with a strong grip and jerked her through the front door, closing it quickly behind her. Then he turned in place twice and set some new wards that Hermione was not familiar with. She could feel her skin tingling as she leaned up against the front door.

"Best to step away from there if you value your flesh. The spell is designed to burn anyone who comes too close and stays near the building for more than a few seconds. It is specifically designed to deter peeping toms and the like."

"Oh, my! You'll have to teach me that one," she said as she moved away from the door and rubbed her arms. "Doesn't take long, does it?"

Snape's lip curled into a smile, but the expression was fleeting. "I'm ashamed to admit that I have no gift for you, but it's not for lack of trying."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure you didn't expect to see me and therefore you..."

"I have spent the last week attempting to reproduce the Secret Recipe fragrance that you are so fond of, but I was unfortunately unsuccessful. In fact, I continued to work well into last night and finally gave up and fell asleep on the couch in the sitting room. I was still there when you came knocking just now." With this he gestured toward his wrinkled shirt and trousers. "So please forgive my somewhat disheveled appearance." He walked back over to said couch and motioned for her to follow.

As they settled in before the dwindling fire, Hermione smiled and reached out to touch his sleeve. "You went to all that trouble just for me?"

"Who else would I do it for, Winky?"

"I don't know. Does Winky wear perfume?"

"Not that I've ever noticed. The manufacturers must put something in it that I don't have access to. I tried everything I could think of, but it always came up lacking. I just couldn't figure out what."

"Well, I know the secret ingredient, but knowing it still won't do you any good. It's a highly controlled substance that's not even available on the black market."

He raised one eyebrow and huffed. "You don't know my sources."

Hermione grinned and narrowed her eyes.

"Well... I've sweated and slaved over a hot cauldron for a whole week for this. Give over!"

Hermione hesitated.

Snape scowled.

"Veela tears."

"Veela tears?" he asked, astonished. "Are you sure?"

"Fleur's great-great-great-grandmother supposedly invented the fragrance. The amount is only a fraction of what was once in the formula because, as you probably know, in large doses they are very addictive."

"Not to the wearer, of course, but to those close enough to inhale the scent."

"Exactly."

Is that why I couldn't stop thinking of you, even after thirteen years? "I suppose I'll have to ask Winky to purchase another bottle from Madam Malkin's."

"You don't have to buy me anything, Professor. Just spend some time with me this afternoon. That will be the most precious gift you could give." She inched just a little bit closer to him and looked longingly into the depths of his coal black eyes. "I've missed you." The words came out as barely a whisper.

He pulled his sleeve out of her grasp and scooted away from her as his eyebrows came together with concern. "You shouldn't be here," he said in a hoarse whisper of his own.

"I know, but it's Christmas."

"You keep saying that as if it's supposed to make a difference."

"Doesn't it? Just a little?"

Snape let out a heavy sigh and stood up to stoke the fire. "Not if someone finds out you were here."

"I swear to you I was not followed. Now will you please just relax?" She rummaged around in her bottomless bag for the shrunken cauldron in its velvet-lined box. When she still hadn't found it by the time he re-joined her on the couch, she finally gave up and pulled out her wand. "*Accio gift.*" She handed it to him, took a deep breath, and held it.

"Por moi?"

Hermione nodded rapidly with wide eyes and an impish grin.

Snape pursed his lips and opened the package, taking great care not to rip the beautiful silver and green marble paper. As he opened the lid on the box, his eyes grew wide as saucers. This was truly unexpected. But he quickly schooled his features. He wasn't sure how he should feel about this exceedingly extravagant gift. Whenever anyone had gone to such trouble for him in the past, there had always been a rather large favor expected in return. But those gift-givers were usually Slytherins with agendas. Hermione was, of course, a Gryffindor to the core. His eyes didn't meet hers, but he continued to examine the gift. "You must have used a weightless charm. This should feel very heavy."

"I am a Charms professor," she informed him with a tilt of her head. "The weight might have given it away, and I so very much wanted to surprise you. Do you already have one?"

He shook his head as he unwrapped the crystal stirring rod that was nestled inside. Then he continued to shake his head. "This is too much. I can't accept this."

"Oh, please, don't insult me. I know that there are certain potions that simply don't turn out right without a gold-lined cauldron. I also know that with what you've been through the last twenty years, you could never afford one. I also know that you have helped me with Hugo, with my failing marriage, and with finding a better job, not to mention the case."

"Speaking of the case..." Snape desperately tried to change the subject. He hated hearing her go on about him as if he were a saint.

"Can we please not talk about the case tonight? I'm sick to death of the case."

Snape raised his eyebrows at this. "Sick of the case?"

Hermione frowned and pursed her lips. "Let's talk about something else...anything else!"

"Alright." Snape lifted his hands in surrender as he tried not to smirk at her. "How are Rose and Hugo? Tell me about your Christmas."

Hermione proceeded to bring him up to speed on all that was happening with the children, their new Christmas gifts, the excitement shared throughout the Weasley and Potter households over the last couple of days, and Ron's new love interest. The conversation carried them through the lavish dinner that Winky had prepared for Professor Snape before she had left to join Tolkey, who was still in France with the Malfoys.

Later, as they enjoyed a snifter of fine cognac in front of the fire in Professor Snape's study, they found that words were unnecessary. Each chose a book from his many shelves and settled into the love seat side by side. Every time Hermione would lean over to take a sip of her drink, she would settle back in a little closer to her beloved professor. She had hoped that the evening would end like this. She wished with all her heart that she could expect many more evenings just like it in the near future. But the reality of their situation didn't show much promise in that direction, so she decided to enjoy it while it lasted.

Snape noticed Miss Granger inching closer with each sip of cognac, but he didn't mind. He figured that it was Christmas after all, and he might never get another chance to be this close to her. She really was his perfect mate. He knew of no other witch who enjoyed curling up with a good book in front of the fire, in peace and quiet for hours. She was his intellectual equal, so when they did talk, the moments were filled with meaningful conversations instead of the inane nattering that most women spouted (and most men, for that matter). She was kind and perceptive, able to see through his protective steel exterior to the sensitive man beneath. And she was willing to forgive his thoughtless cruelty when he slipped up and said or did something he immediately regretted. She was such a jewel. He knew he didn't deserve her. But his Slytherin side just couldn't help itself. For this one evening, he would indulge himself in the luxury of her presence.

Slowly, as the time passed and the sumptuous meal combined with the fine cognac, Miss Granger's eyelids grew heavy. Being a more frequent drinker than his companion, Snape was not as susceptible to such things, but he did still feel its effects. As she began to doze, her head fell onto his shoulder, and she subconsciously snuggled up against his side. He didn't have the heart to wake her, so, with a flick of his wand and a silent spell, he transfigured the love seat into a double recliner. He then leaned them both back with gentle precision so as not to disturb his beloved Miss Granger and Summoned a blanket from upstairs. He draped it over them both, wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and closed his eyes. His lips ghosted over the top of her head and he whispered, "Merry Christmas, Miss Granger."

... The lake's tranquil waters stretched out before Severus as he sat on a granite bench next to Hermione. Her cushioning charm did wonders to make the immutable stone bearable for his 110-year-old derriere. They held hands, fingers interlaced. His curly willow walking stick leaned against his right leg at the juncture where it met the bench. He glanced over at Hermione as the breeze played with the wisps of silver hair that had escaped her tight bun. His wife let out a contented sigh as they watched their grandsons play at the water's edge.

Suddenly, Vespasian shrieked and Hadrian began to laugh like a hyena. "Grandfather! Hadrian splashed water on me!"

"You sunk my boat!" Hadrian yelled with a sneer.

"You call a few sticks and a leaf a boat?"

"They could have been if you'd let me finish."

Finally, Hermione could take no more. "Boys, boys. Enough of this. Just because one of you is in Slytherin and the other in Gryffindor doesn't negate the fact that you're still cousins, and that means that you're still family. So stop fighting, and play nice."

"And what have I said about the way you address me in public, Vespasian?" asked Severus, a note of censure in his voice.

"Sorry, Gra...Headmaster," Vespasian whined. "But what difference does it make when there's no one around?"

"We are in a public space at Hogwarts. You never know who or what might be lurking about. Therefore, in any common area, you are to address me as 'Headmaster.'"

The two boys waded out of the water and made their way up to the bench where their grandparents enjoyed the view. "I bet Dad and Uncle Lucius didn't have to call you that when they were in school here."

"Actually," Hermione informed them, "Uncle Marcus and Uncle Lucius had to call him that. They also addressed me as 'Professor Granger.'"

"But your last name is Snape!" objected Hadrian.

Hermione smiled and pulled Hadrian in for a hug. "Yes, but right after your grandfather and I were married, we both were professors here, and to avoid the confusion two Professor Snapes would cause, I kept my maiden name just for teaching."

Not to be outdone, Vespasian sidled up to his grandfather in the hopes that all would be forgiven. Severus eyed him through narrowed lids, then his hand darted out and captured the startled boy's arm, drawing him in for a hug as well...

And Snape pulled Miss Granger a little closer, drifting into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Snape awoke to the blissful aroma of strong, fresh coffee mixed with a hint of Secret Recipe and a nose full of frizzy hair...wait...frizzy hair? Oh, yes. Miss Granger... MISS GRANGER?

Snape sat bolt upright, waking Miss Granger in the process. "We've got to get you out of here," he said without preamble. "It's already daylight outside. *I* knew this was a mistake." He stood and started to pace the room. "You and your bloody ideas."

Just then Winky walked into the room with another cup of coffee which she set down in front of Miss Granger, along with milk and sugar. "Good morning, Master Severus. Good Morning, Miss Granger. Will Miss be joining us for breakfast this Boxing Day morning?"

"That would be lovely, Winky," Hermione replied as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes, "but I'm afraid..."

"She most certainly will NOT be joining us, Winky. We've got to get her out of here. Merlin, what I wouldn't give to have that bloody cloak of Potter's about now."

Hermione glared at him as he continued to pace the room. "I told you, I wasn't followed. Don't you think we'd know by now if I was?" Professor Snape's return glare could have made a Hippogriff quake in its boots if it could wear any. Hermione finally succumbed to the inevitable. "Alright, alright, I'll go. Please, let's just not fight about this. Last night was amazing. I don't want anything to mar the memory."

"Perhaps Winky could take Miss home?" Winky offered.

Professor Snape pondered the idea, but Hermione broke in. "Thank you, Winky, but that really isn't necessary." She turned to face him. "I. Was. Not. Followed."

His glare faded to a worried look that contained a touch of affection. "If you insist. Now I don't mean to be rude, but may I show you the door?"

"By all means," Hermione said with a half smile. She would have loved to stay for breakfast, but she shared his concern. The fact that he hadn't run her off last night was a bit of a miracle. She didn't want to push her luck.

He draped her winter cloak over her shoulders, and she followed him to the door. He held it open for her, then he joined her outside on his front steps. But as he contemplated escorting her to the river, he noticed a beetle crawling across the back of her cloak. "That's odd," he said as he reached over to capture the colorful creature.

"What's odd?" asked Hermione as she twirled around to see what had caught his attention.

"Be still!" Her movement had put the beetle out of his reach. He grabbed her shoulder and spun her back around just as the insect took flight. "Bugger!"

"What in the world is your problem?" Hermione huffed as she straightened her clothing.

"There was a beetle on your cloak. The middle of winter... who'd have thought? Oh, look! It's landed on the shrubbery."

They both leaned in for a closer look, and Hermione gasped as she realized who it was. She and Professor Snape both lunged for it at the same time, each thwarting the other's attempt, as the beetle took off once again. "Damn!" Hermione searched the air, but the gloomy winter sky cast little light to help her with her search.

"Too bad. Fresh insects are especially difficult to acquire this time of year. I could have used that beetle."

"Nooo!" Hermione became frantic as she drew her wand and began to flick it in the general direction of the beetle's retreat. "*Accio beetle! Accio beetle!*"

Snape's eyes grew wide as he reached over and pulled her hand down. "Have you lost your mind, woman?"

She continued to aim haphazardly from under his arm. "*Accio BEETLE!*"

"There are Muggles about!" he hissed as he held her arms tightly against her sides.

"You don't understand!" Hermione cried, "I've got to stop her. We can't let her get away!"

Snape was truly concerned for her sanity now as he dragged her back inside and shut the door before the neighbors realized that something very strange was going on. He held her tightly by the upper arms and looked into Miss Granger's eyes, now brimming with tears. "*What* are you *on* about? It was a *BUG* for Merlin's sake."

Her bottom lip trembled as a lone tear fell down her cheek. "That was no bug. That was Rita Skeeter."

AN: Evil cliffy, I know. Don't hate me.

At the beginning of this chapter, I reference several names from actual ships' manifests that I researched online. They were all real people who came to Jamestown from England in the early to mid 1600s, with the exception of Alveryn Selwyn. There was someone with the given name of Alveryn and someone else with the surname of Selwyn. I just put the two together. Also, thanks to the insight of my wonderful mod, **lyn_f**, I realized that I needed to tweak the names of Crabbe and Avery to match canon spelling. The actual spellings on the real ship's manifest were Crabb and Averie.

The rule that a 4th generation Squib is classified a Muggle is solely my idea. I don't remember anything in canon about that one way or the other. I figured with the shorter life spans of non-magical folk, the old traditions and desires to create magical offspring would have died off after four generations, so it was a logical assumption. I also feel that too much in-breeding is not healthy for any species, so the assumption that marrying within the group would be more likely to produce magical offspring was false.

One more thing, for those of you who haven't figured it out, in the dream sequence the grandchildren are cousins, and their fathers are brothers, named after the only brotherly team of Roman Emperors who ruled peacefully at the same time. So Lucius, the son of Severus, was not named after his friend so much as for a Roman Emperor who willingly shared the throne with his brother. And I tried to pick names for the grandsons of more benevolent rulers who did not meet a violent end.