

Beyond 84 Charing Cross Road

by devsgma

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

Part One

Chapter 1 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

Some of you will be familiar with the general location of our tale. 84 Charing Cross Road is a rather famous address, even if it is no longer a home for the Muggle Marks & Cohen. It may, however, come as a surprise to quite a few of you to discover that it wasn't the founding bookstore. 84 5/6 was and is the location of Marks and Sons, a wizarding used bookstore established in the year 1900, twenty years before Marks & Cohen opened their doors and located one step beyond 84 Charing Cross Road.

On this particular day, a large black falcon swooped in and deposited a letter, addressed to the new manager of Marks and Sons, on the front counter. There was barely a pause before it turned and left.

A young man picked up the missive, spent a moment verifying who it was for, then tossed it into a basket under the front counter. Eventually, the basket and its contents found their way to a small office just off the sales floor and on to the desk of the slightly frazzled and more than a tiny bit over worked manager, where it was finally opened and read.

December 15th, 1999

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Sir or Madam,

This missive finds its way to your shoppe in the vain hope that your skills will exceed those of your predecessor. A list of volumes is enclosed. Used, if in good condition, is preferred. Price is an object in this instance, so I am prepared to pay no more than the amount listed behind each. I am familiar with the volumes in question and do consider these to be fair amounts and will not question those amounts taken from my account with your shoppe. They may be delivered by return owl at your earliest convenience.

Cordially,

Simon Sopohorous

With a sigh and a roll of her eyes, the manager placed the letter in her "To Do" box and turned toward the rest of her correspondence. Due to one thing or another, it would be several days before she had a chance to pen a reply.

December 21, 1999

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

Please pardon my delay in responding to your letter dated the 15th of this month; your list is extensive, and I wished to familiarize myself with the requested titles before beginning my reply.

Most of the books you seek have been out of print for decades, if not considerably longer in several cases. A large handful appear to be the product of rather obscure authors and specialized publishing houses, leading me to believe there were a limited number of copies in circulation.

I assure you, Mister Sopohorous, that the staff of Marks and Sons both current and past take our reputation for customer satisfaction seriously and that every effort will be made to procure a copy of each title on your list with as little delay as possible.

Respectfully,

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

Post Script Enclosed is an invoice for two of the books from your list. The delivery owl should arrive this afternoon. If the conditions of the books are satisfactory, your account will be debited this evening.

H.G.

--8--

Slitting the envelope with the Marks and Sons logo on it took only a moment, and after that was accomplished, Simon sat down at his minuscule desk to read it. One eyebrow rose, and a small smirk appeared on his mouth when he saw the signature at the bottom. Simon's eyes rose to read the letter a little slower.

Still the need to flaunt her knowledge, I see.

The defense of the underdog is an equally resilient trait.

Pity.

You'd think she'd have outgrown it by now.

Mr. Weasley must have escaped the noose... unless she's taking the modern view and retaining her maiden name.

Pulling a fresh piece of parchment toward him, Simon began to write with a degree of anticipation he hadn't felt for several years. A small smile gradually lifted the corner of his mouth.

December 21, 1999

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Ms Granger,

I am not a Medi-wizard, so you may want to disregard my diagnosis until you've checked with one, but you may want to consider purchasing some spectacles. If you review my first letter, you may note that I indicated familiarity with these volumes. I am well aware that they are what could be considered rare, hence my dissatisfaction with the efforts of your predecessor.

If you feel the task is beyond the scope of your talents, or indeed of anyone currently employed at Marks and Sons, advise post haste, as I will endeavor to locate a competent bookseller.

The volumes you have managed to locate are acceptable.

Cordially,

Simon Sopohorous

--8--

Hermione realized her left hand had risen to self-consciously adjust the frame of her reading glasses and grimaced.

How dare this *customer* insinuate there was an issue with her reading comprehension. She had merely been attempting to explain why they did not have most of his books on hand, not make excuses for...

Her grimace turned into a glare as she reached for a piece of parchment and her pen. Hermione was of half-a-mind to tell Sopohorous to go ahead and take his business elsewhere because he was no longer welcome at her store, but she knew she wouldn't. She had reviewed his account history upon receiving his first inquiry, and while he didn't spend an exorbitant amount of galleons each month, he had made several purchases over the last quarter (and who knew how long before that).

Surely not all of the owl order customers are as charming as this one?

December 21, 1999

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

If you would review my earlier letter, you might note that every effort will be made to fulfill your requests.

Your volumes will be located and offered for purchase as quickly as possible considering the challenge involved with the rarity which we are both aware of, as has been clearly established of the books in question.

Respectfully,

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

--8--

An almost inaudible chuckle sounded deep within Simon's throat as he perused the latest letter from Ms Granger. He hadn't been this amused for a number of years. Her letter was placed on the blotter, and Simon's eyes unfocused as he pondered what he would write in return.

The lioness has definitely had her fur rubbed the wrong way.

What would be...

Yes.

December 22, 1999

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Ms Granger,

I must admit, your latest reply has left me feeling quite nostalgic. I'm sure you won't know what I'm referring to, but it brought a longing for the kindlier, gentler times when a customer's simple request was fulfilled with an almost gracious attitude on the part of the sales clerks and higher management. A time when the customer was acknowledged as the reason any particular shoppe still had a thriving business.

I must do some research into this peculiar phenomena of customers now being something of a bother and see if there would be any interest, on the part of the owners of course, in having their sales persons attend classes in an attempt to reverse this particular unsavory trend. Towards this end, you will find two titles enclosed on a separate sheet concerning business etiquette to add to the list of volumes I require.

Cordially,

Simon Sopohorous

--8--

Considering her first instinct was to immediately advise Mister Sopohorous to go soak his head, Hermione thought it best to put his letter to the side and ignore it for the rest of the day. Better that than letting frustration something she hadn't felt this strongly since she was a student cause her to write something she would only come to regret and giving the store owners a reason to doubt their decision to promote her to manager.

The next two days were spent assisting her staff with the rush of shoppers searching for last minute gifts and stocking stuffers, and Hermione found she didn't have time to spare more than a moment or two to consider the vexation that was Mister Sopohorous.

It wasn't until several days after the holiday that Hermione was able to put pen to parchment.

"Only one way to handle this. Smother him in politeness," she muttered to herself.

And hope he suffocates.

December 28, 1999

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

I am delighted to inform you that both of the titles you specified in your last correspondence shall be delivered to your address this afternoon. Neither book is used, I'm afraid, but as we here at Marks and Sons consider you to be such a valued customer, I have made special arrangements to offer the pair to you at a discount. I think you will find the price to be comparable to the used rate for each book in pristine condition.

Your concern about further educating my staff is very touching; I've given the matter some thought, and agree that we should offer additional training in how best to serve our patrons.

Hermione's lips curled upward as she considered the seminar she'd thought to suggest to her bosses "The Customer is Always Right and Other Fallacies: Dealing with Demanding Clients in Today's Market."

We shall be receiving a consignment of rare potions texts sometime after the new year, and I have reason to believe at least one of your titles may be included in the lot.

Graciously Yours,

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

--8--

Hermione's reply to Simon's baiting arrived after a particularly bad night of little or no sleep. He wasn't even tempted to try and aggravate the young witch further as he read the words he'd written in desperation a few hours before.

Why do I still dream of you, Lily? What the last few minutes of your life must have been like?

There are times I wish I could dream of what could have been had I but held my tongue and not blasphemed you with that ugly name. It might lend me the courage to end this travesty of a life and join you all on the other side. As it is, I fear my return as a ghost would be my only "reward" for services rendered. An unending path, forever seeking redemption.

Your son still lives, Lily. What else can be done to assuage the blame and guilt laid upon my soul? While the Dark Lord existed my efforts were almost enough. Only faint echoes of screams chased me from my bed.

I still love you... I'm begging.

Let me at least sleep.

"I'm getting old, Yorick," Simon said to the large black falcon sitting on the perch in the corner as the journal was closed. "I'm not even tempted to stir the pot a little more until her temper boils over."

The bird's head bobbed once or twice as if to say, "Yes."

"You don't have to agree, you black hearted bastard," groaned Simon as he rose and headed back to the bedroom. "I'm merely tired, not dead. Remind me to change my will and leave you to Hagrid's half-brother. One bite would be all it took."

As he lay down and closed his eyes, Hermione's words kept running through his head.

"We shall be receiving a consignment of rare potions texts sometime after the new year, and I have reason to believe at least one of your titles may be included in the lot."

"An answer," he whispered to the ceiling. "Please let there be an answer in that book."

Part Two

Chapter 2 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

Hermione told herself she was relieved that she never received a reply to her last letter and had put Sopohorous out of her mind until the expected shipment of potions texts arrived.

Rather than wait for the books to be checked in by Mister Fitzgerald, Hermione volunteered to assist the older man with his work, taking note of each title as it passed through her hands.

Perhaps it was the twinge of disappointment at not finding the anticipated book that urged her to re-examine Sopohorous' file.

January 17, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

Today's shipment of books included the rare texts I mentioned in my last letter. Unfortunately, the volume I was expecting was not amongst those received.

There was a volume with a nearly identical title, but upon closer inspection I believe it is not the book you are seeking. However, on the chance that I am incorrect in my assumption, I am sending the volume to you for examination. If it is not what you seek, please return it to our store – at our expense. If we have not received the return in five days time, we shall debit your account.

I have also taken the liberty of including another book from today's shipment that appears to deal with similar subject matter. It is my hope that you will find one or both of these titles useful.

Graciously Yours,

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

--8--

Several nights of almost uninterrupted sleep had left Simon in what – for him – would be considered a good mood. He had spent several hours working on some orders from a regular customer. After leaving the confines of his potions lab, closeted in – appropriately enough a closet, magically enlarged – Simon paused in the act of wiping his hands.

There was a parcel on his table.

Glancing up at Yorick, he raised a brow.

"No extra mouse for you this evening. You could have let me know when it was delivered."

Naturally suspicious, Simon didn't relax his guard even when he spied the Marks and Sons logo. He noted his increased heartrate and tried to quell the surge of excitement he felt.

You're an idiot if you think for one moment a copy would be that easily found.

Still, the hand that unbound the books shook slightly as it picked up the larger volume. It was opened and several pages flipped before it was harshly closed. The deep sigh that accompanied the sound of his body slumping into a chair was disappointment personified. The second volume was picked up and discarded without a second glance.

Glancing up at Yorick, Simon tilted his head.

"You get the mouse after all. They weren't worth the effort of bothering me."

Picking up the letter, Simon read it carefully.

"I'm surprised, Yorick. She apparently has learned a few things working in that book shoppe. If I were Dumbledore, I'd give her credit for the effort. But I'm not, now am I?"

The falcon chuffed once and turned his back on Simon.

"I can still change my mind about the mouse, you ungrateful chicken."

Standing up and walking over to his desk, Simon pulled a fresh sheet of parchment and glanced once over at the bird.

He might be right. There is that old saying about catching more flies with honey than vinegar – or was that acid?

Shrugging slightly, Simon began to write with his enchanted quill.

January 17, 2000

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Ms Granger,

While I do appreciate the effort you obviously put into the search for the two items I received today, neither one will be of any use to me and I am returning both.

The first – as you suspected – is an obvious attempt to capitalize upon the good name of the original author. Unfortunately, only those familiar with the genuine article can tell the difference as they are both quite old texts. I advise you to use the impostor as a door stop. It will be put to much better use that way, and the only dangers involved will be if someone happens to trip over it.

The other 'object' you sent me – and I use that term in place of 'kindling' to spare your book-loving soul some torment – isn't worth the paper it's printed on. The author, Emiline Sneerbody, is clearly a shyster who is trying to turn a fast Galleon or two, as Sacharissa Tugwood, the Potions mistress she supposedly apprenticed under, never had one. Ever.

I look forward to your future efforts to placate this difficult taskmaster.

Cordially,

Simon Sopohorous

--8--

It came as no surprise to Hermione that both books were waiting on her desk when she came in to work the next morning, along with his note. What did surprise her was the tone of his letter.

The acidic wit she had come to expect from her limited dealings with the man was clearly still intact, but didn't seem to be directed at her for once. In fact, his note was almost—Hermione wouldn't go so far as to call it pleasant, by any means, but it didn't make her grind her teeth as the last one had.

Then there was the line about sparing her book-loving soul. That had left her puzzled, searching her memory for any indication that she might have met Sopohorous before receiving his first letter a month ago. The name didn't ring a single bell.

"Idiot," she muttered. "I work in a book store; it's not that far of a stretch to assume I might like books. He probably recognized my name from some article or another in the *Prophet*, probably something that Skeeter woman wrote, which might explain why we got off to such a bloody lovely start, if he believed anything that *that woman* had to say about me."

She pushed the niggling bit of doubt out of her mind and reached for both of the books he had returned, resolving to take them home and read them. Surely they weren't as bad as Sopohorous said?

January 20, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

It may interest you to know that all copies of Miss Emiline Sneerbody's book can now be found shelved with the rest of our fiction.

Yours,

Hermione Granger

--8--

Yorick didn't like it when strange owls delivered letters to his master. His ruffled feathers had only begun to smooth down when a sound he had never heard before rang through the small flat. He could be forgiven for starting and leaving in a huff.

Simon Sopohorous was actually laughing, if the rusty sounding noise issuing from his mouth could be called one. It had been years since his vocal cords had been used for such a purpose, and they weren't quite sure they could pull it off, but they tried.

Honey, indeed.

I can almost forgive her not yet finding the texts I need.

Almost.

January 20, 2000

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Ms Granger,

Your wisdom in not arguing the merits of a book being precious just because it is bound upsets a pet theory of mine concerning the future guardians of our accumulated knowledge. There will always be swine attempting to become silk purses, and being able to tell the difference will ensure the legacy stays intact.

Cordially,

Simon

--8--

"How odd."

Mister Fitzgerald passed her a cup of tea before settling down into the chair across from her desk with his list of received books that would need to be entered into their inventory system. "What's that, dearie?"

"I think I've just been paid a compliment, but I'm not quite sure." Hermione snorted, her lips tilting upward as she tucked the letter into one of her desk drawers. "All right, Mister Fitzgerald, what do you have for me today?"

Part Three

Chapter 3 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Lariope you are the greatest. We thank you so very, very much for all the beta work you've done on our behalf.

March 15, 2000

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Ms Granger,

If indeed you are still employed there and I don't receive this back by return owl, as I fully expect to hear the blasted establishment has either burned down or gone out of business

If neither of those catastrophes have happened, and as the Ides of March are not a holiday

Where are my bloody books?

Simon Sopohorous

--8--

"Wanker!" The word echoed around her small office, and Hermione was terribly grateful she'd closed the door before opening her mail.

Where were his books? Obviously, if she knew exactly where to find them, he would have had them by now.

The buyers for the store were aware of his list along with the lists of every other customer looking for a specific, and often difficult to come by, title and she even made a point to double check the receiving records on the off chance that one had slipped past unnoticed. If no one was offering the books for sale, there was no way she could authorize their purchase!

Apparently she should have been spending every waking moment of the last several months scouring private libraries for glimpses of his precious texts and then robbing their owners blind in order to appease him.

Hermione took a calming breath and rubbed her temples with both hands. She had thought that they had reached an understanding a truce of sorts and while she could concede that there may be cause for a certain level of frustration at the seeming lack of progress, she thought his newest letter was rather uncalled for.

"I would like to suggest several places where he could look for his bloody books; the first would be next to the stick lodged up his arse."

March 15, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

As disappointing as I'm sure it must be for you to read this, I am still employed in the same position I held when we last traded correspondence. To alleviate any fears you may have held on the other score, the building that houses Marks and Sons is still standing, and I am unaware of any plans to close the business in the immediate future.

If I had known you wanted constant updates on the search for your books, I would have assigned one of the clerks to the task, as my days of late have been rather hectic between managing the store and trying to discover yet another elusive collector willing to part with some of his or her treasures so that I can fulfill the requests of valued customers such as yourself.

I had been planning to travel to the Isle of Man next month to meet with a dealer who specializes in buying and selling out-of-print charms manuscripts; his letters indicate that he may have at least one from your list in his possession with the slim possibility of acquiring a second before our scheduled meeting. I have also been in contact with a gentleman who recently inherited his grandfather's potions library and am in negotiations to allow Marks and Sons first access to the books with the option to purchase. Three of your books are listed on the estate appraiser's inventory.

However, as you seem to feel that my efforts, and those of my staff, are truly inadequate, then I must say that Marks and Sons will be sorry to lose your patronage. I do wish you the best of luck in locating your texts in the future.

Respectfully,

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

--8--

March 16, 2000

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Ms. Granger,

Your offer of periodic updates is accepted and will cover any future shortcomings.

Be sure to include a warm wrap on your trip to the Isle of Man. It can become quite cold in the evenings.

Cordially,

Simon Sopohorous

--8--

"Periodic up I never..." Her muttering culminated in a barely aborted scream of frustration, a stomped foot and an overwhelming desire for a cup of tea.

It was several hours later before Hermione returned to her desk to reread the short reply from Mister Sopohorous.

Now that the initial burst of confusion? annoyance had passed, she discovered what she had missed the first time through. He was apologizing.

In a half-assed way, true, but one she was able to recognize. She'd witnessed the boys making amends in a similar manner several times before. Hermione distinctly recalled the Tri-Wizard fiasco of fourth year and the way that Ron and Harry had made up after the first task without Harry letting Ron actually say the words. Instead there had been concern for Harry's health and Ron's overly complicated efforts to warn Harry about the dragons. To Hermione it would have been so much simpler to just say "I was a prat, please forgive me," and move on, but she suspected it was most likely a matter of pride.

And now she had the urge to owl them both to see if they wanted to get together for dinner at the Leaky Cauldron.

"I have every right to be annoyed with you, Simon, every right. I wonder what it will be next time, a thorn stuck in your paw?"

March 17, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

I will make sure to pack a jacket when I visit the Isle.

Will twice a month be suitable for your progress reports?

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

"In other words, apology accepted."

--8--

March 18, 2000

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Ms Granger,

Twice a month will be acceptable, if you do not delegate the task to one of your underlings. Since you're the manager, I would assume that those you supervise know less than nothing about the volumes in question. As I do not desire to paw through half a dozen fraudulent or worthless copies each time one of them thinks they've found a treasure, I would prefer any correspondence come from you.

Do not take what comes next as an inquiry into your personal life. I detest the "Ms" modern witches have adopted. Shall I address you as Miss, Mistress or Madam the next time I am required to pen you a note?

Cordially,

Simon Sopohorous

--8--

There it was again, another "is it or isn't it" compliment. Hermione settled back into her chair and decided it was.

For the first time since the letter that mentioned her book-loving soul, Hermione tried to picture Simon Sopohorous. If she were forced to guess, she would say that he was probably an older gentleman. Judging by the things he wrote, perhaps a crotchety grandfatherly type. Used to having things done his way, on his time-table, and utterly annoyed when the rest of the world dared not to fall in line. Probably retired, judging from the amount of books he wanted, the varied subjects, and the time he spent writing letters to a book store manager.

She giggled, trying to imagine the faces of some of her younger staff if a silver-haired wizard were to show up out front, worked up into a tantrum and demanding to speak with "Mistress Granger." She'd never hear the end of it. Especially if word managed to reach Ron or Harry.

March 19, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

I'm not particularly comfortable being addressed as Mistress or Madam, and as Miss reminds me of my years in school, I think I would prefer to be addressed as Hermione, if given the choice.

As I mentioned in an earlier letter, I'm currently following two leads that I hope will produce several of the volumes from your list. Consider that your mid-month update for March.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

--8--

Having received her reply, Simon was forced to acknowledge the fact he was starting to look forward to the letters he received from Hermione and taking that into account, he wrote the following:

March 20, 2000

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Hermione,

Simon stopped to stare at the salutation. It seemed extraordinarily strange to be addressing a former student by her first name. The fact she was unaware she was a former student didn't stop the twinge of *wrongness* Simon felt deep in his chest.

I'm being a dolt.

An old dolt at that.

Neither she or anyone else will ever know who she's really corresponding with, so what possible difference will it make?

Dumbledore did it constantly, as did the mangy werewolf, and while they're not the best examples of

Just write the bloody letter and get it over with.

You need not limit yourself to twice a month. If you run across any worthwhile texts you feel might pique my interest, feel free to correspond.

If you're going to be negotiating with Mister Emerson Peabody, be extremely wary and on your guard. He is not the upstanding wizard his grandfather was.

Another note of caution, if you will. If, on the Isle of Man, you chance to descend to the bowels of the house I suspect you'll be visiting, don't purchase the volumes written by Anastian Higgleworth. They were damaged a number of years ago during a storm, and some of the pages are missing. As much as it pains me to admit Peabody's copies should be worthy of a closer look if you're in the market.

Cordially,

Simon Sopohorous

Post Script You may address me as Simon if you wish.

--8--

The battered and well worn copy of *Bewitchments and Charms for the Ages* sat on her desk blotter, innocently enough. Hermione continued to chew on her lower lip, debating whether or not to mention the book to Simon.

Simon. She'd thought of him by his first name on more than one occasion, although more often it had been Mister Sopohorous or simply Sopohorous when he annoyed her, but now that she thought of him as someone's cranky grandfather, it seemed strange to actually call him Simon. Almost disrespectful, and Hermione had been brought up to show respect to one's elders. It was one thing to ask him to call her Hermione, quite another to...

"Now that he's offered, surely it would be rude to refuse."

Nodding silently, she turned her attention back to the book on her desk. The last two books she'd sent unsolicited had been returned with much disdain, and she was very tempted to purchase this one to add to her own library, but the niggling thought that Simon might find it useful tugged at her. Not to mention it would give her an excuse to send a letter, and she had been dying to ask him to elaborate about Peabody.

March 27, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Simon,

A first edition printing of *Bewitchments and Charms for the Ages* by Ignatia Wildsmith has found its way to the store. Regrettably, its condition is such that it holds small value to an antiques collector, and I'm extremely reluctant to even have it put on the sales floor for fear that it will languish unsold and manhandled until such time as it falls to pieces. However, with the proper care it could survive for many years to come, and I hope to see it find a proper home, one way or another.

If you have any interest in the text, please let me know.

I've made note of your warnings regarding the Anastian Higgleworth books and will be sure to give them a careful examination - in case the house I'm planning to visit is the one you suspect it might be.

Speaking of warnings, what exactly do you mean about Mister Peabody? Do you believe he intends to cheat the store somehow? Should I be on the lookout for a forgery?

Sincerely,

Hermione

--8--

After he recovered from the shock, Simon's first impulse was to tear over to the bookstore and rip... gently remove the book from her Muggleborn fingers.

For that book, he would have, except for one important detail. He hadn't yet perfected the experimental potion to change the timbre of his voice, and as he wasn't talented enough to change the pitch on his own he couldn't.

"Blast! I can't believe How **WHERE** could she possibly have..."

Deciding that trying to rip out his already short hair wasn't doing anything to gain him some answers, Simon sat down to write a reply.

Are you daft, woman?

There are two reasons that particular volume isn't at the top of my list. One there were only two printings, neither of which was very large. Two the price, even for a copy in the condition you describe, would be far beyond my pocket.

Having got that particular bit of frustration out of his system, Simon read what he had written. He considered starting over, as he was sorely tempted to own the book.

She doesn't appear to know its value...

Standing, he paced back and forth in the small space he allotted for that purpose. Glancing up at Yorick, he frowned.

"You would probably advise me to be forthright in this, wouldn't you? I don't know why I'm taking the advice of a creature that has a brain the size of a walnut," Simon grumbled as he sat back down at the desk and picked up his quill.

"Although," he added as he looked back over at the bird, "I've always suspected you might be Gryffindor at heart, and since I'm dealing with one who has the potential to finally fulfill my shopping list you win."

Taking a deep, calming breath, he began to write again.

"Besides, I wouldn't be able to actually use the book in the condition it's in."

I propose a bargain.

If Marks and Sons is unable to safely duplicate the book, place a Protective charm AND a Vacuum charm on the book before sending it to me. I have developed a potion that when applied to a fresh, blank volume will allow for the duplication of the text when used in conjunction with the correct spell. The original doesn't have to be opened for this to occur, but it does take several days for the process.

This potion hasn't been offered on the open market as of yet; therefore, I am hesitant to allow any of it out of my immediate possession. In exchange, I will also duplicate a volume for you and return the original. Sadly, its condition makes it unsuitable for use. That book is worthy of an equally worthy collector who will cherish and protect it. Do not let it escape your grasp cheaply.

Simon

Post Script Simply put, Mister Peabody is a leech who will take advantage of almost any situation as long as the witch is comely enough or the wizard is pretty enough.

Standing up as he sealed the envelope, Simon attached the letter to Yorick's leg.

"Here, you should know who it's going to by now. And don't dawdle with the reply!"

--8--

Having grown a thicker skin when it came to some of Simon's written outbursts, Hermione did no more than blink at the first line of his most recent missive.

Instead she continued on to the rest of the letter. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth as she stared, unseeing, at the wall across from her desk.

As unsellable as the book was too expensive for the average reader, too damaged for a collector or charms expert to use it was still extremely valuable. She should recommend that it be placed in the store vault at Gringotts, another antiquity to add to Marks and Sons' assets.

Sending it to a man she had never actually met and barely knew, with no contract for payment, even with the condition that it be returned... If something were to happen to the book, were it to be destroyed or stolen... Losing her job would be the least of her worries, as the authorities would most likely be brought in to the matter.

No, letting the book leave the store unpurchased would be insanity.

Mum and Dad were going to kill her when they found out what happened to her old university fund.

March 27, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Simon,

The new owner of Bewitchments and Charmes for the Ages has been made aware of the opportunity to have the book duplicated and has decided to accept the offer, if it is still available. Due to the nature of your potion and out of respect for your privacy, no one but myself is aware of who the book shall be shipped to in order to have it duplicated.

I am going very, very far out on a limb with this, and I'm afraid I can not, in good conscience, send this book to you without your word that it will not come to any harm.

In the meantime, every precaution is in place to keep it from deteriorating any further. The new owner wishes it to be inspected for insurance purposes before it is removed from the store, and this may take several days to arrange.

Hermione

Post Script Regarding Peabody, I highly doubt his lechery will be an issue with me, but I shall remain on guard nonetheless. Thank you for the warning.

--8--

"I've held not only *her* life, but her future... Whatever the hell he is to her now Weasley's life as well as blasted Potter's life in my hands and now I'm questioned about taking care of a... a bloody **book!**" Simon seethed as he stood face to face with Yorick. His rubbish bin was full to overflowing with drafts of letters written in return and then discarded under Yorick's watchful eye.

There were times he detested not being free to use his own name, as hated as it probably was in many corners of the wizarding world. Simon turned away from Yorick's perch only to spin back around and point a finger at the poor falcon.

"It would almost be worth spending the rest of my life in Azkaban to march into that store, announce to her who I am, and ask if she felt I was still unworthy to copy her precious book. Ungrateful wench," he muttered as he finally strode to a window and glared out at a passing stranger.

"It would serve her right if I never answered. Let her and the new *owner* figure out how to duplicate the damned thing."

It didn't occur to Simon that part of his reaction to Hermione's letter might lie closer to jealousy than to affronted pride. His heart was still held tightly in a dead woman's grasp, and there was no room to consider any one else in the role Lily had played in his life. The closest thing Simon had ever had to friendship was the relationship with Lily, and it had been dead for more years than he cared to remember. He didn't realize quite yet that he had come to view Hermione as more than a bookseller filling his order, and she was *his* bookseller, damn it!

It took several days for Simon to get over his snit with Hermione's letter, but he was finally able to sit down and write a reasonable reply.

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Hermione,

Caution in all things is not always a good thing.

That being said, I can understand your reluctance to send such a valuable item to a faceless person on the other side of a quill. I would do nothing less and probably a great deal more.

To place your mind, and the mind of the owner of the book at ease, I am sending several rare volumes of my own for you to hold until the return of Bewitchments and Charmes for the Ages. Collectively, they are not worth a pittance in comparison, but it is all I can offer in exchange other than my word, which admittedly isn't worth anything in today's market.

Advise if this is satisfactory.

Simon.

Post Script If you look anything like your pictures in the papers, don't be a fool. Peabody's lechery will be a very large issue for you to deal with.

--8--

She did not blush, no matter how warm her face had suddenly felt. Not at all. Considering Hermione had yet to see a photo of herself in one of the papers where she was looking her best most seemed to catch her disheveled or owlishly surprised and more than a bit annoyed at having a camera shoved into her face she could only deduce that Simon was being kind.

Or he was attempting to butter her up to get his hands on her book.

Either way, she hadn't been able to keep from grinning like a buffoon. "At being warned that I'm lech-worthy, by Grandpa Simon's standards, at least."

She had felt the tiniest bit guilty about accepting the "loan" of his books in exchange for hers, but since she had purchased *Bewitchments and Charmes for the Ages* outright, any further arrangements for its care were hers to make and would no longer involve the store. At least, that's how she justified taking the three rare volumes home with her that night. Hermione had been extra careful with the charm and the potions texts, but the transfiguration tome had nearly caused her to hyperventilate. Professor McGonagall had mentioned the title many times during her advanced classes, and Hermione had always longed to read it.

There had been little sleep the night before as she stayed up reading, trying to absorb as much as she could before she would be forced to return the books to their rightful owner.

April 1, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Simon,

Your arrangement is most satisfactory. Bewitchments and Charmes for the Ages is being sent by courier and should arrive within the next day or two. Please notify me if any problems should arise.

I will be leaving for the Isle of Man on the third, but will leave word that any correspondence from you should be forwarded to my destination immediately.

Wish me luck. Or should I be the one wishing the same to you?

Hermione

--8--

"If wishes were fishes..."

Hermione's youthful, carefree reference to wishes left Simon feeling somewhat maudlin. There was one thing bothering him that required a return note, and as it would be rude *not* to wish her well he did the best he could.

April 2, 2000

Hermione Granger

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Hermione,

The number of years that have passed since I last made any kind of wish is probably greater than the number you've been alive. If I still indulged in that idle past time, I'd wish you a safe and speedy trip, but I'd advise placing your trust in a well formed Portkey instead.

I hope you understand my reluctance to have Bewitchments sent back to Marks and Sons if you are to be absent. A note upon your return, perhaps?

Simon

--8--

April 2, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Simon,

You'll be the first person I notify once I'm home. Hopefully there will be more to write than ruminations on the weather and the food, at that time.

I trust you'll keep the book safe until my return.

Hermione

--8--

"Ha! See this, Yorick? *I'm* to be the first person she contacts upon her return. Not the bloody prat who bought the precious volume. Not Potter or even gods, what was it Brown called him... Won-Won!" Simon said with no small amount of glee in his voice as he waved the letter in front of the falcon's perch.

Part Four

Chapter 4 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: We bow our heads in supplication to the wonderful Lariope. Thank you for being our beta.

It was very dark by the time Hermione Portkeyed back to London. She stopped by Marks and Sons only long enough to deposit several carefully wrapped parcels in the store safe, then *Apparated* directly to her small flat.

As she unpacked, she remembered her promise to alert Simon when she returned. Her quickly scribbled note was on a sheet of her personal stationery, a simple cream colored parchment that lacked the familiar stylized M&S of her official work stationery.

April 7, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Simon,

I'm home. The trip was well worth the expense. The dealer had several manuscripts that we've been searching for, including two of yours. As soon as I get to work in the morning, I'll ask Mister Fitzgerald to bump your books to the front of the list for receiving and, barring any unexpected issues, they should be on their way to you by the ninth.

Thank you, again, for the warning about the Higgleworth volumes. You were correct; they were not intact. I suspect my dealer friend wasn't expecting me to check as thoroughly as I did.

As I have not heard anything from you, I can only assume rather optimistically, I'm afraid that you have also had success with your endeavor and that you were able to duplicate Bewitchments?

Please disregard any snappish behavior my owl may exhibit. Leontes is rather annoyed with me for being gone so long, and he won't appreciate being sent out so soon after my return.

Hermione

Post Script Nearly forgot, I have your three books with me, but I dare not ask Leontes to deliver them tonight. It would be better if I sent them via one of the store owls after I hear from you.

--8--

When a strange owl attempted to deliver an equally unfamiliar looking envelope to him, Simon threw a quick Petrificus Totalus on the poor bird, and it landed with a thump on the floor. Its tail feathers were spread in such a fashion braking to land he was sure that it appeared to be balanced on a tripod consisting of the tail and the tips of both wings. The legs were still drawn up slightly, and the angle made it difficult to see the envelope still attached to one.

A bit of twisting and turning allowed him to finally make out the name Simon on the envelope, and he immediately recognized the handwriting as Hermione's. Carefully removing the letter from the frozen bird's leg, Simon grimaced slightly at what the bird might relay to its mistress.

"Yorick, after I counter the spell, sweet talk this hell and damnation. I don't know if it's a male or a female. I don't even know if it's hers, so it doesn't matter."

A flick of Simon's wand released Leontes who wasted no time in departing the company of such a rude wizard who offered no water or treat but seemed much more interested in smelling the letter Leontes had apparently risked his life to deliver than he was in reading it.

"Vanilla if I'm not mistaken, and since I never am... It fits," Simon advised Yorick as he finally tore open the envelope.

"Optimistically? **Optimistically?**"

Snorting once, Simon glanced over at the two finished copies and the perfectly safe original.

"I wish I still had you in my class right now, Miss Granger. I'd give you something to be optimistic about," he grumbled as he pulled a fresh sheet of parchment towards him after sitting down at the desk.

April 7, 2000

Hermione,

Unforeseen circumstances occasionally happen even to the best of us. I'm sure it wouldn't surprise you if I were to advise those three volumes should be forwarded to the owner of Bewitchments with my heartfelt apologies and that the attempt to make copies was a complete and utter failure.

You cannot imagine how I feel about owning up to the disaster I caused. If it makes you feel any better, I will never, ever forgive myself.

Simon

Post Script The original and your copy will be delivered to you first thing in the morning, you ungrateful wench. Optimistically, my Great Aunt Agatha's arse. There was never any doubt it would be a resounding success.

--8--

April 8, 2000

Simon,

You you I can't even think of a name that would fit you nearly gave me a heart attack. And what did you do to my owl?

You are very lucky that he let me rub his feathers this morning, even though he was still refusing to look at me when I left for work.

You're also lucky that I've seen both copies of Bewitchments and am willing to be forgiving.

The Wench

--8--

Bleary eyed, Simon read Hermione's note, and though his sleep had been broken by more screams resounding through his head, he had to chuckle lightly. He'd put the time to use, as silly as it seemed to him later, by attempting to improve upon the scent she preferred. Picking up a crystal bottle, he pulled the stopper and sniffed once more before comparing it to the aroma of the letter he'd received the night before.

"It will do for now."

April 8, 2000

Hermione,

As I have been promised a delivery containing a paltry two volumes of a long overdue order by a certain bookseller, who shall remain nameless, you may find that I am in somewhat of a forgiving mood myself.

A small parcel should be attached to this letter. If not, Yorick will be properly ashamed of himself I'm sure. It is a small token of my thanks for all the effort you've gone through on my behalf as well as a small bribe to continue those same efforts, of course.

I think you will find it somewhat superior to the scent on your stationery, as I have used a special blend of vanilla and a hint of two other mild oils. Unlike the heavy handed bottler who doused yours with a tad too much persimmon, this particular scent is somewhat lighter in aroma while the staying power will be greatly increased.

As to your dealer "friend"... Never forget Caveat Emptor let the buyer beware. If your "friend" had gone to Hogwarts, Slytherin House would have had another student. Dealer first friend as long as it lines the pocket.

As far as your beloved owl is concerned he left my residence in the same condition as when he arrived. Was he injured?

Simon

--8--

It wasn't until she'd read his letter and looked at the bottle the parcel had contained that Hermione realized what she'd done. The other night she had sent a letter to a customer from her home; yesterday she had signed her note in an inappropriate manner. A teasing manner.

She groaned and dropped her head into her hands. Yesterday, or even the day before wasn't the first time she'd crossed the line toward familiarity. "That ship sailed a long time ago."

Bumping Simon's books to the top of the list, trusting him with her very expensive and irreplaceable book, letting him call her wench without at least making a half-hearted effort to hex him in the unmentionables... and now the crystal bottle.

If the owners ever found out, it would mean her job. Wouldn't it? She had seen Marks himself talking up a widow who had come in to find a book on gardening.

Not that I've been talking up Simon! That's just... the very thought is just... Grandpa Simon.

But she had, at some point, after the initial pissing contests were out of the way, begun to look forward to his letters. She knew for certain that her tone had slipped away from strictly professional long ago.

The question was why? The answer, Hermione suspected, was that not once in all of their correspondence, did Simon ever ask about Harry. He never asked about the war, what it was like, what did she do.

He treated her as if she were simply Hermione Granger, bookstore manager, and Hermione appreciated it. She liked it.

She liked him. At least as far as trading quips on parchment, sharing a love of books, and offering the occasional favor... to a friend. Nothing more.

With that thought, she released a pent up breath and raised her head. She reached for the bottle and carefully pulled out the stopper, breathing deep.

April 9, 2000

Simon,

Something horrific happened today. Much to my chagrin, I have discovered that I am bribe-able. I suspect that should bother me more than it does; perhaps the intoxicating aroma I'm currently wearing was sufficient to overcome any silly concerns on that account.

You know very well that something was wrong with my owl; I just haven't figured out what could have upset him so. Do you have a dog?

The two books we discussed earlier are in the attached parcel. I hope to have more for you by the end of the month.

Hermione

Post Script *If one wished to scent one's bath water with a particular scent, perhaps something she received as a bribe at some point, what would be the recommended amount to add to tub full of hot water?*

--8--

"Oh, good gods! Did she learn nothing in my Potions class? Putting the scent into hot water will Blasted woman is more trouble than the books are worth."

Not saying another word, Simon left her letter and the two new volumes, which were almost untouched, on the desk while he headed back to the small lab. He may have grumbled, but deep inside, he was greatly pleased Hermione liked the scent, and if she wanted something to place in her bath she'd have it.

Two days later, he was fairly satisfied with the results.

April 11, 2000

Hermione,

I don't own any type of mangy cur, either canine or feline in nature. Yorick is enough company and manages to keep himself and his perch in order. You mentioned your owl was upset you'd been gone; could it be nothing more than that? If I were of a sensitive nature, I'd be upset at your insinuations I would harm another's owl.

The books, while a bit more worn than I anticipated, are in an acceptable condition and arrived safely.

The scent I sent you before isn't suitable to add to your bath. The extreme temperature of the water would destroy the delicate bond I managed to build between the oils to give it the desired aroma without being overpowering. Therefore, since it is your desire to languish in your bath while I'm languishing over the lack of my other volumes, I am foolishly forwarding a small sample of bath salts for you to try. Advise if it meets your expectations. If not, a few adjustments may be made. It should emit the same aroma, but the staying power will not be as resilient as the oil based scent.

Simon

--8--

The bath salts were tested the night they were received, but Hermione waited to reply until the next evening, choosing to send her letter from home rather than work.

April 12, 2000

Simon,

I'm glad to hear that the books are acceptable, especially since I had to go all the way to the Isle of Man just to get them for you. I did have a thought as I was languishing in my bath last night the salts worked beautifully, by the way, and while the scent wasn't as strong by the end of the day as with the oil, there was still a hint of it as I left work this evening how expensive is your potion, the one you used on Bewitchments, not the one you sent me, to create?

Before you get into a huff, I'm asking because it occurred to me that part of the reason it has taken so long to make much progress with your list of books is that I've been searching for a certain minimum quality in the book's condition, but if I could broaden that search to include volumes that others might not consider worth purchasing...

It's an option to think about.

Hermione

Post Script *Be nice to my owl. Could it be your Yorick that upset him?*

--8--

How much of your rudimentary Potions lessons have you've retained, Miss Granger?

After shrinking a large jar of bath salts to be delivered by Yorick, Simon sat down to write his "test" letter.

It does almost feel like I'm preparing a test again.

Simon paused and stared off into nothing while he considered how he felt about the idea.

Is it good or bad that I'm not bothered by it?

Another slight shrug and the enchanted quill was once again disguising Simon's normal handwriting.

It matters not in the long run.

April 12, 2000

Hermione,

Yorick has impeccable manners as long as the bird in question doesn't attempt to land on his perch. Which is far more than I can say for your bloody bird, who barely placed his beak inside my residence before dropping the letter you sent on the floor and leaving post-haste.

What have you told him about me that he treats my correspondence in such a fashion?

I must admit, I hadn't thought of using my potion to duplicate all the tomes I require. Good on you. A few quick calculations have given me the amounts of the various ingredients I would need. There is one that I'm quite short on, and as I don't get out much any longer, do you think you could add a pint of Acromantula venom to your shopping list the next time you venture forth? That should just about cover what I require and leave a few volumes left over as spares.

As ever,

Simon

--8--

Hermione looked at the duplicate copy of Bewitchments lying open on the desk near her, then back to the letter.

What is it about Potions makers that make them such pains in the rear? Fumes? Are they given lessons in sarcasm along with the proper way to dice roots and powder beetle carapaces?

Simon is as bad as Professor Snape used to be. And then there was Professor Slughorn; he was irritating in a completely different ball of roly-poly annoyance kind of way.

April 12, 2000

Simon,

You could have just said the potion was expensive to produce.

I hadn't told Leontes a thing about you before I sent him the first time, but I have had to promise him several treats just to get him to deliver to you since.

Yorick is a fine looking bird, by the way. Is there any kind of treat or snack he prefers above the rest? Something a tad bit less expensive than a pint of Acromantula venom, preferably.

Hermione

--8--

"Still passing with flying colors, I see. All due to the extraordinary professor she had her first few years I'd venture," Simon advised Yorick while pretending to buff his nails. Picking up the special quill that altered his handwriting, Simon tapped it on his chin before deciding how to reply.

April 13, 2000

Now, now, Hermione,

If I had merely stated the potion was too expensive what might you have sent in response? Questions and more questions like as not.

Was I sure? Is there any way to cheapen the cost? Substitutions or a different way of brewing?

While it might have been amusing to shoot down what I'm sure would have been some brilliant suggestions, wasn't it better you reasoned it out on your own?

You should be grateful, really, that the price is so exorbitant. If everyone could duplicate a book they wanted you'd soon be out of a job. If I ever find a suitable, and inexpensive, replacement for the Acromantula venom, I shall endeavor to give you sufficient warning in time to change your career.

Yorick is a chicken pretending to be a falcon and doesn't deserve any special treats. He failed again to notify me when your letter arrived. He does, however, seem rather more fond of white mice than he does brown. With an occasional biscuit thrown in on the side.

Simon

--8--

April 15, 2000

Simon,

It is mid-month, and I owe you an update on your book list. I'm meeting with Mister Peabody over dinner next week in order to discuss the distribution of his late grandfather's library. As discussed previously, I shall be making specific inquiries for three volumes from your list. At this time I have not seen the books in question and do not want to get your hopes up as to their condition.

Simon, I'm not quite sure how to ask this, but do we know each other? I mean apart from our correspondence, have we met at some time, or did I attend Hogwarts with one of your children or perhaps a grandchild?

I know my questions may look odd, especially now, but sometimes the things you write seem so familiar to me, not to mention your observations about my inquisitive nature. Perhaps you just remind me of someone I used to know.

Hermione

--8--

Hermione's letter had shaken Simon more than he cared to admit. If it was this easy to allow slips of the nature he'd given away in a few letters...

Perhaps the time has come to return her letters unopened.

He studied what Hermione had written and was somewhat chagrined to note she thought him old enough to be a grandfather.

"Saucy wench."

If she thinks I'm elderly it might not come as a surprise if the letters were returned "Addressee deceased."

He shook his head as he discarded the idea. Not only would she not see an obituary, he was loath to try and find yet another name to live out his remaining years.

I have to persuade her we've never met, but if I lie would she somehow sense it?

It took a few hours of pacing and thinking, but Simon thought he'd found a way to mislead Hermione without straight out lies.

He still wanted his books, after all.

April 16, 2000

Hermione,

Peabody's books as long as they're still contained in his grandfather's library and not tossed about by Emerson in a search for something he might consider valuable will more than likely be in excellent condition.

Must I repeat my warning about his nature?

I thought not.

It is possible we might have seen each other before. More than once, I suppose, but I can almost guarantee you that if we were to meet face to face at this very moment you would not know me from the proverbial Adam until I introduced myself.

While I am of an age where it is possible I could have had a child go to Hogwarts while you attended, I do not. Nor am I old enough to be a grandfather unless I started at a very promiscuous age and my offspring followed suit. To put your mind further at rest, I have no living relatives who are closer than approximately fourth cousin, twice removed.

As to knowing about your inquisitive nature... You underestimate the coverage the "chums" of the boy who lived received in the papers. Who in the wizarding world doesn't know a great deal about the "trio" and their exploits?

As ever,

Simon

Part Five

Chapter 5 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Thank you, Lariope! Without you, this story would never have made it here.

You underestimate the coverage the "chums" of the boy who lived received in the papers. Who in the wizarding world doesn't know a great deal about the "trio" and their exploits?

Of course. Hadn't she suspected that very thing months ago? Simon believed he knew her, or at least enough about her to make educated guesses about her nature, because of the things he read in the papers.

"How much of his 'knowledge' is based on the lies and half-truths reported as facts and insinuations over the last ten years? No wonder he never asked me any of the usual questions, he probably believes he already knows the answers."

Her acute sense of disappointment seemed horrifically out of place, but Hermione couldn't shake it. Nor could she get rid of the strange unease that plagued her since finding out that Grandpa Simon... wasn't.

She refrained from contacting him until after her disastrous dinner with Peabody, waiting until his books had been added to the store inventory and were ready to ship.

April 22, 2000

Simon,

Three books will be delivered this afternoon; your account will be debited tomorrow barring any issues.

Since your warning about Peabody and his intentions proved valid, I shall return the favor with a warning of my own the sensational rubbish you may have read or heard in the media about the "trio" is just that, rubbish. For every fact printed, there are half a dozen lies.

Respectfully,

Hermione Granger

--8--

Simon's eyes narrowed for a moment when Hermione's letter confirmed the fact Emerson Peabody was still up to his old habits. He paused for a moment while considering the wisdom of sending the other wizard a little *gift*.

It's too close to her visit. She might receive the blame.

One eyebrow lifted as he finished reading the short letter. He'd grown accustomed to more of a rambling letter from Hermione, containing a bit more warmth than this one contained. It wasn't hard to determine why this one seemed brusque.

She's actually concerned about what other people think of her.

How quaint.

Utterly silly.

But quaint none the less.

April 22, 2000

Hermione,

The books have arrived and are satisfactory. I plan to send Peabody a "present" in the near future after enough time has passed so it could not be laid at your door are there any suggestions on your part?

Your warning comes far too late I'm afraid. The true nature of the majority of those involved with the press was made clear to me many, many years ago. I suspect the number of sales far outweighs the value of truth in most publications. Truth, un-embellished of course, wouldn't sell nearly as many subscriptions now would it?

As ever,

Simon

--8--

One of the owls from Marks and Sons flew through the morning sky with two envelopes tied to its leg. The first carried the return address of the store.

April 30, 2000

Simon,

As it is the end of the month I wish I had more progress to report. With any luck, there will be better prospects to discuss next month.

Hermione

The second bore Hermione's name as the sender.

Simon,

There are many things I could suggest that might be of benefit to Mister Peabody, his roaming hands, his inappropriate tongue and his rampant libido; however, as I would prefer to remain employed for the foreseeable future, and as I will be meeting with him at least once more to finish negotiations for the last of the lot, it would be best if I kept them to myself.

Please don't let my silence keep you from bestowing a gift upon anyone you might choose.

I don't know what may have happened in the past to sour you against the press, but I cannot say I disagree with you. On this point, at least.

As a matter of fact, I have realized over the last few days that I don't know a great many things about you, whereas you appear to "know" much about myself. My life, as they say, has been something of an open book, and once again it has put me at a disadvantage.

The feeling unsettles me, and I'm afraid that I have let that unease color my earlier interaction with you.

Hermione

--8--

Having never talked on a Muggle phone, and not having had a long term correspondence with anyone before, Simon was unaware of the ease with which one fell into the comfort of "confessing" to a faceless voice or a blank sheet of parchment. He found himself telling Hermione things he'd never dreamt of telling even Dumbledore the man who had basically owned his soul since the day Lily was murdered.

After all, she'd never know who was really penning the letters signed Simon. Right?

Hermione,

I have enough books for now. Do not fret over them too much. If they are to be found they will be found.

I will try to tell you a little of myself, but there's something you need to understand. My life such as it is has been anything but an open book. It should come as no surprise that I am somewhat guarded when it comes to the members of the press or anyone else for that matter. Stupid decisions on my part, and a bit of circumstance, forced duplicity upon me at a young age. It's become the habit of a lifetime. One I'm not even tempted to change, really.

It has allowed me to survive, and while I'm not shouting it from the rooftops I'm still breathing. Still putting one foot in front of the other and still still living which is much more than too many can say.

My needs are simple. My wants, other than the list you have, are few. In a nutshell, I am a boring old fart who spends the greatest majority of his time alone with a chicken who pretends to be a falcon.

As ever,

Simon

--8--

"Enough books for now? Who is this man, and what has he done with Simon?" she asked her cat. Crookshanks stared at her for a moment, turned his back to her and began licking his paw.

Simon called himself a boring old fart who spent his time with his bird. Hermione spent most of her evenings attempting to converse with her cat and owl. "What does that make me? I'm too young to be an old fart, aren't I?"

Crooks finished his bathing and paused to butt his head against her knee before moving off toward the kitchen and his food dish.

"It's not that I don't have friends," she called out toward his retreating tail. "I'm just usually tired after work and don't feel like going out every night. I'm happy the way things are, really. And I'm not lonely; I talk to people all the time. I do. There's Harry and Ron, and I exchange letters with Viktor and Penelope, and I ate lunch with Mister Fitzgerald just today. He told me all about his newest grandchild and... and... Good lord, I'm dull," Hermione huffed as she fell over sideways to lay across her sofa.

She resolved that the next time one of the ladies from the store invited her to join a group of other employees for a night out, she would go. No matter what.

"Unless it's a weeknight. Or I have to get up early the next morning. Or Mrs Tonks needs a babysitter, or Whatever the young, female equivalent of a boring old fart is, you're a definite candidate, kiddo."

Rather than dwell on the fact that she actually preferred to stay home, alone, talking to her owl or cat, instead of sitting in a bar or club surrounded by strangers all straining to have any semblance of a conversation over the pounding bass of the house band, Hermione reached for her pen and stationery.

Simon,

I hope you don't think this too forward of me; I am aware that our strange correspondence began out of a business relationship if one would call it that rather than any desire on either of our parts to gain a pen pal, but I find myself writing your name far more often than necessary to discuss your list. Over the last few months I have begun to look forward reading your letters. Yes, even the rude ones.

I am aware that you are much older than I, but I think that we may have more in common than one might expect. Our letters of late have been rather more than those between mere bookstore manager and customer; at least, that is the way it appears to my eyes. If I am incorrect or am misreading the situation, please feel free to tell me so, but I have come to think of you as somewhat of a friend.

If you do not mind, if it's not too inappropriate, I should like to continue to write to you when there is something worth sharing to write about, of course, as I would not wish to waste your time or mine from my home rather than from the store. Your twice monthly updates will still come from Marks and Sons, but as most of my work correspondence is kept on file and there have already been some things written that I would prefer be kept out of the quarterly reviews...

There are times when I wish I could remain guarded rather than telegraphing my thoughts and feelings for all the world to see the most recent example would be the above paragraphs where I just opened myself up for what may be one hell of a nasty rebuff and a potential calling on the carpet by my employers after they hear what I've done. Which, I can assure you, is not something I've done before now; I don't just randomly accost anyone who writes Marks and Sons looking to purchase something via owl order. I'm still not sure how this came about, why I didn't just tell you to take a long walk off of a short pier upon receiving your second, and rather rude, letter. Perhaps I have a well hidden masochistic streak that even I was unaware of?

On that note, it grows late and I need to send this before I think better of it.

Your friend,

Hermione

--8--

Yorick became somewhat concerned after the third hour of immobility and actually flew down to land on the arm of the chair Simon was sitting in. The movement broke the morbid train of thought that had held Simon in its grasp since the latest of Hermione's letters had arrived.

"What do you make of this, my chicken?" Simon held the letter out as if Yorick could actually read and comment on it. "She calls me friend and ~~pen~~ pal. It must be a Muggle term," Simon said almost absentmindedly, fully aware he was avoiding facing the facts.

The idea was *appalling*. To have the Muggleborn student he'd mocked more than once consider him a friend? It just wasn't possible.

"I must be slipping or becoming soft," Simon muttered as he stood and walked toward his desk. Turning to look at Yorick, he added, "It's a bloody good thing I'm no longer in a position of authority at Hogwarts. Instead of students fleeing at my approach they'd be offering cheerful hellos or worse yet searching me out in my office to unburden their teenage woes upon my poor, bewildered ears."

Sitting down at his desk, Simon pulled open a drawer and considered the two sets of files contained within. One was full of business correspondence and one held the letters from Hermione. His eyes narrowed slightly as he pulled the latter out and spread them before him. As Simon flipped through the stack, he didn't have to read them again to know what they said, but he did each one before gently placing them back where they'd been. After closing the drawer, Simon rose and walked away from the desk.

June 5, 2000

Hermione,

It has taken several days for me to be able to absorb and admit this. You are correct. I do consider you what could possibly be termed friend.

Do not take offense at my wording. I have had acquaintances, colleagues, superiors, enemies and even business associates. Until now, I don't believe I've ever had a friend of any age in the last twenty or so years. I did have one once. A childhood friend who died before her time.

Before you start feeling sorry for this old fart, you should also know it was mostly by my choice. Friends invite confidences, trust and too many other stumbling blocks on the path I'd been set.

If, indeed, you did not continue to write, the days would be less bright than they've become, the nights a little longer, and though I am loath to admit it, I would miss your correspondence greatly.

Age is a perception of the young, really. I don't feel any different than I did when I was your age. I do think I've learned some harsh lessons and am finally wise enough to know I've still more to learn. Since age does not show on paper what does it matter?

As ever your friend,

Simon

Post Script I have no objections to your plans to divide the updates from your personal letters.

--8--

"Oh, Simon." He hadn't wanted her to feel sorry for him, but she did. It was similar to the melancholic sadness that sometimes plagued her when Hermione was feeling rather sorry for herself, which thankfully wasn't often.

She remembered what it was like to not have friends. As comforting as books and pets could be, there were times when the one thing she needed the most was the company of a friend. Even if it was only in the form of a letter.

June 10, 2000

Simon,

Those days between the sending of my note and the arrival of yours found me in a near constant state of morbid anticipation. The longer you remained silent, the more I managed to convince myself that you were offended, were planning to take your business elsewhere, and were just taking your time to choose the perfect wording for your scathing reply that would put me in my place.

Needless to say, I am rather relieved that this was not the case. Considering the way most of my staff immediately find something else to do far across the building the moment your Yorick makes an appearance, the chances of anyone else reading such a missive would be extremely slim, thereby saving me some embarrassment, but it was still something I wasn't looking forward to.

You said age is a perception of the young, and I would have to argue with that. At the very least, it is not only the young who concern themselves with physical age and sometimes overlook emotional maturity. I can not think of a single time where I have thought to myself "I can not do this, I'm simply not old enough," but I distinctly remember being told I was too young by many of my elders. Don't even get me started on the idiocy that comes with being eighteen, somehow managing to survive that final battle at Hogwarts when so many fell, to witness so much... only to be told that I was too young to properly understand what had happened, that I needed to be coddled and reassured that nothing like this would ever happen again, that no one important had the time to listen to the words of a child when she tried to warn them that it could happen again if we weren't prepared to learn from the past. Yes, I had been through a lot, more than most, but it all came down to the fact that I was still only eighteen years old.

It would appear that I still hold a bit of bitterness in my heart for that. Perhaps I've just grown cynical in my not-so-old age.

I only meant to argue one small point, and I've managed to run off on a drawn-out tangent, haven't I?

Consider yourself lucky you only have to read my ramblings; I've been told I can get quite caught up in things when I speak.

Tell Yorick that while I don't keep mice in the flat, I have some biscuits that he may like. I was given the recipe by a customer who raises owls and other birds of prey, and Leontes adores them. If Yorick is willing to stick around on his next delivery, he is more than welcome to try one.

Hermione

--8--

June 13, 2000

Hermione,

I tell you this not to stir pity in your heart, but to give you the other perspective. Would it surprise you to find you are envied? Not for the trials you've suffered through, but the care and concern shown you later. The bit of bitterness in your heart at the "coddling" you received would be a mere wisp of smoke compared to the blaze I hold in my own for the lack of it.

Which would you rather have held in your heart?

Simon

Post Script - I told Yorick to stay for a biscuit, but do not offer him tea. It makes him jittery and snappish.

--8--

June 16, 2000

Simon,

I apologize for the briefness of the mid-month update yesterday, but we were in the midst of a store-wide inventory.

Needless to say, from the moment I stepped foot in the building until I left two hours later than usual the last three nights alone there has barely been a moment to sit, much less take the time to pen long, or even medium sized, notes.

Luckily, inventory is done for several months, and I'm home and able to put my feet up, finally.

Yorick seemed to like the biscuit, although I was hesitant to actually hand it to him. His beak is a bit intimidating. He didn't look too offended when I sort of put it on the table and slid it in his direction. I'm not sure he knew what to make of my cat; it was the first time he's stuck around long enough to see Crookshanks.

I suspect you have a point about the coddling I received. As much as I may bluster in irritation at the treatment, I don't know what I would have done if no one had cared or shown concern. I suspect it would have hurt far worse, at the very least I think I would have been tempted to turn my back on all of it.

And that, I think, is enough of that.

I don't want to write of sad things; I'm tired and frustrated and slightly sloshed...

Red wine or white?

Suspense or comedy? Fiction or nonfiction?

I already know you are a Potions maker, and you know I manage a bookstore, but what do you do for fun? I read, no surprise there. But I bet you didn't know that I also knit. Sometimes while I'm reading!

What I really want to do is write, though. It's something I've always wanted to do, even more than being the Prime Minister or a ballerina or a professor at Hogwarts.

What did you want to be when you grew up, Simon?

Hermione

Part Six

Chapter 6 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Lariope, a thousand thank yous will never be enough for your wonderful beta work.

June 20, 2000

Hermione,

If this is the sort of correspondence exchanged by "friends," I now know why I have none. Of what possible use is this trivial information? Due to your "sloshed" condition, which you shouldn't be by the time this reaches you, I shall indulge your request for this drivel.

I prefer Ogden's and if forced red.

Fiction is a waste of time, therefore non.

Suspense or comedy what? Plays? As I've never attended any, I have no preference.

I am indeed a potion maker, and I am aware you manage the book store.

Fun. What a strange little word. I don't believe I have "fun."

I enjoy experimenting with Potions. There is nothing more satisfying than making something no one else ever has or possibly ever will again.

I enjoy a good glass of brandy on a rainy night as long as there's a hearty fire nearby. I occasionally enjoy a cigar along with the brandy if I'm of a mood. Add one of my nonfiction books, especially if it's one I been waiting for, and I am almost content.

Is this what you mean by fun?

My childhood was too long ago and too short to contemplate what might have been in my dreams. By the time I reached my teens, my course was set with no detours allowed.

Do you require a hangover potion to keep on hand?

As ever,

Simon

--8--

June 25, 2000

Simon,

While I may not be a potion maker by profession, I am fully capable of making my own cauldron full of hangover relief... or running out to an apothecary in the early morning hours before I'm supposed to be at work.

As to the sort of correspondence between friends, I'm afraid that in your case I'm not all that sure. You see, the other people that I write to are all people that I know, or knew, in person before we began exchanging letters. I didn't have to ask them "getting to know you" questions, because I already knew them.

You, my friend, are a bit of a blank page. I know next to nothing about you, other than you can make me laugh and you can make me want to rip my own hair out (followed quickly by yours), sometimes in the same sentence. I understand from reading your earlier letters that you aren't the type to open up to just anyone, and I don't mean to pry into delicate things and feel free to tell me if I'm being too inquisitive, but it is my nature which leaves me with the inconsequential questions one might ask to get to know someone else.

For instance, I generally do not make a habit of drinking, but when I do I prefer something with a hint of a fruity flavor. The one and only time I tried Ogden's, I ended up spitting up most of it and couldn't feel my tongue for ten minutes. As you may have noticed, I get chatty when I'm tipsy, which is the main reason I tend not to drink around strangers.

I'll read anything put in front of me, but I have a special fondness for romantic fiction. I can almost picture you sneering right about now. You probably don't want to know what face I'm making.

As far as what I would define as "fun," anything that one finds enjoyable, I suspect. Even if that enjoyment comes from a fine brandy, a good cigar, and a better book. Change the brandy to a glass of cocoa and the cigar to a bubble bath, and you've got the recipe for one of my favorite kinds of evenings. I'd suggest you give it a try, but you don't seem the bubble bath type.

Are you still in a place where you're not allowed any detours? Or is that a question I shouldn't have asked?

Hermione

--8--

The smoke from a cigar was winding its way around the ceiling when Simon received Hermione's latest letter. He wasn't drinking Ogden's or brandy, those were for special occasions, but the tea in his cup was strong and hot. Slipped feet rose to rest on the footstool in front of his chair as Simon leaned back to read. An occasional chuff or "unlikely" would fall from his lips as he did.

It was set to the side while Simon sipped his tea, and the cigar was finished almost absentmindedly. There was no doubt in his mind that Hermione would be very upset if she ever found out she did know him before they started exchanging letters.

"Can you imagine, Yorick, what kind of letters Professor Snape would receive? Nothing like this, I'd wager."

As he went to his writing desk, Simon smirked once.

"In fact, I'm quite sure they'd be very proper and only in response to inquires about texts."

June 25, 2000

Hermione,

You were wrong. I didn't sneer.

I sighed.

Every woman, many that are far, far older than you, seem to prefer romantic fiction. It puzzles me.

Are all women that anxious in some instances I might use the word desperate to make themselves a slave of some man? To bear his children, cook for them all and clean from dawn to dusk? I have lost count of the brilliant minds I've seen wander down that path because they think, or have been brainwashed to think, that is what is expected of them.

You haven't mentioned your shall I call it affiliation? with one of your classmates. It was bandied about for quite some time that you would be making a match of it. Are you already a Weasley in everything but name, Hermione?

From what I know of Molly Weasley, she's a fine wife and mother. Graduated from Hogwarts, tied the knot with Arthur and spent the remainder of her life popping out one child after another. There are those who would say she's happy that way. I wouldn't know as I've never had the opportunity to ask.

You do.

Before you jump into the holy pit of matrimony, make sure it's what you want.

As far as detours, my road is my own now, so I may take as many, or as few as I like. In case you haven't guessed, I'm not and never have been married.

I'm not a blank page, merely a closed book. One that is particular about its readers. Nothing you have asked thus far is too delicate or intrusive, and if you do, you won't receive an answer.

No, I'm not the type to take bubble baths. Would you have preferred bubbles to salts? If so, I will endeavor to develop one, since you spurn my hangover potion.

As ever,

Simon

--8--

July 1, 2000

Simon,

There is more to romance than marriage and indentured servitude. I think that you would find, should you ever bother to look, that a majority of romantic fiction tends to focus more on the building of a relationship, a romance, if you will, than on ten years down the line after the vows have been spoken and all that. We read for the escape, for the chance to picture ourselves in the heroine's place, being wooed and seduced by the man of our dreams. For a few short hours we are witty, attractive and desirable, and that can make facing the harsh realities of the real world just a tad bit easier the next day.

Molly Weasley is a wonderful woman, wife and mother, and as you do not know her personally, I do not feel comfortable discussing her any further with you.

After such a scathing denouncement of married life, I should inform you that I am, in fact, quite happily married, and let you be the first to offer congratulations on the upcoming birth of little Junior.

However, I shall, instead, say that I am not currently romantically involved with anyone that would include Ronald Weasley, who is a topic I would prefer not be discussed for now, thank you but if I were, you can rest assured that I would be no man's slave if I ever did find the one that I wish to spend the rest of my life with. That does not mean that I won't cook for him, should the urge strike (and he is willing to take his life into his own hands by eating whatever monstrosity I set before him), or clean the house (I do prefer that everything be tidy and put away for my own peace of mind), but I have demands of my own that I shall want fulfilled in return: foot rubs, uninterrupted reading time and

And the rest of that list would be more than you would care to read, I'm sure.

Have you ever taken a bubble bath? If you haven't, how do you know you wouldn't enjoy it? I dare you to set aside an hour one evening and give it a try, but be sure to protect your book against the water first.

You've already spoiled me with the scent and bath salts, so I should tell you not to bother with bubbles, but I won't as I'm feeling particularly greedy of late.

Speaking of baths, I've got a date with a good book and a hot tub, so I shall bring this letter to a close.

Hermione

Post Script *In case it wasn't made clear, I was teasing earlier, and I do appreciate that you don't want me to be trapped in unhappily wedded bliss. Thank you. I think.*

--8--

July 6, 2000

Hermione,

Your blasted bubble bath exploded and ruined three other potions in my lab today, young lady. Needless to say, it's not quite ready yet, nor am I of a mind to bathe in it.

From the things you've said in your letters, I'm of the opinion you're a hopeless romantic. I should warn you, I'm not a romantic at all.

I've thumbed through a romantic fiction or two in my time, and the pictures painted by the authors are totally unrealistic. Heaving bosoms, panting heroes arriving in the nick of time to forestall whatever calamity is in the works (sometimes those roles are reversed and the heroine is the savior), true love and happiness ever after (sometimes delayed by a tragic misunderstanding), is the standard recipe the last time I looked. Has it changed?

I've delayed responding to it as long as I can, for I do not wish to end our friendship. Read my warning again about being a romantic, for I've read your post script more times than I care to remember, and I do not tease. In order for there to be no misunderstandings between us, you need to know the following. It matters not one iota to me if you are trapped in a happy or unhappy marriage. You seem to possess something fairly rare in this day and age: an intelligent brain. I merely hate to see it wasted.

As ever,

Simon

Post script Have your negotiations with Mr. Peabody come to a satisfactory conclusion?

--8--

July 10, 2000

Simon,

Young lady. I haven't been called that in ages. For someone who insists that he's not old enough to be my grandfather, you do make it difficult not to picture you as such.

Rest assured that I would never dare to suggest that you might be a romantic. At all. I'm a tad bit confused as to why it should matter, your lack of romantic nature versus my alleged status as a hopeless romantic? Haven't you ever heard the phrase "opposites attract" before? It's not as if we're dating or anything of that nature. If I had to have everything in common with someone I considered a friend, do you think I'd still be talking to any of the people I knew from my years at school?

Never think that your honesty might end our friendship. I've come to prefer the harsh truth to the pretty lies that so many try to fob off on you when they want something or don't want to hurt your feelings. I will be honest, in turn, and tell you that it may not matter to you if I were trapped and unhappy, but it would matter to me if I knew the reverse were true for you. That's just how I am, and I don't expect either of us to change our minds on the matter any time soon.

Hermione

Post Script Mister Peabody is turning out to be a pain in my backside. I'm having dinner with him tomorrow night, and this will be the last time I plan to be in the same room with the man satisfactory conclusion or not.

--8--

Hermione's letter found Simon somewhat bleary eyed after a night of seemingly endless bouts of nightmares. On mornings such as these, his efforts to remain alive seemed pointless and his defenses were extremely low. If he'd answered Hermione's somewhat cheerful letter at that point, he was in no doubt their friendship would have come to an abrupt and ugly end if he'd given her yet another "harsh truth." The letter was carefully folded and put away.

"Another day," was muttered as he closed the door to the lab behind him.

As Simon worked on his potions that day, the irony of the situation did not escape him. There were days, when he'd labored in the dungeons of Hogwarts to impart some semblance of knowledge into the heads of the students, when he'd longed for a life such as he had now.

It had been more than a year since he'd had face to face contact with another human being, wizard or Muggle. Hermione's letters were more to him than merely words on paper between two supposed friends. Simon refused to admit to himself he missed the human element.

Good gods.

Next I'll be waxing lyrically over the bloody werewolf being dead.

Putting his ingredients away, Simon strode back out of his lab and headed toward the writing desk.

She prefers harsh truth. I'll give her a little. Then we'll see what kind of "friendship" she still wants to offer.

If he'd stopped to examine his motives, he would have been very confused. It was another "test," but of a far different nature than he was used to preparing.

July 11, 2000

Hermione,

You have lightly touched upon several things during your previous letters that I have let pass by without comment. I choose to comment on them now.

You say you understand that I'm not a romantic and that it matters not. You also say you prefer "harsh truth." The following are mine.

I am forty years old. Old enough to be your father, not old enough to be your grandfather. From my age you surely understand that I was alive during the Dark Lord's first reign of power, so do not take what I say lightly.

I allowed you to believe that I did not personally know Molly Weasley. I did for a time know her, but I did not invade her privacy to ask her if she was content with her lot in life. She was an extraordinary witch who, in my opinion, wasted her life raising a mob of children who inherited their father's scatterbrained wits.

Have you never noticed how effortlessly she casts her magic? How she manages that household of insanity?

I understand she felled Bellatrix Lestrange. The Dark Lord's favorite. One of his strongest soldiers.

That alone should tell you Molly is not one to be trifled with. What could she have done, accomplished, if her apron strings had not been thoroughly tied around her waist?

You indicated you tried to tell people about the dangers of "this" happening again. People are fated to repeat history's mistakes. There was possibly one person who could have prevented the Dark Lord's reign of terror.

Dumbledore.

He's the one who brought Tom Riddle to Hogwarts. Watched him as he grew into his powers. Surely if anyone could see the potential for evil, he could have.

I had to stop and walk about the room before I decided to assure you of this. I knew Dumbledore. I didn't know him as well as I thought I did, and that became obvious the more I knew him.

Many call him "the greatest wizard." I call him "the great manipulator" because he was.

People were not "people" to him. They were chessmen to be placed where and when he needed them in the battle with the Dark Lord. Nor were they allowed to know "too much." Knowledge was parceled out sparingly and quite grudgingly.

How many lives were lost needlessly because the great and wise Dumbledore had his plan all mapped out and didn't want one of his chess pieces to upset the balance? I say this unwillingly, because I am a cold hearted bastard at the best of times, I was appalled at some of the tactics he employed.

His heart wasn't merely cold. It was made of stone. It had to be.

Now you know why I warned you. I am not, never have been, and never will be a romantic. Life is too short for daydreams when your only reward is nightmares.

Simon

Post script For Merlin's sake just slip an untraceable poison in Peabody's dinner and deal with the widow! She would probably thank you by giving over the whole library.

--8--

Wrapped up in her favorite flannel PJs and a comforter, the flat's air con turned up as high as it could go just to keep her from getting too warm, Hermione's mind refused to focus on the majority of Simon's letter. Her nerves were too raw from her evening spent dodging Peabody's advances just enough to keep her integrity intact, while attempting to stay in his good graces for the sake of the books.

Books. Books are safe. Books don't try to make you remember things you'd hoped to forever banish from your thoughts. Books don't lead you to believe their stories, to gain your trust and then...

Then what?

Hermione sniffled and shook her head, eyes falling to the post script once more as she allowed herself the momentary distraction. "Married fucking wanker."

She carefully folded the letter and shoved it into the top drawer of her end table, atop the others that Simon had sent over the months. It would be days before she offered a response, and that brief missive, dated the 15th, was written on Marks and Sons stationery. It was merely a single sentence notifying Simon that the accompanying parcel contained one of the books from his list, signed with her name and title.

Hermione had debated mailing the book to him over the last few days. Simon wasn't the first person to request it, nor was his the highest offer for it; but the moment Peabody had mentioned "finding" it amongst his grandfather's things, she had wanted it for Simon. That, more than anything else, had kept her lingering over the dinner with Peabody far longer than she had felt comfortable with, making small talk as he finished his dessert before agreeing to discuss business.

Her nights were plagued with nightmarish dreams, and ultimately Hermione realized that nothing short of Dreamless Sleep would settle her mind until she stopped dwelling on the things she wanted to forget and the doubts and suspicions corrupting her thoughts.

July 25, 2000

Simon,

I may not have been alive during You-Know-Who's first reign, but I am very aware of the devastation his return caused. I was witness to Molly Weasley sweet, motherly Molly Weasley casting the Unforgivable, gathering hate and darkness into her heart to power the most final of the curses. I was there the night that she lost her son. I was there the night that Colin Creevey, Remus Lupin, Professor Snape and so many others died because of a mad man and his followers. I was eighteen years old, fighting for my life against witches and wizards who had been harnessing Dark magics since before I was born, and I was outclassed and extremely lucky that I didn't join the others in death that night.

You speak of Dumbledore's chessmen; I was one of his pieces. Perhaps not a pawn I suspect I was too valuable to be sacrificed too early; Harry needed my stability to complete the task he had been given. A rook, I think. Yes, that seems to fit. But I harbor no illusion that the moment my usefulness came to an end, the moment I was no longer necessary in Dumbledore's great plan, I would have been tossed to the wind. Do you have any idea what sort of protections were put in place to keep my Muggle family safe? The defenseless parents of Harry Potter's Mudblood friend?

None. Not a single one. I had to do it on my own, protect them the only way I could think of, and now they hate me for what I did.

But they're still alive when so many others are not, so I consider it to be a worthy sacrifice.

I believe I have earned the right to a few daydreams now and then if I choose, if it helps me get through another night without screaming myself awake as I witness the life draining out of someone, again and again, helpless to save him, helpless to do anything but silently cry and bite back the bile crawling up my throat.

What of you, Simon? You talk of his first reign, but where were you during the second? You called him the Dark Lord, a habit of his followers. That's something you might want to watch in the future, my friend. Others may not be as willing to overlook something like that; luckily, you're exchanging letters with a "romantic" Pollyanna, correct? Having read your words on Dumbledore, I'm inclined to believe that you were privy to some of his plans at one point or another. Manipulative as he was, I doubt he would have freely given information to someone he did not trust, which is the only thing that has me writing this

letter now.

Dinner with Peabody was quite successful. Not only was I able to procure that additional book for you, a feat in and of itself, but I managed to confuse the man considerably when I mentioned your name. I was attempting to distract him from inquiring about my plans for the rest of the evening, and I'm afraid I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. I suppose I should apologize for that.

It seems he has no clue who you are, or how you may know him. At first, I assumed you were merely friends with the late grandfather and had never met the younger Peabody. But then your letter arrived, and with it the nightmares, and suddenly I had many hours in the dead of night with which to stare at the ceiling and think.

Who are you, Simon?

I can tell you who you aren't. You aren't a forty-year-old potion maker named Simon Sopohorous. I've done my research this time. There is a Sopohorous in the Potions field but he is far too old to be you, as you keep reminding me.

A grandson, perhaps, trying to make a living and needing to use the name and reputation of your relative to break into the business?

Or do you have another reason to hide behind another man's name?

Just tell me one thing, Simon; let me see it in print so that I can ease my mind and move on, one way or another.

I did what I did that night for Harry, not for the Wizarding World, not for Dumbledore, but for Harry and Ron and myself and to just put an end to the exhaustion and death before I finally broke down and collapsed.

When Voldemort fell, whose side were you on? His, Dumbledore's, or yours?

Hermione

~8~

Too proud to write a letter asking for forgiveness, Simon was at first quite glad to finally receive a reply from Hermione after a two week silence.

Then he read it.

Anger at Hermione and poor Yorick ran the course before he finally had to admit no one was to blame for the pickle he was currently in other than himself.

July 26, 2000

Hermione,

Who am I?

Whose "side" was I on?

It's not that simple, Hermione.

The sad truth is... I no longer know.

In my youth I took the Dark Lord's mark. The Dark Lord destroyed the only thing I've ever loved, leaving behind a shell.

Dumbledore took that shell and filled it with his purpose. It was a terrible purpose in its own right. I did not know this until almost the end.

My task is now complete. Dumbledore is dead. The Dark Lord is dead. And I am again left as a shell.

Who am I?

I am Simon.

A forty-year-old potion maker who wishes merely to live out the rest of his life in peace.

As always,

Simon

~8~

The sensible thing would be to take the letters, the most recent ones at least, to Harry. He was in the Auror program, he would know what to do with an admitted Death Eater who might have escaped punishment.

But her instincts, her gut, told her not to. They told her that this man Simon deserved a chance to have his peace. Especially if he was who she suspected him of being.

"Or he could just be playing me for a fool. The chances of that are much greater than of Snape coming back from the dead and wanting nothing more from me than books."

Indecision wore at her for most of the night, until in the early hours before dawn, Hermione sat down to write.

July 27, 2000

Oh, Simon,

You remind me so much of someone who was lost years ago. Too much.

I don't understand how or why; I have so many questions, but

A small pool of ink formed under the nib of Hermione's fountain pen; her hand stilled as she worried her lower lip between her teeth.

She moved the pen lower and started on a fresh line.

The man I'm thinking of died tragically during the final battle, and while his loss is mourned, I like to think that he's moved on to a better place now.

There are things I should do with the recent information I've learned, but in honor of that man's sacrifice, I won't. Not unless I'm given reason to regret my decision.

I hope you understand what I'm trying to say; I've found that subtlety is not one of my strong suits. If not, or if I am mistaken, this won't make a bit of sense, but if I'm correct...

Regardless, you are Simon. Forty-year-old potion maker. And my friend.

Hermione

Part Seven

Chapter 7 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Lariope I hope we do you proud.

She knows, and that should come as no great surprise considering all the blasted clues I've fed her. But she's apparently willing to keep my little secret.

Simon slowly folded the letter and *almost* placed it on the table beside his chair.

And without a bribe.

But there is a strong hint of a threat.

Rising, Simon walked toward his desk clutching the latest missive from his "friend."

I have to try.

Without lying.

July 28, 2000

Hermione,

I did not die a tragic death in the final battle, so I cannot possibly be the man you're thinking of. If you feel the need to pass on what little information I've given you as incriminating evidence of wrong doing, do so without regret.

I would.

I didn't die for a very simple reason. What Dumbledore and "You-Know-Who" didn't know saved me. When my task was completed, an end was surely in mind for me. I would have been a total blooming idiot not to be able to see into the future that far. Much as you did with your parents, I prepared. For a great many possibilities, as I knew no one else would.

I thank you for the book. I know how dear and rare it is.

Do not lose yourself in the daydreams, Hermione. Always keep a toehold on reality and remember the lessons of history. Your children's children should be told the stories.

Told the stories so they need not live the nightmare.

As always,

Simon

Post script *Promise me one thing. If you do decide to forward your information give me twenty-four hours notice.*

--8--

Promise me one thing. If you do decide to forward your information give me twenty-four hours notice.

"Who am I going to tell? How could I possibly hope to convince someone that you're Snape, when I'm not even sure of it myself. They'll haul me off to St. Mungo's, thinking I've finally snapped."

She stared up at the ceiling above the bed, caught up in the same circular thoughts that had been plaguing her since his last letter.

I saw Snape die. I saw it. I've seen it in my dreams countless times since. Simon, obviously, did not die. Logic then says that Simon cannot be Snape. But, if Snape didn't die... then Simon wouldn't be lying when he said that he wasn't the man who tragically died that night and... and my head is going to be killing me if I don't stop doing this to myself.

Hermione rolled out of bed and padded, barefoot, down the hall to the kitchen. She filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil.

"It has to be him. Doesn't it? Maybe I am losing my mind."

July 30, 2000

Simon,

I've asked Leontes not to deliver this until after the sun rises; with any luck the bloody bird will listen to me. If not... oops. Blame me for getting out of bed to write in the middle of the night.

I've written and ripped up several letters over the last two days. Each one started a different way because each time I'd managed to convince myself of something different, and now I just don't know what to think anymore.

I hope you're proud of yourself; you've managed to confuse "the brightest witch of her age," to quote my own press.

You asked for twenty-four hours notice if I were ever inclined to tell another. I want to make that promise to you I honestly do but I can't. Giving my complete trust blindly isn't something I can do anymore, for anyone. But I will promise you this: unless I have reason to believe that you are dangerous to more than just my mental health your secret is as safe with me as my own.

For whatever that may be worth to you.

Have you had any luck with my bubble bath?

Hermione

--8--

...written and ripped... letters... Each one started a different way... I just don't know what to think anymore.

A large sigh escaped, and tense muscles slowly relaxed as Simon's head was allowed to rest on the back of his easy chair. His eyes closed briefly before the head was raised and the rest of the letter was read.

A small snort sounded as Simon looked around for his chicken.

"Yorick, listen to this, and I quote, 'Have you had any luck with my bubble bath?' Can you believe the child..."

Simon paused and frowned.

"Not a child. Not any longer as she would be quick to point out."

He glanced around the small flat, noting the preparations he'd been making. Most of his non-essential items were shrunken, packed and ready to move at a moment's notice.

They can remain packed. Perhaps I've gotten too complacent. Too at ease with the notion I've been forgotten.

While that idea should have upset him, Simon found he was anything but. He felt better than he had in a long while.

Longer than he could remember.

Or want to remember, Simon decided as he rose and stretched. His finger stroked the back of Yorick's head as he paused by the perch on his way to the lab.

"I'm getting too old for these games, Yorick. The youngsters have grown too wise, and the rules keep changing, even though the trickiest one of them all is no longer around to pull the strings."

Yorick, who didn't particularly like the back of his head stroked, attempted to nip a finger as it passed by his face.

"Careful there, my chicken. You wouldn't want to contaminate what is sure to be the best bubble bath ever made, would you? Hermione wouldn't like that," Simon advised as he shook that same finger over his shoulder while walking away.

August 4, 2000

Hermione,

It took a few days, but your bubble bath is done. The small vial Yorick brought you should be enlarged to approximately a liter. Depending on how many "bubbles" you require in your bath, one or two cap-fulls should suffice. I would advise more than three only if your bath is approximately the size of the Prefect's bath at Hogwarts.

Leontes was a perfect gentleman. The sun had already started over the horizon when he delivered your, or should I say, my reprieve? As I wasn't sure how you'd respond to my plea, I was preparing to move yet again. At some point in her life, I hope "the brightest witch of her age" will forgive me for confusing her. What I'm about to impart may do that even more.

I am a dangerous man, Hermione. Never doubt that. I merely choose to do no harm unless I'm forced. There is a great difference, you see, and while I suppose I shouldn't be telling you this, I cannot stand being thought of as a milksop or a coward.

I am not ashamed of the name I was born under. Nor am I ashamed of my actions. If I am detected I will not lie. I hope you understand a little of what I'm trying to say.

If you note I'm a little freer with the information I'm giving you, it's because I don't believe the tiny lie you told me in your last letter. About not giving your complete trust.

If you didn't trust me would you have asked for a "potion" I'd brewed? Even one as innocuous as a bubble bath?

As ever,

Simon

Post script Be sure to advise me how long it took you to decide to either try the "potion" or toss it out.

--8--

The man was *trying* to drive her insane. He had to be.

Hermione harbored no illusions that Simon would be a dangerous adversary, even without knowing (for certain, at any rate) his skill level with a wand *And didn't that sound dirty?* she had been on the receiving end of his written temper enough times to suspect that he wasn't simply all bark. Simon definitely had a bite.

Doubly so if he was Severus Snape, ghost from the past.

She was also a tiny bit irritated at herself that he was able to read her so well.

It was time to return to safer topics, for now, at least.

August 5, 2000

Simon,

I am a prune. A lovely, vanilla-scented prune who spent far too long soaking in her bubble bath. Which, by the way, I started running the water for shortly after Yorick left my flat, since you were wondering. If only my tub were the size of the Prefect's bath, I'd never leave the house. How much do you think I'd have to tip the delivery boy to have dinner brought straight to my bathroom?

Bad news on the book front I've run out of leads for the remainder of your list. Please don't take that to mean that I've given up; I'm just not sure when there will be any further progress.

Hermione

--8--

August 6, 2000

Hermione,

You are a wicked, wanton woman.

Before you protest, allow me to elaborate. You have painted a picture in my mind.

A beautiful young witch, lounging in her bubble filled bathtub. Her hair hastily bound up with a few tendrils falling down around her face skin damp with moisture and a male presence enters the room bearing food and drink.

Depending on the amount of coverage offered by the remaining bubbles the delivery boy should offer to pay you.

I know I would.

Simon

--8--

"I What No, I wasn't I What?" She pressed a hand against her heated cheek, and Hermione stared at the letter in horror. She groaned as she read it once more, clearly hearing the words in a distinctive *familiar* male voice.

The embarrassed flush began to morph into something else as she pictured the scene Simon had described, her mind automatically trying to place him in the bathroom with her, trying to squeeze into her suddenly too small tub with her. In her mind's eye, he looked remarkably like her old professor the day that he'd knocked Gilderoy Lockhart on his arse at the dueling club demonstration, and that should have been enough to cool the building heat, but it wasn't. The opposite, in fact. "Well, bugger."

He called me wicked. Wanton. Beautiful. At least, I think the beautiful was meant for me.

August 6, 2000

Simon,

Have you been drinking? As in, right now, are you drunk?

Hermione bit her lower lip and quickly scratched through both sentences.

Oops?

If you didn't want to know about the bubbles, you shouldn't have asked.

I'm going to go take a bath* She shook her head and drew a line through the last three words ***do something else and then head to bed.**

(Apparently) Wicked and Wanton,

Hermione

Post script *The more I think about it, the more I'm forced to smile. No one has ever called me that before. Ever.*

--8--

A wicked, deep chuckle sounded in the throat of one Simon Sopohorous as he read the seemingly flustered response of one Miss Hermione Granger to his last letter. He had wanted to call Yorick back the moment the bird had left with his previous note, but it had been too late.

Simon had never been a handsome man. Many had considered him as ugly as a troll. Since he'd never had the desire to be openly mocked, he'd never tried to chat a girl up as even an average looking boy might have done. Simon's heart had never strayed from its obsession with Lily Evans, or he might have at least tried after he'd reached maturity.

The only "romantic" entanglements he had ever had with the fairer sex were with those for hire. There had been no need for sweet words or romantic gestures with those

ladies, so the ability to make a woman flustered possibly interested was quite new to Simon.

And very, very tempting.

It gave him a rush of *something* he'd never felt before, and Simon wanted very badly to feel it again. He didn't realize he was flirting, because flirting, either in person or by letter, wasn't something he did. If it had been suggested that was exactly what he was doing, Simon would have been appalled. He'd seen students sending what was called "goo-goo" eyes at each other for enough years to recognize it in others, but he wasn't familiar with the sensations it caused. If he had, he would have realized how addictive it could be.

August 7, 2000

Hermione,

I do not drink to excess, my dear wanton one. There has never been a time in my life that I've ever been tipsy. One glass of Ogden's, one glass of red wine or one snifter of brandy is all I've ever allowed myself. Before now, it was to be clear headed in case the need arose. Now, I do not care to become an alcoholic by drinking to excess, especially alone.

I'm sending you a bottle of mead with Yorick, lucky bird, at approximately the time I think you'll be taking one of your bubble baths.

Why?

You remind me of it, and I'd like to think of you sipping on a glass as you bathe. Drink it sparingly. It's sweet on the tongue, doesn't burn your throat and is lethal if taken to excess.

As always,

Simon

--8--

My dear wanton one...

Hermione sunk lower into the tub full of vanilla scented bubbles, tingling a bit as she thought about the letter she'd received not long before. She hadn't intended to take a bath that night, but once she'd given Yorick a biscuit, sniffed the contents of the bottle he had brought and read Simon's letter, the urge to do as he'd suggested had been strong.

The mead was sweet, just as he had said it would be, and she was careful to only have the single glass, wanting to keep her head relatively clear as she considered the puzzle that was Simon.

His last few letters had been different, less formal, almost...

"Almost what? Almost as if he might be attracted to me?" Her lips slipped into a disbelieving grin as she sipped from the glass of mead.

There, in the tub, up to her neck in warm water and silky bubbles, hair piled atop her head, Hermione actually felt a bit like the wanton woman he had accused her of being.

Eventually she would have to get out of the tub and figure out just what she would write back to him the next day. But not just yet.

August 8, 2000

Simon,

The mead was lovely, and just as you described. I had a small glass, carefully sipped in an effort to keep it from going to my head. I don't think I managed to become tipsy, but I thought it would be best if I didn't write last night, just in case.

Who knows what sort of impertinent questions I might have come up with.

Well, actually, I do know what sort of questions and we're both probably better off that I kept them to myself, really.

Hermione

Post Script I really shouldn't ask this, but I just can't help myself. Do you really think of me bathing?

I can't believe I actually put that in writing, and yet I'm not reaching for a new piece of stationery or scratching it out so... Do you?

--8--

August 9, 2000

My dear wanton one,

Do I think of you bathing?

I sit here in my chair, smoking a cigar, drinking either tea, or perhaps that occasional snifter of brandy, and visualize your nightly routine. You indicated you like the water hot, so I imagine you're slightly flushed from the steam in your lavatory before you ever enter the tub. One delicate foot follows the other as you sink into the bubbles. Do you sigh as you settle into the scented water?

I imagine a well filled sponge being wrung out over one shoulder and then the other. The water racing down to kiss the skin it finds before running over luscious curves, caressing as it goes. Finally, you rise, flushed, scented and very, very wet. Rather like Venus from the sea.

Irresistible.

I hope you realize part of me is with you in that bath every night. I designed the bubble bath and every potion I concoct has a little bit of me in it.

Strange. I'm beginning to envy it.

Are those the types of thoughts you think are better off not said? They've been bottled up inside me for too many years as it is. I think I shall allow them their freedom.

So, back to your question Do I think of you bathing?

I believe that qualifies as a resounding yes.

As ever,

Simon

--8--

"Oh. My. God." The words were barely loud enough to qualify as a whisper.

Hermione swallowed hard and looked around her flat, searching for something, anything that might indicate that this was part of a joke or an hallucination.

Finding nothing to indicate that the letter was anything other than simply the latest in a long line from Simon, she carefully read it again, shivering at the thought of part of him in her nightly bath. It was a rather erotic concept for her, and Hermione found that she was suddenly far too warm.

She pulled loose the tie she'd worn to work and forced herself to prepare a light dinner before she even considered trying to write a reply.

"I don't even know him. I mean I do, but I don't. I don't even have a face to put to the name."

Oh, but you do, don't you? Right or wrong, you have a face and a voice.

So what if you have never met him? You probably never will. What harm is there in flirting a little? Teasing a little? So it's out of character for you; for once, let yourself live a little bit. Simon is.

August 11, 2000

Simon,

I have a confession to make; every time I apply the scent you made, every time I slip into the tub and feel the water touch and caress my skin I think of you.

Epecially these last few nights. It's almost as if you're there in the room with me, watching.

Those are exactly the sort of things that I thought would be better left unsaid, but now that they are, I find that I have no desire to take them back.

You know part of what I do almost every night; tell me something of what you do? Do you sit in that chair with your cigar, lost in thought or a good book, or something else entirely? I'd like to know. I'd like something to think about the next time I'm surrounded by you and your bubbles.

Hermione

--8--

"I'd like something to think about the next time I'm surrounded by you and your bubbles."

Simon suddenly longed to tell her of the many things he'd done and yet none of them.

How many would she condemn me for, even if they had been done under the hand of Dumbledore?

Would she understand the depths to which he'd had to sink to do what was needed? The depths he was still trying to find his way back from? He spent many hours fighting an inner battle to use her as his *confessor* until reason won out.

She wasn't asking about what he'd done in the past. Hermione wanted the present. That he could provide. The shadows were winning in Simon's flat before he lit a candle and began to write.

August 14, 2000

My sweet, wanton, romantic dreamer,

On nights when I'm restless and the fog has lifted, I go to the roof of my building. Most nights I am content to watch those below me. Other nights, I wish to see the heavens, but as you know, the Muggle lights that surround us make that difficult. On those nights I cannot stand being confined to my building or the roof I fly.

I have always been a creature of the dark. The night. Now even more so. The night is forgiving and soft. It holds me lightly in its grasp and allows me to believe I'm finally free.

How would you like to fly with me, Hermione? Cuddled into the crook of my arm with a warm cloak wrapped around you. Smell the rain on the wind before it reaches this tired old city. Mock the slow-moving creatures tied to the ground. Watch the sun start to peak over a mountain before turning around.

Perhaps some night, you'll hear a tap on your window and I'll be there with that cloak. Would you come?

As always,

Simon

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Lariope you are a treasure. Irishredlass thank you again for pleading our case.

She was really beginning to like the way he addressed her in his letters of late. For someone who insisted he was not a romantic, he had his moments.

Not that she would ever tell him so.

Hermione trapped her lower lip between her teeth and reached for her pen.

August 20, 2000

Simon,

For a moment I was there, under your cloak, warm against your side. If I thought I could get away with it, my arms would have crept around you as I buried my nose in your shirt front, trying to take in your scent so that I could remember it later. You would smell faintly of cigar, and whatever you'd been working on in your lab that day, and something that was simply Simon.

I wish I could fly with you; you make it sound so lovely, but I can't. I can't fly. Technically, I am capable of lifting off the ground on a broom, but it generally ends badly. I haven't flown anywhere in at least two years; I'm not even sure I could remember how.

Hermione

She realized she hadn't answered his last question and that it had been a deliberate oversight. Hopefully he wouldn't notice. If he appeared at her window, at her flat, would she go with him? She didn't know.

The letters were one thing. Face to face... "Would I come? Perhaps. Even if I couldn't, I think there would be a large part of me that would want to very, very much."

--8--

"If I thought I could get away with it, my arms would have crept around you..."

"Yorick! She's a cheeky little bookseller, at that," he commented to the room at large, not at all displeased with the way she'd responded in complete contradiction to what he'd just stated.

"arms would have crept around you as I buried my nose in your shirt front, trying to take in your scent so that I could remember it later."

Simon was suddenly struck with the need to tell her they didn't need brooms, that there was no reason to hesitate, and as it occurred to him what he was thinking, he tossed her letter atop the desk and walked away.

"She's not a witch," Simon said with conviction as he stared the falcon in the eyes. He nodded once before continuing. "She's a siren or an enchantress of some sort masquerading as a harmless bookseller."

Walking away from Yorick's perch, Simon's hands flew up in the air before he turned and paced back to stare in the falcon's eyes.

"Of course! What more proof would she or anyone need? How many saw me leave Hogwarts that night? I'd be trussed up and headed for Azkaban before another day passed and **you** " he said accusingly while shaking a finger in Yorick's face, as if everything were the poor bird's fault, "you'd be back among the chickens scratching around, fighting for the next juicy worm."

Simon huffed, left his flat after securing it, and headed to the roof. It was dark, and with the avoidance spell he'd placed on the access door, he was confident he wouldn't be bothered.

As he glared down at the people on the street below him, Simon realized he didn't believe Hermione would notify the authorities about his identity even if she had iron clad proof.

Don't be a bloody fool.

Gryffindor. She'd be honor-bound to tell.

His eyes narrowed when he considered her actions toward Longbottom during their First Year.

When Dumbledore stole the cup away from my house by dolling out points for every tiny thing he could think of.

She did it for Potter her friend.

A sharp intake of breath sounded on the faint wind while Simon's chin rose.

*She considers me... a friend. Would she do such things **forme** if the need arose?*

Simon sank down on the ledge of the roof. His eyes were open, but they weren't really seeing what was in front of him. They lost focus as the meaning behind Hermione's use of the word friend became clear to him.

"But why?" Simon asked himself, thoroughly and honestly puzzled. "Why risk so much in the name of friendship?"

Rising abruptly, Simon hurried back to his flat and pulled the file containing Hermione's letters. He leafed through them until he found the one that contained the phrases he sought.

"The man I'm thinking of died tragically during the final battle, and while his loss is mourned..."

"...in honor of that man's sacrifice..."

"Regardless, you are Simon. Forty-year-old potion maker. And my friend."

As he read those words again, Simon realized she'd still offered her hand in friendship, believing he was her old professor come back. As mean, as hateful, as he'd been to all three of them she had still offered.

"Bloody, cheeky, sentimental drivel," Simon muttered as he drew a fresh sheet of parchment. It was time to find out if she was truly his friend.

Damned good thing I haven't unpacked.

August 21, 2000

Hermione,

I do believe the only blasted reason you've been put on this earth is to test the last dregs of my patience even without the infernal hand waving. Re-read my last letter. Are you attempting to not be an irritating know-it-all any longer? Is there any indication in it at any point that refers to using a broom?

As ever,

Simon

Post script Remember your promise, my wanton one.

--8--

He started the letter with her name, and Hermione felt a brief stab of disappointment.

That disappointment quickly turned into something else, something she couldn't name.

... infernal hand waving...

... irritating know-it-all...

No need for a broom.

She'd suspected it, sure. Had been certain several times, but this confirmed it. It shouldn't have been a surprise, wasn't a surprise.

So why did it feel like the bottom had just dropped out of her stomach?

"He is alive. *Snape* is alive. Oh, God, I have to tell Harry, I have to... No, I can't tell Harry. Not yet. He might want to tell others, and they'd want to talk to him, and all Simon wants is to be left in peace."

She nodded to herself, not noticing that Crookshanks had jumped up onto the sofa beside her to nudge against her arm in concern.

"Somehow he really did survive."

Suddenly she stilled, blinking rapidly as her mind finished processing the newest barrage of thoughts and information. "Oh, good God, I've actually been flirting with Severus Snape." Even more disturbing to her composure was the follow up. "And he's been flirting back!"

August 22, 2000

Simon,

I very nearly wrote sir in addressing you. Old habits. Nerves, most likely.

Yes, that was an admission that I'm a bit nervous at the moment. Although, perhaps, not for the reason you might think.

Suddenly, you're real. I know that sounds stupid, but you've known who I am from the very beginning, what I look like, what I sound like, etc. To me, you've mostly been a name with no face or voice. I admit, of late, I had begun to picture someone you, it turns out when I read your words, but it was a fantasy. Not reality.

And now I know the man behind the words, to a small extent. I've met him, I know more about him than the average student would have learned, and I saw him die. Only not, it turns out.

Couple that with the tone of our last few letters completely at odds with the man I thought I had known before and I realized that I didn't really know anything.

There was some inner debate as to what I should call you, but Simon seems to fit, and we both agreed that Simon is who you are, so Simon it shall be.

My dear Simon.

I do remember my promise, and it has not changed.

Now that that is settled flying. It shames me to admit this, because I do hate admitting that I'm rubbish at anything, but a lack of broom probably wouldn't help. I've ridden on the backs of flying creatures before, and I couldn't do more than clutch at them, terrified that I was about to plummet to my death. I'd spend the entire flight wrapped around you like some sort of limpet or Devil's Snare and wouldn't dare to even look around, much less be able to take anything in. Eventually I'd probably cut off your air supply, and then we'd both fall to our deaths, which would be a lovely way to end an evening, don't you think?

Your wanton friend,

Hermione

--8--

My dear Simon, seemed to float through Simon's brain at odd times. He'd catch himself woolgathering, wondering what the very grown up Miss Granger's voice sounded like.

And how very much he would like to hear her say his true name.

"Rubbish pure and simple rubbish," he'd mutter before returning to the task at hand.

Done in the lab for the day, Simon closed the door behind him and rubbed his hands together in anticipation while he walked past Yorick's perch on his way to the

bedroom.

"What shall we have for dinner this evening, my chicken? One of your relatives perhaps?"

Shedding the garments he wore in the lab, a sturdy shirt and trousers, Simon stepped into the lavatory to take a shower. He paused and reached for the bottle of cologne he'd purchased for the times he sought out paid female companions. Opening the stopper, he sniffed it lightly and frowned before dumping it down the sink and tossing the empty bottle into the bin.

Wouldn't mix with the scents in the lab. Something... spicy.

As he showered, more phrases from her letter rumbled through his mind.

"I had begun to picture someone you, it turns out when I read your words, but it was a fantasy."

"She's had a fantasy about me? The real me?" Simon asked as his head hung under the shower, eyes closed while the water ran past. "I thought she was supposed to be the smartest witch of her generation. It doesn't make any sense."

Shutting off the water, Simon grabbed a towel and briskly dried off. He caught sight of himself in one of the two mirrors he owned, and for one brief second, he was startled at seeing a stranger. Walking closer, he studied the reflection and wondered if Hermione would like what had been done to change his appearance.

"A name with no face or voice. Little does she know."

One of his hands moved up to slide a finger down the straight slope of his nose and a corner of his mouth lifted.

"She'd still know my voice. The little popinjay never had that, now did he?"

When Gilderoy Lockhart had become the DADA professor, Simon had hated the man on sight for that reason alone. He'd been a stuffed peacock who knew absolutely nothing about anything. But when it seemed every female student, and a few of the males, had fallen in love with the fop, Simon had despised him.

Not that Simon had ever actually wanted adoration and fawning from his students. He wanted their attention to detail and precision above all. It was the idea that, with mere looks alone, Lockhart could charm his way through any situation as long as he could smile. Something Severus Snape could never hope to pull off.

Simon smiled at his reflection, noting the whiter, straighter teeth and chuckled. He was remembering the expression on Lockhart's face when he'd sent pretty Gilderoy thudding across the platform, on his arse, during the dueling demonstration. It was one of the few moments of absolute joy in his life.

"Too bad Creevey didn't have his camera handy *that day*."

Creevey. Do I even know his first...

In his mind's eye, a list appeared, and his head dropped enough to rest against the doppelganger.

Colin.

Dead.

Too many... Dead and buried.

Simon lifted his head enough to meet the eyes in the reflection. The sneer he sent would have been recognized by any student he'd taught as one of complete disdain.

"And what gives you the right to remain alive? A perverse desire not to return as a ghost? Maybe that's all you deserve."

Throwing on a dressing robe, Simon wandered back out to his desk and picked up Hermione's letter to read again.

August 26, 2000

My dear wanton one,

I can think of no sweeter way to die.

Enjoying myself with a beautiful young woman wrapped around me. Smelling the scent of her hair, perhaps feeling its softness brush my face. My only regret would be that you would die as well, and that is not to be. Not yet.

Not for a very long time to come.

Make me smile, my Hermione. Tell me of your fantasies. The real ones, before I confirmed who I am. I have a hard time believing you, you see. What kind of fantasies can revolve around the great, hooked-nose bat of the dungeons?

As always,

Simon

--8--

Enjoying myself with a beautiful young woman wrapped around me.

Even knowing what he was referring to flying together Hermione still felt her skin warm from within, her heart race just a bit faster.

"He wants to know about my fantasies?"

September 2, 2000

My dear Simon,

In all honesty, I don't believe I ever harbored a fantasy about my former professor. Or, at the very least, not one that ended terribly well for you.

I take that back; there was one, I think, not long after the end of my second year. Mostly, though, that one was about seeing a certain DADA instructor get what he deserved, and in my mind's eye he got it over and over and over again.

I suspect, though, that's not quite the sort of fantasy you were inquiring about. If it is, do us both a favor and just skip the rest of this letter. Please.

Slightly more recently, I've begun to imagine what it would be like to have you him you here in my flat as I bathe. The door to the bathroom is open just enough so that my cat can come and go if he wishes, and as I lie there in the tub, sunk low so that I'm covered up to my neck in bubbles and water, the door slowly swings open the rest of the way. A figure in black is standing there, his dark eyes taking in the candlelit room, the way I've sat up in surprise so that there's only the thinnest film of bubbles protecting my modesty. I want to say something, but the words die unspoken in my throat as he deliberately steps into the room, shutting the door behind him. His hands hands I used to watch so closely in order to copy his technique in class reach up to remove his shirt, unfasten his belt, slide the top button of his trousers open as he moves across the small room toward me.

I should demand that you leave, but the heat pooling low in my stomach has me lifting my chin to ask what you think you're doing. Then you speak, and my insides melt. I've never heard that voice say my first name, but I can imagine what it might sound like, and it's good. More than good. Almost like the brush of your thumb against my lower lip, seeking permission to slip into my mouth and be caught gently between my teeth. I can't help but wonder what you would taste like.

There have been others, other fantasies. They're not all quite so illicit, by any means. In one, I merely look up from one of my books to ask your opinion on what I'd just read, and you tell me, without the hint of annoyance that always seemed to taint your voice when you addressed me before. In another we're in a lab, working together on a potion I can't identify, and your hand brushes against mine. That's all, just a hint of contact, but it was enough to make me want to lean toward you. Perhaps it would have been wiser if I'd chosen one of them instead.

It might also have been a good idea not to write this in that tub, drinking a glass of the mead you sent me. Not only has it served to loosen my tongue, my pen has been rather unrestrained as well.

Goodnight, Simon. I don't know if I was able to bring a smile to your face, but I can hope. I wish you pleasant dreams.

Yours,

Hermione

--8--

Her latest letter lay unopened on his desk for several days. If she'd basically laughed in his face, which he fully expected, Simon wasn't sure he wanted to know. If he never opened it...

"Gods, this is bloody ridiculous," he snarled on the fifth day of passing it by before snatching it up and ripping the envelope open. His eyes had lingered on it every time he passed the blasted desk, and he had worked himself up to the point of not caring. Or at least he tried to believe he wouldn't.

His eyes locked onto the salutation and at first refused to move lower.

I'm still a dear at any rate.

"don't believe I ever harbored a fantasy about my former professor. Or, at the very least, not one that ended terribly well for you."

Simon found out quite quickly how well he'd lied to himself. A sharp stab of disappointment went through him as the hand holding the letter fell to his side. Sinking down in his chair, Simon's head turned toward Yorick.

"I should be thankful she didn't try to... What is the phrase? 'Let me down easy.' Blunt and to the point is our Miss Granger," Simon advised as he started to read the remainder.

The remarks about Lockhart did bring a small smile to Simon's face.

It appears a photo wasn't needed after all.

The next two paragraphs were read. And read again. The third and fourth time they were perused, Simon's mouth was hanging slightly open, but no sounds were issued. He rubbed his eyes with the fingers of one hand, opened and closed them rapidly several times before reading them a fifth time.

"Yorick?" Simon's voice actually cracked and he had to clear his throat. "She **I Good gods!**"

Suddenly anxious to see what else she'd written, he finished the rest of the letter in a hurry. He placed it down on the desk in front of him and studied the handwriting. Pulling one at random from the file, he placed them side by side.

"She really wrote this," he whispered to himself. "She really..."

Putting the second one away, he caught sight of the back of his hand. Bringing them together in front of him, he studied the scars, the imperfections only he could really see.

"...hands I used to watch so closely in order to copy his technique in class reach up to remove his shirt, unfasten his belt, slide the top button of his trousers open as he moves across the small room toward me."

Simon was fully aware of what her words were doing to the rest of his body, but it was as if she'd enchanted the letter. He couldn't stop reading it yet again.

"I should demand that you leave,"

"Not bloody likely," Simon muttered under his breath.

"but the heat pooling low in my stomach has me lifting my chin to ask what you think you're doing. Then you speak, and my insides melt."

Simon swallowed hard and cleared his throat while casting an almost ashamed look toward Yorick as he adjusted...the way he was sitting in the chair. It seemed wrong to be reading it in front of the bird.

Is he looking at my crotch? I swear he is.

"Go find yourself a mouse or something, you lazy chicken," Simon ordered in a very gruff voice. "This is my letter, and I'm not sharing."

Yorick of course ignored him by turning his back.

"I've never heard that voice say my first name, but I can imagine what it might sound like, and it's good. More than good. Almost like the brush of your thumb against my lower lip, seeking permission to slip into my mouth and be caught gently between my teeth. I can't help but wonder what you would taste like."

"Oh, gods," Simon moaned. The urge to find her in that bloody bookstore, drag her to her flat and fill the blasted tub with with

"Bloody, fucking *bubbles* no less!" Simon growled as he stood, glared at Yorick when he squawked at being disturbed yet again, and headed for the bedroom with Hermione's letter still clutched in his hand.

"Shut up or find yourself a new home! It's a damned good thing you can't laugh, or you'd be dinner!" Simon yelled as he slammed the bedroom door behind him.

Several hours later, Yorick's head turned to watch the door open again. Simon emerged, freshly showered, dressed and in a much better temperament. The, by now, very creased letter was carefully folded and placed in a special drawer of his desk. He met the bird's eyes, his narrowing slightly. Simon knew full well the bird didn't know what he'd been doing in the other room, but he still felt slightly sheepish.

"Shut up, you foul fowl. It's still my letter, and you keep your bloody claws off of it!"

Yorick, content with the growled response as being perfectly normal, went back to sleep.

After preparing to answer Hermione's letter at last Simon was at a loss how to proceed. He'd never fantasized about a student. Well, other than where he had been a student, but he really didn't think Hermione would appreciate hearing how he'd lusted after her best friend's mother.

In his mind's eye, the Hermione of old took precedence. He could not bring himself to imagine a child *Gods, no!* Rising, he went to the pile of papers he kept in a corner to search for a current picture. He found one, almost full length, that apparently had been taken when she was in a hurry.

When was she not? Simon decided with a small snort before returning to his desk.

September 8, 2000

I no longer know how to address you. Siren? Temptress? They all seem lacking somehow.

In case you haven't guessed, you did much more than make me smile, so wicked and wanton still fit the bill for the most part. Wicked, wanton siren? I like temptress better. Maybe because it's old fashioned. Somewhat like me, I suppose.

On that note, I had to dig out one of those newsprint pictures you despise. I couldn't bring myself to respond as I'm going to unless I could firmly place you in my mind as the beautiful young woman you've become and not the child of my memory.

Should I tell you what we did in that tub of bubbles? I've never "made love," my temptress, so my technique might be somewhat lacking, but I'm not inexperienced. We left your bath, both dripping and sated before we resumed our activities on your bed. There I got to look, taste and drink my fill of you.

Your hair long released from its clasp is spread over your pillow, cliched I know, but new to me. I ache to see it close and in person, my temptress.

I look at your picture, and as you're hurrying away from the photographer, a flash of thigh is revealed under your skirt. Are you as soft all over as you appear?

Simon rose from his desk and walked toward a window. He couldn't bring himself to be more graphic in print, but he could picture it quite clearly.

You are all those things and more. You've bewitched me with your fantasy, Hermione. It's all I can think of.

Now, more than ever, yours,

Simon

--8--

September 15, 2000

My dear Simon,

If either of us is the tempter, it would have to be you. I've never written anything like that before you, never found myself lost in illicit daydreams at the most inopportune times before we began corresponding. Never called out someone's name as I lie alone in my bed.

Trying to imagine what your touch would feel like, my hands an inadequate substitute for yours, picturing you doing the same with thoughts of me and my name on your lips.

Hermione shook herself out of the fantasy and returned to writing her letter.

If I am wicked or wanton, it must be you that makes me so.

Your experience, limited though you may think it, is most likely more than mine. To hear your voice whisper "temptress," feel the warm breath of the word breathed against my ear or the soft brush of your lips against the delicate skin of my neck... How could I find fault with technique if I can't even think?

You found a picture of me? You really do think I'm beautiful?

She groaned and scratched through the last sentence. "I don't want him to think I'm an insecure child, begging for compliments."

I can only hope it was one of the better ones. I swear the press has made an actual effort to catch me at my worst whenever possible.

This what we're doing, these letters it's all new to me. I'm sure that's horrifically obvious. I just wanted you to know that. I've written to others before, for years in fact, but never anything this I'm not even sure why I brought it up.

I should turn in for the night.

Yours,

Hermione

Post Script I nearly forgot I won't be home the next few days; I'll be visiting my parents. My birthday is in a few days, and Mum decided to use the occasion as an excuse to throw a bit of a family reunion. I've been warned there will be relatives there I haven't seen in years, and Mum wants me to show up a day or two in advance so that she can fill me in on all the things I've been doing, or at least all of the things she's been telling people that I do, since she can't very well tell them I'm a witch. Even if I am just a witch who works in a bookstore.

Part Nine

Chapter 9 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: I almost forgot and that will never do. Thank you, Lariope.

When Leontes delivered Hermione's latest letter, Simon was napping, or attempting to nap, on his sofa. Lily had visited him often of late. She was apparently no longer content to make him merely relive the night she died. A sad, wan Lily appeared in dreams, accusing him of forsaking the love he'd sworn to himself would live forever in his heart.

A desperate attempt to use a Muggle technique called, of all things, Positive Dreaming by thinking of the fantasy he and Hermione shared only seemed to make it worse. She would cry silently, silver tears running down the translucent skin of her face, always floating just beyond his grasp. Each time he awoke, Simon would be tangled in his sheets, breathing heavily, attempting to reach her. He never could.

Holding Hermione's unopened letter in one hand, Simon stroked it with the other. He'd actually found someone who considered him a friend. Someone who, with the way their letters had been heading, might have been more than a friend someday.

"I'm sorry, Lily. No one can ever take your place," Simon whispered as he rose and tiredly walked toward his desk. The letter lay there for several days before he decided to open it.

When he found out Hermione's birthday was near, Simon frowned in thought. Sending gifts was something he'd done many times before, as it was wise to keep acquaintances, such as the Malfoys, happy. Picking up the rare transfiguration text he'd sent her once before, Simon briefly considered duplicating it for her.

I haven't got enough potion made up. It has to go to someone, someday. It might as well be her, now.

September 18, 2000

My dear Hermione,

As you're probably still at your parents', I'll merely tell you Happy Birthday. If Yorick does his job the way he's supposed to I'm quite confident it will be.

As ever,

Simon

--8--

There had been a mad rush to keep Yorick out of sight while Hermione retrieved her post, and she'd been most apologetic to the bird for the undignified scramble. Leontes had been left in the temporary care of Mister Fitzgerald from the bookstore, and Hermione hadn't thought to bring any owl biscuits on the chance that she might receive mail during her stay at her parents'.

Simon's letter had been extremely brief. Hermione fought to remind herself that she had no reason to feel disappointed. She read the note in its entirety several times as if searching for some hidden meaning, worrying her lower lip between her teeth until her mother told her to stop before she ruined her lipstick.

The book more than made up for the brevity of the letter. She recognized it immediately, a bibliophile's joy causing her to clutch the book to her chest as she danced around the kitchen.

September 19, 2000

My dearest Simon,

Thank you so very much.

I wish I had time to write more, but luncheon begins in twenty minutes, and I still need to Apparate into Diagon Alley to borrow one of the owls from the store if I want to get this sent today.

Yours,

Hermione

--8--

Closing the last of the new books Hermione had sent him, Simon glanced over the ones left on the list. They were mostly ones he'd had to leave behind at Hogwarts, and as he was quite familiar with them, they would contain nothing new.

It's time to admit defeat.

It galled him even as the thought occurred, but defeat no longer trying being able to sleep even if forever was very tempting. Pulling open the bottom drawer of his desk, a small vial was removed from its depths.

It has the color of a ruby, he noted absently as it caught and returned the light from a lamp he'd left lit on the far side of the room. *An emerald would have been more fitting.*

He'd taken great care when preparing the potion. It was designed to work within seconds, and while he couldn't guarantee it was painless, it was close enough. The only

thing holding Simon back was fear. Not of death or any possible pain, but as returning, possibly to Hogwarts, as a ghost.

"Gods, not there anywhere but there," Simon mumbled as he put the vial away. "Joining Binns on staff would be more than anyone should have to bear." Straightening his jumper as he stood, Simon snorted. "If that happened, Yorick, at least I'd never have to worry about my clothes if a student's cauldron decided to explode."

An unfamiliar owl, but one that apparently had delivered something to Simon before, appeared briefly, and much as Leontes was apt to do, dropped its burden and fled.

"Is it me, or are they getting more and more rude?" Simon asked Yorick indignantly as he walked over to inspect the letter on the floor. Luckily it had landed with his name showing, so there was no hesitation when he recognized Hermione's writing. It puzzled him for a moment and then Simon remembered the rest of what she'd written in her last letter.

"Blast. Muggle relatives who don't know she's a witch. No Leontes, I'd wager."

Turning to look at Yorick, Simon's right eyebrow raised.

"And how did she explain you and the parcel you delivered, my fine feathered friend?" Simon asked as he bent to pick up the envelope and looked it over carefully. "It's not a Howler at any rate."

September 20, 2000

My dear Hermione,

I believe I owe you an apology. Friends offer those to each other, if I recall correctly, when one of them has done something to put it bluntly stupid. When I received your letter about your birthday being close, I was not at my best and sent you a letter and parcel via Yorick.

It was only after I received your last one, by a strange owl, that I recalled what else you'd said. You were going to be around Muggle relatives who didn't know you were a witch. I have assumed, since you didn't send me a Howler in return and seem to be pleased with your gift, you were able to handle it with your relatives ending up none the wiser.

In reading my first paragraph again, it rather sounds as though I was in my cups. I wasn't.

Simon's eyes closed, and the hand holding the charmed quill tossed it down. Pride, one of his greatest foes, wouldn't allow him to beg.

What other choice do I have?

The bottom drawer of the desk was opened, and he sat back in his chair with hands folded on his lap. Somber eyes flicked back and forth between the letter and the now visible vial.

My bloody little know-it-all or Binns?

It didn't take long for pride to bend, but it left a bit of anger in its place that it had come to this.

Why is this so bloody difficult? I've shared far more with you than what sticks in my craw and won't come out.

The books I've requested, needed to find, aren't for mere ownership. The ones left on my list will be of no use. I desire copies of those merely because of prior ownership, nothing more, so there is no need to fret overmuch on their account.

I suffer from nightmares, Hermione, that Dreamless Sleep cannot block. Most of the people in our world would probably consider it a just and relatively painless "reward" for my actions over the years, and they are mostly correct. They weren't as stubborn when I was actively involved in fighting the You-Know-Who. It's only the last few years they've grown, and I'd hoped to find a potion strong enough, intricate enough, to block them again.

If, during one of your marathon reading sessions, you happen across something that I might consider using, may I count upon you to forward the information?

As ever,

Simon

--8--

September 30, 2000

My dear Simon,

No apology necessary, I assure you. It wasn't too difficult to keep Yorick out of sight; I had been near one of the windows that overlooked the garden at the time that he appeared, and Mum was able to come up with a suitable diversion almost immediately.

"Unfortunately, that diversion involved a handful of pictures of me as a babe, streaking about the house with a bare bottom, apparently using my nappy as some sort of parachute," Hermione mused out loud, deciding that Simon really didn't need the embarrassing details.

Having suffered from nightmares in the past, although not nearly as persistent as the ones you describe, I must offer my sympathy and insist that you do not deserve them, no matter what some uninformed idiot with more opinions than common sense may attempt to spout off.

You said that you were looking for a potion, that you had managed to block them before. Can you tell me what you were using before that did work? By no means am I attempting to imply that I might be able to offer potion advice to a master, but it might provide me with a jumping off point that could lead us to a solution all the quicker.

I do not like to think of you suffering.

I would have written sooner, but I've been skimming through my personal potions library every free moment. As of yet, I've not found anything that would appear useful. Do not despair, though; if I can not find something to help in my own books, I do have access to the store inventory, and now that I know what you need on a more specific level, I may be able to find a reference you hadn't yet thought of.

Have you tried any Charms, yet?

Your friend,

Hermione

--8--

Upon the first reading, Hermione's letter was everything Simon been expecting only more so. A scene flashed through his mind. Hogwarts' Potions classroom was the setting. Hermione's hand was in the air, rising through a sea of bowed heads avoiding eye contact. Not so Hermione. Her bottom lip was being chewed, and you could almost see how difficult it was for her not to bounce up and down in her seat.

There was something wrong with the scene, and it took a few moments for Simon to realize what it was. It wasn't Hermione the student in his fantasy flashback. It was an adult Hermione. Simon shrugged it off and returned to reading the letter.

"Having suffered from nightmares in the past..."

"Not at all surprising, considering the events," Simon muttered and then fell silent as he read the rest of the sentence. An unease settled in Simon at the concern she expressed so vehemently in her letter over the opinion some faceless, nameless person might have of him. A return to the questioning, gathering information, part of Hermione's nature made him smirk. It didn't last long.

"I do not like to think of you suffering."

Other than Poppy Pomfrey, whom Simon was of the opinion fussed merely to be fussing, no one had shown any great concern over what injuries or maladies befell him. Filch had been Simon's choice for assistance when Hagrid's ugly beast had bitten him. He hadn't seen the need to visit Madam Pomfrey, since he supplied most of the healing potions for her in the first place.

"I'd have been in the infirmary for bloody month of Sundays," he muttered while reading the last long paragraph.

"Good gods, Yorick! I think I've activated a one-woman crusade on my behalf," Simon remarked in total bewilderment. The last sentence, however, made him frown.

"Charms? She suggests Charms?" Simon sputtered while at the same time standing and walking over to the bookcase that covered one wall in the flat. It was only three quarters full, and it took only a few moments for Simon to find the volume he wanted.

I'll never live it down if one of these works was the thought that ran through his mind as he settled down in his easy chair to read.

More than a week later, and a countless number of Charms, he admitted defeat in yet another area.

October 10, 2000

Hermione,

Unless you can figure out a way to get Flitwick, or someone equal to his caliber to treat me, I do believe we can rule out Charms.

As far as what I've tried, it would take too long to write them down. I'm sending what notes I've taken with Yorick, and the less than stellar results. If you can find something I haven't tried, I'll give you the golden spoon they gave me when I became a Potions master with my blessing. Although, I warn you, you'd have to find it. I'm not quite sure where it is any longer, as it's been a number of years since I've even thought of it.

As always,

Simon

Post Script Do you still chew your bottom lip when you're anxious?

--8--

Do I still... Hermione cast a guilty look around the room as she released her lip from between her teeth.

"How did he?"

She knew there was more important things in his letter to dwell on, but it took far too long for Hermione to actually pull herself away from wondering why he wanted to know.

October 15, 2000

My dear Simon,

I'll answer your question, if you answer one of mine.

Yes, I do, still, torture my poor lip. It's a habit I've never been able to break, no matter how hard I try.

Now, it's my turn. It wasn't until I saw your notes that something clicked into place, and I realized that the letters you send me can't be written in your own hand. I recognize the handwriting in the notes I saw enough of it over those six years at Hogwarts and I can't believe it never occurred to me before now that your current penmanship lovely though it is isn't, well, yours. What do you do? A charmed quill, spelled parchment, an incantation?

I think I sort of miss your old handwriting.

While I am not equal to Professor Flitwick's skill, I do have a talent for Charms. If you don't mind, I'd prefer not to rule them out entirely just yet.

I also plan to begin working on a set of Arithmancy equations that may, assuming I manage to pinpoint the correct variables from your notes, help send us in the correct direction. Unfortunately, the equations I'm contemplating are going to be quite complex, and it will take me some time to work them out.

I would hate to take your spoon when we succeed, Simon. I'm sure you can think of something else with which to reward my efforts.

Hermione felt her cheeks heat as she wrote that last line. She wasn't sure how he would interpret that.

"Well, I'll just have to nudge him in the right direction."

Considering your current situation, I'm aware that it wouldn't be prudent to meet somewhere public for a meal, but I would be more than happy to offer my flat for a quiet celebratory dinner.

Yours,

Hermione

She quickly scribbled her name and sealed the letter before she could talk herself out of leaving it as it was and tied it to her owl's leg. "Go, before it has a chance to sink in how stupid I'm being."

--8--

Glancing at the warped reflection in the side of the glass currently in his hand, Simon had to snort.

October 16, 2000

Hermione,

You are correct. I use a charmed quill as there are too many out there that would recognize my scrawl, as I assume you would have, if I'd written the first letter.

I once told you if I met you face to face you would not know me. You wouldn't, until I spoke. So, if someday a celebratory dinner is in order and I could afford a posh evening, which I might the location would not have to be your flat. There would be no awkward questions from Mr. Weasley, or aspersions upon your reputation for entertaining a man in your home.

I thank you for the effort on my behalf, but I don't know what possible use Arithmancy equations will have.

As ever,

Simon

--8--

So, if someday a celebratory dinner is in order and I could afford a posh evening, which I might the location would not have to be your flat.

Either he wasn't getting the point that she **wanted** the celebration to be at her flat, or...

"Or he understood it perfectly well, and this is his way of trying to let me down gently." Hermione pouted and reached for the carton of half-melted ice cream. "And what does Ron have to do with anything?"

October 16, 2000

You, my dear Simon, must not have studied Arithmancy to your NEWT level. In the hands of an extremely talented Arithmancer, every thing, every object, every person, every question, every possible answer can be converted to an equation. And every equation can be solved.

Not that I'm saying that I am an extremely talented Arithmancer, but Professor Vector did say I had a knack for the subject.

Yours,

Hermione

Post Script I think Ron would be much more inclined to ask awkward questions if he were to hear that I was seen eating in a posh restaurant with a man he'd never met before than if that same man and I were to have a quiet, intimate meal in the privacy of my own home.

Not to mention, considering the things that I suspect he has been up to over the last few months, I would have to dance naked in the street, propositioning every man or woman I met before he would have any grounds to cast aspersions upon my reputation.

Part Ten

Chapter 10 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: One of the hardest jobs I ever tried was being a beta for another author's story. Thankfully, it didn't even involve the nasty little commas and other little squiggly things that like to lie in wait to trip me up. I had a very hard time keeping my hands off of their words. I wanted to twitch them, turn them around to my way of saying things, so it is with more gratitude than ever when I say:

Thank you, Lariope. You are a wonder.

It had arrived without the usual little note from Hermione, and the handwriting on the label wasn't hers, but Simon still unwrapped the latest parcel from Marks and Sons with no small amount of anticipation. The tome that greeted his eyes was an old friend in another form. He'd been forced to relinquish his collection of books at Hogwarts without so much as a whimper, and while the ones he'd managed to salvage from Spinner's End were much more valuable, those left at the school were *his*, and he missed them sorely still.

"Will you serve me as well, I wonder?" Simon asked as he picked up the volume in one hand. It felt right somehow, and he frowned while taking it over to the window to examine more closely.

It can't be.

He flipped several pages past the middle of the book.

There's a stain in the correct spot. From a cup of teal spilled.

It can't be...

The inside of the back cover was examined, and there was no longer any room for denial.

*It **is** mine.*

Dumbledore's strange little mark was there. Still faint, but there. Right where it should be in the bottom inside corner.

Memories of a forgotten Christmas flooded Simon's mind and glazed his eyes. Dumbledore had stated he was clearing out his shelves, had no further use for the volume, and did Severus want it? The cagey old bastard had known he'd always envied him the volume and refused to call it a present. As much as Simon detested the old man at times, it was the only gift he'd ever received in any form from anyone.

As Simon sank down in a chair, he cradled the book close to his chest. Unaccustomed moisture in his eyes forced him to raise his chin in the air in an effort to forestall it falling. Once he had swallowed several times, he was able to lower his chin and focus on the book again. It rested on his lap as its surface was checked for any new dings or indignities it might have suffered on the journey back into his hands.

A muscle began to flex in Simon's jaw when he realized exactly what it meant. Instead of his small but cherished collection being added to the Hogwarts library, which had been stated in his will, it had been broken up and *sold*.

A few volumes lifted and sold on the sly?

All of them?

A student? The current Potions Master?

Minerva?

Simon couldn't acknowledge how much the thought of his possessions being so callously discarded hurt, and he chose to release it in anger instead. The wayward traveler was carefully placed in the appropriate desk drawer before it could be damaged by his tightening grip.

"They had no **right!**" he fumed at Yorick. "No right! How many more of *my* books are laying around that damned bookstore?"

Breathing heavily, Simon paced back and forth in front of the perch, trying to figure out a way to make a list of books to send to Hermione when he didn't even know which books might have been sold.

"There's no help for it. I have to go there myself."

His lips pursed as he strode toward his laboratory. He didn't care if he ended up sounding like an adolescent girl who'd stubbed her toe, it was time to use the altered Polyjuice potion he'd been working on to change the timbre of his voice.

A short time later, a vial safely tucked in the outer pocket of his robe, Simon Sopororous ventured out on the streets of London. Suddenly being in the midst of people again was a trifle more difficult than he had anticipated, and more than once Simon considered returning to his flat.

*I am **not** a bloody coward. I **do not** need to hide behind a woman's skirts or her book selling skills.*

I can do this.

They're only people not spies intent on turning me in.

It wasn't that far to Marks and Sons, but it seemed to take an age to reach his destination. Skimming the volumes displayed in the window, he wasn't certain if he was reassured or dismayed not to find any that looked familiar.

Turning slightly to the side, Simon pulled the small vial from his pocket and added a hair from the brush of one of his male neighbors. The vile taste made him wish for a glass of Ogden's, and he vowed to improve that as soon as he could. Simon had to clamp his jaws tightly shut and swallow hard several times as he felt the change in his throat begin. The vial was secreted back in a pocket as he turned to open the door.

It doesn't seem to have been altered, was the first thought that ran through his mind upon stepping inside. It occurred to him, since the writing wasn't Hermione's, she might not even be at the store.

Spotting a likely looking man behind one of the counters, Simon stepped up and asked, "Is Miss Granger in?" and barely contained a grimace.

Oh, good gods.

I'm a fucking falsetto.

--8--

The clerk had been about to ask if he could be of any assistance, but something about the man on the other side of the counter urged him to simply nod and call to one of the others to cover his post.

Hermione looked up as he knocked on her office door. She'd only been back in the store for a matter of minutes after having spent the last few days meeting with book sellers all over the country. When she was informed that there was a customer out front who wished to speak with her, Hermione frowned. She pushed her reading glasses up to rest atop her hair and paused long enough to make sure she was presentable before stepping out on to the sales floor.

The clerk discreetly tilted his head toward the tall, dark haired gentleman who was impatiently pacing up and down the aisles, stopping to quickly examine a book before returning it to its shelf and swiftly moving on.

Hermione put on her best "helpful" smile and approached him, stopping a few feet behind him and clearing her throat. "Hello, I'm Hermione Granger. How can I help you today, Mister?"

--8--

Pacing up and down the aisles of shelved books, Simon had become completely engrossed in skimming titles and examining bindings. The shoppe, and those in it, faded into obscurity as he searched for the lost companions of his former life. A volume on the third shelf from the floor had caught Simon's attention when someone cleared her throat behind him.

It should be mentioned that Yorick had never cleared his throat. At least Simon had never heard him do it in all the time he'd had the bloody bird, so perhaps he could be forgiven for what happened next. He spun, pulling his wand and crouching low while pointing it in the general direction of the noise. What spell or curse he had hovering on

the back of his tongue would never be known, as it was swallowed as soon as Simon saw his *adversary*.

The wand's end slowly lowered as Simon stood and gazed on the woman he'd been writing to. His eyes, ever quick, took in the gentle curves of her figure, perhaps not shown to their best advantage in the neat white blouse and trousers she wore. Seeing Hermione in the flesh was quite disconcerting. For the first time in a very long time, there were no ready words for Simon's tongue. He was frozen with indecision, but his thoughts were coming faster than he could control.

Tell her or not... taken the potion... won't know my voice... finds out later... could be easily explained... passed off... concern for others overhearing...

All of the above occurred within seconds. He took a deep breath to finally speak, and it saved him from making what might have been a tragic mistake.

That deep breath, drawn through his nostrils, brought Simon a scent the scent he'd gifted her with and it caused a small smile to lift the corners of his dour mouth a tiny bit. It was reflected briefly by a flash of warmth in his eyes.

It wasn't merely words on paper to humor me.

Here was the chance to parley with an intelligent person. One who *knew* who he really was. As he opened his mouth to speak, something occurred to Simon.

Well, hell. She said something, but what in the bloody blue blazes was it?

Inclining his head slightly as he put his wand away, Simon said, "I beg your pardon, Ms... Hermione. You startled me, and old reflexes die hard."

Glancing around as full awareness of the shoppe returned, he asked, "Is there somewhere we could speak privately?"

--8--

It had been at least a year, probably longer, since Hermione had found herself at wand point, and while she was relieved to see that her reflexes were still fairly good (if a bit slower than she remembered), she was equally dismayed to discover that her comfortable business attire wasn't really made for the speedy drawing of her wand. By the time she finally closed her fingers around the handle of her wand, her attacker had already begun lowering his.

Not that she was relieved in the least.

Hermione kept her hand slightly behind her back, on her wand, and made a mental note of how many other people were visible in the store. If spells were going to be fired, she wanted to minimize the casualties as much as possible.

He drew a deep breath, and she tensed. Then the barest hint of a smile seemed to skate across his lips, and he put away his wand. Her eyes were following the movement of his hands, intent on watching as he disarmed himself, so much so that she nearly missed his apology and the way he called her by her given name.

Hermione stiffened at the informal address coming from the man she was certain she had never seen before in her life. Even more so when he asked if they could go somewhere private to speak.

Her first inclination was to scoff in his face, but she restrained the impulse.

"May I ask what this is pertaining to, Mister ?" Once again she let her sentence trail off in the hopes that he would identify himself and provide a clue as to why he'd asked for her by name.

--8--

She did not know him.

It was totally illogical, not to mention extremely surprising, when a sharp pang of disappointment made a small wince cross Simon's features. It was no use telling himself he should be ecstatic. The Muggle dentistry had apparently been worth the pain. All the effort involved in the judicious applications of potions, creams and other unmentionable magical arts to change his nose and skin tone had not been wasted. Simon's nose, to him at least, was still overlarge, but not hooked as it had been before. He barely refrained from running a finger over it even now to check. This was what he'd wanted. Anonymity was his for the keeping.

She did not know him. It was expected, and still he felt disappointed.

I am a bloody fool, it seems.

He tilted his head slightly and studied his *pen pal* for another brief second.

Now to confirm and compound it.

Glancing around only once to see if anyone else was in earshot, he simply said, "Sopohorous," and waited for her reaction.

Friend or foe, Hermione? Will we visit a quiet room, or will I be on my way to Azkaban?

--8--

Sopohorous.

She heard the name clearly, but it took a few precious seconds for the syllables to make sense.

"Simon?" Her voice came out far huskier than she intended, and Hermione hoped he didn't notice. The man standing before her was virtually unrecognizable in comparison to the memory of the man who had taught her. She searched his face for any sign of Professor Snape, something inside growing heavier with each passing moment.

Then she blinked, the frown that had been tugging at her mouth began to fade and her hand fell away from her wand. "You I mean, follow me, please."

Hermione led the way, nodding reassuringly at the clerk who had fetched her earlier as they passed. Once inside her small office, she softly closed the door, then leaned back against it. Her gaze swept over him slowly, cataloging everything she saw as if there was a good chance that she might never see him again. By the time she looked up from his hands to his eyes, she welcomed the slight support of the door, as she felt like someone had hit her with a stunner.

"You have his eyes," came out in a breathy rush. "And his hands."

With a push away from the door, she stood up straighter and tried to calm her racing heart. "I didn't see it at first, but now... How did you ?" Her hand gestured toward Simon's face.

--8--

Simon, as he'd followed her, hadn't been able to take his eyes off Hermione's back and the gentle sway of her hips in trousers. Normally, he didn't approve of women wearing pants. His opinion had changed greatly during that short walk to what he assumed was her office.

Something inside Simon rebelled and struggled against a lifelong leash at her questions. He had denied being a romantic, and for the most part, he was able to subdue that part of his psyche with sarcastic comments and jibes toward others. It had been contained and controlled for forty years and was choosing now to flex its not inconsiderable muscle. *Now* was not the time for questions and more questions and the give and take of answers. Didn't she realize? Didn't she know?

This was the woman who had written him letters of bathtubs and bubbles and delights long suppressed. The husky sounding *Simon* had lit a small fire within his libido that had been fueled by the simple act of observing her walk.

"You have his eyes...and his hands," delivered in a tone that made Simon think of bedrooms and secrets, was the final tug that broke the leash.

Stepping forward, a hair's breath away from her, Simon placed one finger on her lips and shook his head while meeting her gaze. He damned the potion he'd taken to alter his voice and vowed not to say her name again until it had worn off.

"My eyes. My hands," Simon whispered before he replaced that finger with his lips, gently taking her mouth with his own.

I was right. As sweet as mead.

--8--

She hadn't expected him to move closer, definitely hadn't expected him to touch her. He'd whispered, and she'd had just a moment to mourn the difference between his voice and her memory before he was kissing her. Then there was no thinking, no ability to do anything more than feel his lips against hers in what might have been the sweetest kiss she'd ever been given.

Kissing Ron had always involved heavy breathing and tongues and over-active hormones, not gentle pressure and warmth and *want*.

For a moment she leaned closer, before drawing back slowly, remembering where they were.

"Why here?" *Why now?*

--8--

As her body brushed against his, Simon had almost brought his hands up to pull her as close as possible when she began to withdraw. Fully prepared to be slapped, or worse yet, laughed at, Simon was momentarily stunned with her simple question. Hermione hadn't spurned his advances, had seemed instead to almost welcome them. Relief and something akin to joy flooded the narrow confines of his throat and made him unable to speak. A hesitant smile finally filtered across his mouth as one hand lifted to gently brush the side of her face and move on to briefly taste the softness of one of the curls in her hair.

Why?

I don't quite recall.

"I... It no longer matters," Simon said truthfully as his hand finally lowered. Books were the furthest thing on his mind. They had always been there, and they would be yet again.

She might not.

It occurred to him that he should step back at least a pace and allow her the freedom to move where she chose, but he was loath to increase the distance between them when all he wanted was another taste of her lips and what lay beyond. His eyes lingered on them, and his own were lightly licked in an unconscious gesture of preparation.

"Before this blasted potion I've taken to change my voice wears off, do you think you could take the remainder of the day off and go somewhere a little more secure? Once there, I'll attempt to answer **most** of the million questions I'm sure are buzzing around that fuzzy haired head of yours," Simon said with a raised brow and a slight smile to soften the words.

--8--

"A little more secure?"

I did not just squeak. Did I?

When she'd written her last few letters, she had wanted nothing more than to spend some time alone with him, but that was when the entire concept had been words on paper and heated thoughts in the night. This was reality, and there was a flesh and blood man directly before her. A man who had just kissed her.

"A potion? You mean your voice will come back? Oh, thank God." She felt her cheeks warm in embarrassment and tried to cover for it by narrowing her eyes and glaring up at him. "My hair is not fuzzy! That is not the best way to convince me to skive off the rest of the afternoon."

--8--

His eyebrows rose slightly at her exclamation, and while it pleased him she apparently liked the timbre of his normal voice, Simon had to find a way to use it to his advantage if he wanted to get her out of the shop. He wasn't really worried about the glare she'd sent him. Simon had seen her level the same type of expression toward her two friends many, many times and they still lived.

Or so he'd heard.

The flush on her face he'd chalked up to youth. Then another, very disturbing, thought occurred he hadn't considered before.

*That letter **couldn't** have been written by a virgin could it?*

Perhaps that's what caused the breakup between her and Weasley.

Parts of her last letter swirled through his brain, teasing, just out of reach.

Something about having to dance naked in the street, propositioning everyone before...

Oh, good gods. *She might be one at that.*

Stepping back a pace at last, Simon nodded his head and moved to sit on the edge of the desk with his legs slightly spread.

Temptation in another, more familiar, form?

"I've developed a slightly deviant form of the Polyjuice potion which affects only the vocal cords. Unfortunately, I seem to have *borrowed* a hair from a bloody tenor," Simon advised with a trace of ire.

Picking up one of the books on her desk, he frowned and pretended to disapprove of the volume while setting it back down. Pulling a pocket watch, he noted the time.

"I have approximately three quarters of an hour left before I need to depart."

Raising his eyes to find hers while the watch was stowed away, Simon tilted his head and studied her hair through slightly narrowed eyes.

"I may have been mistaken about the texture. May I touch it again?" he asked, knowing full well her hair was soft to the touch and not frizzy at all. Simon made no move to leave his perch on the desk. He was waiting waiting to see if she was willing to close the distance. His present position afforded him an excellent spot to observe and learn from her approach if she chose to do so.

Which are you, Hermione?

An innocent, playing at being a woman, or my wicked, wanton little witch?

--8--

She glanced at the door behind her, unnecessarily confirming that it was shut; although why that seemed so important at the moment, she wasn't sure.

Hermione knew that while he might appear and sound relatively innocent, beyond the facade was Severus Snape. No one in their right mind would ever dare to call Severus Snape relatively innocent. Wily, yes. Brilliant, definitely. Dangerous, with utmost certainty.

She studied him once more, this time with a different eye, one that wasn't looking for hidden traces of the man behind the mask. His new appearance wasn't unattractive most would probably say it was a vast improvement but she wouldn't call him pretty. Handsome, perhaps.

Who are you trying to kid? You wouldn't have let him kiss you if you didn't find his appearance at least somewhat attractive. Wouldn't want to kiss him again, to see if it would be the same as before.

Slowly, cautiously, as if approaching a wild animal, Hermione crept closer.

"I would be interested in seeing your developmental notes for this Polyjuice variant, if you wouldn't mind showing them to me." She paused just in front of where he was sitting, then took the final step to move between his spread feet. Then, before her burst of courage had a chance to dissipate, Hermione reached up to pull her reading glasses off the top of her head and leaned closer to toss them gently on the desktop, shaking the rest of her hair loose.

"Well?"

--8--

Watching her stealthy approach, Simon suddenly understood how a mouse would feel if Yorick were hunting. The Sorting Hat hadn't made an error in judgement. She was a lion through and through. There had been no hesitation in the slow crossing, merely an *awareness* which made Simon's brows draw together briefly. He may not have been her head of house, but he'd noticed something missing.

Where has the spontaneity, the excitement she held for this world, gone?

It used to branch and bristle out of her, especially the first year, much like lightning racing across the heavens.

It saddened him a trifle when he realized exactly where it had gone.

Into cold dark graves along with the dead.

A tiny quirk lifted the right hand corner of Simon's mouth when she asked about the potion. The bold step placing her feet between his made Simon think of the old nurse rhyme about the spider and the fly. The altered Polyjuice had been the lure, and he had her exactly where he wanted her to be.

Well, hell. Now what?

Simon felt a momentary surge of panic. This was entirely new territory. The ladies he was used to dealing with required no gentling, merely coin, to do as he wished. As he watched Hermione remove her glasses and shake out her hair, the panic grew.

Her "Well?" demanded some sort of action, and while Simon wasn't a lion, he did have a brain.

Romance. She said women like romance. I should have read those damned novels instead of burning them ~~more~~ through his fevered mind as he watched a hand rise to gently thread its way through the strands on one side of her hair. It was difficult to keep his eyes fixed on her face when they wanted to lower their gaze to try and catch a glimpse of cleavage.

If I can fool the Dark Lord into believing I'm a loyal follower, I can fool myself into thinking I can do this.

The other hand soon followed on the opposite side, and taking a chance that she wouldn't harm the part of his anatomy so completely exposed, his fingers soon found the softness of her skin. He didn't allow them to travel as far as he wanted, keeping them confined well above her shoulders.

"I've never been more wrong in my entire existence," he muttered softly and was horrified to realize he'd miscalculated the potion's endurance when his voice cracked and returned to normal in the middle of the last word.

Clearing his throat lightly, he snorted. "I should probably rephrase that, shouldn't I?"

--8--

There was no point in trying to contain the shiver that rippled through her when his true voice returned; it merely joined the goose flesh and prickles of awareness that had sprung up when Simon Severus put his hands in her hair, touched her skin.

"Would you say my name?"

--8--

He'd noted the shiver, but attributed it to the cool air of the office and the lightness of her blouse, not his voice until she asked him to say her name.

Say her name?

It can't be as easy as that can it?

He almost opened his mouth to say it when another thought occurred.

How the hell am I supposed to say it?

Softly?

Loudly?

By itself?

Well, fuck. This was a great deal easier on parchment.

Inspiration struck before too many seconds passed.

"What name would you have me call you?" he asked simply. "Siren? Temptress? Or merely Hermione?"

--8--

Perversely, she'd half expected to hear him call her "Miss Granger".

Hermione found that she was extremely pleased with what he chose instead.

Siren. Temptress.

Her eyes fluttered closed briefly, the better to savor the rich timber of his voice, the way he seemed to caress each syllable. Especially her given name.

That's going to haunt me when I try to fall asleep tonight. There will be pleasant dreams, indeed.

Lips curled up in to a satisfied smile as she opened her eyes. "They're all lovely, but I think simply Hermione will suffice for now, Simon." She nibbled her lower lip for a moment, suddenly uncertain as to how she should address him.

"I know you go by Simon now, but I Well, what would you have me call you?" Hermione echoed his question back to him.

--8--

I'm definitely slipping, Simon decided as he tore his gaze back to Hermione's face as her eyes opened. Simon, first and foremost a male, had discovered his eyes weren't always under his conscious control. When hers had closed, his had readily peeked into the opening of her blouse. His neck had cooperated as well, bringing the head slightly forward to obtain a better view. None had come away disappointed.

He had to swallow a snort when *pervert* flashed through his mind. A smaller version of her smile was reflected back, with a touch of sadness included. He'd daydreamed of pillow talk with this woman where she called him by his real name.

It's time to put the daydreams back where they belong. With her.

"Simon," he said firmly, but not unkindly. "Simon Sopohorous is who I am, and who I shall remain."

--8--

There was a brief stab of disappointment, but it wasn't difficult to overcome when she thought of all the letters she'd exchanged with "Simon" over the last several months.

Severus Snape was a man she had grown to respect and mourn; but Simon was the man who had slowly opened up to her in his letters, the one who had become her friend and tempted her more than she could ever admit now that he was actually here.

That they were, in fact, one in the same made no difference for now. Later, perhaps, if the circumstances were right.

He'd humored her silly request to hear her name; it was the least she could do to honor his. Hermione ignored the matter of fact voice in the back of her mind that mentioned she'd already let him touch her hair when he'd asked, and shouldn't that have made them even?

"Just Simon? I can't call you Nuisance, or My Personal Pain in the Arse?" Her smile deepened mischievously as she debated the wisdom of retreating across the room to safety.

She studied his face, looking for the first sign of danger, paying close attention to his mouth. "I suppose My Friend Simon is right out, too?" The smile faded just a hair as the tip of her tongue flicked out to moisten her lips.

"My Dear Simon," was breathed as Hermione gave in to the urge, closed her eyes and leaned forward to brush her lips against his.

This time she was ready for it and was determined to catalog every sensation and taste to analyze later that night when she was alone in her flat. Who knew when, or if, she'd ever have this chance again.

Both hands hesitantly landed on his shoulders to ensure her balance as she tilted her head just enough to better feel the firmness of his lips against the softness of her own, and Hermione made an inarticulate noise of appreciation.

--8--

One eyebrow had risen to lofty heights, and Simon's mouth had begun to open the slightest bit to retort, when Hermione pulled the dirtiest trick in the book out. She not only said, "My Dear Simon," in a smoky whisper designed to level the staunchest defense he'd managed to erect, she kissed him. Leaned forward, kissed him and made the most delicious sound imaginable.

No more than half a second of indecision passed before his were responding, softly seeking, asking for admittance. Since she'd taken the liberty of putting her hands on his shoulders, Simon's decided to travel to her waist. Once there, pulling her a touch closer seemed like a good idea. His arms protested slightly at their cramped position, so it was merely to relieve their discomfort that the hands traveled around to her back, where they splayed open.

A brief inner protest was thoroughly trounced and subdued by the simple pleasure his thumbs received when they decided to stroke the smooth expanse of Hermione's back.

No more daydreams, remember?

Not a damned dream... Shut up already!

--8--

It might have only taken him less than a second to respond, but it felt like eons as her mind screamed that she was making a huge mistake, that she was opening herself up for what would surely be an excruciating rejection, that he was surely going to push her away and...

And he was pulling her closer. The very hands that she'd fantasized about were open against her back, thumbs moving in a way that would surely drive her out of her mind if not for the sanity-saving material of her blouse to dull the sensation.

The thought of the warm glide of his hands against the bare skin of her back was enough to make Hermione groan unexpectedly. She crowded even closer, one hand sliding upward from his shoulder to tangle in his hair as she parted her lips to taste him. Where Simon's lips had softly sought permission, Hermione's demanded. The hand in his hair tugged slightly, a silent encouragement.

--8--

There had been occasions when Simon had asked to be dominated by the ladies he'd employed, but more often than not, time had been of greater importance than what he actually wanted. As he'd never kissed anyone who actually desired him, Simon was slightly taken aback by Hermione's aggressiveness. Not enough, however, to break the kiss or even consider not responding.

She'd challenged him in a way. No one challenged Simon and walked away unscathed. His lips firmed and took control of the kiss even as his grip tightened, one hand sliding up, the other down. Hermione tasted of forbidden delights, and while Simon was greedily contemplating the feast in store for him, there was still the question of her innocence.

Or lack thereof...

He'd been the butt of too many jokes, too many tricks, not to look this particular gift horse in the mouth. Breaking the kiss, but not his hold on her body, Simon studied her face through heavy lidded eyes, which dropped to relish the look of her now swollen lips. His voice was slightly rough, passion glowing in the depths of his eyes as he finally spoke.

"Tell me this isn't a game, Miss Granger."

--8--

"If it is, I'm not familiar with the rules," she replied, a bit more breathlessly than she would have liked. Now that they were no longer kissing, Hermione became aware of the way her pulse was racing and the feel of Simon pressed against her body. He was solid, warm, and very, very male. Being this close to him was almost enough to make her lose her head, had already made her act impulsively in a way that was very un-Hermione. The urge to kiss him again was strong, to press against him, to rub against the unmistakable hardness against her belly. Strong enough to frighten her.

Hermione tried to step back, needing to put some distance between them so that she could clear her head, and for a moment Simon's hold held fast, resisting her retreat.

For just a split second, there was another kind of fear in her heart as she looked into the eyes of a predator who could very well devour her whole if she wasn't careful. Then he released her, and she stepped out from between his legs.

"I probably shouldn't have done that. You go to my head. I wasn't expecting that." As her words tumbled out of her mouth, Hermione ran both hands through her hair, nervously pulling it back and twisting it into some semblance of a bun.

--8--

The right corner of Simon's mouth twitched slightly when Hermione made her admission. He sat passively, patiently waiting while she donned her "armor," recognizing the need to feel secure and in control. If his eyes wandered other places while her arms were raised to fix that armor into place, it was the fault of the tailor who made the blouse, was it not?

When she'd finished fussing with her hair, Simon slid slowly off the desk and took a step closer. He'd recognized the flash of fear in her eyes and released her accordingly. The brief notion to use her desk in a fashion it was never designed for would have to wait for another day.

A finger of his right hand lifted her chin just enough for him to plant *araalmost* chaste kiss on her lips. At the last possible moment, his teeth grazed the full bottom one in a promise.

"Nor did I, Hermione. Nor did I," he advised quietly while raising his hand to brush the side of her hair. "Next time and there *will* be a next time, since you've assured me this isn't a game allow me to release the bolt on your armor."

Glancing around her office, one corner of his mouth lifted, and he couldn't help teasing her in his own fashion.

"I should probably leave and let you tend to business. How many poor souls are out there languishing in misery while waiting for their books because you're entertaining me?"

--8--

Release the bolt of my armor?

The puzzling phrase was quickly forgotten as the rest of his words registered. Had he really thought she might be playing with him?

If anyone should be worried about being played the fool in this situation, it should be she.

But he was affected just as much as I was.

That knowledge gave her the inner strength to draw a deep breath and return his smile. "Most of our customers' requests are filled by my very competent staff. Only a select few manage to find their way onto my desk." *Poor word choice, Hermione.* She knew her skin was heating in embarrassment and hated it.

"Only the most irritating and annoying, really. Which is how I ended up writing to you, I believe."

--8--

Her words brought a laugh, short and sweet, from Simon's throat as he cast a glance over his shoulder and then back. If she knew what his plans for that desk had been a short time before...

A slap on the face would be the least of my worries, I'm sure.

Romance. Women want romance, do they? What would be...

No, if I tried a dip I'd probably drop her and then fall on top of her.

Deciding the desk had proved to be an admirable supporting cast member, Simon considered trying to sweep Hermione off her feet and placing her there before kissing her senseless.

She doesn't look like she weighs a lot, but there was that one woman who almost broke my back in...

She'd most likely detect a Levitating Charm and be insulted, so that's right out.

Deciding to play it a bit safer, Simon held out his hand instead. Hermione looked at it for a moment, then backed up at him and then took it. Leading her back to the desk, Simon placed both hands firmly on her waist and lifted her the short distance needed.

"My turn," Simon said with an enigmatic smile as he moved her legs to either side of his and swooped in for a good-bye kiss. His hands had moved to hold her head as his mouth, not asking this time, plundered and sought the sweetness of hers.

Reluctantly releasing her, Simon smiled again and backed up a step.

"Until next time, Hermione."

--8--

"Right. Next time."

Next time? Oh, thank goodness. She pressed the fingers of one hand against her lips, which were tilted up in a bemused smile as he walked out her office door. As it slowly began to swing shut, she caught the eye of Mister Fitzgerald and realized she was still perched atop her desk.

Hermione offered a sickly wave and hopped off, flushing a deep red up all the way to the roots of her hair.

"All right, that probably wasn't the best way to handle that," she muttered to herself as she took her seat behind the desk. "I can't be locking myself in my office with an attractive man while I'm supposed to be working; what will the others think? They'll think I'm fooling around in here, getting kissed to within an inch of my life, and ... that's not a good example to set for the staff."

She nodded once and reached for her pen and daily diary, quickly scribbling a note into the organizer. "Note to self: Stop wearing threadbare laundry day pants to work. Just in case."

Part Eleven

Chapter 11 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: It is difficult to find new ways of saying thank you, so I shan't try. Instead, I will say that Lariope is a wonderful beta and, Irishredlass if you're reading you were so right.

October 20, 2000

My dear Simon,

Writing those words used to flow so easily from my pen, and now I have to pause because I keep remembering saying them to you in my office yesterday.

Yesterday.

You never did explain why you came to the store. Why yesterday? Why not any time over the last few months? Why at all?

I'd like to think it was because you wanted to see me; however, as you keep insisting in your letters that you are not a romantic sort of person, I just can't picture you suddenly being overcome with the desire to pop into my place of business just to kiss me senseless and then pop back out again.

Not that I objected or anything silly like that.

So what did spur you to stop in for a visit?

And while I'm pestering you with questions, you said you would explain how you look so different. Is it permanent, do you have to renew it, will it fade over time? How did you do it? Is it another variant of the Polyjuice, like the potion for your voice?

Since you're not here in person this time, I don't think you'll be able to distract me nearly as easily.

Yours,

Hermione

--8--

"This isn't a letter!" Simon announced to Yorick. Rising from the easy chair by the fireplace, he waved it furiously. "It's an inquisition! Does she think I have nothing better to do than answer her questions? First it was what wine did I like. Filthy stuff. Fiction or non and whatever the hell else it was she wanted to know."

The fact of the matter was, at the moment he didn't have anything else to do, but fresh from a new round of guilt laid upon his head by Lily, Simon wasn't in the best of moods. Add to that Hermione's voice popping up at odd moments saying, "My dear Simon," precisely the way she had right before she kissed him...

"Oh, to hell with it," Simon grumbled as he pulled the ledger chronicling all the steps he'd taken to change his appearance over the last two years. Sitting down at the desk Simon started leafing through it, wondering where and how to begin.

This one's totally new. There's no basis for comparison to give her. That one's right out Simon decided as he viewed one which had a few "proscribed" ingredients listed.

He'd never actually used it, but someday, somehow he might have the need.

An hour later, Simon looked at the notes he'd taken, raised an eyebrow and proceeded to tear them in half before tossing the lot in the rubbish bin. Pulling a fresh sheet of parchment, he smirked.

October 20, 2000

Hermione,

As I have no desire to waste a years worth of ink and untold pieces of parchment not to mention Yorick's poor back I'm sending a Portkey. If you wish to learn the answers to some of your questions, you'll be holding it precisely at three o'clock on the morrow.

Simon

Pulling one of the Portkeys he'd made for the flat out of his desk, Simon activated it and placed it inside the envelope with the short note.

"Yorick!"

--8--

At ten til the hour, Hermione stood next to her kitchen counter, staring down at the innocent-looking object on its surface. When she'd opened his letter and the Portkey had fallen into her lap, she'd been puzzled. Why would Simon be sending her a keychain, especially one that advertised a used car lot with the slogan "If you're desperate for a ride, you know who to call"?

I admit, I may have come off a little heavy-handed with that kiss, but I don't think that makes me desperate for a shag.

The letter had explained the presence of the keychain, although she still wanted to know why he even had it in the first place.

Moments later, the keychain securely stowed in her pocket, Hermione had rushed through her flat like a whirlwind. Every book, every sheet of paper, every hastily scribbled idea on the edge of a paper napkin that had anything to do with Simon's nightmares was gathered together into a pile on her coffee table. If she were really going to visit him, she didn't want to show up empty handed.

Most of the night had been spent sorting through her things, pulling out the most likely references and carefully recopying the notes that had been written in her own personal shorthand. By the time Hermione was done, there was only a messenger bag that contained a pair of folders and three books.

Now that she was looking at her efforts in the light of day, she felt her heart sink. Instead of leading her to the answer, her research had simply lead her to even more questions.

A glance at her watch told her she had minutes to go before the Portkey would activate, taking her... She didn't know where it would take her, actually, but she reasoned it would be to wherever Simon was.

She ran her hand over her hair, checking to make sure none of it had managed to work its way free from the chignon she'd wrestled it into earlier that afternoon. She'd also spent an extra few minutes cursing at her make-up mirror and fidgeting about in her closet before settling on something similar to what she wore to work. *Not too casual, not too overdressed. I hope. Definitely not too alluring; I don't want Simon to think I'm out to seduce him.*

All right, maybe just a little bit.

Her stomach began to roll uneasily as Hermione slung the strap from her bag over her shoulder and reached out to grasp the Portkey.

--8--

She was right on time, of course. Simon ignored the relief threatening to make him send her a smile, and he frowned slightly in its place. Rising from his easy chair, Simon pocketed the watch he'd been holding and walked toward her.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger," he advised while reaching behind her to tear out the pins holding the mass of hair in place. Tossing them in the general direction of the rubbish bin, Simon's eyes narrowed slightly as his hands worked their way through the curls and settled on either side of Hermione's face.

"Marginally better," he said dryly, finally allowing a glint of amusement to show before leaning forward and taking what he hoped would be the first kiss of the day.

--8--

Professor Snape's voice sternly issuing a point deduction still had the power to snap Hermione to attention.

While her mind raced to figure out what she could have done to earn the rebuke, Simon's hands destroyed all the hard work she'd put into taming her hair. That, coupled with the "point loss" had her beginning to glare up at him when he leaned down and kissed her. There had been something in his eyes that softened the less-than-complimentary "marginally better," and the feel of his lips against her own went a long way toward calming her earlier unease.

After a moment, she drew back, fixing her features into the same stern countenance she had used on Ron and Harry when they were plotting something sure to get them all into trouble.

"Ten points?"

--8--

His thumbs seemed inordinately interested in tracing the line of her jaw. Simon allowed this while he tilted his head to the side and met her almost-glare. One black brow rose, and he nodded slowly.

"For not checking where the Portkey would take you," he told her seriously. "It might not have come from me or I might have changed my mind about having a bothersome little bookseller know who I am and how I now appear."

A slow smile lifted the corner of his mouth.

"Would you care to try and earn those points back?"

--8--

She ought to kick him in the shin for calling her bothersome, but he had a very valid point. Plus, she suspected he was teasing her.

Instead of kicking him, she rolled her eyes. "It was delivered by your Yorick, and I doubt anyone would be self-destructive enough to try to intercept your falcon when he was on a mission. The letter was in your pen; you specifically mentioned the Portkey, and... You're right. I shouldn't have blindly taken it without verifying who it was from and where it would take me, but " Her features softened, and one of her shoulders raised in a slight shrug. "I trust you."

Some semblance of her earlier glare returned, this time couched with a fair amount of mischief. "I'm not about to write you an essay for extra credit, if that's where you're headed."

--8--

"I trust you."

You *shouldn't*, almost made it to the tip of Simon's tongue before he bit it back. Didn't she know? Didn't she realize how many people had *trusted* him over the years and were now moldering lumps of dirt?

Taking a deep breath, Simon removed his hands from her person and swept one in the general area of the dining alcove situated just off the kitchen. It wasn't large, but held a sturdy oak table and two mismatched chairs.

"No essays today, Hermione," he said with a slightly forced smile. "We can sit there if you like or in front of the fireplace."

Glancing toward the hearth, he added, "I should warn you the chairs in the alcove are decidedly uncomfortable after an hour or two, but probably more conducive to...information gathering if your time is limited."

--8--

He stepped away, and Hermione felt like stomping her foot in annoyance. She didn't, she had far too much self-control for that, but the urge was there.

One minute he was touching her and teasing. The next he was distancing himself, was what it felt like to her: *Hot and cold running Simon. And men say women are complicated and difficult to understand.*

She looked at the little area dedicated to dining, then toward the pair of chairs in front of the hearth with the little table almost nestled between them. Her lower lip found its way between her teeth for a moment as she considered.

"I hadn't made any other plans for the afternoon." She swallowed hard and kept her gaze carefully focused on his small, almost cozy, living area. "Or this evening. So, unless you're planning to kick me out in an hour or two, I think I'd prefer to be comfortable."

Hermione turned back toward him and smiled. "I'll try not to let having a cushion under my bum affect my information gathering, but if I start to veer off too far, we could always move."

--8--

Perhaps because of the year of solitude, and therefore no need to school his features or glances, Simon found his eyes were still not completely under his control. They chose to flick in the general direction of the bedroom door before Simon forced them back toward Hermione.

That wasn't where she was referring to, he told himself sternly.

Damn it.

"I have no wine," he said with a small smile while putting one hand beneath a feminine elbow to lead her toward the smaller of the two chairs. "But I do have some excellent tea if you've a mind."

After seating her, Simon tilted his head slightly before one corner of his mouth lifted again.

No plans for this evening...

This could be a good thing, his libido told Simon quietly.

"If you're *very* good and don't drive me too far to distraction with your questions, I might be persuaded to provide a biscuit or two."

Dinner! *Here! With you!* screamed the practical side of his brain.

Simon's eyes blinked rapidly a few times, and while he was actually quite glad she'd decided to use the Portkey, his stomach was slowly twisting into a knot of anxiety. Hermione was the first person he'd actually *invited* to any place of residence, and if he'd thought it through, he might not have issued it so easily. There had been witches or wizards who dropped in at Spinner's End during the lazy days of summer, but their visits had always pertained to business, either Dumbledore's or the Dark Lord's.

At the moment, he was quite concerned about what his cupboards contained or rather didn't and was itching to send an order, via Yorick, to his regular grocer.

Did I eat the... Yes, I did.

Thursday last.

Blast!

--8--

She'd seen where his gaze has briefly gone, toward a closed door that Hermione suspected might hide his bedroom. *Interesting.*

"Tea would be lovely, and if those biscuits are chocolate, I could be persuaded to be *veryvery* good." She knew she was flirting, or giving it her best attempt, and hoped it sounded at least half as natural as it felt to her. Something about Simon made her want to flirt, to tease, to see if it was possible to fluster him the same way he often made her feel.

She set her bag down next to the chair and endeavored to appear serious as she looked up at him. "It's probably best that you don't have any wine on hand. Not only is it still relatively early in the afternoon; if you did have a bottle waiting, I might have been forced to assume that you had dishonorable intentions toward me and were trying to get me drunk."

Hermione leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs, suddenly reassured in her decision to wear a knee-length skirt and modest heels. "What would you prefer, first? Tea or answers?"

Or something else entirely?

She had been serious earlier. Hermione wouldn't be opposed to sharing another kiss or several with Simon, and she was relatively certain that she could make it *veryvery* good for him with a bit of effort, assuming he was equally willing.

She'd also been serious about the chocolate biscuit. Hermione had been too nervous to eat lunch before she'd arrived, and suspected that if she didn't have something to

nibble on soon, her stomach might begin to make its presence known to the room at large.

--8--

There was an attractive woman in his home. One with extremely well turned ankles and calves. One who was there willingly and not on a mission of intrigue. One who, if he wasn't mistaken, was flirting with him quite strongly.

Quit staring, you dolt. You're not a boy.

How was it possible? She made his mouth water while at the same time it felt as dry as the unicorn horn powder he used in the lab. He wanted this woman quite badly and didn't know exactly how to proceed.

"Answers, but not from me," Simon stated quite emphatically.

He dropped to a crouch beside her chair and gazed questioningly into Hermione's face. "I'm going to send an order with Yorick if you'll stay for supper. *Exactly* what kind of wine do you prefer?" he asked while one hand reached out and gently grasped the ankle floating near him, stroking it lightly. "Or should I specify mead?"

There it was in a roundabout, maddening sort of way. As directly as he could, Simon was telling her his intentions were *anything* but honorable.

--8--

If she had been a kitten, Hermione was positive she would have started purring the moment he began stroking her ankle. As it was, her breath caught, and her foot arched in her shoe.

He was distracting her from her questions. Again. Hermione was tempted to let him get away with it, but there was something she needed to clarify before things went any farther.

Being coy had never worked well for her, especially since it was so much easier to just be upfront about her desires and avoid any potential misunderstandings that might crop up.

She reached toward him, feeling a bit as if she was about to attempt to pet a hippogriff and lightly placed her hand on his shoulder. Her fingertips barely grazed against the skin just below his ear.

"I would love to stay for supper, if you'll have me. However, you should know that while I am attracted to you very attracted and I can tell you right now that you won't need wine or mead if you wish to kiss me this evening, I'm not going to sleep with you, no matter how much I may have to drink.

"Not tonight, anyway." Her lower lip found its way between her teeth as she met his gaze with her own and wondered if, when the time came, she'd be able to stand by her word.

"Still want me to stay?"

--8--

Encouraged by the visible and audible responses to the touch on her ankle, Simon continued to stroke the silky skin and fine bones. He'd never before considered a woman's ankle an erogenous zone and was wondering where else a feather light touch might be welcomed when she began to speak.

Hermione's question almost made him smile, and a small chortle did sound in his throat. A brow rose while he studied her for a few seconds.

"I very much want you to stay," he advised while moving his head in for a kiss. Just before his mouth took hers, he added, "I swear I will not press you ~~to~~ sleep with me."

--8--

Far from reassuring her, Hermione considered his words to be a warning of sorts. She had declared her intent to remain out of his bed, and he was declaring his *fair enough*, she thought, shivering slightly when his lips caressed hers and biting back a tiny moan as his hand slid up the smooth skin of her leg.

Thank God, I shaved today.

While she would have liked nothing more than to join him on the floor the chair was far too small for the both of them Hermione was smart enough to realize that such an action would be playing right in to Simon's hands. *Such strong hands, and they do feel lovely.*

Instead, she aimed one quick nip at his lower lip, then drew as far away from him as the chair would allow. "You mentioned tea?"

Part Twelve

Chapter 12 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair.

It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: As always, thank you so very much, Lariope, for all your hard work on our behalf.

Having remembered *"and he is willing to take his life into his own hands by eating whatever monstrosity I set before him"* from one of her letters, Simon had turned down Hermione's offer to help prepare their evening repast. Carrying a plate containing a modest variety of sharp and mild cheeses, he placed it precisely in the middle of the table before sitting down. It wasn't much, as desserts go, but it was what he liked.

"I do hope you weren't expecting a concoction of froth and sugar," he advised while filling a wine glass for her. Setting the bottle down, Simon gestured in the direction of the lighter colored Gouda while choosing a slice of Gorgonzola Dolce for himself.

"That particular cheese should go well with your wine. At least that's what Lucius informed me once." A small huff of amusement was closely followed by a slight smirk.

"Of course, with Lucius, one never knew quite what to believe."

The throbbing in his temples had ceased, at least for the time being. Simon didn't know if he'd been that hungry for food, or if it had been the ceasefire brought about by the meal itself. He was thankful Hermione apparently hadn't picked up the disgusting habit of talking with her mouth full from Weasley.

Speaking of which...

It was time for Hermione to provide a few answers of her own. Swallowing the last bite of his cheese, Simon tilted his head and sent her a questioning look.

"How is it that you're not a Weasley by now? Potter, from what I hear, has already tied the knot with the youngest one. ~~Not~~ *appily ever after* ending for you and the red headed Quidditch goalie?" Simon asked with only a trace of the sarcasm he would have normally used.

--8--

Hermione froze, wide-eyed at the unexpected direction the conversation had suddenly turned to. Earlier, while she'd watched Simon prepare the simple, yet delicious meal, she had peppered him with the questions that had been uppermost in her mind.

What had he done to his appearance? *And was it at all reversible?*

She'd been relieved to hear that the majority of the mostly superficial changes were not permanent, in so much as they were caused by potions and salves that he had to administer on a regular basis. A few skipped doses and the only difference between Simon and Severus would be a straighter nose, better teeth, shorter hair and a tragic lack of billowy, teaching robes. Although Hermione had to admit that while he had been preparing their meal, she had much enjoyed the view provided by the Muggle slacks. *Who would have thought that Professor Snape had been hiding such a lovely arse under those robes all these years?*

Hermione had decided it would be best to hold on to her questions about his nightmares until after dinner, not wanting to sour the meal with unpleasant topics.

Apparently Simon had no such qualms.

She swallowed the piece of cheese that had been sitting like a rock on her tongue and set the rest of it back down on her plate, taking the time to carefully wipe her fingers on her linen and sip her wine while she considered whether or not to tell him it was none of his business.

"Ron and I had an insurmountable difference of opinion." Her tone was the coolest it had been since she'd arrived that afternoon. "He felt I was an unemotional cold fish who couldn't understand his needs, and I felt that he was a boorish lout who couldn't understand mine. He called me frigid; I called him a pig and... Eventually, we realized we were better off as friends than lovers."

Hermione reached for her wine glass and took a sip, watching him over the rim. "How is it that you're not dead? I very clearly remember seeing you bleeding to death in the Shrieking Shack, and yet, here you are."

--8--

Hermione's letters hadn't conveyed the full extent of her *current feelings* for the youngest Weasley male. Her tone did. Both of Simon's eyebrows had risen during her explanation, completely unaware that the mere asking of the question might have caused the mood shift.

Frigid?

More fool he.

Placing his tea cup back in the saucer, Simon refrained from touching his throat at her question. He knew the high necked jumper he wore covered the scars, but the slight wince on his face, as remembered fangs pierced his skin again, wasn't controllable.

Raising shadowed eyes from the depths of his cup, Simon fed her a small smile.

"Come now, Hermione. The *'smartest witch of her age'* shouldn't be flummoxed by a simple problem. You found an answer for the protection of your parents. What would you have done in my position?"

--8--

What would I have done? I'd probably have died.

She had seen the wince, and it had made her feel just a bit guilty for striking back at him with a question guaranteed to poke at an old wound after he'd asked about Ron. Even though she cautiously considered Ron to be her friend, thinking of her failed relationship with the only man she had ever loved still had the power to make her overly defensive, and she'd taken it out on Simon.

Hermione took a deep breath and set aside her empty glass. "I don't know what I would have done in your position, Simon. When we couldn't find your body, I wondered, obviously, but I'd seen what I'd seen, and there really didn't seem to be any reason to hope that you might have survived. We all assumed what was left of the other side had taken and secretly buried the body. They probably assumed the same thing, actually. It's not as if we could have asked your portrait what you would have done or even wondered why it wasn't talking; it didn't survive the battle in the castle. I think Harry said it had been found in one of the rooms that had collapsed, burned almost beyond recognition.

"To be honest, I had more pressing concerns to deal with after that than what had happened to my former professor's body. Other than the occasional nightmare, I hadn't really spent much time thinking about it until recently. And even if I had, the likelihood of you surviving through the night, even if you had managed to crawl out of the shack somehow, was infinitesimal."

Hermione nodded toward the seating in front of the hearth. "Do you mind if we move? I'm suddenly feeling a bit of a chill."

--8--

"Not at all," Simon said quietly while standing and moving to pull out her chair. "Would you like a brandy instead of more wine?"

Hearing the cold, hard facts that *no one* on either side had bothered to check his status wasn't surprising. Simon knew perfectly well the chaos surrounding the *finabattle* would have precluded anyone from visiting the shack too soon, but he still had to stifle a sigh the hollow feeling in his chest had produced.

As Simon's hand moved briefly to touch the silk of Hermione's hair before she rose, he realized he was tired. Tired of the pretense, the loneliness that was the reward he'd earned for trying to atone for the mistakes of his youth. Moving away from her before baser instincts won out, Simon walked toward the shelf that contained an adequate brandy and a bottle of Ogden's. Splashing some of the latter in a glass, he took a healthy swallow, turned and saluted her with the remainder.

"If I'm going to be forced to answer those types of questions you'd be better off getting me pissed."

--8--

Her earlier guilt intensified as she sat in the same chair he had lead her to that afternoon. He obviously didn't want to discuss the events of that night or how he managed to survive what should have been a fatal wound. It was cruel of her to keep pressing for answers, yet Hermione *needed* to know almost as much as she needed to draw her next breath.

"Whatever you're having is fine." She suspected that Simon wasn't going to be the only one who would need something bracing to drink before their conversation was over. "Go ahead and bring the bottle."

--8--

Glancing once at the bottle still in his hand and then over at Hermione, Simon mentally shrugged. She kept reinforcing the statement she was no longer a child after all.

"Be it on your own head," he told her while at the same time presenting an empty glass. After sitting down and pouring himself almost a full measure, he motioned for her to raise her own. As she held it, he poured.

"Say when."

--8--

"That's fine, thank you." There was just over two fingers of liquid in her glass, and Hermione knew that should be more than enough to tide her over for awhile.

He hadn't told her what they were drinking, but odor was vaguely familiar. A very cautious sip one that caused a full-body shudder told her it was Ogden's, as she'd suspected.

Vile stuff, but it would serve its purpose. Between the Ogden's and the fire, the chill from earlier was slowly beginning to fade away.

"Right, then, you were saying?"

--8--

He tried to look at her and speak, but found he couldn't. Simon's gaze turned toward the fire and then into the liquid in the glass. Another large gulp was taken before he settled back into the depths of his chair. As the chairs weren't directly facing each other, it was easy to watch the fire destroy the wood he'd placed there earlier and pretend he was talking to Yorick.

"When you and Potter left I was as good as dead," he stated flatly.

"In order to fool the Dark Voldemort when the time came, it was necessary for me to have a dose of the Draught of Living Death on my person. It didn't take a bloody *genius* to know he'd use Nagini, since he delighted in terrorizing those around him with the beast."

Simon paused and took a slower sip of the Ogden's.

"Smethwyck developed a very effective antidote, you know, as Arthur Weasley can attest. It wasn't difficult to find a way to combine those two, along with a Blood-Replenishing Potion, into a concentrated solution."

He smirked slightly and chanced a glance in her direction before the fire won out again.

"Thanks to a Muggle syringe hastily emptied into my thigh, it was in my blood stream before Voldemort turned his back on me. Once he left me for dead, I slapped a patch on my neck and then you and the boy wonder popped in."

The liquid left in his glass was swirled and studied.

"When the Draught wore off, I was able to Apparate to Spinner's End my *ancestral* abode, where I finished healing the wound. As far as the bloody portrait goes it was burned before I left Hogwarts."

The glance he now threw in Hermione's direction was dark and deadly, as was the tone of his voice when he asked, "Does that satisfy your morbid curiosity enough for one evening, Miss Granger?"

--8--

Back to being Miss Granger, I see.

She took a cautious sip of the Ogden's and wasn't sure if she should be pleased or disturbed that it didn't burn nearly as badly as before. Perhaps her throat was beginning to go numb?

"If you're asking if I have no more questions, I'm afraid the answer would disappoint you, or at the very least, try what is left of your patience." Another sip and Hermione was feeling pleasantly warm and hardly grimaced at all. "However, *Mister Sopohorous*, I suspect neither of us is particularly eager to discuss such a delicate subject any further this evening."

He hadn't moved to kick her out yet. Hermione chose to view that as a positive sign even in light of the glare and his tone.

"Simon." The last dregs of liquid were quickly swallowed and the glass set on the small table before Hermione tentatively reached out to touch his arm. "Simon, thank you. For sharing that with me."

Her hand hovered over his for a moment, unsure if he would welcome her or not, before she threw caution to the wind and wrapped her fingers around his.

--8--

The Severus of old would have drawn his hand sharply away, and had there been a trace of pity in Hermione's eyes, Simon still would have. Finding none, he merely nodded and took another sip. He didn't squeeze her fingers, as it smacked too much of something *Dumbledoreish*, but his thumb did raise enough to stroke the front of her digits before gently removing his hand.

After his *confession*, the flat seemed smaller than usual. Simon needed the roof, and since it would be the height of rudeness to leave a guest sitting alone in the flat, Simon rose and took two cloaks from a small closet next to the front door of the flat.

"Would you care to accompany me to the roof? I *canalmost* guarantee I won't be tempted to toss you over the side," he said with a small smile.

--8--

The roof. She still remembered the letter he had written just a few short months ago, when he had told her how he would visit the rooftop when he was feeling restless.

Hermione returned his smile and accepted the cloak he offered. "I would be honored. I've been curious to see it since you wrote of it, actually."

As she followed him out of his flat and up the stairs, she settled the borrowed cloak around her shoulders. Hermione couldn't help burying her nose in the fabric to see if it smelled like Simon and was grateful that he was leading the way and couldn't see her momentary foolishness.

I'm as bad as a schoolgirl with a crush on the Quidditch captain.

When they reached the rooftop, the view was almost exactly as she'd imagined it. The sounds of the city were there, but muted enough to not be harsh. The moon seemed to be absent from sky, but the city gave off its own light, making it possible for her to see Simon's profile in the darkness.

A slight October evening breeze chilled the air, and Hermione drew the cloak tighter.

"It's beautiful."

--8--

If he'd been a Lothario, that would have been Simon's cue to murmur a sweet nothing along the lines of how her beauty dimmed that of the city's, but he wasn't and he didn't. Instead he noticed the tightening of the cloak and remembered Hermione being chilled earlier. Stepping closer, Simon flipped his own cloak around her. The fact that it required his arm to be around her shoulders, in his mind at least, was a bonus.

"It has its moments," he said while looking down on her head. The slight wind played with her curls, bringing a few tendrils to brush against the side of his face. It reminded him of the brief touch of her fingers earlier in the day.

"You're in the crook of my arm shall we take flight?" he asked with a raised brow and a slight smirk, wondering how she'd react.

--8--

He had asked her that once before, and at the time, Hermione had let her fear keep her from answering. The fear of falling, and she had to admit to herself now the fear of actually meeting Simon. In their letters, she could be an alluring, self-confident woman who could make Simon laugh and even *desire* her, but in person... In person, she was merely plain old Hermione Granger, and when he had asked his sweet, wanton, romantic dreamer if she would fly with him, she had been terrified that she would disappoint him or that he would in some way disappoint her and the relationship, as strange as it was, would be over.

Now, the only fear that remained was the one that had plagued her since first year falling. It came down to one simple thing did she trust Simon to keep her safe?

Hermione turned to press her face against him, her arms creeping around his form to hold on tight, hands grasping a fistful of jumper each. "If you drop me I will find a way to hurt you a lot." She had tried to sound as if she were joking, but there was a waver of unease in her voice that betrayed her.

She lifted her head to look up at him, eyes straining to make out his features in the dark. "I'm a bit nervous. That's a lie; I'm terrified. Just... kiss me first?"

--8--

After the confession in her letters, Simon had expected Hermione to balk and head down the stairs, tossing him a bit of sass over a shoulder. To find himself being hugged threw him slightly off balance, and the slight tremble in her voice finished the job. His hands rose to either side of her face and smoothed the hair back. There was an unaccustomed *soft* feeling in his chest that was threatening to expand to his throat.

"Bloody, foolish Gryffindor pride," he murmured roughly. "We *do not* need to do this, Hermione. I spoke in jest with a spirited chase down the stairs in mind as a consequence."

A brief kiss was given, and then he gave her a real smile, feeling quite safe in the dark.

"One day when you're sure you'll be able to step up on my boots, wrap your arms around me and then we'll fly."

--8--

He was giving her an out, and Hermione was tempted to take it.

So very tempted.

However, his concern only seemed to firm her resolve to do this, to fly without the aid of a broom.

In Simon's arms.

She released her hold on his jumper and pulled her arms free. Hermione looked out at the city for a moment before loosely wrapping both arms around Simon's neck and carefully placing her feet atop his. It was a pose that reminded her of dancing with her father when she was a child.

"I'm sure."

--8--

Simon had not lied to Hermione when he'd told her he was a creature of the dark. Its cloak was soft, sweet and more than willing to allow a multitude of freedoms the day never gave. Slipping his wand out of a sleeve, Simon held it loosely in his right hand while the left slid around Hermione's waist.

"My dreamer has finally arrived," Simon said in a voice tinged with a touch of wonder, before his mouth dipped to claim hers.

Ventus sinus ut meus mos, his mind supplied, while the wand swirled over their heads in a gentle motion. They rose, slowly turning, until he judged the moment to be about right. Breaking the kiss, he glanced to the side and down. They were a fair distance above the building, London spread out beneath their feet.

"What say you to this, wanton dreamer? Continue or return?"

--8--

In the back of her mind, she had registered the changes around them, had recognized what it had to have meant; but as long as Simon's lips were against hers and her eyes were firmly closed, Hermione could pretend they were still firmly planted on the rooftop.

Then he spoke, asked her a question, and she whimpered ever so softly, hoping that Simon hadn't heard the fear she was trying to control.

First one eye and then the other cautiously opened, and Hermione risked a glance downward. With a gasp, she wrapped her arms even tighter around him and found that looking at Simon, or up at the night sky above them, was easier to adjust to.

"I uh I'm not too heavy for you, am I? We're not in any danger of crashing to the ground in a heap of broken bones or anything?"

Simon had her, he wouldn't let her fall. **She** wasn't about to let him let her fall. Hermione drew herself even closer to his body and risked another look down.

It really was exciting, once she was able to get past the first waves of mind-numbing terror. "I can't believe this is even possible."

--8--

While Simon certainly wasn't about to object to the *closeness* they were currently enjoying, there was a fundamental part of his soul that remained the teacher. If he was any judge, she was closer to hysteria than was safe for either one of them.

"Hermione," he said almost sharply. "Cease the prattle and listen to me carefully."

When he was sure he had her attention, Simon raised one eyebrow and spoke clearly and in his sternest teacher's voice.

"Do you have to *believe* it's possible when you conjure a spout of water out the end of your wand, or do you just do it? Do you have to ~~believe~~ it's possible when you cast an Incendio or use your blasted bluebell flames on an innocent professor's robes, while he's trying his damndest, I might add, to save another student's neck?"

--8--

There it was again, that tone that had always demanded her attention in the classroom. It was enough to distract her, somewhat, from wondering when they would fall to the ground and die.

"I didn't know that's what you were doing at the time, did I? Wait, you knew that was me? But you never punished me for ... This is definitely not the time to get into all of that." It never even occurred to her to worry that she was no longer clutching him quite so tightly.

"Are you telling me that you can fly, something that is so rare that a large portion of the Wizarding world doesn't even know it's possible, simply because you can? It's just something you *do*? Then how come everyone can't? How come I can't?"

--8--

"Good gods, woman," he growled, while both brows drew together. He wasn't upset, merely falling into his old teaching mode. She was going to understand if they had to stay up there all night.

"It's a wonder you passed *any* of your classes. *Listen*, and for Merlin's sake, use that bloody brain of yours and **think** about what I'm saying. All of those are what, Hermione? There are two I didn't mention."

--8--

"All of those are things I can do," she muttered under her breath, more than a little annoyed at being lectured like an illiterate first year.

She pulled a face as she worked with the problem, considering and discarding possible answers as she worried her lower lip with her teeth.

The bluebell flame was a portable fire charm, obviously. *Aguamenti* was another charm, this time producing water...

"Flame and water." Hermione blinked. "Fire and water, earth and air, the four elements?" It could not be as simple as that.

"This is possible because of some sort of spell that can produce air or wind, or something of that nature that you can control enough to lift you off the ground? I've never heard of such a thing." There was the excitement that only came from learning something new in her voice. Hermione squirmed around just enough so that she could get a better few of their feet, as if she were hoping to see some visible sign of the spell at work.

--8--

She was getting the idea, but not the full potential. Even Voldemort hadn't realized the extent to which it could be used.

Shaking his head slightly, Simon expounded, "It doesn't *produce* air or wind, Hermione. It *controls* it. With the right spells, in the right combination, we could build castles of air on a cloud.

"Take one of your feet and test the area between mine," he instructed her while keeping a firm grasp on her waist.

--8--

She'd actually begun to shift her weight to do as he asked, when her self preservation instincts made themselves known once more.

"I ... I'm not sure that I can." Her words had come out much softer than she'd intended, and the night breeze did its best to whip them away, unheard.

Get a hold of yourself, woman. You broke into Gringotts, faced down Death Eaters, survived being tortured by a psychotic bitch, and told Molly Weasley there was no way in hell you would ever marry one of her sons. This should be cake in comparison.

"Cake."

Hermione kept her eyes on her feet and her hands locked around Simon's neck, just in case, as she gently probed the space between his feet with the toe of one shoe.

"Amazing." She lifted her head and smiled at him. "How difficult is it to control? Do you think you might be able to teach me?"

--8--

Simon had been puzzling over Hermione's "cake" comment when she finally did as he'd asked. The resulting questions tempted him to let them drop a few meters, but as he really didn't want to be strangled to death, the impulse was resisted.

Performing a *Disillusionment Charm*, since they were continuing to rise and would soon be in full view of Muggles, Simon didn't answer her immediately. The trouble he'd gone through to ensure Voldemort didn't realize his latest "advantage" was no longer a secret held by himself alone went through Simon's mind. The danger it would place Hermione, and himself, in if any of the former Death Eaters learned of her knowledge...

"No," he said briefly. "And before the whys and *whynots* begin, I will merely state that it wouldn't be prudent for either of us to have you flitting about without a broom."

As he studied the face still looking up at him, his tongue added, "Not right now at any rate. Who, other than the great and mystical Trelawney of course, knows what tomorrow will bring."

*And why the **fuck** did I just say that?*

No was sufficient.

--8--

Hermione did not like to think of herself as a pouter, but when Simon said "no," she was almost positive that she had begun to pout. She suspected it was not a particularly attractive sight.

She'd been about to tell him, quite vehemently, that Hermione Granger did *not* flit anywhere broom or no and that she found his remark insulting at best, when he qualified his answer.

That brought a softer, sweeter version of her earlier smile back to her lips. She returned her foot to the top of his and pressed herself against his body; this time because she merely wanted to, rather than because she feared for her life. Her head rested against his shoulder. She felt rather bold as she brushed her lips softly against his jaw before turning her attention to the lights of the city.

For the moment, she was content.

Learning to fly could wait.

Simon would teach her of that she was confident.

--8--

Simon frowned slightly while looking down at the woman snuggled against him. Wonder of wonders there appeared to be no more questions. Only a suggestion of a kiss on his jaw. He felt almost peaceful. While it was an agreeable sensation, and one he didn't recall having in recent memory, it made Simon uneasy.

His eyes searched the night sky, looking for the thunderclouds he was sure were waiting to descend on their unsuspecting heads. When he didn't find any reason for concern, the unease grew heavier in his midsection. For once, the dark wasn't comforting. It contained shrouded dangers he couldn't see. There was hell to be paid in some form or other.

Part Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Thank you, Lariopel! I fear I will never learn all that you have to teach, but I'm so glad you're willing to ferret out the mistakes.

October 26, 2000

My dear Simon,

You did it again.

You managed to distract me. Yes, you answered my questions about your appearance, but I had others. I had an entire list of things to ask you about your nightmares; I'd even brought my notes on the matter, and you took me up to your rooftop and took my breath away.

Then, when we reached solid ground once more and my mind finally had a chance to focus on something other than the sound of your heart beating under my ear, or the way you smelled or that pulse point under your jaw that fascinated me to the point where I wanted to and I'm getting off topic, once more.

The point I was trying to make is that when we returned to your home and I was just about to reach for my bag and my notes, you kissed me, and I'm beginning to suspect you're doing it on purpose.

I do hope you weren't offended by my insistence that it was late and I needed to leave when you suggested that we finish the last of that bottle of wine. I would have liked to have stayed, very much so, too much so. I have the feeling that you can be very persuasive if you set your mind to it, and I'd already had more to drink than I was used to, plus the excitement of the flight ... to stay would have been to ask for more than I would have been prepared to handle in the light of day, I think.

Which I probably should not have admitted to you, of all people.

I would like, assuming you would be willing to put up with my company for another evening, a chance to discuss my notes and to return the favor of the meal you made. As I have no current desire to poison you, I would be providing take-out for our dinner and am willing to consider suggestions. I could even be persuaded to procure a bottle of wine or two.

My place, Saturday evening?

Yours,

Hermione

--8--

Simon spent nearly an hour trying to find an angle in the hand held mirror that would allow him to study this mysterious pulse point Hermione had mentioned in her last

letter. He hadn't heard of any vampire attacks in recent years, but...

There was all that time she and the other two spent camping out in the wilds.

Giving it up as a bad job, Simon returned the mirror to the trunk where it had resided the last decade. Shrinking the luggage, he returned it to the pile in the cloak closet and shut the door firmly behind him.

"Yorick, what in the world do you think she was thinking of doing? I don't know of any potions that call for the blood of a sarcastic bat, but I *have* been out of touch for a few years," he mused while heading back to the desk. Picking up the letter, he sat down to read it again.

"Nightmares. Who in their right mind wants to constantly think and talk about the damned things. Isn't it enough I have to endure them?"

After Hermione had left, the remainder of the bottle of Ogden's had provided some comfort, but hadn't stopped the guilt laden dreams from rendering the rest of night decidedly broken. They were the worst they'd ever been, and Simon had been desperate enough to discover a double dose of Dreamless Sleep, laced with a trace of the Draught of Living Death, was enough to give him several nights of much needed sleep.

October 26, 2000

Dear Hermione,

I must admit I find the way you're trying to persuade me to teach you that certain something a little puzzling. You spurn my advances, blame me for your own forgetfulness, infer that you have considered poisoning me at some point and then then try to wiggle out of a dinner invitation by threatening to make me drink swill.

Change one of the bottles to Ogden's, obtain adecent order of sesame chicken from one of those Muggle oriental places, and I might appear at your door. All that depends on one thing, of course.

Where in the bloody blue blazes do you live?

As ever,

Simon

Post Script You didn't run into any vampires while you were gallivanting around the countryside did you?

--8--

October 27, 2000

My dear Simon,

Silly me, I had assumed you'd be able to find me from the letters we've exchanged. I suppose, now that I think about it, that it is slightly different for a person to find someone than an owl. Or falcon.

Unlike you, I don't keep Portkeys to the flat around, just in case they might come in handy. I'm afraid you're left with three choices, my friend. One, you meet me at Marks and Sons tomorrow, and we both hope that nothing "urgent" suddenly pops up while I'm in the store. Two, I come to your place, and you allow me to bring you home on a Side-Along to a location you've never been to, and I can't imagine that's a something you would be particularly comfortable with. Or three, you use the enclosed sheet of paper with my address and Muggle directions from the store to my flat to find me on your own.

You may be in luck; I believe there is a mostly full bottle of Ogden's in my kitchen cupboard, which means I won't have to break my long standing rule of not purchasing things to drink that could pull double duty as paint stripper. I think Harry left it here a year or so ago and never mentioned wanting it back.

Since you asked, I don't believe we encountered any vampires during our travels, but I didn't think to poll everyone we encountered after dark so I could be wrong. Do you need one? I believe I met one during one of Professor Slughorn's parties my sixth year; he may be able to put you in contact with the gentleman.

Yours,

Hermione

Post Script I did not spurn your advances; I merely required that they be postponed to a later date. If the time should ever come when I decide to fall into your bed, I want the decision to be made without the aid of alcohol.

--8--

"Yorick, I suspect I'm being mocked," Simon advised while sending the falcon a raised brow. He slumped down into his stuffed chair and raised one ankle to rest on a bony knee while he contemplated the puzzle that was a woman. The ceiling was the recipient of an intense gaze while his fingers flexed against each other in a steeple.

"She offers **Potter's** leftover Ogden's which is too dear to turn down no matter *who* paid for it and then states she won't fall into my bed or hers I would assume while under the influence. Unless it means only *she* wouldn't imbibe which might place me at a great disadvantage or not. Logic can't be applied it's all helter skelter at best."

Muttering to himself as he stood, Simon strode over to Yorick's perch and addressed the bird directly.

"I wonder if some enterprising soul has managed to figure them out and had the good sense to write it all down? But *then* I'd have to ask the maddening bookseller that I'm attempting to bed if there *was* such a book. She'd either die laughing or never speak to me again, I'd wager."

October 27,2000

Hermione,

I'll use the directions you sent if you'll kindly tell me the hour?

As ever,

Simon

Post script Do you prefer crumpets or toasted bread for your breakfast?

--8--

October 27, 2000

Simon,

Seven.

Crumpets with jam. Planning to invite me over for breakfast some morning?

Hermione

Post Script Strictly out of idle curiosity, which do you prefer?

--8--

October 27, 2000

Hermione,

Seven it will be.

In a manner of speaking, I am.

Neither actually. I prefer something a bit more delectable for my first meal of the day, which I'm sure I'll have no difficulty locating as long as you're there.

Until tomorrow,

Simon

--8--

You are in over your head.

She remembered thinking that when she'd received Simon's latest letter the night before, again when she bustled through the flat straightening up earlier that day, and once as she spent an hour soaking in a bubble filled tub to relax that afternoon.

Here it was, nearly seven, and she was thinking it again. "Over my head and in danger of drowning if I'm not careful." She cast a critical eye over her flat, trying to see it through Simon's eyes.

The furniture was sturdy and comfortable, mostly in shades of beige and tan to offset the brighter blues, greens and purples of the throws, pillows and artwork that were scattered about. Her small kitchen table was covered in her research, which meant they would be eating dinner on the sofa in the living room; Hermione hoped that he wouldn't find it too inconvenient. Although she couldn't see it from where she was standing, she knew the bedroom had been given a thorough once over, and the sheets on her bed were fresh and crisp, just in case. She'd even scrubbed the tub after her earlier bath.

"I think I might be growing tired of being so careful."

--8--

He'd started out far too early, of course. Casting a critical eye over the exterior of the building Hermione lived in, Simon tried to pick which flat on the second floor might belong to her. It occurred to him that he could cast a *Disillusionment Charm* and float up to peer in each one, but discarded it as soon as he thought of it.

I have my doubts about being able to forget the sights I would probably pay dearly not to see, he reasoned wisely before starting to walk briskly away. There was almost half an hour before he was due on her doorstep, and while he could now *Apparate* there at will, he wouldn't be totally comfortable doing so until a more discreet location was found.

A narrow alley behind Violet's Violets seemed to be an ideal location. There was a small alcove built into the side of the building that was hidden from view. Fixing it into his mind, Simon started back in the direction of Hermione's building when he stopped and glared back at the flower shoppe. A niggling little voice was telling him it was rude to arrive empty handed when one had been invited for dinner, and as she was supplying the food and beverage, unless he wanted to try and locate a sweet shoppe at this late hour, flowers were his only option.

The clerk was entirely too cheerful and kept beaming a great smile which reminded Simon of Lockhart. The endless questions about what the gentleman preferred and what the occasion was were met with terse answers. When asked if he wanted real or silk flowers, Simon couldn't hold his tongue any longer.

"If I wanted something made of *silk*, I'd have visited a clothing shoppe, not a bloody florist. You're wasting my time as well as my patience, you idiot! Do you have a small bouquet of flowers suitable for the middle of a dining table or not?" he asked while scowling. "If so, present it and allow me to leave."

A suitable arrangement was quickly found; money changed hands and Simon was out the door before the small amount of change he was owed was counted out. He was now *officially* late and not at all happy.

--8--

"He's not coming."

Crookshanks turned his head to give her one of his "looks" the one that never failed to make her feel as if he thought she was over-reacting before returning to the serious matter of grooming his hind end.

"Fat lot of help you are," Hermione muttered.

If he was coming, he was late, and Simon had never struck her as the kind of man who would be anything *out* punctual. He'd even started his classes right at the stroke of the hour, like clockwork.

"It's only five minutes. He might have had difficulty finding the place, or got caught in traffic, or been ambushed by a pack of rogue Death Eaters intent on revenge. Or he might simply have changed his mind, and Yorick may be on his way here at this moment with a 'Dear Hermione' letter."

She felt the tiniest bit guilty for hoping, given the last two choices, that Death Eaters might be involved.

"Bugger this, I'm opening the wine."

--8--

Taking the stairs to Hermione's flat two at time, Simon arrived before the golden2H only slightly out of breath. After adjusting the lopsided floral arrangement, he was preparing to knock when a small creak from a door slightly down and across the hall drew his attention. The bright blue eye peeking out of the crack made an eyebrow and his hackles rise.

"Is there something you require?" Simon asked in one of his deadliest tones. A small noise of distress was the only answer he received before the door was firmly closed.

Feeling as though he'd fought several battles just to get this far, Simon raised his fist and knocked briskly on the door.

--8--

The knock half-expected though it was startled her, and Hermione very nearly choked on her wine. She set the glass down on the coffee table in front of the sofa and crossed the room to peek through the spy hole in the door.

One could never be too careful, even in Muggle London.

Don't mention that he's late; it will seem like you've been watching the clock. Don't criticize. Harry says guys hate that. Let him get settled before you start in with the questions. And above all else, do not jump the poor man before he's had a chance to eat dinner; he'll need his strength.

Pep talk concluded, Hermione opened the door. "Hi."

Her gaze fell to the flowers in his hand, and she blinked. *Simon brought me flowers. Flowers. From Simon. The non-romantic. Oh, good gravy, so over my head.* **Dinner first!**

The door was held open wide for him as she gestured that he should come in. "I really hope you're hungry."

--8--

The shocked expression on Hermione's face when she spied the flowers didn't help. Simon's eyes looked the arrangement over as he stepped inside and turned as Hermione closed the door.

Bugger. Did the bastard sell me a funeral arrangement? If he did, I'll be sure and send one to his soon.

The events of the evening, coupled with his earlier inability to determine what was the best course of action to take to get his bookseller into any bed, made him thrust the flowers into Hermione's hands as he crowded her personal space. His, being free, moved to retrieve the pins denying her hair its full glory. Tossing them onto the small table by the door, Simon almost glared down at Hermione.

"Hungry **yes** for food **no!**" he stated emphatically. Using the door as a brace, Simon lifted Hermione enough that he didn't have to bend in order to feast on her mouth.

--8--

Somehow Hermione had ended up with a handful of flowers and Simon glaring at her. Before she'd had a chance to ask what she'd done ~~this~~ time she didn't think it was the hairpins, as he seemed to enjoy destroying all the effort she put in to taming the mess almost as much as she enjoyed him doing it he had her off balance and pressed against her front door.

By then, of course, asking questions had dropped down to the bottom of her to-do list, far under "Kissing Simon senseless" and "Being kissed senseless by Simon" while the two were not mutually exclusive, Hermione felt that they were both important enough to be listed separately.

The arm that ended in a bouquet of flowers was wrapped around his neck, carnations pressing against his back in a way that would surely leave bits of greenery stuck to his jumper. That left her other hand free to cup the back of his head, fingers sliding through surprisingly soft hair in encouragement.

Hermione wasn't sure how, exactly, they'd gone from opening the door to this, but she wasn't going to complain. Dinner could wait a bit longer, after all.

--8--

In Simon's opinion the day was taking a drastic upswing. It had gone from tolerable, down to irritating, bottomed out at terrible and was now quickly streaking toward extremely satisfying.

He took the hand on the back of his head, which was sending shock waves along nerves he never knew he had, as permission to seek out new and unexplored territory. The blouse tucked into her waistband was loosened, and his hand was delighted to discover the skin under it was just as soft as her leg had been. The change in texture between it and the lacy bra she wore tantalized his thumb into stroking the bottom side of what appeared to be a very full breast. This, in turn, encouraged Simon's vocal cords to send Hermione a message of exactly how much he wanted her.

He'd experienced the sensation of blood pounding hard enough to hear it in his own ears before, but the slight vibration running through the door made Simon realize the light *noise* he'd been hearing wasn't coming from him.

Bugger that! Maybe she won't notice, he decided while trying to ensure she wouldn't.

--8--

There had been the vaguest of thoughts that she should protest when his hand slid under her blouse. *We barely know each other*, had quickly been canceled out by, *Over the last year I've probably learned more about him than any other man I've ever even considered sleeping with.*

Technically, this was only their second not a date, surely? Hermione didn't think that what she and Simon had at the moment could be defined as "dating" by any definition of the term. Even if it was, and they were, wasn't it the proper thing to wait until the third date before allowing him to take such liberties with her person?

Bollocks to that.

Simon's thumb came very close to shutting down Hermione's thought processes entirely, at least for a moment. It was the noise he made, however, that really drove her out of her mind.

Somehow she managed to wrap one of her legs around the back of his lower thigh, her sensible flat threatening to fall off if she arched her foot any more. The hand not still wrapped tightly around the increasingly damaged stems of the flowers dropped from Simon's hair to seek entrance under his jumper. His hand felt so good against her skin; she needed to know if the reverse would be true.

It was.

She didn't whimper Hermione Granger did not whimper but it was close enough that someone could be forgiven for mistaking the sounds she made with something similar to a whimper. Her leg tightened around his, and she wondered if he were ever going to move his bloody hand and *touch* her, or if she were going to have to move it for him.

The door behind her head seemed to vibrate, and the sensation wasn't terribly pleasant. She briefly wondered which of them was causing it, and if it would be enough to bother her neighbors, and perhaps it would be a good idea to suggest moving someplace else. Someplace a bit more comfortable, like the sofa or the armchair or the bed or the kitchen table Hermione wasn't feeling particularly picky at the moment.

"Simon?"

--8--

When she broke the kiss enough to say his name, Simon was sure she'd heard the blasted knocking on the door. However, the look she was sending him didn't appear to say she had.

"Hermione?"

What to dooooo!! was sending his mind scurrying in different directions to keep her unaware there was a very rude intruder asking for entry. Hermione's leg wrapped around his seemed to be part of the answer. Sliding both hands under her arse, Simon pulled them away from the interfering door. Turning and walking a few steps, he found a sturdy chair and brought his fragrant burden to rest upon his lap.

Catching sight of *her* pulse point when her hair fell back, Simon suddenly knew what Hermione meant in her letter. *Had* to touch it, taste it and see if his lips and tongue could feel the heartbeat as well as his eyes could see the flutter. One hand went up to tangle itself in the glorious mop on her head, to bring the tantalizing little bit of flesh closer, while the other slipped back under her blouse and found its own reward.

The power of that little flutter astounded him while the weight of her breast delivered delight. She was so warm, *so alive* and in his arms. Simon found an earlobe that was decidedly tasty, and since he was in the immediate area, he whispered, "Bed, couch or floor?" in what he hoped was a sexy tone and not the whimpering plea his libido was telling him to use.

--8--

Bed, couch or floor?

Any of those were good. All of them was better.

She squirmed, searching for and finding a more comfortable position on his lap. "Yes," Hermione breathed, answering his question to the best of her ability.

She leaned back, coincidentally pressing certain parts of herself against certain parts of Simon in a way that greatly encouraged her hopes for winning an intimate trifecta that evening.

The soft knocking that had teased her ears before turned into something more insistent. Hermione turned her head toward the door, reluctant to distract Simon from what his mouth had been doing to her earlobe, and groaned as the voice of her older neighbor slid around the door as if it were some sort of noxious fume.

"Hermione? Hermione, dear, are you alright? Can you hear me?"

"That's Mrs Carmichael," Hermione whispered. She leaned forward to press her forehead against Simon's. "She knows I'm home. Let me up, if I don't let her in she'll start to think I'm unconscious or dead, and we'll end up with the police in our laps. God, this must be what it feels like to get caught necking on your parents' couch."

--8--

As he'd never entertained the *idea* of kissing anyone under his parents' roof, let alone on their furniture, Simon was at a loss for a reference. He merely sighed deeply and reluctantly removed his hand from under her blouse. It joined its mate on the either side of her face where they pulled her mouth down to his. Kissing her soundly, he then said, "Banish her quickly. If you have difficulties, I will *gladly* lend my assistance."

--8--

Simon's assistance would most likely end in some uncomfortable questions coming from the Muggle police and a pack of Aurors; therefore, Hermione thought it would be best to handle the situation without it.

She reluctantly slid off his lap and attempted to smooth down her clothing as she called out her neighbor. "I'm coming, Mrs Carmichael; no need to beat down the door."

Giving up the tucking of her blouse into her skirt as a lost cause, Hermione sent a perturbed look over her shoulder at Simon and pulled the tails the rest of the way free. Her hair was probably a fright, but there wasn't time to deal with it.

There was a smile pasted on her face when she finally opened the door. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Hermione, dear, I was just wondering if I could borrow a cup of flour? I was in the middle of baking and realized I was short and Oh, I'm not interrupting, am I?" Judging from the way the older woman had been craning her neck from the moment the door opened in an effort to look over Hermione's shoulder and into the living room, she obviously knew she was.

"No, not at all. I was just on my way to put these into a vase when I heard you knock." She ignored the confused look that Mrs Carmichael gave the sad-looking bouquet and turned toward the kitchen.

"Simon, this is Mrs Carmichael. She watches over Crookshanks for me when I have to go out of town. Mrs Carmichael, this is Simon. I was just about to serve dinner, so if you want to get that flour..."

"Dinner? You didn't try to cook, did you, dear?"

Before Mrs Carmichael could open her mouth to say anything further, be it an offer of assistance with the meal or to tell Simon one of her *amusing* anecdotes from the time she had tried to teach Hermione how to bake a cake, Hermione cut her off.

"I'll get your flour." She gave Simon a wide-eyed look and disappeared into the kitchen.

--8--

When Hermione looked back at him over her shoulder, the picture she presented was enough to make him rise and take one step in pursuit of his prize. To Simon, she looked thoroughly kissed and decidedly beautiful. The memory of how soft her skin was, along with the fullness of the breast he'd been briefly allowed to caress, made him impatient to see her unclothed. Glancing at the electric lights ablaze in the room, he wondered if she had any candles or lamps, as he'd much rather see her skin for the first time bathed in their softer, warmer light.

All his hopes and tentative plans for the next hour or two were dashed when the owner of the bright blue eye he'd seen earlier basically forced herself into Hermione's

home. Glancing down, Simon secreted his lower body behind the chair he'd been sitting in as it was blatantly obvious what the bloody Mrs Carmichael had interrupted.

Nodding once as the ancient cow was introduced, Simon's eyes narrowed at the implied slight on Hermione's cooking skills. They narrowed further when Hermione abandoned the room and left him with her pushy neighbor who proceeded to walk toward him while chattering away.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt your dinner, but Hermione hardly *ever* has any visitors. She's always at work, or when I occasionally visit, she's got her nose stuck in one of those books she's always reading. Of course there was that black haired young man that's visited a few times, and I'd hoped they were going to be making a match of it, but unfortunately he got married. I've tried to introduce her to my niece's youngest, Hershival, but the timing just never seems to work out. I just know they'd be perfect for each other. He's one of those bookish sorts too, that likes to spend all their time reading, don't you know."

Mrs Carmichael seemed to finally run out of air and then Simon watched almost horrified as the woman filled her lungs for the next onslaught.

"Of course there was that nice young man that lived down on the first floor in the back, but I heard after he moved out that he was gay. I don't think Hermione had her cap set in his direction, but you never know. Are you a friend of her parents' passing through? You look old enough to be her uncle. Would that be on her mother's side or her father's? It's a shame they don't get over to see her more, or her them, but Hermione is so sweet and kind I'm sure she'll take you sightseeing if she has time."

The glare Simon sent in her direction was guaranteed to silence a Seventh Year Slytherin and cause him or her to fall down unconscious, but it didn't seem to faze Mrs Carmichael.

"Madam! I am *not* acquainted with Miss Granger's parents, *nor* am I an uncle in any way, shape or form," Simon hissed.

He was fingering the end of his wand when Hermione finally returned.

--8--

"Flour!"

Mrs Carmichael may not have been aware of just how close she came to being verbally eviscerated, but Hermione was. She was familiar with the tone, and while the face had changed somewhat, she could still recognize the basic architecture of the very glare that used to make Neville shake in his boots.

Hermione began to herd her well-meaning neighbor out the door, physically placing herself between Simon and the older woman until the door was shut with one last, "Don't worry about returning the cup tonight, I'll swing by to pick it up tomorrow. No, it's no trouble at all. Good night, Mrs Carmichael."

She turned and leaned back against the door with a sigh, then jerked upright when she remembered how ending up in a similar position had delayed dinner in the first place.

"Sorry about that. She likes to keep an eye on me, on everyone in the building really, but she really does have my best interest at heart. I think. I mean, I'm pretty sure she does. Most of the time, anyway."

And I'm babbling.

Five minutes ago, she had been well on her way to what was promising to be a blissful and thoroughly enjoyable evening, and now... Now she was thinking...again.

She still wanted Simon; that hadn't changed, not at all. But now that she'd caught her breath and managed to cool her blood somewhat, she wanted to talk to him, spend time with him, **then** snog the stuffing out of him and possibly drag him off to her bed.

"I took the liberty of removing the warming charm on the sesame chicken while I was in the kitchen. My table is covered in the notes I wanted to talk to you about tonight, but I could clear it off if you'd rather eat there instead of on the sofa."

Nerves played havoc with her tummy and caused her to shift her weight from one foot to the other, both hands fussing with the wrinkled hem of her blouse. Would Simon be willing to wait, to eat with her like this was a normal date for want of a better word, or would he try to rush her into bed?

Assuming, of course, that Mrs Carmichael hadn't chased him off entirely.

Part Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: As always, Lariope, thank you so very, very much.

Hermione had *seemed* to be as interested as he was in taking their physical relationship a bit farther along, but then there had been the fidgeting and the nervous fingering of clothing after the neighboring menace had left, sending nonverbal messages as loud as any Simon had ever seen. It was as if she was afraid he would pounce on her like a cat did a mouse. If there was one thing he didn't want to appear to be, it was a fool. Wizards running after indifferent witches half their ages definitely qualified in his estimation.

Simon had never been a good sport about losing at *anything*, and as it was very unlikely he'd start being one at this stage in his life, it was a wonder that Hermione hadn't thrown him out with the nosy Mrs Carmichael. The elderly neighbor had successfully cooled his ardor with her pointed references to the obvious age difference between himself and Hermione; therefore, it was with an ill grace he agreed to eat dinner while sitting on Hermione's sofa.

He'd cast several glances in her direction while they dined, wondering exactly what Hermione stood to gain from their continued collaboration. She had other options, other wizards to spend her evenings with that weren't tarnished, weren't *old* and weren't basically hiding from the rest of the wizarding world. Weighing the pros and cons of what he considered they might be with each bite of chicken he ate, Simon finally put his container down on the small table in front of the couch and swallowed half a tumbler of

Potter's discarded Ogden's at one go. The thought she might have been ashamed to be caught with *him*, doing what they'd been doing, made the burn of the alcohol as it ran down his throat welcome indeed.

"Tell me, Hermione. Are you of the same opinion as your cherished Mrs Carmichael?"

--8--

While it would have been easier to let the wine calm her nerves, Hermione had been serious when she wrote that she didn't want alcohol to influence her decision **if** when she decided to sleep with Simon.

In her mind, unless something truly unexpected were to crop up that evening, she would wait for the right moment and then broach the subject. They were obviously attracted to each other; she felt that they had a strong friendship and that their friendship could only be improved by taking the next step toward physical intimacy.

The fact that Simon could make her feel like her brain had turned to mush with just a few kisses might have had something to do with her decision.

Of course, telling herself that it was only logical conclusion during a quiet pep talk in the kitchen and putting it into action were two completely separate things.

She contemplated the glass of wine she'd been nursing since Simon had arrived and wondered if it was obvious that she had been growing more and more tense as the meal went on, nearly missing his question.

"Hmm? The same opinion about what?" Her mind sought out what bits of conversation she'd overheard before ushering her older neighbor out the door. Hermione set the remains of her dinner on the table to buy a few moments and tried to sort out what opinion he might be asking about. She leaned down to slip her shoes off, tucking her feet up on the sofa beneath her in an effort to relax.

"Oh, uh, well, I suppose so." She looked up at him. "Although I never really thought you'd be the type who would like spending the day visiting all those tourist traps, paying astronomical prices for food you could get much cheaper a block or two up the street, but if that's what you want, we could go sightseeing.

"Unless, you're talking about that whole old enough to be my uncle thing? Which is silly my uncle Mort is sixty if he's a day, and I certainly wouldn't want to spend the evening with him. If you think dinner conversation with a pair of dentists is boring, they've got nothing on an appliance salesman. On the other hand, he did get me a rather nice deal on my washer and dryer."

--8--

"*Oh, uh, well, I suppose so,*" almost made the bottom half of the tumbler of Ogden's rush to join the top, but Simon paused before the tumbler hit his lips and decided he didn't want to try and *Apparate* while completely intoxicated. If he'd been home and alone...

Due to Simon's almost total self-absorption, most of Mrs Carmichael's prattle had been ignored, and the rest discarded as of no consequence. Therefore, when Hermione mentioned paying astronomical prices for food and going sightseeing, he was completely at a loss as to what she was blathering on about. When she finally mentioned the part that had held his interest, she flummoxed him again by mentioning her washer and dryer.

One last good swallow of the Ogden's was taken before he sat it down next to the rest of his dinner.

"While I'm pleased to know you don't consider me old enough to be your uncle *why* would I want to go sightseeing? I *live* here!" Simon said while standing and walking toward her kitchen to peer around the door frame.

"Where are they? I must admit I'm surprised, what with that S.P.A.W.N. movement you attempted to start at Hogwarts."

--8--

"I didn't know why you would want to go sightseeing, that's why I asked." Hermione stood and followed him.

Temperamental as a hedgehog and just as prickly; am I sure I want to spend more time with him?

"Where are who?" She edged past him, bumping into his form as she squeezed through the doorway. "It was S.P.E.W. the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, thank you. Are you looking for elves?"

She rolled her eyes and pointed toward the back of her small kitchen at a pair of appliances stacked one atop the other. "Those are my washer and dryer, Simon."

Her head tilted to the side as she contemplated the man next to her. Ever since Mrs Carmichael's interruption, Simon had been acting oddly *Surely he wasn't taking her jabbering to heart?*

Hermione reached out to pluck a bit of molted orange cat fur off of Simon's jumper and let her hand linger for a moment longer than necessary before moving away to approach her kitchen table and the notes and books piled on its surface. "Did I ever tell you how very relieved I was to find out that the man I'd been writing to all those months wasn't really the grandfather of one of my classmates?" she asked over her shoulder.

"When you told me how old you really were let's just say it came as a great relief to know that the attraction I was beginning to feel wasn't as inappropriate as I'd feared, and that, perhaps, there was a chance that you might have been feeling it, too." Hermione felt her cheeks warm and turned away, thinking how much easier it had been to say those sorts of things on paper.

She gestured toward the table. "I've worked up some primary figures and equations with the notes you had sent me, and the answers are confusing at best. As far as I can tell, there's no reason that most of the treatments you've tried shouldn't have worked."

--8--

The sharp disappointment at learning Hermione hadn't been able to find any answers with her Arithmancy equations completely obliterated the smug feeling he'd experienced when she confessed relief at finding out he wasn't ancient. In an attempt to cover, Simon approached the cold looking metallic objects she'd pointed out and gingerly lifted the lid on the bottom one.

"It's of no consequence," Simon said briefly as he lowed the lid and turned to face her and the daunting pile of papers on the table. It was almost humbling to see the extent of how hard she'd worked to try and help him. No one else, other than Dumbledore, who merely wanted his spy fully functional, had ever been bothered to go above and beyond what was expected of them. She had, and it was difficult for Simon to express how much that meant to him. To "confess" as she'd done a bit earlier was to reveal weaknesses and leave yourself open to attack.

"I expected no miracles, Hermione," Simon said gently as he walked back toward her. One hand lifted to caress the side of her face and touch again the softness of her hair. "You recall how difficult it was for me to accept your friendship, I trust? It wasn't nearly as difficult to acknowledge the fact I was very attracted to you. You've become a very beautiful, as well as extremely intelligent, witch. A quite lethal combination, actually. One that deserves a great deal from life."

Much more than you'll ever find with me cluttering up your time.

He blinked once, lowered his head and gave her a brief kiss.

"It's late. I should go before Mrs Carmichael becomes too concerned and pays you a return visit," Simon said with a small smirk.

--8--

Bugger Mrs Carmichael!

For a moment, she was afraid she might have actually said that out loud.

Simon thought she was beautiful and intelligent, and he wanted to leave. "No!"

Hermione cleared her throat and tried again, hoping to sound a bit less desperate. "No, it does matter. You've had these nightmares for years, decades really, and you've suffered all that time. There *has* to be a reason for it, don't you see?"

She'd begun in the hopes of keeping him in the flat a bit longer, but now that she'd started, Hermione was deadly serious. Concern impassioned her voice as she continued, staring earnestly up at him.

"What I was trying to say before was that if your notes were correct, and I have absolutely no reason to doubt that they were, your treatments should have worked, at least on a temporary basis. But they were hindered somehow, either not working as well as they were supposed to, or not at all.

"If your nightmares were just products of unconscious emotions and disturbing feelings, you should have been able to deal with them, but you can't. That's the missing variable!" Hermione rounded the table quickly, excitement at her breakthrough speeding up her words, making her resemble, for just a moment, the young girl she used to be. She pulled a long parchment covered in barely legible numbers and symbols that seemed to move about the page on their own and held it out to Simon across the table.

"That's what this formula was trying to tell me. Those can't be just dreams, Simon, not your own. You've been influenced somehow. A curse or a hex or ... I don't know, it could have even been a potion. But how? And how would the effects have remained for so long?"

Hermione returned to his side. "You've been looking for the wrong cure."

--8--

There was a reason one he wasn't about to tell her. Guilt over his actions that had started the whole mess and ended up with his beloved Lily who also *happened* to be the mother of one of Hermione's best friends' dead, held his tongue tight. Hermione seemed to have some regard for him, and Simon would rather not have one more person in the world hating the very air he breathed. Especially one who knew so much about the new persona he'd donned.

Simon retained vague impressions of the memories he'd given over to Potter in the event he really did die, and he was counting on the boy wonder's *integrity* not to let the majority of them become public knowledge. The fact that the greasy bat of the dungeons had been in love with his mother should have sealed them forever, really.

Listening carefully as Hermione continued with a passion he hadn't seen in anyone for a very long time, Simon slowly began to shake his head in the negative.

"I understand what you're saying, Hermione, but you're wrong or have made a mistake in your equations. Something of that nature would involve using dark magic, and while I'm not invincible to be sure, I would have noticed."

--8--

He had a valid point, but Hermione **knew** deep down that she was on the right track.

"I may have made a mistake that's certainly possible but can you honestly tell me there was never a time when you let your guard down? You were under a lot of pressure while you were spying, had a lot on your mind. You had to sleep sometime, after all."

She looked down at the parchment in her hand with an uncertain expression on her face, one short nail tracing the progression of an equation as it danced across the page. "Perhaps perhaps someone you trusted?" came out almost too softly to be heard.

Hermione lifted her head and carefully placed the parchment on the kitchen table. "I need more data to find the answer. If I'm wrong... What can it hurt to have looked and ruled the possibility out? And if I'm not, then we might be one step closer to finding a way to help you. Don't you want that, Simon?"

--8--

The only one he'd really trusted throughout the whole ordeal had been Dumbledore, and Merlin knew how many times that old bastard had tricked him into doing something he didn't want to, but the use of dark magic?

Albus wouldn't stoop that low, crossed his mind and was quickly followed by, Wouldn't he? Look what he was willing hell, planned to happen to Potter!

Simon shook his head vigorously this time and strode to look out one of Hermione's windows. In all the research he'd done, all the answers he'd looked for, there was one thing he *hadn't* considered. If, as Hermione suspected, this was the work of a potion or curse and it was lifted or cured Lily might not visit him at *all* any longer.

Do I want the nightmares to stop completely? It's all I have left of her.

The lie came easily to his tongue when he wasn't forced to peer into Hermione's face.

"Of course I do. Do you think I'm insane?"

Am I?

--8--

"No, I... That's not what I meant at all, Simon."

She sighed and pushed both hands through her hair. "Look, come sit with me. I'll refill your Ogden's, and we can make ourselves comfortable while we talk, all right?"

Hermione didn't wait to see if he'd object. She went back into the living room and picked up his glass, taking it to the side table where she'd left Harry's forgotten bottle earlier that evening. Once the glass was full again, she settled on to sofa and held it out toward him as an offering.

"Please?"

--8--

Simon turned finally to look at her, and while a muscle flexed in his jaw line, he fought the impulse telling him to flee. Flee the presence of this resourceful, intelligent witch. His breathing had increased, and the blood flowing through his veins had quickened in preparation for flight. Hermione now almost frightened him in a way that the Dark Lord never had. She stood ready, willing and possibly able to rip the last of Lily away from him.

Forever.

It looked cozy and inviting with her hand holding out the Ogdens', and his eyes narrowed as the image of the spider and the fly flew across his mind once more. A brow rose when Simon realized he was playing the part of the fly.

If I fly into her web will I emerge intact or a dry husk without my Lily to sustain me?

Telling himself he was being stupid, Simon willed his legs to move in her direction. Sitting down, he took the glass and placed it on the low table. Now was not the time to be addle-headed with drink.

"What is there to talk about really?" he asked. "I've told you I don't recall anything that would indicate a potion or a curse was used."

--8--

He seemed reluctant, and she realized she was pushing more than she probably should, but then he joined her on the couch, and Hermione smiled.

She tucked her bare feet up next to her, in the process scooting closer to Simon on the cushions.

"Let's think about this logically. If you were cursed in such a way as to give you these nightmares for an extended period, possibly to wear you down and make you more likely to make a mistake or or to be more docile, I don't know the purpose of the curse but if you were cursed, then surely the one who cast it or administered the potion would have gone out of their way to not alert you to its presence? If you knew about it, you'd find the antidote or the counter-curse immediately, and they wouldn't want that."

Hermione leaned closer, thinking out loud now and hoping he would be able to follow along. "It's insidious, really. You're not plagued by them constantly; they come and go. Which makes it less obvious. Why do they come and go? What causes them, what triggers them?" The questions were rhetorical, she didn't wait for an answer before moving on.

"That's what we need to figure out first. If we can find what sets them off, we may be able to track them back to the source, and if we can do that, we can figure out why and, more importantly, how."

She looked up, face flushed. "I want to watch you sleep; I want to see how the nightmares affect you. Are they different each time, or always the same? What happens in them?"

--8--

Simon refrained from pulling back as Hermione, much as he had done earlier, invaded his personal space. The questions she asked had the heart in his chest pounding so hard, it was a wonder she didn't hear. Logic had been thrown out the window along with any shred of intelligent thought due to the strongly held conviction he was going to lose the very thing that had kept him alive for over twenty years. The fear now flooding him was almost too much to bear without some sort of flight, yet he sat as if frozen in indecision.

"I want to watch you sleep... see how... nightmares affect you. Are they different... always the same? What happens in them?"

Simon blinked once, twice as Hermione asked to *watch* him sleep. She not only wanted to rip Lily away from him, she wanted the gory details of how he was tortured by the woman he loved as well.

"**No!**" burst out of his mouth as he quickly stood and walked around the small table. He suddenly missed the billowing robes he used to wear, not really realizing they had been part of *his* armor, and turned as he let the anger replace the fear he'd been feeling earlier.

"You want me to allow you to watch me *sleep*?" he asked with an incredulous tone and expression. "Do you realize what you're asking? **No one** has ever been allowed in a room while I'm sleeping, not even Yorick! In order to relax enough for sleep, I have to cast numerous wards to guarantee no one can gain entry. Dumbledore didn't ask this of me when he was trying to help, why..."

Pacing back and forth in front of the small table, he shook his head and glared at her.

"No, no, a thousand times, **no!**"

--8--

Hermione flinched at the onslaught. She had been expecting resistance, but this was far more than simply being uncomfortable.

His agitation and his words gave her much to think about, more than she could process right at that moment, but there was something that she latched on to.

"Dumbledore tried to help you?" Hermione rose from the sofa and closed the distance between them. "But he wasn't successful. What did he do, what did he try?"

--8--

"He was partly successful," Simon informed her as he glared down into her earnest face.

"When they'd become too much to bear, he was able to give me some relief, but as he stood behind me, I haven't a clue, and he wouldn't tell. I always assumed it was another way to keep me in his debt."

--8--

"That's a plausible assumption." *And, knowing the manipulative codger, probably completely accurate.*

Dumbledore had been able to ease the nightmares somehow, which meant there had to be a solution, even if it was only a partial one. Hermione refused to believe that the answer had died with the old goat.

There had to be a way to find it, but if Simon couldn't remember how, then...

Or maybe he has, and just doesn't know it? An idea was forming, but Hermione was positive it was one that Simon would never agree to.

Then I won't tell him. Not until I know for certain.

"All right. Just think about it for me, and if anything comes to you, anything at all, tell me?"

Hermione very much wanted to slide her arms around him and offer some form of comfort, but she suspected he wouldn't accept it. "Watching you sleep is out of the question. For now. Can you tell me what happens in the nightmares, or is that forbidden as well?"

She tensed, preparing to throw herself in front of the door if it looked like he was going to make a break for it. This entire conversation was bothering him enough to confirm

her suspicions that there was something more than just dreams affecting him and Hermione might not have pushed quite so hard if Simon hadn't asked her for help. Simon *No, Severus. Severus Snape.* had been desperate enough that he had asked her, and come hell or high water, Hermione was going to help him find the answer.

Whether he was willing to cooperate or not.

--8--

Simon fancied he knew Hermione fairly well by now. Well enough to know she wouldn't be satisfied with a pat, sanitized answer.

"People **die!**" Simon said harshly while turning away from her bright, young face. "Terribly and quite nastily, over and over again. Even though I *know* every damned time what's going to happen..." A visible shiver ran over his frame as he sank down to sit on the floor. He felt drained even of anger as his head tipped back. The ceiling was examined as if he could find the face that haunted his sleep.

"I can never change a bloody thing," Simon said softly. "Not one bloody little thing."

Part Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death, at which point it becomes AU.

AN: For those of you that have waited so patiently, and in some cases I'm sure impatiently, I offer my apologies. Issues with my mother's health, the recent holidays and the glad, glad return of Darned Child's hubby from overseas has delayed it somewhat. We hope you enjoy.

Larlope, I send you a million kisses with all my thanks.

*People **die!***

Terribly and quite nastily, over and over again. Even though I know every damned time what's going to happen...

I can never change a bloody thing. Not one bloody little thing.

Even knowing that it would be unwelcome, Hermione dropped to her knees beside Simon and offered what comfort she could. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled his head to her chest like a mother seeking to calm her child.

"I know." Hermione rubbed her cheek against the top of Simon's head. "I know."

--8--

Simon allowed the unaccustomed embrace for a time, never admitting it was a balm to his tattered soul, and then gently pulled away while keeping his eyes fixed on the floor. Taking a deep breath, his gaze finally sought hers.

"If this was the sort of coddling you despised, you're not as intelligent as your press makes out," Simon told her with an elevated brow while rising to his feet and then holding out a hand to help her. "Although, I must admit being held tight to the bosom of an attractive witch *probably* only works on the male of the species."

--8--

"The coddling I hated," Hermione began as she took his hand, "came from well-intentioned strangers and various people in authority who thought they knew what was best for me, not from people who..." Her voice trailed off as Simon helped haul her to her feet, pulled her close, and wrapped his arms around her once more.

"Not from people who care," she finished, speaking into the front of his jumper, preferring not to see the look in his eyes when she admitted that *sheared* about Simon.

"You're probably right; the allure of an attractive bosom is lost on me. I would gladly endure a pair of strong arms and a firm but not too muscular yet definitely male chest over a heaving bosom any day."

--8--

One of Simon's hands moved and raised her chin enough to see her eyes, and a small smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

"You do care, don't you?" he asked with a slightly puzzled look on his face.

His thumb rose and lightly caressed her bottom lip.

"You are so different from me, and yet you still care, and aren't afraid to admit that you do. I should leave you unsullied by my hand, but I don't have the strength to walk away from the temptation that is Hermione Granger," he said while leaning down and replacing his thumb with his mouth. Simon's hand slid into her hair, holding her close, while his lips and tongue gently explored the contours and depths of hers.

--8--

She wasn't sure what he meant by "unsullied," not the definition of the word, but why he felt that his hand his touch could defile her in some way.

He was correct in saying that they were different. As different as night and day on the surface and yet upon closer inspection, she and Simon were more alike than Hermione would have thought possible. Rather than chase her away, their differences had drawn her closer.

Simon had accepted her admission, her declaration of affection, and while he hadn't returned the sentiment in so many words, he had not rebuffed her. Hermione did not fancy herself in love with him, and she did not harbor any delusion that Simon might love her; but the gentle way he held her sometimes, the soft kisses that slipped into unexpected moments, and the way he allowed her to probe into his privacy without reaching for his wand or flaying her with his tongue... To Hermione, those things spoke of his feelings toward her. In his own way, Simon cared for her.

That revelation, coupled with her earlier desire to comfort him, eased whatever nerves she might still have had.

The kiss continued for a long moment, and when they finally parted, Hermione slowly opened her eyes and met his. "I don't want you to walk away."

--8--

Simon's brain fought for clarity as the maelstrom of feelings vying for dominance in his chest threatened to smother him. Guilt, remorse and fear were waging a fierce battle against the newcomers Hermione had introduced into his life. Care and concern were no match for such embedded veterans, and they slowly lost precious ground. So many words hovered on the edge of Simon's tongue, it was almost impossible to breathe. He'd already basically collapsed on her floor, and as he didn't want to do it again, Simon forced himself to take long slow breaths.

Hermione didn't want him to walk away, and yet she should be running away from him as fast as she was able. Simon didn't tell her this as he thought it would only strengthen her resolve to *help* him. He was also quite afraid that she might actually take the advice and show him the door.

"For tonight it might be best?"

Simon had intended it to be a statement but he realized as he spoke it was as close as he could come to a plea.

--8--

"If that's what you want," she replied softly. "But I would rather you stayed."

Hermione held out her hand, hoping he'd take it. "Tonight, the choice is yours. Do we say goodnight now, or will you stay? I promise no more difficult questions for the night."

She wiggled her fingers slightly. "Please, stay, at least for a little while longer for me."

--8--

A beautiful, young witch wanted him Severus Snape to remain with her in her home. Possibly for the night. Some small part of him was telling him he was insane to even think of leaving. The greatest majority was still urging him to leave and leave **now**.

The fingers on the hand beckoning to him were slender, and the hand itself was *so small* in comparison to his own. Taking it shouldn't have given him a moment's pause, and yet it did. The tight band of anxiety still wound around his lungs relaxed a trifle when Hermione promised there would be an end to the inquisition. Feeling as though he was struggling to make the crest of a mountain, Simon finally put his hand in hers and then almost withdrew it when he realized his was ice cold.

"I for a while," he said while dropping his eyes to the floor.

"Yorick, the stupid chicken, will want his mouse sooner or later."

--8--

She suspected that Yorick would be able to take care of himself for the night, if there was a need, but didn't dare voice the thought. Simon was well, she wasn't sure how to describe how Simon was acting at the moment, but if it were anyone else, she might have used the terms "fragile" or "ready to bolt."

He had taken her hand, though, and that was enough for now.

"I wouldn't want Yorick to go hungry."

Hermione gently tugged on his hand, leading him back toward the sofa they had abandoned earlier. "Come sit with me." She urged him to settle on the cushions, then curled up against him. Normally she might have waited to see if he would make the first move, but this time Hermione took the liberty of burrowing under his arm to press against his side. Her cheek found a home on his shoulder as she tried to project relaxing thoughts toward Simon.

"I've been dying to do this all evening."

--8--

Simon literally, but gently, bit his tongue when Hermione led him to the sofa.

Am I now a child to be led around and

When and why did all this become so complicated? he asked himself as she snuggled up next to his side. It wasn't unpleasant, far from it, but it wasn't what he was used to. It took some time for the stiffness in his posture to begin to relax, and as it did, the scent from Hermione's hair had his head turning in order to obtain a stronger sample of whatever it was she used. It didn't clash with the vanilla scent she wore, but it was different enough to send his mind spinning off into the whys and hows of attempting to make a shampoo.

Oh, good gods.

I'm sitting on a sofa with a young, attractive female and I'm trying to invent a fuckingshampoo!

Not knowing if he was angrier with himself for acting like a boring old fart or with Hermione for the way the whole evening had gone, Simon put his free hand under her chin and tilted her face toward him.

"Where were we when that *wonderful* neighbor of yours so rudely interrupted?" he asked with a dangerous lift to one brow. Leaning closer, Simon stared into Hermione's eyes for a moment. "About here, I think," he said before lowering his mouth to hers.

--8--

Hermione had begun to wonder if he were ever going to relax. Sitting patiently and doing nothing had never been her forte. The only reason she hadn't tried to summon a book was because she had realized this would be her chance to familiarize herself with his scent, the weight of his arm around her, little things that she could never quite focus on for more than a moment when they were kissing. For once in her life, Hermione had been content to wait.

She had hoped that her uncharacteristic patience would be rewarded.

When he had lifted her chin, she knew it would be.

She let him initiate the kiss, allowed him to deepen it at his leisure. Simon was just as strong willed *bossy* as she was, and Hermione saw nothing wrong in letting him lead the way.

For a moment, at least.

Eventually, perhaps a few minutes or less later, Hermione opened her eyes and grinned up at him. "Actually," she offered in a soft, husky voice that was quite unlike the one she used to correct the boys or her staff at the store, "I think we were somewhere a bit closer to *here*."

Then, Hermione turned and knelt on the cushion of the sofa just long enough to slide her weight onto Simon's lap, one knee on either side of him and her bottom on his thighs.

She looked down, her lower lip caught between her teeth as she considered their new position. "Still not... Oh!"

Hermione reached between them and quickly slipped the first few buttons free on her blouse, pausing when the first hint of lace appeared, then her fingers freed two more. She tilted her head and looked at Simon, her new resting place making up a majority of the difference in their heights.

"Better?"

--8--

Hermione had surprised him with her actions, and while they were far from unwelcome, there was still the feminine minefield of "romance" to pick his way through. Simon was fairly certain that if he did what he normally did with the ladies he hired, Hermione would bolt off his lap and possibly leave a stinging slap or a hex behind. Not that he did anything perverted, far from it, but their bodies he had basically bought and paid for at least for a short time. This one he hadn't.

He was considering a slow unbuttoning of the rest of Hermione's blouse when he remembered her reactions when he had first arrived, before the annoying Mrs Carmichael had inserted her odious presence into their evening. The witch in his arms and then lap hadn't been adverse to his touch. Sliding his hands under the material of her skirt, Simon followed the outside length of her thighs until they met at her arse. Pulling her closer, close enough to put a slight pressure on the ache she was causing, made a small smile appear on the mouth that was heading for her neck.

"Preferred," he said gruffly, just before he found the soft spot below her ear.

--8--

If this was merely "preferable," then Hermione had no clue what she would have to do to earn his enthusiasm. *I suppose if he's just not that interested, then I could call the whole thing off and se...*

And then his lips and mouth did something that seemed to momentarily short circuit her cognitive skills, leaving her capable of thinking nothing more complex than "Feels good."

She might have actually said it out loud, in retrospect.

Hermione felt warm and incapable of sitting still. She didn't want to remove herself from his lap. Didn't want to rush them by pressing herself harder against his length, although she was acutely aware of how close they were and how very easy it would be to...

No! No rushing! If the worst happened, if tonight was a one-time thing, if one of them decided that whatever they had between them wasn't worth the effort and moved on, Hermione wanted to be able to look back to this night with fondness in her heart.

And heat in your loins, let's be honest, Hermione. Knowing you, it could be years before another man makes you feel like this; you'll need all the memories you can hoard to get through the dry patch. Now stop thinking and start going after what you want.

Her inner monologue had an excellent point.

She felt the muscles in her thighs flex, squeezing Simon's hips between them. Felt her buttocks tighten under his hands as she fought the urge to squirm.

While she was still technically dressed, Simon had access to all sorts of interesting places on her person, and Hermione had none. That wouldn't do, not at all.

She moved both hands low between them and under his jumper to slide against the warm skin she found there. As her hands rose, so did the jumper, until his arms kept the material from going any higher.

"Help, Simon." It wasn't a demand, but it was close.

--8--

Since whores didn't ask for their clients to disrobe unless the client asked for something specific that required it, Simon's chest and his various imperfections had never been seen by another person, male or female. Hermione wasn't asking for the world, merely the removal of his jumper. The jumper that hid the scarring left behind by Voldemort's beloved Nagini. The jumper that covered the molted, discolored skin where the Dark Mark had tainted his skin for so long. While neither were hideous, they were still there.

Simon's upper arms tightened against his sides in reflex. Leaning back, his chin rose a trifle as his eyes sought Hermione's. Would she be repulsed? Worse yet, would she pity him?

"I was unable to prevent scarring," he said quietly. "If you'd prefer, I can easily douse the lights from here."

--8--

It took a moment for his words to penetrate the haze surrounding her brain. It helped that his mouth was no longer against her skin.

Her hands stilled against his chest, the weight of his jumper against the back of her wrists.

"I never assumed you were perfect, Simon." She looked down at her own chest, still mostly hidden by the partially unbuttoned blouse and slowly withdrew her hands from him. "Neither am I."

Very few people had seen her own scar, and most of them had been medical professionals of some sort. Hermione wasn't ashamed of the scar that she had received as a result of Dolohov's curse in the Department of Mysteries, but she was fully aware that it wasn't an attractive sight.

She finished releasing the buttons on her blouse and pulled the left lapel to the side just enough to expose the cup of her bra and the puckered, faded scar tissue that peeked out from beneath the underwire to trail a few inches down her ribs.

"If it would be better for you to have the lights off, I would understand." Hermione lifted her head and met his gaze. Her hands slid back under his jumper. "But don't do it on my account."

--8--

Simon had long ago acknowledged the fact he was selfish, but to have forgotten so completely what had been done in the Dark Lord's name against *children*...

They shall pay.

After pulling the jumper over his head and discarding it on the floor, Simon purposely kept his eyes lowered. If there was any pity in Hermione's eyes at the first glimpse of his scars, he didn't want to see it. The front closing clasp of the garment Hermione wore didn't puzzle him overlong, and soon the sweet weight of her breasts warmed the skin of his palms. One long finger traced the blemish on her flesh as he asked, "Whose hand is forfeit?"

--8--

Hermione shuddered. She wasn't sure if it was the feel of his hands against her breasts or because of the deadly serious way he had asked his question, his tone making her believe that he would personally hunt down the man who had hurt her and make him pay.

It frightened her almost as much as it made her feel oddly cherished.

As her gaze settled on the left side of his neck and she took in the devastation that Nagini had wrought, Hermione knew exactly how Simon felt. Rage filled her for a moment, made her wish that Voldemort were still alive so that she might be the one to cast the *Avada* herself, because he dared to hurt the man before her.

With a deep breath that settled her breast more fully into his hands, Hermione took in the scent of her Simon and released her anger. Her hands trailed across his chest, tangling in the light smattering of dark hair before rising upward to rest on his shoulders. The fingers of her right hand lightly brushed against his scar in much the same way he had touched hers.

"It was Dolohov, my fifth year. They were able to repair most of the internal damage; they say the scar is the worst of it now, but sometimes my chest will hurt if I push myself too hard, for too long."

Hermione continued to look at him, her hands following her gaze across his newly exposed skin. Fingers drifted across the discolored area that must have once been his mark before continuing on to his hands. Her own pressed against the back of his for a moment, then began their return journey to Simon's chest.

"It would be rude to wolf whistle, wouldn't it?"

Simon choked, and Hermione was worried that he was offended until she realized he was very nearly laughing. She grinned, relieved that the mood in the room had taken a turn for the better, and slid off his lap to stand.

She shrugged out of her shirt and bra, letting them fall to the floor unnoticed, and reached for his hand. "You know what we need right now? A bubble bath."

Part Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Once again, many thanks to Lariope for the wonderful job she's done.

To those of you reading, I offer my apologies for the extremely long delay in posting this latest part. There is no real excuse. RL has tossed some doozies in my direction, including the loss of our family's beloved Jake a week ago. To the rest of the world he was merely a huge dog. To us, he was and always will be a very large part of the family. - Devsgma

I know that Devsgma has already explained that real life has been a horrid, horrid witch over the last few months, leaving both of us with little spare time to work on Beyond. I'd like to say that things have changed and that we'll be returning to weekly updates as soon as we can, but I don't think that's going to happen any time soon. Do not worry that we're going to abandon the story or anything like that. We'll continue to write as time and circumstances allow. Thank you for bearing with us and staying with our story. - DC

Dolohov among the dead.

Simon had told Hermione the truth in one of his letters. Dolohov had never been a friend. He'd never been much of anything as far as Simon was concerned. Now, there was only a brief satisfaction that the wizard was indeed dead before Simon found himself trying to choke back the laughter Hermione's wolf whistle comment had instigated.

Then she removed her clothing, held out her hand, and laughter no longer presented a problem.

As much as he would have *loved* to deny it, Simon was a fairly normal, red-blooded male when it came to the charms of the opposite sex. He'd seen naked breasts before, of course, but they never failed to temporarily mesmerize him with their seductive sway.

Mine! was the initial, infantile response of what he *had*, at one time, considered to be a brilliant mind.

Simon's eyes had flared open and were trained on their movements as Hermione led him somewhere. It was only as the flooring changed, causing his boots to make noise, that he held they'd gained over him dissipated and he noticed where they were.

Skidding to a halt, Simon raised a brow and found Hermione's eyes at last.

"Tell me you didn't say what my ears are trying to tell me they heard," he growled lightly.

--8--

"That would depend on what it is that you thought you heard, wouldn't it?" Hermione answered back with another grin.

With a bit of concentration and a flutter of her free hand, slightly more than a dozen candles sputtered alight.

The bathroom had an electric light fixture, the same as the rest of her apartment, but Hermione preferred the softer glow of candles when she was soaking in her tub.

She released his hand and began filling the tub with water. While she was bent over the side, hand out to test the water temperature, Hermione looked over her shoulder at Simon. "You might want to take your boots off."

--8--

She's trying to trick you into looking ridiculous, whispered a dark, very insecure part of his mind. The feminine back, beautifully illuminated in the soft light and currently being appraised by hungry male eyes, was sufficient to send the warning spinning off into the dark where it belonged.

Who would she tell? Simon asked himself as he toed off the aforementioned boots and removed the remainder of his clothing. Normally very neat, he tossed them, without looking, toward what he thought was an unoccupied corner. Stepping up behind her, Simon ran his hands up and then down Hermione's arms before he started kissing and nibbling the lowest part of her spine.

"You do realize," he stated between nibbles, "if I drown you'll have to adopt my chicken."

--8--

She had heard him approach, but still her hands shook as she opened the container of bubble bath and added the required amount. Somehow Hermione managed to keep from dropping the entire thing into the water and was able to finish and set it aside before she was forced to grip the rim of the tub to keep from falling as her knees threatened to collapse.

She moaned in encouragement, back arching slightly.

"We'll just have to make sure you don't drown, then."

As soon as the tub was full enough, Hermione twisted the handle and straightened. Simon was a warm presence at her back, and she didn't have to turn to know that he was nude. Desire to see him, all of him, warred with the last of the nervousness that she had been trying to hide most of the evening. She swallowed hard and fumbled with the button and zip of her skirt. After a moment, both the skirt and her knickers were pushed past the swell of her hips and dropped to the floor, and Hermione was bare.

"You should that is, it would probably work best if you were in the back."

--8--

I am, almost made it past Simon's lips before he realized exactly what she'd meant. The naked woman before him still had her back turned in his direction. That, coupled with the slight tremor in her fingers, told Simon quite clearly that Hermione wasn't the practiced seductress she was apparently trying to project.

Sliding one arm around her waist, Simon used the other hand to pull her hair to the side. His mouth soon found the delicate skin of Hermione's neck, and a dark, deep whisper began a tale.

"I recall a letter," he said while gently turning them sideways. He put one foot into the tub and waited for her to follow suit. "It was sent to me by a siren," he explained as his other leg joined the first and his hand assisted Hermione the rest of the way into the tub. Releasing her long enough to sit down, Simon placed both hands around her waist.

"Would the siren care to join me?"

--8--

More than anything.

Hermione looked down at the masculine hands at her waist. She could feel his legs on either side of her feet, hidden beneath the bubbles. "I think she could be persuaded to join you."

She stepped forward just a bit, not enough that Simon would have to let go, but far enough that she wouldn't be in danger of smushing her bum against his face as she carefully lowered herself into the tub. A small amount of water splashed over the high sides of the claw-footed tub.

Once she was safely seated, Hermione inched back until her hips were snug between Simon's thighs. Surrounded by warm water, vanilla scented bubbles, and Simon, she slowly released her death grip on the rim of the tub and leaned back against his chest with a contented sigh.

"Do you have enough room?"

--8--

Later, much later, Simon would wonder which particular Fate had decided to turn a blind eye to the normal course of his life. It was too good to be true. Things like this *never* happened to him. He'd overheard other wizards talk, of course, and had felt the required envy those without felt, but any daydreams he might have had had always included Lily, not a former student with hair of tangled silk.

"Enough room? Yes," he said quietly, since his mouth was quite close to the ear he'd nibbled on much earlier in the evening. Moving his head to the side of hers had been an attempt to find those rather fascinating mammary glands that had drawn him into this tub of *bubbles*, which now hid them from view.

Rather than attempt to mouth some type of "romantic" drivel, Simon chose to pick up a sponge that lay in a nearby tray. It was within arms' reach atop a small table that contained numerous objects he had decided to investigate another time. One hand slid farther around Hermione's waist and pulled her a tiny bit closer. It stayed there, long fingers stroking the line of a rib and flowing across the slight swell of her stomach.

Eyeing the bubbles with distaste, Simon pulled the sponge down through them and brought up a generous supply of water. As he was about to begin squeezing it over one of Hermione's shoulders, he had an idea.

She did say she likes my voice.

And this is the bubble bath I designed.

"Raise your chin, my cunning Siren," he whispered deeply. "I want to anoint your skin with my potion."

--8--

Even as she closed her eyes and lifted her chin for him, Hermione knew she was in deep, deep trouble. She suspected that Simon could ask almost anything of her, and as long as he was using his voice *just* like that, she would willingly comply.

With her eyes closed, Hermione's other senses came alive, making her even more aware of Simon. His hand was causing havoc across her tummy, fingers dipping just low enough to tantalize her with the possibilities, but never low enough to appease her. She could feel his hardness, trapped between their bodies, pressed against the upper swell of her rear. Then there was the sponge being drawn across her skin, the warm water that temporarily washed away some of the bubbles and bared a small glimpse of flesh here and there.

Another downward stroke of fingers had her squirming, knees bending so that her legs could part slightly, bum shifting against his length. Hermione thought she might have heard him groan, but she wasn't sure.

She wanted to touch him in return. Hermione slid her hands under the water and found his thighs. She had intended to stroke him in much the same way as he was touching her, but another squirm-inducing pass of his fingers against her stomach left her unable to do more than knead his flesh as she whispered his name.

--8--

Simon was fairly certain he'd taken his fair share of childhood baths in his lifetime. He'd never liked them. Mostly because he'd always felt extremely vulnerable while naked and sitting in a room that was far too accessible by his father. Standing at least gave him a fair chance of sprinting out of harm's way if given the opportunity.

There was a great deal of difference in this instance. The sides of Hermione's bathtub were high. Much higher than those in his former home. The water was far warmer than his father had ever allowed. Years later, Simon had realized that was due to the cost of heating water by Muggle means, but to the young child it had only added to the misery of the event.

The slightly steamy water currently filling Hermione's tub was relaxing in a way Simon had never imagined. Knots in muscles he didn't realize he had were slowly giving way and becoming limber. The small ache he *always* had between his shoulder blades was fading, and if not for the very insistent organ Hermione's arse was currently torturing, he might have been quite content to lie back and merely hold her until the water cooled.

The bubbles were another difference, and Simon damned them yet again for blocking his view. Since he didn't want to fumble around under the water, possibly breaking the mood and any chance he had of repeating this particular *exercise* with Hermione, he counted upon her reaction to his voice to ease the way.

"Show me, Hermione," he said in the same tone. "Show me *how* and where you like to be touched."

--8--

Show him? She tensed in a sudden case of irrational concern. What if he found her actions strange or distasteful? Or worse, what if she showed him what she liked and he was just really crappy at it?

Her experience with men was limited at best, but Hermione was a healthy female and was well acquainted with her own body and its reactions to certain stimuli. Was she comfortable enough with Simon to share that information with him so soon and in such an intimate way?

Simon's mouth brushed against her neck, then she felt the slightest sting of his teeth as he kissed the skin there before moving up to do the same to her earlobe.

Hermione caught her lower lip between her own teeth hard, and realized that now was the perfect time, the perfect place, and even at his most rubbish, Simon would probably be more than capable of driving her out of her mind.

Her eyes opened as Hermione took the sponge away from him, carelessly tossing it toward the front of the tub. Now that his hand was free, she lightly guided it to her breast, shaping it around her with her own fingers, blindly tutoring Simon in the way that she liked to be caressed. His fingers stroked over aroused flesh, quickly learning the rhythm she liked, causing her to shift and squirm once again. The bubbles slowly began to float away and pop, granting her ever increasing glimpses of their combined efforts.

It wasn't long before her other hand found his, still against her stomach. She entwined her fingers with his. Hermione turned her head to seek his lips, needing his kiss as their joined hands began to slide lower against her bath-slicked skin.

--8--

The teacher became the student and learned more about the responses of a female body than he had in nearly twenty years of stumbling about on his own. A certain stroke just *there* rewarded him with a quiver while a small nibble at the same time might elicit a sweet groan of want. Simon's eyes were as greedy as his hands, and he marveled at the treasure she'd literally placed within his grasp.

Were all women this responsive, this incredibly giving? Simon had always had a healthy sex drive, even during the very lean years when he'd had to take matters into his own hands, but the need he felt for the woman currently in his arms was almost overpowering.

He wanted her *now*.

Whisper some sweet nothing in her ear before you turn her around seemed to come from out of nowhere and echo through his brain.

She'd probably ask me who the hell I am and where did Simon go before hexing the hell out of me.

She wouldn't

Would!

Deciding the internal dispute could be settled later, Simon broke the latest kiss and nibbled his way along her jaw line to her ear.

"I need you want you, Hermione. Turn around and be with me."

--8--

At first she wanted to mew in protest. She didn't want to move, didn't want to turn around, didn't want to do anything that might end his touch and his kisses. Every stroke of a finger, every brush of his lips had been pushing her higher and higher, and Hermione knew the end was in sight.

"Just a bit more," she wanted to plead. Then thought broke through the overwhelming *want* and told her exactly what Simon was asking.

"Oh, yes," was the actual reply. Hermione reluctantly pulled herself away from him, scooting forward and turning around. Up until now, she hadn't considered the actual logistics of how one went about being intimate in a bathtub.

Some of her earlier eagerness faded as she wondered if it was even possible without one of them pulling or straining something. The last time she had done anything of this nature, there had been a rather large bed with plenty of room.

She realized she was frowning and quickly offered an explanation, not wanting Simon to think she had changed her mind.

"I've never done this before. I'm not sure what to put where?"

--8--

No, no, no, no, no bloody fucking hell, no!

"Never " Simon cleared his throat when his voice cracked and tried again.

"Your timing leaves something to be desired, Hermione. Now is *not* the best moment to tell me you're a virgin," Simon declared a trifle testily while levering himself up to stand in the tub. Glancing down at the proof of his statement, Simon shook his head before he stepped out on the mat and reached for a towel.

Told you it was too good to be true.

Shut the fuck up and leave me alone.

--8--

"Virgin?!"

There would have been more after that startled exclamation, but Hermione was suddenly confronted with the sight of a completely nude and very aroused Simon, and her mouth temporarily went dry.

By the time she was able to speak again, he was already out of the tub, and once again her evening appeared to be going to hell in a hand-basket.

She also stood, hands firmly planted on her hips, rapidly cooling water running down her torso and legs in little rivers. "Are you honestly telling me that if I were a virgin, you wouldn't have sex with me? It's not a disease, Simon; you can't catch virginity like some sort of pox."

Hermione glared at him as she clambered out of the tub, almost as annoyed at how ridiculously exposed and ungraceful she must look as she was with him.

With a huff, she pulled the stopper out of the drain, then turned to face the man who was fast becoming more trouble than he was worth.

"The 'this' that I had never done before, you idiot, was *this* " She gestured from herself to him and back again. "In the bathtub. There's not a lot of room in there, and I wasn't sure what would be the best way to make things fit together the way they should, and I thought, perhaps, you might have a suggestion, and I swear to God that if you so much as reach for your clothes, I will cast a body bind on you."

She was more embarrassed than she could remember ever having been in her entire life, and that included the day Snape had read that horrid article about Viktor and Harry and her out loud to the entire class when she had wanted to curl up under the table and hide.

She was also still aroused, and seeing Simon standing there in nothing more than a towel and a few stubbornly clinging bubbles was doing nothing to help matters.

--8--

There is hope! shouted the dense little voice in the back of his head that pushed for sweet words and gentle persuasion. Simon was listening to it and looking his fill up to the point Hermione called him an idiot. Whipping the towel off, he stepped close enough that the tips of her breasts brushed his chest. Glaring down into her face, he wanted nothing more than to toss her over his shoulder and head for the bedroom.

And then I'd have a sprained back, and she'd not only call me an idiot she'd have proof.

"Normally, when someone levels an insult in my direction," he stated with narrowed eyes, a raised brow and a deadly tone, "I would challenge them to a duel, but since I'm dealing with an inarticulate *Gryffindor*, I'll forgive you for misleading me with your statement."

The towel he'd taken off was quickly slung around her waist and used to tug her along toward what he assumed was the bedroom.

"If there's going to be a body bind cast this evening, my dear, *dear* Hermione, it won't be on me," he said with a wicked glint in his eye, "and it won't be in the bath."

--8--

She returned his glare with one of her own, although the twitch of her lips as she tried to keep from smirking probably ruined the effort somewhat.

"Normally, when a vexing *Slytherin* jumps to conclusions without bothering to ask for clarification, I would be inclined to accept that duel." Hermione glanced down as they inched out of the bathroom and toward the doorway that led to her bedroom. Simon was walking backward, most likely to keep from presenting his unprotected backside to an irritated witch. *Smart man*. She reached out to run her hand down his chest and lower. "However, since I seem to be without a wand at the moment, I suspect I'll have to seek satisfaction in some other way."

He was nothing like the muscled and perfect men Hermione had seen in magazines and movies, far from society's ideal, and yet Simon made Hermione weak in the knees. He could arouse her without a single touch, using only his voice or words on parchment, true, but having him here in the flesh was very nearly a fantasy come true for her.

Speaking of fantasy...

"Next time, I can enlarge the tub first. Maybe a cushioning charm?" she offered. "I'm sure we'll have figured out what goes where by then."

--8--

A soft inward hiss accompanied Hermione's touch. In Simon's previous life, no one had cared to touch him as she was doing now. It felt quite wonderful, actually. Hermione had basically promised him a "next time," which eased some of the pressure upon him to *perform*, but he'd had enough of towels, bubbles and talk of the future. He'd escaped the bubbles, dropped the towel and now pulled her naked form tight against him. As Simon's hands slid down and over her buttocks, he stifled a small groan and acknowledged he may have just made a major error. The soft skin of her belly against his erection was making the floor look entirely too comfortable.

He delivered a nip and then a kiss here and there on her neck, face and lips as his hands flowed over the expanse of her back. They were anxious to discover every dip, every slight variance of her form.

"There is only the *now*, Hermione," he growled lowly near her ear and thought better of what he'd been about to say.

If there is a future...

"The future will take care of itself. Take me to your bed, you wicked wench, unless you want to be bedded on the floor."

Part Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: You all know by now who we're going to thank, right? Everyone say it with us! Thank you so very much, Lariope!

Pleasant exhaustion seemed to weigh her limbs down, and Hermione didn't have to see the alarm clock next to her bed to know that it was late. Sleep was calling to her, trying to lure her into closing her eyes. She shifted slightly, rubbing her cheek against the masculine chest she was currently using as a pillow.

"Thank goodness tomorrow is Sunday. I have a feeling I'll be sleeping in."

Her soft smile faded somewhat as she thought about the coming morning. When she had envisioned inviting Simon into her bed, there had always been a morning after. Perhaps they would get up early and share breakfast, or they might sleep in and share each other. Either way, Simon would have spent the night with her, asleep in her bed.

Now she knew that was not an option.

Their earlier conversation argument, really echoed through her head.

"Do you realize what you're asking? No one has ever been allowed in a room while I'm sleeping, not even Yorick!"

"No, no, a thousand times, no!"

Hermione lifted her chin, straining slightly to be able to brush her lips against the underside of his jaw. "It's getting late. Do you need to go soon?"

While she would have liked him to stay, wanted him to stay, Hermione knew she couldn't ask him to. Not after everything that they'd said earlier.

--8--

While Simon had thoroughly enjoyed the delights he'd found in Hermione's arms and bed, he wasn't at ease with the *afterglow* affect. Thankfully, he wasn't totally ignorant of the expected protocol, and after a few awkward moments had slid an arm around Hermione when she'd moved closer. Prostitutes weren't inclined to cuddle with their clients, nor were they interested in pillow talk. At least that's what Simon assumed it was when Hermione spoke of tomorrow being Sunday. Muttered conversations between the older male seventh-years, along with a few articles read on the sly, had made him aware of the things, in general, women seemed to expect.

Much to his surprise, Simon didn't mind the *cuddling* as much as he thought he would. As his hand skimmed over the hips and slender waist that had a moment ago been his, a smile bloomed on the dour mouth he normally presented to the world. The movement of Hermione's head wiped most of it away, but when she kissed his jaw, it twitched the corners again.

Her next words made his eyes narrow slightly, and Simon wondered if he'd already overstayed his welcome. He couldn't see Hermione's face clearly in the dim light of the Muggle clock to read her expression. As far as he and his ears could tell, Hermione had enjoyed their mutual calisthenics but if she hadn't that could explain why she seemed ready to eject him from her bed. He removed his hand from the silky skin, preparing to slide up and away from her.

"Yorick will probably appreciate an early dinner," he stated stiffly.

--8--

Don't pout. Hermione Granger, do not pout. You knew this was coming, you knew he wouldn't stay the night and you decided to go ahead and sleep with him anyway; you have no right to whinge about it now.

It didn't help.

Simon pulled his hand away, and Hermione wanted to snag it, to put it right back where it belonged.

"I wouldn't want him to starve." She bit at her lower lip, firmly resolved to let him slip away. Then her hand reached out, purely of its own volition, and touched the back of his.

"I know you don't want to stay the night, and I'm not asking you to although, if you wanted, I wouldn't... What I mean is... Damn it, Yorick is a big bird, surely he can manage on his own for a bit longer. Can't he?"

--8--

She wants me to stay?

The hand behind her slowly returned to its previous position while the one she'd touched with her own slid around her waist and pulled Hermione a little closer. The muscles that had prepared to launch him from her bed turned him instead, and one of his legs captured one of hers.

"He can," Simon said quietly before he kissed her lightly on the forehead. He finally understood what she'd been trying to do with her earlier statement, and while he knew he wasn't going to spend the entire night in her bed...

"Would you like me to stay until you fall asleep?"

--8--

I want you to stay. Period. But I can live with this, instead.

She made herself as comfortable as possible considering he had trapped one of her legs between his own. She could have pulled it free, but she didn't want to.

"I would like that, very much."

Perversely, she no longer wanted to go to sleep.

--8--

Hermione might have been sleepy; Simon, however, was anything but. He attempted to lie quietly and wait for sleep to finish capturing his siren before he stole away, but found his fingers slowly tracing the fine bones and intriguing dips. They would still when he told them to, but like disobedient children with minds of their own, they were soon moving again.

She hasn't protested so far...

Giving up, ever curious, and feeling safe within the cover of semi-darkness, Simon started to use his mouth as well as his hands to try and discover any possible secrets Hermione's body might still hold. He also took the opportunity to practice what she had taught him such a short time ago.

--8--

That wasn't going to help her fall asleep.

Well, technically, in the long run, it very well might. Especially if her earlier exhaustion was any indication. However, at the moment, her body seemed to be waking up nicely, and there were no more thoughts of sleep at all.

No rest for the wicked.

Wicked. If I can't be wicked, I can at least fake it.

The temptation to lie there and let Simon do what he wanted was strong, but Hermione had never been known for her passivity. Also, while she no longer worried (as much) that tonight would be a one time occurrence, what harm could there be in hedging the bet somewhat?

Besides, she would have to be insane to pass up the opportunity to have her wicked, wanton way with Simon.

Her hands, legs and mouth began to move as well, her mind referencing back to the hazy memories of her last intimate only and very educational encounter.

Where did... Oh, yes. Right about here.

--8--

Yes! was the thought that ran through Simon's brain when Hermione began to actively participate again. It wasn't that he was greedy well, maybe he was at that but it had been a long dry spell. And she was naked. And willing. And naked. And beautiful. And naked. And very, very there.

Not to mention naked.

And then she did that!

What did one do when a supposedly delicate female turned the tables so effectively on the male of the species, who had *innocently* been plying the seduction tools she'd handed him earlier, when he apparently no longer had the molecular cohesion to do anything more than groan and shiver slightly?

If she does that again, I might die.

"Again," he groaned aloud. "Do it again."

--8--

She did it again.

"Let me..."

Then she nudged him on to his back and did something a little different, but equally well received. Hermione had enjoyed his touch and kisses very much so but this was equally enjoyable. Now it was her turn to learn how responsive Simon could be, what made him shiver and groan and ask for more.

Her lips and teeth slid across skin, hands stroked and lightly scratched, and Hermione knew it was only a matter of time before one of them gave in to his or her need.

--8--

If this was making love, Simon decided he was completely in favor of the practice continuing for the next century. No one had ever touched him and made him feel the way Hermione was making him feel. He *had* known lust before, of course, but never this intent consuming *need* to bury himself deep inside the woman currently torturing him.

Enough is enough.

Grasping her firmly under the arms, Simon pulled Hermione up and on top of him before taking her mouth in a ferocious kiss. Breaking it, he snorted once before saying, "It's a damned good thing You-Know-Who didn't have you on his side. I'd have broken in a moment," in a hoarse whisper.

--8--

Pride warred with arousal, for just a moment, and lost.

Her legs settled to either side, body shifting until everything came together the way it was meant to be.

Hermione lifted herself up enough to see his face in the light from her alarm, just the barest glimpse of planes and shadows. His words still echoed in her ears, the voice that could make her tingle. Simon's voice.

Severus' voice.

The desperate need to move overtook her, and Hermione willingly gave in.

Half-formed words tumbled from her lips, unchecked, as they climbed higher. As she reached the peak, body singing; Hermione called out to him, one single word that gave voice to her bliss, meant to entice him to join her, to show him that for this moment in time he was the epicenter of her world.

"Severus."

Part Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Forever and always, our thanks go to our wonderful beta Lariope.

It had been harder than he'd thought it would be to leave the sleeping Hermione. The warmth of her bed, *and* that of her body, called to him long after he'd returned home, fed his faithful chicken and tried to find some sleep of his own.

For once, nightmares didn't wake him. The memory of a surprisingly agile Gryffindor was to blame for the steady current that fired the synapses in his wide-awake mind. Everything she'd done and said were gone over and over again. He fingered them, moved them aside and like the pieces of a puzzle that didn't quite fit he was drawn back to touch them again.

The sweet sound of Simon's real, true name haunted him more than anything. A small argument with himself, over taking Hermione to task for the slip, ended when he remembered the moment she'd said it. More importantly *how* she'd said it.

*As long as she calls me nothing but Simon outside the bedroom...*almost convinced him to let it slide, but then a nagging little "logical" part of his brain just had to speak up.

There's that old saying about a slip between the cup and the lip.

"That's all well and good," he stated to the ceiling, "but damn it! I just had the most intimate of relations with a *beautiful*, young witch, who apparently wouldn't mind a return engagement, so shut the fuck up!"

Dawn was barely starting to streak the skyline when Simon rose and headed for the shower. He was somewhat startled when the water almost seemed to sting and the towel...

"Yorick!" he bellowed. "What have you done to the cloth in this towel?"

Examining it closely, he knew full well that neither Yorick, or anyone else for that matter, had done anything to it but it still felt harsher than it had the day before. Deciding he must have spilled something from the lab on it, although he knew he hadn't, Simon tossed it toward the basket in the corner. Drawing a fresh one from the cupboard, he tested it on the skin of his thigh.

"Blast! She could have warned me," he muttered while patting his skin dry instead of the rough toweling it usually received. It felt tingly alive in a way it never had before and he believed quite wrongly, of course that it was due to the bubble bath. Stepping up to the mirror, Simon searched his reflection before he began the process of removing the stubble.

I wonder if she'd like me in a mustache? Maybe a Van Dyke? Yes...

"Oh, good gods," he moaned while leaning his forehead on the mirror. "I'm turning into one of those moronic, hormonal brats who thinks of nothing but how to please his lady fair!"

Wasn't last night worth it?

*That's **not** the point.*

Well, wasn't it?

Go away!

You can't tell me you're not going back for more. You want to go over there right now taking crumpets and jam and hoping you'll find her in that bathtub.

She was going to sleep in, remember?

You could always wash the jam what there is left of it off of her later.

So it was that one Simon Sopohorous found himself knocking on Hermione's door, a scant hour later, while clutching a basket that contained freshly baked crumpets, strawberry, grape and peach jam.

--8--

It felt like she'd barely fallen asleep, but that couldn't be right. There was sunlight weak but it was coming through the crack in her curtains.

And someone was knocking on the front door.

Someone with a death wish.

Hermione rolled out of bed, nearly falling as one of her legs caught on sheets that shouldn't have been wrapped around her like they were. Once she regained her footing, she frowned down at the rumpled bedding, then at her body which seemed to be missing her customary pajamas.

Then, as yet another knock seemed to echo through the flat, she smiled a goofy, extremely-pleased-with-herself-but-not-quite-fully-awake smile. A smile that not even Mrs Carmichael at Far Too Early on a Sunday morning could dim.

She snagged her bathrobe and quickly wrapped it around herself; tried to run a hand through her hair, and gave up when it got caught in the tangles; and opened her door. Her greeting for Mrs Carmichael died on her lips.

"Simon!" Surprise had her blurting out the first thing that came to mind. "Oh, God, you smell good enough to eat."

That was when Hermione realized she was starving.

--8--

When she opened the door, Simon felt warmed again. There was something about her rumpled appearance that made him look down and smile before his eyes rose to meet hers. In the past, many had called his eyes cold and dangerous, and while that glare would never be retired, the look he was giving her now was as far from it as was humanly possible. Every finely honed survival instinct in the back of his mind was telling Simon it was dangerous to be this relaxed around anyone. He chose to ignore them.

"And you, my wanton dreamer," he advised in a voice deep and dark, "look good enough to eat here and now."

--8--

Hermione eyed him, seriously considering the temptation in his voice and words.

It was nearly as great as the temptation in his basket. Her stomach rumbled. Loudly.

"I don't suppose you would be willing to hold on to that thought until after we eat?" She gestured for him to come in, then quickly shut the door behind him, not wanting to give her neighbor anything else to gossip about.

Simon came back.

The hint of insecurity that had plagued her last night vanished.

He came back, and he wants me, still.

That thought pleased her, and Hermione decided to show her pleasure by leaning up on her toes and pressing her lips to Simon's in a morning greeting.

--8--

I could get used to this... crossed Simon's mind even as his arm crossed the small of Hermione's back and drew her close. The basket was placed on the table beside the door in order to free the other hand to slink beneath the bathrobe. Not content with a brief kiss, but knowing she was hungry, Simon merely raised a brow.

"As I don't want you fainting from hunger in the middle of anything *important* we'll eat. Now, do you have a decent tea?"

She still feels like silk.

--8--

Her skin tingled where his hand touched, fingers firm and gentle and warm under her robe.

Who could think of tea at a time like this?

A sharp reminder from her stomach told her she could.

For a moment, it was as if Simon had only stepped out to pick up some breakfast for them both, they seemed to come together so easily.

It's not so bad, really. So the man I'm seeing sleeping with having sex with so he can't actually sleep in the same room as me. Considering all the other things that I've heard women complain about, this is workable.

Especially if he's willing to bring me breakfast once in awhile.

She wasn't naive enough to expect such a delightful surprise **every** time she and Simon were together, but his presence on this morning in particular...

She wasn't in love, Hermione knew, because she'd been in love before and it didn't feel like this, but it was more than just like, more than just attraction. Although, in the right circumstances, if she wasn't careful and didn't stop doing such a piss poor job of guarding her heart...

That is enough of that for now.

"Tea. I have tea, yes. In the kitchen. In the cupboard. Do you want to make it while I go freshen up?"

--8--

If "freshen up" is a euphemism for getting dressed then not only no but hell no!

I like her the way she is tousled, rumpled and mostly naked.

She could sit on the counter with her robe as a pillow in case it was cold and I'd gladly make tea.

Simon blinked once, decided to tell her *exactly* what he wanted, and then let his tongue say, "Of course."

I just know she's going to get dressed, damn it.

--8--

Hermione hurried off to the bathroom, not rushing because she was afraid he would disappear if she took too long, but because he was there and she simply wanted to spend as much time with him as possible.

Several minutes were wasted in a half-failed effort to tame her hair with a brush, but most of the tangles and all of the knots were gone by the time she gave it up for a lost cause. A shower and some conditioner would go a long way toward helping things, but she didn't have time for that.

Not right now, anyway. Maybe later.

I wonder if Simon would want to...

Focus, Hermione, focus.

A quick sponge off in the sink and a few minutes with the toothbrush and Hermione was feeling much more refreshed and presentable.

Should I get dressed? If I don't, will he assume that I'm expecting sex? Which I am, or at least I'm hopeful, but I don't want him to feel some sense of obligation.

On the other hand, if I get dressed, he might assume that I'm trying to say I don't want to have sex.

It's cold this morning, and the robe isn't that warm, but we are about to have some tea and that should help heat me up...

She peeked out the bathroom door, and upon seeing an empty living room, quietly scuttled across the floor to turn the thermostat up just a bit.

Then she calmly strolled into her kitchen and smiled at Simon. Her notes were still scattered across the table from the evening before, so Hermione quickly gathered them together and set them out of the way.

"Did you find everything all right?"

--8--

Her eyes aren't green, and her hair isn't red.

Those two qualities had always been at the forefront when Simon judged a woman's level of attractiveness. He was now finding they had shifted positions. A breathy air, a brilliant smile, and wispy flyaway hair made of spun silk seemed to be coming out ahead.

He knew full well why but as Simon had never had the pleasure of seeing Lily after a night of exchanged passions Hermione, as she appeared to him right now, would remain in his memory as the most beautiful witch he'd ever seen.

"I believe I have," he said quite seriously, never taking his eyes off of her.

The tea was ready; the crumpets were arranged on a tidy little plate, and after Hermione cleared the table, Simon placed their breakfast upon it. Pulling out one of the chairs, he waited for her to sit down.

"I've while I was gone that is I've considered what you asked. About watching me sleep," he said after seating her and taking his own. "It's not because I..."

Why is it always so damned difficult.

"It's not because I don't trust you," he blurted out before taking a large, angry bite of his crumpet.

--8--

She took a dainty nibble of her own jam-covered crumpet as she considered what he'd said. Her second bite was much larger and accomplished with an abundance of enthusiasm and obvious enjoyment.

Hermione realized that Simon hadn't actually *said* that he trusted her, just that this particular incident was not caused by a lack of trust. A subtle distinction with a man such as Simon, it wouldn't do to assume but she couldn't help feeling reassured, nevertheless.

She licked some stray jam off her fingers and then took a sip of her tea. "Thank you. I think. So Why? If you don't mind telling me, that is."

--8--

Simon turned his head and studied the young witch while his eyes narrowed slightly.

"You are a *bothersome* little bundle of questions even in the morning, aren't you?"

Picking up his cup, Simon glared into the depths of the dark colored liquid as if searching for the answer.

"I haven't a clue," he said finally.

"I only know that even when I contemplate..."

A shiver chill went through his frame, and Simon put the cup down before he picked up the half-eaten crumpet again. The glare sent in Hermione's direction was only half-serious, but it was a glare.

"Yorick at least has the courtesy to allow me to finish my first cup of tea before annoying me."

--8--

Hermione ate quietly for a moment. Not because Simon found her questions *bothersome*, but because she was considering what he'd said.

As far as she was concerned, being inquisitive was part of what made her Hermione. Simon had known her long enough to be very aware of that, and he had still made the decision to see her...

He'd made his bed, now he would have to lie in it, so to speak.

Heat raced to her cheeks, and Hermione made a very determined effort not to think about last night. Now wasn't exactly the best time.

Her eyes flicked over toward the pile of papers and notes for just a moment, then back to her breakfast, and finally to Simon.

While observing his sleep would have helped, she was sure, Hermione knew that she wouldn't press him. Not while there might be a different avenue that she could pursue.

He's going to hate it just as much, Hermione. If you do this, it could push him away completely.

It could also lead her that much closer to finding the answer and possibly a cure to Simon's suffering.

She watched him drink his tea and felt something tighten in her chest at the thought of Simon enduring those nightmares for the rest of his life.

That's settled, then. I'll owl Harry.

"I can't help but notice that you've finished your first cup of tea." Hermione reached out with her bare foot so that her toes came in contact with Simon's calf under the table. She took a final sip of her own tea and set the cup aside. Her toes slid higher.

Hermione took the last crumpet and ripped a chunk off of it, adding some of the jam that Simon seemed to prefer, and leaned toward him with the offering.

"Since you provided breakfast, I was thinking that it is only polite that lunch should be on me. Which means that we'll have to find some way to keep busy for the next few hours until we're hungry again... Unless you had other plans?"

--8--

At first, when Hermione didn't immediately toss a bit of sass back in his direction, Simon was almost worried that he'd botched it and she'd show him the door. He was almost certain of it when he saw her face flush with what he thought was anger.

He had assumed the touch on his leg came from the monstrous cat she owned, but Simon was heartily glad he hadn't gone with his primary instinct which would have been to kick the bloody thing when the caress continued, and it became obvious, even to him, that it was Hermione.

Lunch. On. Her. Oh, bloody hell, yes.

Having seen enough love-struck students at Hogwarts, Simon wasn't unfamiliar with the "ritual" of feeding the current object of one's affection, but there was still the question of *how* to take the offered tidbit.

Teeth? No teeth?

That leaves lips.

Dry?

Moist?

Trying to dry the inside of his mouth, without taking so much time that Hermione might assume he wasn't going to accept the crumpet, was proving rather difficult.

Ah!

They always just opened their mouths and let the other one stick it inside!

Problem solved.

Leaning forward, Simon nodded slowly, picked up the pot of peach jam and said, "I'll finish my breakfast *on you* as well, if you don't mind," before opening his mouth.

--8--

She didn't mind. Oh no, she didn't mind at all.

Hermione popped the crumpet into Simon's mouth and smiled, letting her fingers brush against his lower lip before she drew them away.

Then she stood and turned to sit on the top of the table, reaching for the belt of her robe. "Just as long as you're willing to help me clean up, after."

Part Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: If it wasn't for Lariope using her finely honed skills, you wouldn't be reading this now. If you know her, send her your thanks.

November 6, 2000

Harry,

I know I only asked you last week, and you haven't had very long to think about it, but I was on pins and needles all weekend, hoping for an owl.

Do you need more time to think, or have you already made a decision? If so, is it the kind I'm going to want to hear, or the kind that's going to force me to try my hand at Ron's wounded hound dog eyes.

I think that's something we'd all prefer to avoid, don't you?

Give Ginny my love.

Hermione

--8--

"I thought these kind of decisions were supposed to get easier as you got older and more mature," Harry muttered to himself as he read Hermione's owl again. "Do I or don't I?"

"I don't know, but if you don't help me with these things, we'll be having scrambled eggs for dinner," Ginny announced as she came in the door, laden down with parcels. Harry jumped up to help, and after all the purchases were stowed away, they sat down at the kitchen table with a pot of tea.

"What has my husband so out of sorts he's talking to himself?" Ginny asked. It still gave her a thrill to say the word husband, especially since it referred to Harry. He gave her a grin before picking up Hermione's letter.

"I still haven't decided and she wants an answer, and now she's threatening me with her version of Ron's hurt puppy eyes," he replied.

"Ah, I see. Well, you didn't give Snape your word or anything like that, so what's the problem?" Ginny asked as she stood and took a package of biscuits out of the cupboard. Sitting back down, she opened it and offered some to Harry. Taking one, he nibbled on it before frowning.

"There's an implied trust in something like that, Ginny. You don't just hand over your most your memories to just anyone you know? If he'd wanted *everyone* to see them, he'd have left them in a Pensieve or a bottle or something and labeled it 'To be violated in the event of my death.' I'm sure it would have been a lot more sarcastic and scary in Snape's Professor Snape's words," Harry advised.

Pursing her lips, Ginny closed the package after taking a couple out for herself.

"That's all nice and tidy for you isn't it, Harry? Well, you weren't there when *Headmaster* Snape was in charge of Hogwarts, were you? You didn't see what..." Ginny paused and shook her head. They'd been over that ground before, and she really didn't want to start again. "I say give Hermione anything she wants out of those memories, and if there's something in there that you think he wouldn't want the Wizarding world to know too bad. He's gone, and it won't hurt him one teeny-tiny little bit."

Rising, Ginny headed for the living room.

"I'm going to watch some telly while you fight your latest battle. Feel free to wave the white flag when you come to your senses and join me," she said over her shoulder.

Harry watched his wife as she left him and his letter alone. He loved her more than life itself, but she simply didn't understand. Snape had been more than awful to all of them, but what Harry had learned or had tried to learn wasn't mere tit-for-tat.

Hermione,

Please, don't give me the wounded hound look. I'm having enough trouble coming to a decision without that.

I won't give Ginny your love right now, if you don't mind. She's all for me handing over all of them, and I just can't do that.

If you'll tell me what you're looking for, I could sort them. Would that be enough?

Love,

Harry

--8--

"How can I tell him what I'm looking for, if I don't even know myself?"

Crooks meowed, as if to inquire whether Hermione were speaking to him. When he received no reply, he stalked off to the kitchen and his food dish, tail high and twitching.

Hermione didn't even notice.

She was too busy scribbling on a pad of scratch paper, crossing out a word here and adding one there, trying to identify the most likely scenarios that might give her what she was seeking from the memories that Severus had given Harry that horrible night in the Shrieking Shack.

"Not that there is any guarantee that there will be anything to find in the first place."

It wasn't as if she could explain what she was looking for.

"Well, you see, Harry, it's a bit complicated, but I've been seeing this man who, it turns out, is actually Severus Snape and he's been having these nightmares for years. I think someone may have cursed him somehow. I also suspect that Albus Dumbledore either had his gnarled hands in it from the start, or the old fart caught wind of it and decided to use the curse to his advantage, but since he can't remember what Albus did to 'make it better,' I'm hoping there might be some clue somewhere in the memories he gave you."

Hermione was pretty sure that wouldn't go over so well.

"Best to stick with what I told him the first time. It's technically not a lie; I really would like to write a book about what really happened during the war. Someday. Just not right now."

November 8, 2000

Harry,

I understand your hesitancy, and I wouldn't ask at all if I didn't think it were truly important.

As I mentioned before, my current research is focused on the relationship between Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape during the latter's years as a spy for the Order. Any interactions between the two, no matter how minute, would be of interest to me.

If at all possible, I would like to witness those memories in particular.

I promise to hold off on the puppy dog eyes. For now.

Love,

Hermione

--8--

When the Ministry had *demande*d Snape's memories be turned over to them, Harry hadn't found it the least bit difficult to refuse. He stored them where he'd placed the Elder wand, and it *wasn't* in Dumbledore's tomb. The idea to place the wand back with the former headmaster had been one of emotion not of reason. While the thought that it would remain with Dumbledore forever was a pleasant one, the reality was quite a different matter. Not even Ginny knew the location, and Harry had intended them to remain undisturbed long after his own death.

November 10, 2000

Hermione,

Give me a week or so to sort out what I can. I'll arrange the use of the Pensieve at Hogwarts if you like.

Love,

Harry

Post script You do realize, I hope, that the Ministry is going to hound you for the next hundred years if they find out you've seen any of them.

--8--

"Yorick! What in the bloody blue blazes have you done with my "

Simon's words and growl ended abruptly when he found the quill the only normal quill he owned where he'd left it on the kitchen table.

"Never mind," he mumbled as he passed Yorick's perch. "Don't touch it again."

Hermione,

Tell me something, my dreamer. Are all women as fickle as those from the house of Gryffindor seem to be? If that isn't the case, and the three postponed dinners are due to overwork brought on by disorganization, I am prepared to overlook the well-done roast I have been forced to dine upon for the last two days.

As always,

Simon

Post script Refrain from feeding Yorick any more of those biscuits, if you please. He appears to be developing a pouch where no respectable chicken should have one.

--8--

November 12, 2000

Harry,

We'll just have to make sure the Ministry doesn't find out, won't we? At least, not until the book is finished, and by that point... Well, you know how stubborn I can be.

Hogwarts would be just fine, thank you.

And thank you for doing this for me. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't think it were truly important.

Love,

Hermione

She carefully sealed the letter to Harry and passed it off to Leontes for delivery before turning her thoughts to Simon's latest letter.

Three? Surely I couldn't have put him off that many times?

A quick mental count told Hermione that Simon was correct. *Damn it!*

Between gearing up for the holiday season at the bookstore and her efforts to convince Harry to grant her access to Severus' memories, what little free time she'd had left at night had been spent trying to relax in a hot tub...

Great. At this rate, I may find out how to help him just in time to push him away because he'll think I've lost interest now that I've seen him naked, or something equally silly, I'm sure.

Exhaustion wore at her, but Hermione reached for her pen.

November 12, 2000

My dear Simon,

Considering the less-than-fresh sandwiches and take-away I've been forced to eat during my late nights at the store, I almost envy you your well-done roast.

Work is... To put it bluntly, work has been a right bugger. Most nights, by the time I get home, I can barely remember my own name. More than once, I've caught myself nearly dozing off in the tub late at night as I tried to relax after another hideously long day behind my desk, and all I could think about is how nice it would be to have you wash my back, or hold me until I fell asleep, or even just to hear your voice.

I miss you, Simon, and I don't think I realized just how much until I received your letter and the dull ache I'd been carrying with me for the last week eased somewhat.

And now I'm being embarrassingly sentimental, aren't I?

I'm afraid I won't have a free moment for another week, at least, but after that, I would very much like to see you again.

Next Saturday is the eighteenth, if you don't already have other plans...

Yours,

Hermione

--8--

Simon wasn't embarrassed by the sentiment Hermione had expressed in her letters, far from it. The old "fight or flight" syndrome had kicked in quite nicely by the time he'd reached the end, and he couldn't figure out why. The adrenaline released made him pace far more than he'd done in the last few months, and poor Yorick's neck was getting more than its fair share of exercise from watching him.

"She *wants* to see me... Apparently misses my presence and from everything I've gathered, that's supposed to be a positive thing, correct?" Simon asked Yorick. "So, tell me, wise Gryffindor chicken, why am I absolutely, positively sensing a trap of some sort?"

Walking toward the window with his hands, one of which was clenched around her letter, locked behind him, Simon vented his frustration with a resounding, "Blast!"

Whipping around and waving the offending letter in the air, Simon strode back toward Yorick.

"She has no guile in her soul! No agenda hidden up her sleeve to spring upon me later! Am I so so tainted that I can no longer tell the difference between a trap and an invitation to a pleasant hell, in all likelihood wonderful evening?" Simon asked coming to a standstill in front of the perch. "Not that I've had an abundance of the latter, but still."

A visit to the roof did nothing to calm the warning bells going off in Simon's gut, nor did spending three hours closeted in the lab. As he chewed on the last of the well-done roast later that evening, Simon came to a decision.

Hermione,

I must send my regrets. An unexpected influx of owl orders has to take priority over frivolity, as I'm sure your practical side would agree. When I can see my way clear, I'll owl.

As always,

Simon

"There. That should take care of that. I'll just never owl."

Coward! seemed to come from the direction of Yorick's perch, and Simon's head jerked around.

He sent the falcon a glare and hissed, "I think that's quite enough out of you for this evening, unless you *want* to live in a coop with the other chickens."

Simon picked up the letter, folded it and placed it in an envelope. As he was putting Hermione's name on it, ***Coward!*** was repeated, louder than before.

"I am **not** a coward!" Simon bellowed as he rose and strode to the falcon's perch. "I am **not!**"

Yorick returned the glare for a moment, huffed, and turned his back toward his master.

"I am **not** a coward, you bloody, foul fowl!" Simon screamed, anger tempting him to grab the bird and toss him out the door. The light glinting off one sharp talon quickly doused that particular impulse, and Simon strode back to his desk.

"You *will* deliver this **tonight!**" he hissed at the bird's back and was completely caught off guard when Yorick took flight and left.

"Yorick! Return this instant!" he yelled, chasing after him with the letter waving in the air. "Now who's the bloody coward, eh? Afraid to deliver one little note. All chickens all over the *world* are *ashamed* of you!"

Turning back around, Simon flopped into his easy chair and glared at the envelope with ***Hermio*** written on it.

"Damned bird. Now how the hell am I supposed to get out of..."

Simon's head came to rest on the back of his chair, and his eyes found their favorite discolored spot on the ceiling to study.

"I am a coward," he mumbled to himself. "A coward who's afraid of nothing it would seem."

Rising and tearing the letter into shreds as he walked toward the desk, Simon shook his head.

Dear Dreamer,

The eighteenth would be agreeable. I shall endeavor not to overcook the roast this time.

As always,

Simon

Part Twenty

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Lariope as Jackie Gleason would say: "You're the greatest!"

Saturday, the 18th of November, found Simon in something of a tizzy. He hadn't seen Hermione since the morning after breakfast at her flat, and he was a trifle nervous.

If she actually makes an appearance.

It was getting rather late for her to cancel, which calmed his nerves somewhat, but there was still too many things to do before she showed up. Putting clean sheets on his bed, making sure there was an adequate number of towels in the bath, and a good scrubbing of the kitchen counter were among the tasks he assigned himself. A small smirk lifted the corner of Simon's mouth as he gave the counter surface a final buffing.

If I'm lucky.

A quick peek in the oven let him know the potatoes were almost roasted to perfection. The chicken, sans sauce, was waiting in a stasis field to keep warm, as were the vegetables and rolls. The small chocolate cake he'd ordered from the Muggle bakery down the street was hidden as a surprise.

"Well, Yorick? Will I pass muster?" he asked as he slowly turned in front of the falcon's roost.

--8--

Hermione tried to convince herself that the tempest gathering force in her stomach was from using the portkey and not caused by nerves.

She knew she was lying.

Once the world had stopped spinning and Hermione was once again able to stand straight without swaying, she took in her surroundings. Simon's home was just as she remembered it, as was Simon. She felt inner heat war with the nerves at the sight of him, torn between the urge to throw herself at him and the urge to immediately launch into an explanation of what she had done and why.

The heavy box cradled in her arms forced her to choose a third option. Hermione carefully settled it onto the small table near the fireplace, then turned to face Simon. Her unease was temporarily overwhelmed by her happiness at being near him after all these weeks.

"I know I'm a few minutes early, but I -" *Couldn't stay away any longer.* "I hope you don't mind."

She wasn't sure what she should do. If this had been the beginning of a normal date, Hermione imagined she would have already wrapped her arms around him and been well on her way toward kissing one of them senseless.

Screw it. Who knows where things will stand between us after tonight; I need this.

Hermione crossed the small room quickly and reached up to pull Simon down to her kiss. "God, I missed you," she whispered, almost desperately.

--8--

Simon had taken one step toward his dinner guest when his focus became the box in Hermione's arms. The question hovering on his lips was dispatched to obscurity when her mouth took his, and any leftover worries that Simon had about Hermione not wanting to see him again quickly evaporated beneath the heat of her kiss. Quite when his arms had found their way around her body, he didn't know, but when she finally broke the kiss, they were very determined to keep her within their grasp. Simon, in his infinite wisdom, didn't object at all.

A small smile tilted the corner of his mouth as he gazed down at Hermione. Something quite similar to mischief pushed him to say, "And I you surprisingly enough." The smile on his mouth grew a little broader, and the warm glow in his eyes wasn't from the thought of dinner yet to come.

--8--

She should have been annoyed at that "surprisingly enough," but she wasn't. In fact, her lips tilted upward in a smile that matched his.

How could I have stayed away as long as I did?

How will I stay away if he refuses to see me after...?

The smile slipped from her lips, and sad regret overwhelmed her features for the briefest of moments before Hermione dropped her head to rest it against his chest. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves, then pulled out of Simon's arms, reaching out to take one of his hands in hers.

"There's something I need to tell you, something I need to show you, and " Her momentary surge of bravery faded. "I think it might be best if we put dinner off until we get back."

Even as she said it, Hermione knew there wouldn't be a romantic dinner for them tonight, no matter what the outcome of the evening.

"Simon, do you trust me?"

--8--

The moment the smile was wiped from Hermione's mouth, Simon's spine tensed in response, and he wondered if he'd carried the teasing a touch too far. One hand had risen to stroke the hair on her lowered head, but Hermione retreated before it had completed its journey.

"Simon, do you trust me?" started a maelstrom of conflict in his chest and mind. Those words, in Simon's experience, never brought good fortune in their wake.

Simon frowned lightly before he turned and walked silently into the kitchen. The pretext of putting their dinner on hold bought him the needed time to sort it all out.

Do I trust her?

Simon's first gut instinct was to simply say yes, but the ghosts of the past wouldn't let him.

She's not the Dark Lord or Dumbledore.

The potatoes joined the rest of their dinner under a renewed stasis field, and he was out of time.

Do I trust her?

As much as I can anyone.

As he stepped back into the living room, Simon wasn't exactly at peace, but he was no longer frowning. Walking over to Hermione, he raised one of her hands to his lips before giving it a light kiss.

"Our dinner will be waiting. Might I inquire where you're planning on taking me?"

--8--

It had taken a lot to keep her from following him to the other room, to keep the flow of persuasive, pleading words on the tip of her tongue from flowing free.

When he returned and reached for her hand to bring it to his lips, Hermione felt as if the ground had shifted under her feet. He might not have said the words, but his actions told her all that she needed to know.

He trusts me. For now, at this moment, Simon trusts me.

Her smile was soft and full of some emotion that Hermione refused to even consider naming.

She gently pulled her hand free and reached into the box she had brought with her, pulling out a bundle of slick, silvery fabric. Hermione held Harry's invisibility cloak out to Simon.

"I thought you might be more comfortable if you had this. We're going to Hogwarts."

--8--

At first Simon's mind refused to interpret the words his ears brought him. He gazed at Hermione and blinked a few times before his mouth opened of its own accord.

"You're bloody insane if you think I'm going anywhere near that pile of rocks!" he spat while stepping back and away from the bundle she held out. Taking a deep breath, Simon pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand and then tried to explain.

"If you're dead set on taking a stroll through memory lane, I'm sure either Potter or one of your other friends would accompany you. I've never been back there, and I don't intend to start now," he said much more quietly.

--8--

A stroll through memory lane... Hermione winced as she thought of the Pensieve that was carefully packed in the box.

"Trust me, if there was any other way to do this, I would have jumped on it. But I need you to come with me, Simon. Not Harry, not Ron. You."

She held out the invisibility cloak once more. "You can stay under this; no one will see you. No one will know you're there but me. I need to speak with someone, and I need you there with me when I do."

Hermione worried her lower lip between her teeth for a moment, then tried one last time. "Please?"

--8--

She needed *him* and it tore at his resolve never to return to Hogwarts. There had to be a god or a meddling little fate somewhere rolling on the ground in laughter at Simon's expense.

"Not Harry, not Ron. You."

The chewing of the lip and the soft, "Please," finished the job of killing any hope of resistance he had left.

Simon took the cloak from her hands while a muscle jumped wildly in his cheek. He glared at the item, instead of her, while running the soft fabric through nimble fingers. Narrowed eyes lifted and took Hermione's measure before he nodded his head once.

"I take it this is Potter's?" he asked with a slight snarl. "First you give me his leftover Ogden's and now this? What next?"

Tucking the hated object beneath his arm, Simon held out his hand.

"If we're going to go, let's go. I've never been one for procrastination."

--8--

Hermione wasn't looking forward to this any more than he seemed to be, but she agreed that there was no point to delaying. She lifted the box and settled its weight against one hip so that she could free the other hand for Simon.

"I'll take us up the road from the gate so that you'll have time to put that on. There's a Quidditch match today, so the castle should be relatively empty by the time we arrive. With any luck, we'll be gone long before it ends."

With a deep breath, she took his hand. "Ready?"

Hermione didn't wait for an answer, just focused her thoughts on their destination and *Apparated*.

--8--

The faint cheering noises from the Quidditch pitch penetrated as last and broke the hold the sight of the castle had placed on Simon. He hated the sight of it almost as much as he loved it. It had been his home, the only real one he'd ever known, for so long and yet the site of so many things he'd rather forget.

Releasing the tight grasp he'd held on Hermione's hand, Simon wasted no more time putting on Potter's cloak. He sniffed once and then commented in a dry tone, "You might tell Potter to use a cleansing spell on this now and then."

--8--

He had held her hand so tightly it hurt; Hermione carefully flexed it after he let go in an effort to return normal circulation, but she didn't complain.

"I'll mention it when I give it back." She pulled out her wand and set the box to levitate behind her, far enough away that any doors they might pass through would have to remain open long enough that Simon could slip through undetected.

She wished she could see him, wanted to see his face to reassure herself that he was all right.

"Minerva's waiting." Hermione led the way through the gate to the castle, then through the deserted corridors and stairs to the Headmistress' office.

Minerva McGonagall looked older than Hermione remembered, and she realized it had been nearly a year since she'd last seen her former Head of House.

She settled her box on the desk and accepted the brief hug the older woman offered, thanking Minerva once more for the use of her office.

"As I said in the letter, no problem at all. Stay as long as you need, and if you're still here when the match is over, you're welcome to stay and join me for a late meal." Then Minerva was gone.

Hermione listened until the sounds of the stairs stilled, until there was no hint of stone grinding against stone. She was pleased to see that all of the portraits were empty save one, just as she'd asked for.

She reached into her box and lifted out the Pensieve.

Once it was in position on the center of the desk, Hermione pulled several stoppered vials out of the box with extreme care. These were placed very precisely next to the Pensieve.

Only then did she lift her head to greet the large portrait behind the Headmistress' desk. "Hello, Professor Dumbledore."

--8--

The sights, sounds and smells were all there. Simon found, much to his chagrin, that he was the one who wanted to stop and savor the stroll down memory lane, and there were a few times he had to hurry to make it through doors that wanted to close in front of him.

Minerva.

One of Potter's champions, true, but a colleague he was only now finding out he'd sorely missed. The extra lines and signs of age on her face made him pause. He had to literally bite his tongue as she passed him on the way out of the office, so great was the desire to speak. Simon watched Minerva as she left and didn't turn back around until Hermione spoke. Only then did he note the empty frames lining the walls, and he eyed the items she'd placed with such care on the desk.

What the bloody hell is going on, and how does it involve Dumbledore?

As he studied his former *master's* portrait, memories of hurried consultations during Simon's own reign as headmaster passed through his mind and caused dark eyes to narrow.

Whatever it is, it bodes nothing good.

He moved closer, not entirely at ease with any of the proceedings, until his mouth was a hair's breath from Hermione's ear.

"What are you up to?" was barely a whisper when it left his mouth.

--8--

Somehow she managed not to shiver when Simon whispered.

Dumbledore replied to her greeting, saving Hermione from trying to find a way to answer Simon without giving his presence away. While Dumbledore's "Hello, my dear" was friendly enough, she thought the look he cast toward the items on the desk was rather calculating.

"Minerva said that you wished to ask me a few questions for a book you're writing?"

Hermione took a step to the side, needing to put some distance between herself and Simon so that she could concentrate on the man in the portrait.

"I wished to clarify a few things regarding some of your actions during the war."

Dumbledore interrupted her, settling back in his chair with an air of one who was explaining something simple to a child who should have known better. "Everything I did, I did for the greater good, child. Harry and I have already had our talk, and he understood."

It was her turn to interrupt. "I'm not here to talk about Harry, sir."

She gestured to the vials on the desk. "I've recently had cause to review some of the memories that were given to Harry by Severus Snape, on the night he died. Specifically the ones that you appeared in, sir."

Once again, Hermione wished that she could see Simon. She was desperate to know what he was thinking.

--8--

The platitudes falling out of the portrait's mouth were so familiar to Simon he could have recited them while asleep. The sneer on his face shifted to one of shock when Hermione announced she'd seen memories he'd given to Potter on the night he *died*. He had to grasp the cloak when it threatened to slide off his head when he whipped it around to stare in Hermione's direction.

How?

When did she...

The cancelled dinners?

*That bloody brat gave her access to **my** memories?*

Simon's eyes closed as one final thought made him wince.

Which ones?

Dear gods, which ones?

--8--

Dumbledore remained quiet, but Hermione had expected nothing less. She suspected that he wouldn't volunteer a speck of information. She was going to have to drag it out of him.

"At first, I didn't notice. You were always so subtle. Then I saw it, it must have been just before our sixth year, your hand. Your movements weren't as smooth as they had been every other time, you see." She moved around the desk to stand under the portrait, hands reaching out to grasp the back of the headmistress' chair for support as she looked up at the old wizard with the carefully blank expression. "You'd made him swear to kill you to save Draco Malfoy's soul, and I thought you were reaching out to soothe him, to offer him some comfort. I had to watch the memory twice to realize that the hand movement was a spell."

She looked toward the Pensieve, then around the room even though she knew that she wouldn't be able to see Simon under the cloak.

"Once I knew what to look for, it was easier to go back and find more. Trace it back to that moment, here in this very room, when he came to you after after Lily was killed."

I know, Simon. I know you loved her. And I'm so sorry.

She turned back to the portrait, anger making her words clipped and tight. "The man's heart was shattered; he even told you he wanted to die. I saw him sitting in that chair, head bowed in grief, and I saw what you did to him. I saw you cast the spell, the first one, the one that you must have had to renew all those other times. What was it? What did it do?"

"What did you do to him?"

--8--

"The man's heart was shattered; he even told you he wanted to die," stabbed a piece of his heart, while it made Simon's stomach churn harder.

She knows all.

"I saw what you did to him. I saw you cast the spell."

What spell is she...

Renewed a spell?

Is that what he...

The deep down hurt and bewilderment he felt at the possibility of another betrayal made him want to leave the office before any more words could be spoken. So many pieces of his life had been played out in that room, and he didn't know if he could stand for it to be privy to even one more.

No.

Deny it.

Please!

"Calm yourself, my dear. I'm sure you've convinced yourself you saw something sinister, but I assure you there wasn't. Severus, Merlin rest his soul, was a key element in the fight against Voldemort. I risked everything when I stood up for him at the Wizengamot, young lady. Now, why would I do anything but attempt to help him?" Dumbledore asked in a soothing tone as he relaxed slightly and smiled down at Hermione.

Simon's eyes flicked to Hermione, and he held his breath in preparation for the blast he was sure was heading Dumbledore's way. She was furious, and she was apparently making no attempt to hide it from the former headmaster.

She looks incredibly beautiful, Simon realized, more than a little stunned. *The heat generated from the fire in her eyes would warm the dungeons for weeks.*

--8--

"Don't you dare say his name," Hermione hissed through clenched lips. "You risked nothing. You sat here like an ancient spider, twitching the strings of your web while the rest of us risked everything to fight your battles, to win your war."

She took a deep breath, then another, and another. Suddenly she didn't want to be that close to the portrait and moved back to the other side of the desk to get away from it.

"I'm not Harry, sir. I know exactly what you're capable of. You used Severus Snape, just like you used Harry."

Hermione braced both hands on the desk and leaned forward. "How did you cause the nightmares? Did you create them completely, or did the spell just find something in his head and make it worse?"

--8--

If Simon hadn't know better, the bafflement currently crossing the portrait's face would have convinced him. There was no hesitation in its voice as it blatantly lied to Hermione, and it didn't surprise Simon when it did.

"What on earth are you blathering on about, child? Nightmares? What nightmares? Would you like me to have one of the elves bring Madam Pomfrey to take a look at you? Are you sure you're not the one having the nightmares?" Dumbledore asked as a concerned look came over his face and his voice became even more soothing. "All those things you had to go through as a mere child have finally taken their toll, haven't they? I'm sure they'll be able to help you a great deal at St. Mungo's if it comes to that."

If that's not a veiled threat, I've never heard one, Simon decided as he drew his wand. He didn't know exactly why, but it felt right to have it in his hand.

Oh, for fuck's sake, man. It's a bloody portrait, not Dumbledore. He can't harm her, he decided, but couldn't bring himself to slide it back inside his sleeve.

So, I hold the damned thing. No harm in that, is there?

--8--

"Oh, I do have nightmares. I doubt there's a single one of us who doesn't have one once in a while. Except, perhaps, you."

Hermione tilted her head to the side, lips pursed. "You know, you really are good at this; I might have fallen for the concern if I hadn't seen with my own eyes just how *concerned* you were when he came to you how *sympathetic* as you made him promise that he would do anything for you, as long as you kept Lily Potter safe. But you didn't, because that wasn't part of your great plan, was it? If Lily didn't die, you wouldn't have had your perfect weapon. You didn't even try to save her, did you?"

A foul taste was growing in her mouth with every word.

The eyes of the figure in the portrait flicked around the room, as if making sure they were still alone, then he leaned forward in his throne-like chair.

And smirked.

Hermione felt her blood boil as her anger made her see red. Her hands shook at her sides.

"Careful, my dear. My name still carries a great deal of weight and respect in some circles. There are those who might see your allegations as treasonous. Why are you even bothering to concern yourself with matters long buried?"

He tapped a finger against his lower lip, that hateful smirk still on his mouth. "Why this sudden crusade? I doubt *Severus* would have appreciated your intrusion into his privacy, were he alive today. I imagine he would have been furious to be exposed so, especially by someone he could barely stand to teach. You do know he abhorred the very sight of you, don't you, child? So any feelings you might have been harboring for him all this time, any school girl crush, he never would have returned them."

Hermione gasped.

--8--

"You didn't even try to save her, did you?"

Simon's grip on his wand tightened as he waited for the denial or the assurances that never came. Only more lies tumbled from the portrait of the man Simon had once considered almost a father.

"Enough!" he growled as the cloak was thrown off.

"Enough of your blasted lies, old man!" Simon yelled as he walked toward the portrait, wand shaking, but pointed directly where there would have been should have been a heart.

Dumbledore's portrait looked surprised for a moment, before a crafty look found its way back. Peering over its glasses, it chuckled before settling back in the chair.

"Well, well. You always were full of surprises, *Severus*. I'm quite astonished to see you, if indeed it is you and not someone merely mimicking your voice."

Simon's eyes narrowed and his chin rose before he hissed, "It is indeed me *Albus*. Answer her question."

Dumbledore glanced dismissively over at Hermione and shrugged before turning his attention back toward Simon.

"And which one of the thousands of questions she's always had would be the one you're interested in, *Severus*?" he asked while tapping that same finger against his mouth. "Let's see now don't tell me let me guess.

"I'd say the one that burns your soul even to this day," the portrait said while leaning forward.

"No, I didn't try to save Lily or James, for that matter. Having Harry grow up in the wizarding world with eleven years of exposure before I could *lead* him? Oh, no, no. That would *never* have done. I needed him bedazzled and trusting only in me," Dumbledore said with a satisfied smirk. "You have to admit it worked beautifully."

Glancing down at the obviously furious wizard, Dumbledore laughed.

"So you had to endure a few nightmares. That was little enough punishment for all that you did, wasn't it? And when they became too *much* for your poor little psyche from time to time, I did ease them for you, didn't I?" the portrait asked in a condescending tone.

"You would have fared far worse in Azkaban if I'd let the *Wizengamot* have their way. Although," Dumbledore added in a thoughtful tone, "it might have been amusing to see you and *Black* as cell mates. You still could end up there, you know. Alongside your little friend here."

Simon's wand was still pointed at the portrait, but it no longer shook.

"You absolute bastard," Simon hissed while stepping closer.

"And what do you purpose to do with your wand, dear boy? I'm a portrait, not flesh and blood." Dumbledore sneered down at him. "You can't harm me."

"You're wrong," Simon advised with narrowed eyes.

"*Contenere*," was merely whispered before, "*Incendio*!" was said with a great deal of relish.

As the paint ran and then crisped in the magical flames, Simon took no small measure of satisfaction in remembering the astonished look on the portrait's face when it tried to escape to another frame and couldn't.

Turning toward Hermione, Simon smiled tightly before gathering up the cloak and slinging it around his shoulders.

"If we're quite done here, I suggest we leave before *Minerva* returns. *Yorick* has probably proven his cannibal ways and eaten part of our dinner, but we could stop by that Chinese restaurant you favor for take out if you like."

Part Twenty-One

Chapter 21 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through *Deathly Hallows* to the point of *Severus Snape's* supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: I must apologize. I was getting parts twenty-two and twenty-three ready to send on to our wonderful beta, Lariope, when I noticed part twenty-one had not been posted

to this site. This is through no one's fault but my own.

To those of you that have waited patiently for an update, I thank you. The extended illness, and death, of my mother made it quite impossible, for a time, to write. My wonderful writing partner, Darned Child, never gave up on me, and I guess her patience was rewarded. I hope yours will be.

Minerva was going to kill her.

Assuming, of course, the Board of Governors, the Ministry, or even just a mob of Dumbledore worshiping sycophants didn't get to her first.

Hermione had been so horrified by the things that the portrait had said that she hadn't reacted when Simon had appeared. Hadn't even noticed that he had his wand in hand until the curses were cast.

She should have stayed behind, tried to come up with some explanation *Spontaneous combustion? Portrait suicide?* instead of disappearing as quickly as her feet could take her. She'd barely had the presence of mind to snatch up the items she'd unpacked before they left.

Now they were back at Simon's, and she was pacing, lower lip nibbled raw as thoughts tumbled and turned through her mind.

"I cannot believe that you killed Dumbledore. Again. Not that the bastard didn't deserve it. Actually, he deserved worse, but I'm never going to be able to explain why and I'm going to have to change my name and go into hiding. I'll have to live on the street, or as a Muggle, or worse."

Hermione stopped pacing and turned to glare at Simon. "You won't even be able to come visit me if I end up in Azkaban, will you? You couldn't have waited until later? We could have crept back in tomorrow or later tonight and done it; I would have gladly helped."

The last hint of color drained from her face, and Hermione felt light-headed. "We still don't know what spell he used on you. Or how to break it. And now we'll never I should have waited; I should have been better prepared, should have done more research, should have expected..."

She knew she was babbling, but that knowledge didn't make it any easier to stop. She wrapped both arms around herself and forced her lips closed.

--8--

At first Simon reached for a bottle of sherry, but as Hermione's dissertation continued, he put it down and selected a different one.

Ogden's should do the trick.

Pouring two good measures, he held onto one and presented the other to his upset companion. Taking a sip, he raised an eyebrow and studied the witch in front of him. One hand reached out and caressed the side of Hermione's face.

"This needs to be made perfectly clear, and I want to you pay *very* close attention to what I'm going to say," Simon stated flatly and waited until he was sure he had her full attention. "No amount of preparation would have made a difference. You were up against an expert in manipulation with over a hundred years experience. As far as waiting for later which would have been perfectly logical, I grant you I didn't want to. I've been bound by prudence and 'For the greater good' too damned long as it is."

Turning, Simon walked over and sat down in his chair and motioned toward the other one with what he hoped was a faintly leering expression.

"Sit down before you faint, woman. Because if you do, I make no promises about what will or will not happen while you're unconscious, and we need to decide what Minerva is to be told."

--8--

She'd gone very still when Simon had caressed her cheek. Everything inside her had focused on his touch, his face and his words.

He had a point. When it came to manipulation, Dumbledore had probably written the book. Several, in fact.

Her lips briefly twitched at Simon's effort to keep her from working herself into any more of a panic.

"Right, we need a plan."

Hermione took a sip of the liquid that he had given her and grimaced, then took another. She headed toward the empty chair, pausing at the small table between the two chairs to deposit her glass, then turned to face him once more.

Normally, she would have sought permission first, especially since he had already indicated that he wished for her to sit in the other chair, but her heart was still racing from the fire and flight from Hogwarts, and she wanted nothing more than to sit in Simon's lap and seek comfort while they plotted.

So she did, quickly sliding her arms around him and tucking her face against his neck before he could offer protest. "So what do you suggest I tell Minerva?"

--8--

Simon had expected a round of discussion broken with protests and arguments on Hermione's part of course culminating in a decision on exactly what the headmistress of Hogwarts was to be told about the evening's events. Instead, a warm bundle of woman slid onto his lap, buried her nose in his neck and robbed him of the words he'd started to prepare. It seemed his arms had no problems determining that the best place for them were around her, and Simon's lips brushed gently against her hair.

"The truth is always the best place to start," he finally said after shifting Hermione's weight slightly. "But, in order to determine which part of the truth is the best for Minerva's ears, I need the rest of it first. What memories did Potter allow you to have?"

--8--

Her head lifted then, just enough so that she could make eye contact with Simon. "You should know that Harry doesn't hand your memories out to just anyone. He's very protective of your privacy. It wasn't easy to convince him to grant me access."

She didn't want Simon believing that Harry paraded the memories out for every curious gawker that expressed an interest.

Hermione lowered her head once more, resting her cheek against Simon's shoulder. "He only agreed to let me see the ones with you and Dumbledore; I asked for those specifically. You had said that Dumbledore had a way to ease the nightmares, and I had thought that if, by some chance, you had given one of those memories to Harry, that I might have been able to duplicate the effect."

Her arms tightened around him as she thought of what that bastard had done to Simon.

My Simon.

"I saw you warning him that the Potters were in danger. Later, after they died. A small handful of other meetings. I have them all with me; I brought them, just in case... Harry wants them back, but I could make up some excuse if you wanted to keep them?"

--8--

Vague impressions of the memories Hermione mentioned tickled the front of Simon's vision. It was all he had retained of the snippets he'd given to Potter that dreadful night. Simon could care less if *all* the memories he had of Dumbledore were poured down the throat of a Dementor. The revelation in Minerva's office had destroyed the last bit of...

Face it, man.

Dumbledore held no more regard for you... than he did the slugs in Hagrid's pumpkin garden. They, at least, would have been given a quick, merciful death instead of a

"So you had to endure a few nightmares. That was little enough punishment for all that you did, wasn't it?"

little enough punishment...

little enough..." continued to pound in Albus' mocking tone at the center of Simon's chest, while a far off wail sounded in his ears.

Simon glanced quickly around his sitting room and looked down at Hermione.

"Did you?" His words were interrupted by a louder wail, and that was when he realized the noise wasn't actually audible. His heart began to race, and Simon's eyes glazed while his head dropped back against the chair. The wail was coming from within, and it drew him. Drew him deeper and deeper as a weeping Lily visited Simon for the first time during his waking hours.

"Lily," was a mere wisp of air on Simon's lips as his limbs went totally slack.

--8--

Did I what?

Hermione didn't like the far-off look in Simon's eyes before his head tipped back.

"Simon?"

At first, the name that passed his lips didn't register as Hermione slid off his lap to her knees in a completely graceless maneuver. She was far too caught up in making sure Simon's suddenly unresponsive body was still breathing, that his heart was still beating, to fret about who he might be calling for.

Later, it would probably stand out as an important detail, but for now, there were much more important things to concern herself with.

His heart was beating far too fast.

"Simon?" Hermione pressed her hands to his cheeks; the skin was warmer than it had been. His eyes were closed now, but she could see them moving, as if he were watching something behind the closed lids.

A vision of some kind? Seizure?

Yet again, Hermione called out his name, her tone beginning to grow desperate. "Simon? It's Hermione. Can you hear me?"

--8--

Sitting up, Simon took stock of his surroundings. There were no buildings, no trees, no clouds. Nary a breeze stirred the hair on Simon's head even as the small ones on the back of his neck rose. Unending gray led away in all directions, except for the weeping woman no more than a stone's throw away from him. She looked alive, and her red hair was far too vibrant against the dismal backdrop.

Lily?

Rising to his feet, Simon approached slowly, cautiously. One hand tentatively reached out to brush the falling hair aside.

"Lily!" As he knelt beside the distraught Lily, his heart sang.

"Am I dead, then?" Simon asked her, completely confused when Lily shook her head no.

"I don't understand," he muttered, mostly to himself. "How can I see you, touch you, and not be dead too?"

Over her left shoulder, a vague form crystallized in the distance and began moving closer. Squinting slightly, Simon was able to make out several distinct and unmistakable characteristics.

"I should have known," he muttered again. To the still weeping Lily he said, "Stay here," even though it was quite obvious she wasn't going anywhere.

Rising, Simon reached for his wand while walking toward the wizard still some distance away. It wasn't there.

Oh, goody.

I wonder what the chances are that he doesn't have his either?

"Stop right there, Albus," he stated when they had drawn close enough that Simon could see the other man carried no wand.

"Why, Severus, you're being downright inhospitable," Dumbledore stated in surprise. "I thought by now you'd be grateful to see someone who wasn't continually crying their eyes out."

"I'm completely over the moon with joy," Simon said in his most sarcastic tone.

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed slightly while his chin rose. Spreading both arms wide, he asked, "Don't you even want to know where we are?"

"Don't be daft, man, of course I do. However, knowing you, the details will be parceled out in small doses designed to confuse and gain me only incorrect answers," Simon said and then turned to make his way back to where Lily continued to cry. "When you feel like giving me the truth in one tidy package, you'll know where to find me."

"It's not really her, Severus," Dumbledore stated flatly and watched Simon stumble to a halt.

"I know that," Simon said while staring at the woman he'd loved as long as he could remember.

"She'll never do anything but weep for those she's lost," Dumbledore said while starting to walk behind Simon.

Spinning around, Simon finally found the anger he thought he'd left in Minerva's office.

"What have you done to me this time, old man? Is this what you thought my version of hell would be? Having her here with me, but never being able to *be* with her?" he hissed while glaring at his old master. "If it is you're wrong."

Dumbledore laughed while moving around Simon.

"Why would putting you in your own personal hell be of importance to me? You're only here now because you've discovered more than you were supposed to. As valuable as you are in the fight against Voldemort, I can't afford to have my minor preparations come to light, now can I? It could ruin everything if people started questioning my methods."

Simon's brows drew together in puzzlement for a moment before enlightenment dawned. This particular *Albus* didn't know the Dark Lord was dead, therefore, he wasn't a ghost.

Lily indicated I wasn't dead but she...

She is and Albus is, but...

Hermione was sitting on my lap.

I'm still there.

This is all in my mind.

"How did you managed to trap me in my own mind, you pathetic bastard?" Simon asked with no small amount of heat. "Wasn't it enough that I see her in my dreams?"

Nodding his head slowly while smirking, Dumbledore turned his head away from the huddled form and looked at his former Potions Master.

"Very good," he said condescendingly. "I thought it would take a great deal longer for you to figure it out. How well have you done on *why* we're here?"

"Because I found out you put a bloody spell on me to have nightmares about Lily, you daft megalomaniac!"

Dumbledore began to chuckle and then to laugh in earnest. He laughed long and hard. Hard enough that tears began to run out of his eyes. Wiping them away, Albus shook his head. "That's not all, Severus. That's not all."

"That's rather obvious, given where we *are*!" Simon stated hotly while throwing his arms wide.

Tilting his head, Dumbledore smirked before asking, "Haven't you ever wondered *why* your love for Lily never, *ever* faded into a fond remembrance, or at most a small pang of remorse now and then?"

Suddenly on the defensive, Simon shook his head slowly. He didn't know if he should trust any of the answers he was getting from this apparition, but as they were all that was being offered he'd take them.

"Honestly, Severus," Dumbledore said in a tone that would have suited a first-year's class. "Think, man!"

I'll bloody think him into...

A horrific thought crossed Simon's mind, and his head started slowly going back and forth.

"You didn't," he stated flatly.

"I certainly did!" Dumbledore said in a joyful tone and with a broad smile on his face.

"You would condemn me to madness?" Simon asked in an incredulous tone while walking up and staring the other man in the face. "Why?"

"Tut-tut, Severus. I took measures to make sure you never quite fell over the edge. Every time your nightmares got intense, I was able to reduce the affect. Even though to all intents and purposes, you're shortly going to be in a coma for the rest of your life, I'll still visit you I'm sure," Dumbledore said while patting him on the shoulder. "Who knows, I might even release you someday if the need arises."

"You're dead, you fucking bastard!" Simon growled while throwing the other man's hand off his shoulder. "Dead!"

Surprise flickered over the face of the faux Albus before he shrugged.

"Ah, well. I suppose you talked to my portrait then, and he gave you the key phrase that started all this," Dumbledore said while turning away from Simon and Lily and rubbing his hands together in some perverse form of satisfaction. "Before I leave you and your lady love for good, tell me how the fight against Voldemort goes?"

Opening his mouth to *report*, Simon paused. He owed this man nothing. Less than nothing.

"It doesn't," he said flatly. "He won when he killed your golden goose. Now you know why this is as far from hell as it can be. I should thank you, really."

Spinning in shock, Dumbledore was at a loss for words.

"I thought you were leaving, Headmaster?" Simon asked as he sat down beside Lily and took her into his arms. "We'd like some privacy if you don't mind."

--8--

Something was wrong with Simon. Very wrong.

"Answer me, Simon!" She shook him, hoping the movement might be enough to jar him into waking from the unnatural sleep.

If anything, he looked worse than before.

"It's got to be something some reaction to confronting that evil goat..." Her mind raced as she tried to remember what, if anything, the portrait could have done. "He was just a portrait; he couldn't cast anything."

His hand was limp, cradled between both of her own, as Hermione fought to keep the rising threat of panic at bay.

"He couldn't cast anything *new*, but what if there was a fail safe in the original spell? Something to keep Simon under control if the truth ever came out. The portrait would know that, he'd know how to exploit it. Think, Hermione, think."

Hermione leaned closer to rest her cheek against his shirt, seeking the shallow comfort of the rise and fall of his chest with each breath.

"If this is Dumbledore's fault, I will find a way to bring that bastard back to life and kill him myself. It can't be a potion, not this many years later. A spell. Not time released, that would be too much of a coincidence. Hand gesture? Voice-activated? An activation word or phrase? All possible, but which? Damn it, this is not my area of expertise; I don't know what to look for, Simon. I don't know what to do." She was aware that she was beginning to tremble.

"Harry might." The last thing Simon would want was Harry Potter's involvement, but if an answer didn't present itself to her soon, Hermione felt she might have no other choice.

"Did you hear me? If you don't wake up, I swear I'll go find Harry and drag him here by the ear and blow your cover out the window; you know you don't want that."

Hermione wasn't crying; she refused to cry, even though she couldn't remember feeling this helpless before. With everything she knew, all the books at her disposal, she had no clue what to look for to even begin to find a way to help him. She also had no idea if he was going to get worse.

Her arms tightened around him for a moment as she gathered together her composure, knowing that she would need a clear head if she was going to *apparate* to Harry's home without splinching herself. "Yorick needs you. I need you, Severus."

--8--

Dumbledore had left them without another word. Nary a peep of advice or apology. Not content to merely hold a sobbing woman until his body died, and having a great deal of mental discipline, Simon set about making their world a more pleasant prison. Being unable to track the *real* passage of time, Simon didn't know how long he and Lily had been isolated. If he had been forced to guess, it would have been on the order of years.

As it was, he hadn't needed to worry about wind, weather, food or any of the other problems of a mortal existence except boredom. That he had in abundance. He wasn't able to conjure books. Oh, he could make a book appear. An exact duplicate of one in his library until it was opened. The pages weren't blank, far from it. They were filled with words, but the greatest majority were fuzzy and so out of focus they were illegible. There were passages that were crisp and distinct, but Simon soon realized they were ones he knew by heart.

Conversations with the inconsolable Lily were anything but satisfying, as they consisted of Simon talking and Lily either not responding at all or giving a mere shake of her head in consent or denial. But she was there, and he was not alone. Not alone counted for a great deal more than he was willing to admit even to himself. If he did, Simon was sure she would disappear altogether.

Simon could live with guilt, in fact had done so for the greatest part of his adult life, which was something that Dumbledore apparently hadn't taken into consideration when he designed this little punishment. If he'd really wanted to plunge Simon into hell, he should have made it a solitary cell, not one inhabited by the woman he loved. As it was, Simon was almost content.

He'd found, much to his dismay, that experimental potions always turned out the way he wanted them to, not the way they were supposed to. Ever the realist, Simon discovered that theory worked almost as well as practical application. Conjuring a blank journal, pen and quill, he wrote and rewrote details of potions he'd only dreamed of trying.

Occasionally, there would be a faint noise or a disturbance in the distance that would draw Simon's attention. It would pass, but it would make him wonder what had caused it. He was sure it was something occurring in the *real* world. In the back of his thoughts, he'd wonder if he was being moved, fed or bathed. As he was unable to affect whatever was taking place, he'd simply shrug a shoulder and return to whatever theory was currently entertaining him. He'd long ago given up trying to guess if Hermione had tried to deal with it him his physical body on her own or had gained assistance.

One *day*, so to speak, Simon was speaking his thoughts aloud, mostly to *hear* a human voice, as Lily never uttered anything except sobs, and almost missed the faint sound.

I need you, Severus, echoed softly and drew Simon's attention to a slightly lighter patch of gray in the distance. He'd never noticed it before and checked carefully in all directions before focusing his gaze on it. It remained, and try as he might, Simon couldn't make it uniform again. A heavy sigh broached his lips as Simon rose from the comfortable desk chair he'd designed. It fitted him as no other ever had, and he was loath to leave it and the notes he'd been making on his newest theory.

"Lily," he said in her general direction. "I'm sure it's merely another distraction designed by our jailer to try to *punish* me. I'll return shortly."

The walk was not a short one. It continued for what seemed like eons while the soft, *I need you, Severus*, was always just ahead, out of reach. Stopping once, Simon looked back, but was unable to see Lily or the cozy little corner he'd managed to carve out of the grayness. Uneasy about being able to find her again, Simon almost turned around to return when the request demand repeated itself, closer and clearer.

"Hermione! That's Hermione's voice!" he shouted while picking up his pace. "If he's trapped her here... No! That's impossible. Isn't it?"

The gray was definitely getting lighter the farther he went.

"Hermione! Where are you? For fuck's sake, woman! Answer me!"

His physical vocal cords attempted to obey the shouted demands of his mind. For the most part they failed.

Part Twenty-Two

Chapter 22 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Lariope, you are a wonderful, sweet woman to continue to beta for us after such a long hiatus. Thank you, again.

There was a rumble under her ear, a guttural groan that couldn't have been classified as a word by anyone.

It was, however, a response, and that was enough to jerk Hermione away from Simon's chest.

"What is it? Was it Harry? Yorick? What Severus?" She had hoped that something she had said had been enough to begin to break through whatever was holding Simon under, but when he didn't react again, Hermione felt her frustration and worry overwhelm her.

She stood, trembling, beside his chair. "Open your eyes. Talk to me. Something."

Another moment passed without a sound or a twitch, and Hermione knew she was losing him. Truly losing him.

"Damn it, Severus, come back to me!" Her open hand flew to his cheek and connected in an uncontrolled burst of movement. Immediately, her fingers throbbled and stung, and Hermione let loose with a string of half-sobbed curse words punctuated by his name, over and over.

--8--

One moment Simon had been running through a gray landscape searching for Hermione and the next he was listening to her curse and wondering why the hell the side of his face hurt. He kept his eyes closed, not moving while he tried to take stock of where and more importantly when he was.

My face hurts.

It actually hurts.

There was no pain there, no hunger.

Without moving his head, Simon opened his eyes and saw what he'd half expected. He was still in his flat.

"Minerva would be properly horrified if she could hear her star Gryffindor swearing like a fishwife," he commented softly before raising a hand to touch the side of his face. "Myself, I'm merely glad to actually hear another voice besides my own. How long was I absent?"

--8--

To her credit, Hermione did not scream at the sound of his voice. She did jerk a bit, more of a flail if one wanted to be honest, but she did manage to contain the scream that nearly escaped her lips.

"I believe Minerva is going to be horrified enough as it is." Hermione winced as he touched his face, although she couldn't bring herself to regret hitting him if that was what had brought him out of the whatever it was.

"You were out long enough to cause me more than a little concern." The rough edges in her tone underscored her words. "But not long enough for me to make good on my threat to fetch Harry. Although it was a close thing."

Now that he was awake, she didn't have a clue what to do.

"How are you feeling, now? Are you all right? Anything feel strange, different? Any weakness?" Hermione forced herself to take a deep breath, then sank to her knees beside the chair once more. "What happened, Simon?"

--8--

All he wanted to do was listen to the sound of Hermione's voice and acquaint himself with the flat. He'd been gone for years, at least it seemed that way, and it was all so strange but very familiar at the same time. A small smile touched the corner of his mouth, and his hands reached out to pull Hermione back on his lap.

She'd asked how he was feeling, and the truth was Simon didn't know. His chest felt lighter somehow, as if a heavy weight had been removed, and he didn't quite trust the feeling. The weight had been there so long and had been taken so much for granted that its absence was *wrong*. Until he found out exactly what was going on, Simon decided to hedge his bets.

"Dumbledore happened," he said simply. "But the brightest witch of her age circumvented the little trap he'd laid for me. How did you figure out the release phrase?"

As he gazed at her, Simon realized that, but for her, he would probably have spent the remainder of his life trapped inside his own mind. The *years* spent there, unable to communicate with anyone, would surely have driven him completely insane. Death would have been a welcome visitor when it finally came to claim him.

His arms tightened around her until she was cradled close to his chest. Simon's head dropped to place a kiss on the top of hers. He realized, at long last, that he had managed to find a true friend in every sense of the word. One who truly cared what happened to him.

"Thank you," was whispered into the soft strands of her hair.

"I'm fine. Tired, but fine."

--8--

There had been no thought of protest when he pulled her into his lap nor when he pulled her closer still.

"One of us should check to make sure there isn't any lingering traces of Dumbledore's spell clinging to you." Hermione tilted her head back to look at him, momentarily distracted. "What do you mean, release phrase?"

--8--

Now he was the one completely confused, and as he pulled back to meet her gaze, Simon's brows drew together.

"You didn't... I thought You said you needed me."

--8--

"I did." The words tumbled out before Hermione could even think of trying to censor them. "I do."

She could feel her skin flush with heat, and the urge to hide her face against his shirt was strong, but Hermione settled for focusing her eyes on Simon's lower lip.

"I do."

--8--

"You do," was repeated softly while a thousand pins and needles pierced the numbness that had invaded his chest. It made it difficult to breathe, and he didn't understand

what was happening. It finally lessened, and he found that tiredness had flown away and left behind a burning desire a burning desire to make the flush on Hermione's face appear for a far different reason. His hands rose to cup either side of her face, and he marveled again at her softness as his thumbs traced the fine jaw.

"As do I," he stated, but in a much deeper tone a tone filled with want and the smoke of need.

--8--

He needed her?

It has to be his recent trauma talking the insecure portion of Hermione's mind tried to reason even as she melted at his tone.

There was so much that needed to be done, quickly. Minerva would be demanding answers. Simon really did need to be examined by someone more qualified than she. Probably a dozen other things would need attending to, and for this moment, Hermione couldn't bring herself to care too much.

Simon needed her.

She rubbed her cheek against the palm of one of his hands. "I'm not leaving until I'm certain you are all right; no one should be able to find me here." Which would only infuriate Minerva all the more.

Both of her hands moved, restless, against his chest, before one settled over his heart. "It might be best if we got you out of this chair and moved you to someplace where you could stretch out and relax." Someplace where she could curl up against his side and reassure herself that he was safe and whole and very much *hers* to care for, for now at least. "Do you feel up to it?"

--8--

The coldly logical part of Simon that had been cultivated and perfected over the years wanted to tell Hermione he was perfectly fine and didn't require a nursemaid. Literally biting his tongue helped stem the flow of words he was sure would send her fleeing home. Instead a small smile, which served as his version of a broad grin, appeared on his mouth while one eyebrow rose.

"I feel *up* for a number of things, my dear Hermione. Which would you propose we attempt first?"

--8--

Surely he wasn't...

"First," she purred as she eased off of Simon's lap, "I propose that we get you into bed, get you out of your restrictive clothing and then... Then I do some spellwork to try to reassure myself that you won't be falling back under Dumbledore's spell anytime soon. **Then** I'm going to have to come up with an explanation for Minerva as to why Dumbledore's portrait is now a mound of smoldering ash. Good riddance to bad rubbish."

Hermione took a deep breath and let it out with a hopeful smile. "And finally, after that mess has been dealt with well enough that we don't have to worry about over-eager Aurors breathing down my neck, or yours... Then, I propose that I join you in bed, assuming you're still there and didn't get up the moment my back was turned."

--8--

One of Simon's eyebrows rose while his head tilted slightly to the left.

"You *are* a bossy wench, aren't you?" he asked in one of his driest tones. "It's a wonder the other two thirds of your trio didn't revolt and drown you, but I rather imagine they were intelligent enough to realize they would never have survived without your guidance."

Heaving a large sigh, Simon rose and held out his hand.

"Do with me what you will for now, my dear, but I give you fair warning," Simon advised with a small smile. "Once the dreary details are swept under the nearest carpet, it will be my turn to rule."

--8--

She took his hand, relieved that he was willing to cooperate. For now.

"It's more a wonder that I didn't smother either of them in their sleep. Trust me, toward the end of that extended hell of a camping trip, the urge to do bodily harm was nearly ever present." Hermione led Severus to bed and began removing his clothing as gently as possible, just in case.

"Not to mention all of the times I wanted to swat one or the other of them over the head during our school years. Sheer force of will alone is all that saved them, really. Pajamas?"

--8--

Far from being annoyed at Hermione's *fussing*, Simon was slightly amused at her assumption that he was in some way incapacitated. He wasn't used to such attentions and found to his great delight that allowing her to finish disrobing him wasn't painful in the slightest. The soft fingers and hands that occasionally brushed his skin were welcomed and cherished.

"Pajamas?" he questioned while both brows rose in what for him was an expression of disbelief. "No, I don't believe they'll be necessary."

Leaving his briefs on, Simon slid beneath the sheets and rolled on one side to face Hermione. An elbow braced on the bed served to raise him enough that he didn't feel the *invalid* as he addressed her.

"As far as what Minerva is told, the closer to the truth the better. She could be advised that you were merely asking questions about incidents prior to his death; he became agitated, and suddenly the portrait burst into flame. If she thinks to cast a revealing spell on what remains, I did manage to remove all traces of the spells I placed on the portrait before we left. She will more than likely conclude it was another one of Albus' *safeguards* in case the portrait fell into The Voldemort's hands."

Here Simon's eyes narrowed, and his chin lifted slightly.

"In fact, it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to suggest the idea to her in a roundabout fashion. Don't indicate it's what you believe," he cautioned gently while slowly nodding his head. "Ask if *she* thinks it could be something along those lines."

--8--

Hermione refused to let herself be distracted by the sight of Simon in only his briefs. As difficult as that was.

"I'd almost forgotten what a sneaky bastard you can be," she replied, affection turning the words into something other than an insult. "Hold still, please. I think I can handle Minerva and lead her in the direction we want."

Her wand glided over his sheet covered form in one pattern after the next, soft lyrical spells slipping past Hermione's lips with each one.

All of the diagnostic spells seemed to agree that there was no sign of anything life-threatening, but that didn't stop her from drawing her bottom lip between her teeth and worrying it. Most of the spells found nothing at all, which should have reassured her, but two of them had found *something*.

Some sort of residual magic, old and radiating an aura that was almost familiar to Hermione. She had seen it or something similar before, but *where* was the question.

The most pressing issue, whether or not Simon was likely to have a relapse, had been answered. The other issue was a puzzle that her mind would continue to struggle with until the answer presented itself, she was sure.

She forced the worry from her face and tucked away her wand. "I think you'll live, for now. I need to get back to the castle before Minerva discovers the damage, if I'm not already too late. Please, stay in bed until I get back." She didn't wait to see if he would object to her intention to return, *Apparating* away the moment she could, on a mission to get back as quickly as possible.

--8--

As soon as the outer door closed behind Hermione, Simon was out of bed and across the room. A drawer of the bureau, known only to him, was quietly opened and while a single sheet of paper was ignored for the moment a torn photograph was removed. The woman in it was laughing and occasionally a brief glimpse of a child whipping back and forth could be seen, but Simon's eyes lingered not on the child. A scarred and calloused fingertip traced the outline of her face, lips and eyes before the photograph was placed gently on the bed.

His gaze never left it as he pulled trousers and a jumper from the wardrobe and threw them on. Slippers were jammed on Simon's feet without the thought of socks being donned first. The photo was picked up while he turned and sat down on the side of the unmade bed.

Spending so much time with the distraught and weeping Lily had awakened a hunger to see the smiling face she'd left behind, and it had taken quite a bit of resolve not to pull it out in front of Hermione. Simon knew she was aware he'd been in love with Lily at one time, but as the subject had never been explored, he was sure his friend lover was ignorant of the fact he was still and forever deeply in love with another woman.

As he gazed on Lily's smiling features, a small frown appeared between his brows. There was something not right. Simon turned the picture over and studied it from all angles. It appeared to have been unaltered since the last time he'd devoured the repeating smiles, laughter and sweet, sweet gleam of those beautiful green eyes.

As the lighting in the bedroom was inadequate, Simon rose and moved into the sitting room. Walking toward his chair and the brighter light from the fire, he continued to examine the photo.

"Yorick, has there ever been any research done on how long Wizarding photos last? Does the magic wear out, down or end if the maker dies?" a worried Simon asked. He really didn't expect an answer, but it helped to say the words. He'd never heard of such a thing happening with Wizarding photographs, but then this particular photo was the only one he'd really paid any attention to.

Sitting down, he studied the laughing woman a little more closely. As he did so, Simon realized that the crushing anguish he usually felt when looking at it was absent. The knowledge he'd never talk to or touch her again didn't make him ill as it had in the past. Glancing once at Yorick to see if the bird was paying any heed, Simon looked inward for the first time in a long time to touch those feelings. His eyes glazed slightly as memories were hauled out and examined. While a soft feeling of what he *knew* was the love he bore for Lily was there, the pain wasn't.

"Dumbledore," he muttered softly. "When Hermione used the release words, she broke... She broke the guilt he'd laid upon my sorry head. There will be no more nightmares."

Simon's head relaxed against the back of his chair, and his eyes closed. A small smile played about his mouth before he whispered, "No more nightmares."

Part Twenty-Three

Chapter 23 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair.

It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: I apologize in advance for the brevity of this chapter. Many, many thank yous are sent in the direction of our wonderful, and speedy, Lariope for the beta work.

Dealing with Minerva had been easier than she'd expected. Minerva had been quite familiar with Dumbledore's *safeguards* in the past, and it wasn't difficult to convince her that the portrait had fallen victim to another of Albus's schemes.

At one point, while Minerva vented about something else that Albus had done, Hermione turned her mind to the strange aura she had found while examining Simon. It was almost familiar, but she didn't think she'd actually seen something like it before. It had to have been something she'd read about. But when?

Minerva finished cleaning up the mess in her office and settled in to the chair behind her desk. She asked about Harry and Ron, and Hermione replied with some anecdote even as the wheels started turning in her head.

Harry and Ron. The aura. She'd read about something similar because of Harry and Ron... When?

"Minerva, would you mind if I stopped by the library before I left the castle?"

Two hours later, Hermione finally found her way back to Simon's flat, quietly moving through the rooms in the near dark in case he was asleep. The bed was empty, which she'd half expected. Finally, she found him, seated in his chair in the living room, dressed in trousers and a jumper, even though she'd asked him to stay in bed.

With a sigh, Hermione reached out to wake him; then she noticed something clutched in one of his hands. Tilting her head to better examine the item, she realized it was a

torn wizarding photo of a smiling, laughing woman. Harry's mom. Severus' beloved Lily.

Her lips tightened into a scowl before she could help herself, but Hermione forced her expression into a blank mask before Simon could awaken and see her.

Very carefully, she leaned down to try to gently ease the picture from his grasp, intending to set it someplace safe where he could find it in the morning.

--8--

There had been no nightmares, but Simon woke with a start nonetheless. Pulling the photo towards his chest, he glared and growled, "What do you think you're doing? This is mine!"

--8--

Hermione had been all set to let him hold on to his precious photo after all, she had only intended to move it to a safe location so that she could get him back to his bed but his growl and the possessive way he held on to the photo triggered her already strained temper.

Perversely, she held on to the picture of Lily Potter just as tightly as Simon. "Yours? What, the Potters gave you a picture of Lily and Harry because you were such good friends after Harry was born?" The bitter words tumbled out before Hermione could stop them, and for one brief moment, she almost wished she could have called them back. Almost.

--8--

Wrenching the photo away from Hermione, Simon rose from the chair, furious. Furious that she *dared* question his ownership of the photo. Furious that she *dared* mention that cursed man's name in his own *home*.

"This," he hissed while shaking it in front of Hermione's face, "is mine. *Mine*. Paid for with blood, sweat and more pain than you can possibly imagine. Potter may have married her, but he *never* deserved her. He played at love the same way he played at life, and it cost them both of theirs."

--8--

"More than I can imagine?" There was a shrill note in her voice that told Hermione she was very, very close to doing something she was probably going to regret later, but for once, she refused to listen to the warning.

"I doubt it will make a difference to you, but I noticed something when I was examining you earlier. A trace of old magic.

"My sixth year, do you remember that Ron was poisoned? There had been these chocolates, meant for Harry. They had been laced with love potion, and that's not what poisoned Ron, but it did worry me enough that I made it my mission to read all that I could about love potions over the next few months, to make sure that neither of my boys were hurt like that again. I was gone so long because I needed to find a book to make sure, but I knew I was right. The aura is distinct to a powerful love potion with no known cure. Permanent, never fading, never ending, obsessive. Sound familiar?"

She stepped back, away from him. "The perfect Lily Potter you've loved for all these years? She would have never loved you back because she had James." Hermione shook her head, anger and hurt and, yes, jealousy fighting for dominance in her emotions. "You will never accept that someone might really love you because you're stuck on the fantasy of her, and the worst part is that I knew it and I still..."

--8--

She lied!

His love for Lily was pure. Uncontaminated and pure. It had kept its vigil in his heart all these long and lonely years *because* it was pure.

"I'm not some foolish boy, then or *now*, to be tricked into taking a love potion of any kind. How dare you imply she used one on me!"

Drawing himself up to his fullest height, Simon sneered as he said, "You know *nothing* about *anything*. Lily loved me *long* before that arrogant dunderhead came along. She fell under the spell of his carefully manicured looks, nothing more. If she'd lived, she'd have grown tired of the simpering fop and left him."

--8--

"Not your precious Lily Dumbledore did it, you... you dunderhead!" She was yelling now, never a good sign.

"She might have grown tired of James, but we'll never know, will we? And if she did leave him, Simon ... Severus, she never would have come to you as anything more than a friend. That is all that you were to her. If it wasn't for the potion, you'd see that."

She took another step back, distancing herself from him even more. Everything was going wrong, and there was nothing she could do to fix it if he wasn't willing to see the truth. Even though it felt like her heart was beginning to snap in two.

--8--

"*Friend. That is all that you were to her.*" Hermione's words cut and burned more than he thought it was possible.

"No!" he bellowed while following her. Simon grabbed her wrist and glared down at her. "You're wrong," he stated coldly. "Dumbledore *did* place a spell on me, a very old, very dangerous, guilt laden curse. *You* broke it when you stumbled on the release words and called me back."

--8--

His hold on her wrist hurt, and she tried to pull herself free.

"Dumbledore was a sick, twisted bastard who *used* you in any way he thought necessary to get what he wanted. He *needed* you to be obsessed with Lily Potter just as much as he needed you to feel guilt over her death. He poisoned you with that potion, I'm sure of it, and the taint is still with you. Maybe we can find an antidote..."

--8--

Words she'd uttered earlier came back to him as he released her wrist.

"*The perfect Lily Potter you've loved for all these years? She would have never loved you back because she had James. You will never accept that someone might really love you because you're stuck on the fantasy of her, and the worst part is that I knew it and I still...*"

It suddenly made sense and all became clear. A snippet from a letter now also made sense. He never could understand how she could have fantasies concerning her Potions master, but a dark figure of *mystery* and *romance*... Miss Hermione Granger fancied herself in love with the bat from the dungeons. Simon stepped back from her this time and narrowed his eyes, considering the trap she'd laid.

"You're trying to trick me in your simple, Gryffindor fashion aren't you? You propose we work on a *cure*, with me as the test subject, when all the while *you'll* be the one trying to feed me a love potion."

The sneer returned to his face as he asked, "Is that why it didn't work out with Won-Won? He refused to take his *medicine* one time?"

--8--

"You leave my relationship with Ron out of this," she hissed. Her hands curled into fists until she could feel her nails biting into the flesh of her palms.

"You are despicable. You can go fuck yourself, Simon, because I'm done with you."

Hermione slammed the door on her way out of the flat and barely had the presence of mind to wipe the tears out of her eyes so that she could make sure the hall was clear before she *Apparated* away.

Part Twenty-Four

Chapter 24 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Many thanks to our wonderful beta, Lariope. I hope this didn't interfere too much with your holidays.

Filled with his righteous fury that Hermione dared lay such a trap for him, Simon found it quite easy to watch the little temptress leave his flat. How many times had Madam Pomfrey checked him over and found him sound? He had no doubts Hermione'd invented the tale of detecting an old magic. Turning, he strode toward Yorick who'd watched, silent and unmoved.

"Does she think me a total fool to believe such an outlandish tale?" he growled at the bird while gesturing with the hand still holding the photo. "She thinks to take Lily's place in my heart!"

Walking back and forth in front of the poor bird's perch, Simon's imagination took flight.

"I wonder how many of those books filled with *herromantic* drivel led her to this stupid idea she's in love with me? Too damned many. No wonder it took her so long to find the books I needed. Sitting in that damned bubble bath reading and reading that that rubbish!"

Simon shook his head before sinking back down in his chair. Lily's face drew his eyes again, and a small smile played on his mouth while his finger lovingly traced her features.

"She's a foolish, foolish girl, Lily, to imagine herself in love with me. One day, when she's married to the *right* Wizard, perhaps she'll be able to thank me for ruining her plans."

It was still easy for Simon, in the days and weeks that followed, to nod his head in satisfaction over his reasoning. He had, through sound deduction, figured out what plans Hermione had laid and was able to foil them. He was quite content working in his lab, filling his orders, eating when it became necessary and having no trouble whatsoever with nightmares when he chose to sleep. Perhaps because he was finally fully rested, other words came to test this theory.

"Haven't you ever wondered why your love for Lily never, ever faded into a fond remembrance, or at most a small pang of remorse now and then?"

The words floated past one day while he was measuring out ingredients for a particularly easy potion on order. Shaking his head, Simon attempted to get Dumbledore's voice out of his head.

"The bloody guilt curse, you bastard," Simon muttered under his breath.

Dumbledore's laughter again rang through his mind, followed by, *"That's not all, Severus. That's not all."*

The ingredients were forgotten as Simon slammed out of his lab and almost ran over to Yorick.

"The old bastard was lying to me!" he yelled at Yorick while pacing back and forth. "He had to be! I've already figured out why he built a release spell into the trap he'd placed into his portrait. If he *needed* me again, there would have been a way. Hermione is *wrong*. With the guilt curse there was no need for any kind of love potion!"

Simon stopped dead as another thought occurred to him.

"But when Hermione released me... The curse was broken. Maybe... No!" he shouted as the pacing resumed. "Pomfrey! She would have..." Again, Simon halted, and as his face blanched white, he turned imploringly toward Yorick. "But, first and foremost Pomfrey worked for Dumbledore, didn't she? If he'd asked her ordered her and there was no *harm* being done to her patient..."

Sinking down onto the floor in a bout of self-pity, Simon shook his head.

"Was I betrayed at every turn? Was there no one who..."

Closing his eyes, Simon whispered, "Hermione."

"You are despicable. You can go fuck yourself, Simon, because I'm done with you."

Several hours passed before Simon rose and again addressed Yorick. "Your master is an old fool," he stated quite simply. Taking a seat in his chair, Simon's gaze sought the flames of the fire. If Hermione was right, and he now knew she was, there was the matter of what he wanted to do about it. While he loathed the idea that there was some lingering trace of Dumbledore's manipulation upon him, he was still afraid of losing what had kept him willing to fight for his life the love that still burned in his heart for Lily.

"The aura is distinct to a powerful love potion with no known cure. Permanent, never fading, never ending, obsessive. Sound familiar?" Hermione's voiced taunted him over and over again.

"Permanent," he muttered. "No known cure. So, even if I agree to try and find a cure, chances are there won't be one."

--8--

No matter how many times Hermione told herself she was better off without him, how angry he made her, how resentful, she still missed Simon.

The bastard.

Missing his letters and his voice did not mean that she ever wanted to see him again, because she didn't. He could rot, lost in his fantasy of perfect Lily Potter for the rest of his life, and Hermione would not care.

Couldn't care.

Caring would lead to heartache, and she was done with that.

"That's what I said yesterday. And the day before. And the one before that. And too many to count before that. Perhaps today is the day I actually mean it." She tucked a loose curl behind her ear and looked around at the barely organized mess of her office. With the holiday season in full swing, she really didn't have time to spend thinking about her latest failed relationship.

If you can call a bunch of letters, one night and the morning after a relationship. I am such an idiot.

Mister Fitzgerald knocked on her open door and stepped into the office. "That book you ordered came in with the latest deliveries. I thought I'd bring it straight to you."

Hermione waited until he'd left to reach out and touch the slim volume he had left on her desk. *The Forbidden Arte of Amore.*

--8--

The approaching holidays didn't hold any sentiment for Simon. Quite the opposite, in fact. He'd always found them a bother, except when the great majority of the students returned home to their families. The time between their leaving and Dumbledore's infantile celebrations had been one of his favorite times of the year. It was surpassed only by the summer break between school years.

Now, he fussed and researched the days away until he was quite flummoxed. Simon had hoped to send Hermione a gift of some sort to start healing the breach he'd caused, but he had no clue what she would want.

"One of those Muggle poinsettias is no good," he muttered to Yorick one day. "There's absolutely no magical value to them at all."

So it was, a year to the day since he'd begun his correspondence with the manager of Marks and Sons, he fell back on what had worked in the beginning of their relationship.

"I'll ask for a book! In a letter! She won't refuse business," he reasoned aloud and quickly sat down at his desk. Picking up the quill that disguised his handwriting, he began what he hoped would be the road back into Hermione's favor.

December 15, 2000

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Ms Granger,

Through the foolish actions of an old man, I seem to have mislaid one of my dearest, and truest, companions. I have a client who needs assistance with finding a cure for a permanent love potion. The name of the volume escapes me at the moment, but I'm sure, being as wise and knowing as you are, it won't take you long to put your hands upon it.

Sincerely,

Simon Sopohorous

"Yorick, here! Take this to her with all speed," Simon commanded after addressing the envelope. The blasted bird seem to hesitate before taking the letter. Simon realized he was on the receiving end of what could just possibly be taken for pity.

"Go, you worthless chicken! Now! She'll not harm you or give you a poison biscuit," he told the falcon. Watching it leave, Simon frowned and headed toward his lab.

"I wish the same could be said for me," he muttered, while closing the door behind him.

--8--

December 16, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

This courtesy letter is being sent to reassure you that your request was received; however, due to the season, the vagueness of your request and our exacting standards, there may be somewhat of a delay in the procurement of the book that you are seeking.

The staff of Marks and Sons take our reputation for customer satisfaction seriously. Every effort will be made to procure a text that will be satisfactory for you needs.

Respectfully,

Gerald Fitzgerald

Marks and Sons

--8--

"Yorick!" Simon bellowed when he'd opened the letter from Marks and Sons. "Did you deliver the letter to *Hermione* or some idiot hanging around the front desk?"

Yorick, of course, paid him no heed other than a glance when his name was spoken and continued to preen his feathers.

"Vague. I'll give him vague along with... Blast!" Simon's frustration was evident in the crumpled paper he held in his hand.

"Either Hermione read it, disregarded what *I know* she would have understood, or she's instructed all correspondence from me to be given to this dunderheaded Fitzgerald person."

The chair at his desk was pulled out none too gently, and Simon sat down with less than his usual grace. A fresh sheet of parchment was drawn out, and he glared at the blank page as if it had offended him. He wasn't used to apologizing to *anyone* and didn't recall offhand any that he had received.

December 17, 2000

Marks and Sons

84 5/6 Charing Cross Road

Hermione,

I'm marking this letter personal, and while I haven't forgotten your request to send such missives to your home instead of the business, I feel that you'd be less inclined to burn it without opening it there.

Yes, I've been a fool. I must be the largest one of all time to believe for an instant that Dumbledore ever really cared what happened to me.

I rarely, however, make such colossal mistakes as I did the last time I saw you. My accusations were unjust and cruel. It took me much longer than it should have to realize you spoke nothing but the truth.

Sincerely,

Simon

--8--

Hermione was in the warehouse when Yorick appeared. Rather than take the offered letter, she shared a look with Mister Fitzgerald. The older man shook his head, then sighed and with extreme caution gently extracted the missive from the falcon's talon.

"Don't forget to give him a treat. It's not his fault his master is such a... Well, it's just not his fault."

Even though she had no interest in finding out what Simon had written this time, Hermione found herself hanging around the warehouse a bit longer than necessary while Mister Fitzgerald examined the outside of the letter.

"It's marked 'Personal;' perhaps you should take this one."

Her hand itched to snatch it out of his hand, and she did feel bad for thrusting him into the middle of her petty squabble with Simon. Hermione nibbled on her lower lip for a moment, then held out her hand.

The letter was quickly read, then read again. *Damn you, Simon Sopohorous, I can't do this again. I can't let you in, because you'll just rip me apart.*

"Please let our client know that I'm simply too busy to reply to each and every missive addressed to me personally, and thank him for his patronage."

December 18, 2000

Simon Sopohorous

London

Mister Sopohorous,

While Miss Granger is unable to read and reply to every bit of correspondence during this busy holiday season, she does wish each and every patron to know that we at Marks and Sons value their business.

Respectfully,

Gerald Fitzgerald

Marks and Sons

--8--

"Fine!" Simon growled as the latest letter from Marks and Sons was delegated to the rubbish bin. "If that's the way she accepts an apology, she'll receive no more from me."

This resolve held until the day Simon was forced into the outside world to forage for volatile ingredients his supplier refused to send by owl. Normally, it would only take an hour before he was safely ensconced in his home once more, but he'd never ventured forth during the *holiday* season before. Simon was somewhat dismayed to find so many witches and wizards out making merry fools of themselves. The fact that they seemed happy in each others' company didn't go unnoticed, nor did the sappy songs being played on every corner improve his mood. It all only served to emphasize his aloneness.

When Lily died and he'd been cajoled into protecting her Potter's brat, he'd accepted he'd be alone for the rest of his life. Hermione's fleeting friendship had changed that, and he was finding it difficult to readjust. A glimpse of a witch outside a pub had Simon's heart racing for a moment when he mistakenly thought it was Hermione. Luckily,

she'd turned in time before he made an arse of himself by yelling her name.

After carefully placing his purchases in the lab, Simon returned to the sitting room to remove his cloak and hang it up. Walking over to the front windows, he stared into the street and watched as the crowds thinned.

"It's quite early for everyone to be heading home, Yorick. I wonder what... Ah, of course. Christmas Eve," Simon stated quietly after looking at the calendar on his desk. "She's probably home, in the bosom of her family, drinking that dreadful egg concoction and passing around gaily wrapped parcels. Or do they do that on Christmas morning?"

The streets were barren and cold looking when he finally turned away and threw a few more logs on the fire. Special biscuits, usually only eaten by Simon, were shared with Yorick, while a glass of brandy and a good cigar were the presents he chose to give to himself.

Perhaps it was because of that glass of brandy that Simon found himself with quill in hand, sending a letter he had sworn he never would.

December 24, 2000

Hermione,

Again I am marking this personal in the faint hope that you will read it. I do not know if you read the previous one, nor does it make any difference.

I hope your holiday was enjoyable, and I wish you the best for the coming year.

Sincerely,

Simon

--8--

December 25, 2000

Simon,

I hope your holiday was pleasant. I, too, wish you all the best for the coming year.

Hermione

The note was short, and cheerful, and at great odds with everything she really wanted to write. Hermione smoothed her fingers across the words one last time before carefully folding the piece of her personal stationery. Next to her was a small parcel wrapped in brown paper, containing *The Forbidden Arte of Amore*.

The book had provided a wealth of information about the love potion that Simon had been given, but nothing that led her to an antidote. Perhaps Simon would have more luck, assuming he bothered to read it.

"He can burn it for heat, for all I care." The words didn't have a ring of truth to them, which only served to annoy her further.

Hermione ripped the note into little pieces and dumped the bits into her rubbish bin. Seconds later, a reluctant Leontes was called into service and pushed into the cold winter air to deliver a parcel with no return address or letter.

Part Twenty-Five

Chapter 25 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Lariope, you sweet woman. Thank you for giving up part of your time on the holidays to beta for us. We really do appreciate it.

The Forbidden Arte of Amore sat untouched upon Simon's desk for at least a week while he labored to fill the vast number of orders he'd received for various hang-over potions. He knew they were in anticipation of the coming New Year.

"Far be it from me to deny our noble apothecaries their fair share of profits due to the misery of others," he commented dryly to Yorick as the night of drunken celebration drew one day closer and the last of the orders had left his flat. "Even though there is no one to blame for their misery except themselves."

Turning away from the front windows, Simon eyed the empty tea cup in his hand and approached the bird.

"It's a far cry from the ones they suffered a few years ago, so I suppose there's room for some sort of idiotic behavior now," he commented while heading to the kitchen to refill his cup. Stopping dead in his tracks, Simon whirled around and sent a wide-eyed, horrified look to the falcon.

"Good gods! Yorick! Did you hear the drivel that fell from my lips? Understanding and *acceptance* of a behavior that leaves the participant incapacitated and completely worthless?"

Waving both hands in the air, empty cup in one, he moved back toward Yorick.

"This is all Hermione's fault. It's her influence!" Simon stated emphatically while nodding his head in understanding and relief. "I'm *not* getting soft. I'm **not!**" he repeated

while finally making his way into the kitchen to refill his cup.

Perhaps it was this resolve to prove that he wasn't getting soft that finally made Simon pick up the volume he'd received on Christmas day. Its pages were yellowed, but the print was still quite legible, so it didn't take him long to find the potion he *knew* that Dumbledore would have used.

"Duplicitous old bastard," Simon muttered while re-reading the list of ingredients. "I wonder if he brewed it himself or had someone else do his dirty work? Who was available around that time? Slughorn? Of course, it could have been sitting in his cupboard for years, merely waiting the call of its owner to be put to the most judicious use."

A handwritten list of the ingredients, along with the remembered properties of each, was etched onto a new sheet of parchment. Next, various herbology books were consulted and any forgotten or newly discovered variables were noted as well. Sitting back in his chair, Simon consulted the original volume of love potions and then added the directions for brewing the liquid. Finally, noting the dimming light in the room, Simon paused long enough to light several candles near and on his desk.

"Now, if I wanted to reverse this dastardly potion, where is the weakest point? Ah, here. Yes," Simon muttered to himself as he started making notes on a fresh sheet of parchment.

Further study of the list made him frown and pick up the original again.

"I'm surprised they used this one, Yorick. Wait when was this published?" he muttered while flipping to the first few pages of the book. "A hundred years or so ago. They would have used the *original* strain, which would have been more than adequate. I wonder if Dumbledore's brewer did, or if they used the modern, easy to acquire, milder version?"

It took Simon almost a month to devise what he thought might work as a cure. The problem was there were several variations depending on the actual ingredients used in the original potion. Since he didn't have a sample of that potion, and he didn't know if he had ingested the potion or if it had been applied to his skin, Simon's research was at a standstill.

There was another problem he was loath to admit. He would need assistance in the brewing of all the variations. Too many ingredients needed to be added simultaneously for him to do it alone. Finally, there was the question he was still unable to answer. Did he want the potion neutralized?

One witch held both an answer and the assistance Simon required. If she provided the wrong right answer, the assistance might not be required.

Folding his notes and placing them inside *The Forbidden Arte of Amore*, the small packet was placed in a pocket of his vest. His wand was slid up a sleeve and as he pulled on his cloak Simon paused in front of Yorick's perch.

"I suppose it's too much for you to wish me any sort of luck on this foolish endeavor of mine?" he asked the silent bird. "Save your breath, my chicken. I know. Believe me, I know."

Quietly letting himself out of the flat, Simon turned to *Apparate* and arrived in the alley behind Marks and Sons. It didn't take him long to find his way past the few Muggles he found in the streets and much, much too quickly he was confronted with the front door.

Well, bugger. I've forgotten the voice changing potion, now haven't I?

His eyes narrowed when he realized he no longer gave a damn if anyone recognized him or his voice. There was no longer any hesitation in his step as Severus pushed open the door and stepped up to the front desk.

"I'd like to see Miss Granger, if you don't mind. The name is Snape. Severus Snape."

If you do... Well, we'll deal with that if the need arises, won't we? he decided while tapping his fingers impatiently on the desk.

--8--

"Severus Snape?" Hermione knew she'd screeched, but the name one of her clerks had given her was, frankly, impossible.

Improbable, not impossible. Just extremely unlikely. Someone was clearly trying to take the piss at her expense, and, while she had no idea why they would be using this particular tactic, she did not like it. Not one bit. Someone was impersonating her Simon and that...

That needs to stop, right there. He's not 'your' anything, not anymore.

"You tell this Severus Snape that he can... No, I'll do it." She didn't even bother trying to identify the confused look on her employee's face, but the stunned expressions on the ones at the front desk who must have heard the impostor's introduction were quite clear.

Although none of them were as stunned as Hermione when it came apparent that it really was him.

"Simon? I mean, Severus?" She shook her head to clear it and started again. "Mister Snape. I was told you wished to see me? My office, then?"

--8--

Raising a brow at one of the male clerks was an extremely satisfactory use of his time while Severus waited for Hermione. The flustered employee suddenly announced he had to sort some books and took off toward the rear of the store. Severus frowned slightly when he realized the man looked vaguely familiar.

A former student?

Adversary? Not possible, probably the former given the speed with which he left.

And finally...there was Hermione. She was, he noted with an inner sigh of relief, prepared to be at least civil to him. His eyes swept her form, and it was with a pang of regret that he noted her hair was bound up in her armor.

Glasses, trousers and blouse complete the business ensemble. I wonder if I would have fared better at her home?

Too late for a change in plan. The situation is what it is and must be dealt with here and now.

Proceed as you mean to go on, you fool.

A small smile lifted the corner of Severus' mouth and he nodded.

"Your office would be perfect *Hermione*. Please, lead the way."

A small gesture at the fleeing back of the clerk preceded the question, "Is that, by chance, your Mister Fitzgerald?"

--8--

She hated it *Loved it*. when he said her name. Rather than let him see her react, she took her time looking for the man in question.

"No, actually. That is Mister Fitzgerald." She nodded toward the older man hovering in the doorway that led to the warehouse. Hermione was sure that news had spread like fiendfyre, and her friend was probably concerned, so she gave him a reassuring smile as she led Simon *Bugger it all*. Snape to her office.

"He's devoted to his wife and his three grandchildren." She bit her tongue, annoyed with her babbling *Why did I tell him that?*

Once they were safely in her office, behind a closed door, Hermione realized her tactical mistake. They'd been in this position before, and he'd kissed her senseless then. Her palms grew tingly at the thought, so she rubbed them against the fabric of her trousers as discretely as possible.

"So, you wanted to see me?"

--8--

"No," Severus stated quite simply. He waited a beat before beginning to speak again, mostly because he'd caught a whiff of a fragrance. A fragrance he'd personally brewed for the witch standing in front of him. It gave him enough courage to take a step toward her.

His tone was soft and unlike his normal sarcastic speech when he said, "I had no desire to merely ~~see~~ you, Hermione. I have come to humbly beg your pardon for the damage I've done to you and our friendship. I don't know if you read or burned my letter of apology and it doesn't matter except that I would like to repeat the words. I was completely and utterly wrong, and I chose a cruel way to demonstrate my apparent ongoing stupidity in misjudging your motives in cultivating our friendship. Can you *possibly* forgive me enough to give me another chance?"

If she refused, there was the answer to the question that had plagued him since the last time he'd seen Hermione. If he had no hope of rekindling what they had had, he would leave and keep Dumbledore's last curse as the only source of light left.

--8--

No.

He had said no. That hurt more than she wanted to admit.

And then he apologized, again, for hurting their *friendship*.

She wanted to tell him that he had ruined a lot more than just a simple friendship, that he had broken her heart, but she couldn't.

Nothing has changed, not really. He's still obsessed with Lily and I'll never be anything but second best, maybe not even that. I can't do that.

"Oh, Severus. I can forgive you, I do. But I can't give you another chance, I'm sorry."

--8--

It was rather surprising how low Severus' spirits sank when she forgave him, but refused to allow him to remain in her life. His eyes dropped and he nodded his head. His last words to Yorick came back to mock him now. It *had* been a foolish mission, at best.

"I understand," he stated while raising his eyes and meeting her glance. "I can't bring myself to throw my body on the floor and grovel, Hermione, so I won't trouble you further. Your Mister Fitzgerald will be adequate to handle any requests I send in the future."

Turning toward the door, he paused when *The Forbidden Arte of Amore* nudged him in the side. Pulling it, and his notes, from the vest pocket he laid it on a corner of her desk.

"Consider this a belated Christmas present, if you will. I have no further need for it, and it should make you a tidy sum someday if you ever figure out the rest of it. Fare well in your life, Hermione. You deserve it."

Shutting the door quietly behind him, Severus didn't pause to look at any of the books on the shelves. He was reminded of a time, not too long ago in this very room, when he'd disregarded them in favor of a witch.

She is gone, but the books will remain. Again.

--8--

For some reason, she hadn't expected him to look so upset at her refusal.

He was out the door before she looked at the book he had left and realized there was something tucked into its pages.

Mere seconds later, she had scanned the notes and read bits and pieces of his handwriting, just enough to figure out what he had been working on.

An antidote!

Her heart seemed to stop beating for a moment, then started again, faster than before.

Hermione dropped the book on her desk and ran to the door, jerking it open hard enough that it swung back and hit the wall in her haste.

He had made it to the front door, and she would never reach his side in time to stop him unless she...

Loud enough to be heard throughout the store, Hermione called out as she rushed toward him, "Severus, wait! Please!"

--8--

The bang of a door startled Severus somewhat and he picked up his pace as he neared the front door. Hermione's words reached him as his hand touched the handle to exit.

She probably wants to refuse the gift. Give her the opportunity or leave and make her send it by owl?

That at least would give her time to read the notes and realize the potential.

And be terribly, terribly rude behavior behavior on my part.

Which she does not deserve.

Severus considered the options briefly and turned in resignation.

"Miss Granger, you could have returned the gift by owl if needed. It really wasn't necessary to test the hearing of everyone in the shoppe," he stated with more than a trace of the old sarcastic tones coming to his aid at long last. "I'm sure all within a three block radius would have thanked you."

--8--

That's the Severus I remember.

"I don't want to return it; I want to discuss the notes you left in it. If you don't mind. My office, again?" She offered a tentative smile. "Please?"

--8--

For one brief moment, Severus had hope, but before they could gain a small foothold on his soul, he dashed them into shards with a firm shake of his head.

"No," he stated again quite simply. "You have everything I could bring to the puzzle in my notes, Miss Granger. The smartest witch of her age should be able to piece together the rest."

Severus knew he was throwing away a chance to be with her, possibly work along side her, but without the hope of some type of relationship to build upon...

"As I said," he told her in a firm tone. "I no longer have any need for the antidote and don't wish to waste any more of my time delving into possibilities. I make enough for my needs, therefore it's yours to do with as you please."

--8--

She'd hurt his feelings with her refusal.

That wasn't even close to making them even, but it was enough to give Hermione the hope she needed to extend her hand toward him.

"What if it would please me to work on the antidote with my friend? Will you give *me* another chance?"

--8--

Pushing aside the inner, snide voice that told him Hermione was playing him for a fool, Severus slowly took the small hand she offered, but refused to move.

"If you're saying, what I *hope* you're saying *you* don't require a second chance, Hermione. You've never used up the first one."

Glancing down at their hands, he squeezed hers gently.

"I can make no promises," Severus advised soberly when his gaze rose again. "There are no guarantees we can find an antidote. Even then, that I will... That my feelings will... We may end up as we began, Hermione. Merely friends. I think you know all that, but I need it said."

Part Twenty-Six

Chapter 26 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Once again, many thanks to Lariope for the wonderful beta work she manages to fit into her busy life.

"The Saturday before Valentine's and I'm going to be spending it cooped up in a potion's lab." Why didn't that sound as bad as she was expecting it to?

*Because your **friend** Severus will be there with you.*

Friends.

It was a tentative friendship at best, and bittersweet because she had glimpsed the beginnings of what could have been.

That was before. This is now, and things are different. I can't let myself think about what-ifs until we've managed to find an antidote, and we will find it.

That had been her mantra since she'd last seen Severus. "No what-ifs, and we will find the antidote."

After Severus had left the store, there had been a minor uproar as word had spread through the customers and employees. Hermione had refused to comment, and Mister Fitzgerald had graciously volunteered to deal with any written inquiries that had nothing to do with the buying and selling of books for the next few weeks.

Still, it had been several hectic days with Hermione dodging one curious gossip after another. "No bloody comment," seemed to be her other mantra for awhile.

She couldn't dodge Harry, who had been quite upset to discover that Snape was not only alive and well, but that Hermione had known about it and not told him. She'd tried to explain that it hadn't been her secret to tell, but she suspected he was still annoyed with her, because he had ended the Floo call quite suddenly and she hadn't heard from him since.

She and Severus were getting together to brew, not for a date, so Hermione wore older, comfortable clothing that could survive a stain or two. She finished pinning up her hair and told herself one last time that Severus needed a friend right now, and she was the only likely candidate other than his bird.

With the reminder of Yorick, Hermione rushed into the kitchen and snatched up a tin of the biscuits she liked to give the falcon.

--8--

As soon as the owls started arriving Severus regretted his momentary lapse in judgment when he had replied to Kingsley's first letter granting him an Order of Merlin, and a full pardon, therefore confirming the rumors Severus Snape had lived.

"I *knew* it!" he yelled at Yorick while shaking a fist full of crumpled pages. "The only worthwhile scrap of correspondence in all this mess was the short note from Kingsley, and I should have burned that one as soon as I knew what it contained, but *noooooo!* I just had to return that scrap of metal and advise him what he could do with it, didn't I?" Glancing around his paper filled flat, Severus shook his head in annoyance before a small smirk lifted one corner of his mouth.

"Some of the death threats are somewhat amusing," he advised while using his wand to sort the pages into three neat piles. "The greatest majority show an appalling lack of imagination. Hufflepuffs, I'd wager."

As he considered the piles, Severus realized he felt really *alive* again in a way he hadn't for a long, long time. Squatting down beside the smallest of the piles, he read the topmost one without touching it and sent a questioning, disbelieving look in Yorick's direction.

"I'll never understand the feminine mind, my chicken. Do you have a clue why this woman would want me to *marry* her daughter, let alone meet her? I'm a bloody Death Eater for Merlin's sake, *and* I killed their dear, darling headmaster."

Rising to his feet, Severus pointed his wand at the offending offers, and a moment later, they were reduced to a small pile of ash. The stack containing the death threats soon followed. That left the second highest stack of papers, which were quickly sorted into three other stacks. The largest joined its predecessors in the dust bin as ash, while the other two, much smaller, found a place on his desk.

February 10th, 2001

Kingsley,

As I stated previously, I do not want, nor will I accept, this blasted piece of tarnished metal and ribbon. Do not send it to me again or I shall endeavor to find The Dark Lord's last resting place and pin it on his grave.

SS

February 10th, 2001

Minerva,

While I've no doubt you've forgiven me for all my ugly sins, I don't know that I've forgiven you for yours. I have no desire to return in any capacity whatsoever to Hogwarts, so feel free to give any positions that might open up in the future to whomever your little heart desires.

SS

Post script Please advise Madam Pomfrey that her duplicity has been exposed at long last. Her master would have been quite pleased with her efforts.

February 10th, 2001

Potter,

I want all of my remaining memories returned posthaste.

SS

Post script I have noticed a disturbing trend among our newborn citizens. A large number have been given the name Albus, which isn't surprising. What is surprising is the amount that have been burdened with the name Severus. If you and the former Miss Weasley are EVER cursed with offspring, I forbid you to use my name, alone or in conjunction with the aforementioned Albus. If you go against my wishes I shall find you.

Putting down his quill, Severus rose, stretched, and raised his hands toward the ceiling.

"I'm in need of some lunch, Yorick. I'd forgotten how tiring it can be to correspond with acquaintances. The rest can wait, with what I know is bated breath, to hear from me."

His arms dropped, and he turned as his brewing partner appeared in his sitting room.

"Good afternoon. Would you care for a bite of lunch while we look over the notes?"

--8--

Her first instinct was that she had made a mistake in coming.

*Better here than at the house, where every room holds some memory of...*She shut that line of thought down quickly, but not before heat bloomed on her cheeks.

"Lunch would be fine, thank you. Oh, I brought these. For Yorick. Since we haven't he doesn't get them as often as he used to."

While he dealt with gathering the lunch things, Hermione looked around the sitting room. Curiosity got the best of her, and she peeked at the letters he had sitting out, presumably waiting to be delivered.

A small smile formed on her lips and she quickly wiped it away as she followed Severus to the kitchen. "You're not really planning on sending those letters, are you?"

--8--

Is that a trick question?

Deciding it probably wasn't, Severus paused in the cutting of the sandwiches, glanced at Hermione with a questioning look on his face and asked, "Why, after taking the time and effort to pen them, wouldn't I?"

Picking up the tray containing their lunch, he headed toward the small dining area.

"I can assure you, my dear Hermione, my handwriting doesn't improve with practice."

--8--

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar?" she teased back. "Although, I never did understand why someone would want a bunch of flies in the first place."

She took a seat at the table and reached for a sandwich. "You wanted to go over your notes?"

--8--

"Ah-ha!" Severus stated emphatically while waving a knife in the air. "I told Yorick it was vinegar and not acid! I am somewhat familiar with the old saying, however, the amount of *honey* involved depends on whether or not you wish to be bothered with those particular flies, does it not?"

The knife was set down on a plate while a sheaf of notes were drawn from his pocket.

"Yes, I'd like you to look these over, please. There are a number of variations we shall have to try. Some of them due to the fact I don't know if I ingested the potion or if it was applied topically," he noted. Severus took a bite of his sandwich, chewed, swallowed and took a sip of tea before continuing. "Dumbledore would have had to be close to me either way at the time, as it isn't a potion that requires the use of a hair or any other item from the intended heart throb, but merely the mention of his or her name."

--8--

Swallowing quickly, Hermione wiped her hands on her napkin and reached for the papers. She read them, her mind whirring as she thought about anything she might have seen or heard in the memories she had borrowed from Harry.

Several minutes passed in silence before Hermione lifted her head, eyes wide. "I think I think I might know when he did it. If the potion can be administered topically, then I think I saw the bastard do it."

She stood up, her half-eaten sandwich forgotten, and began to pace as the memory came back to her. "It was the same memory as when he put the guilt curse on you. You were in his office, head bent down in grief and sorrow, and he had this vial in his hand. It must have been just a few drops on your head any more and you would have noticed, I'm sure. Then he leaned closer and whispered her name, and I thought he was just reminding you of what you'd lost, not not condemning you to..." Here she stopped, well aware that it would be very easy to say the wrong thing.

"Do you think that could be it?"

--8--

I wonder if that intense look of concentration is on my face when I walk and think aloud Severus mused silently as his eyes followed Hermione in her travels. The rest of his sandwich was demolished just before she halted.

"I think," he said before wiping his mouth, "that you should sit down and finish your lunch. I'll not have an assistant that faints from hunger during an important phase of brewing." A sip of tea followed this pronouncement, and he summoned a plate of chocolate biscuits he'd ordered specifically for Hermione. Taking one, he nibbled a corner.

"I have no doubt that could be the moment in question," he stated firmly. "After lunch we shall brew a sample of the topical potion and see if it matches the diagnostic you ran on me before. Then we will know for certain it's the correct one before we subject our volunteers to its properties. If not, we'll have to make each one before we know for sure."

--8--

Her "Yes, Mother," was mumbled very quietly as Hermione took her seat and picked up the rest of her sandwich.

"We have volunteers? Do they know they've volunteered for this, or am I about to be introduced to the mating rituals of the rodent world?"

She dutifully finished her lunch and then snatched a biscuit off the plate, biting into it with obvious enjoyment.

--8--

His minor irritation at being compared to her mother quickly evaporated when Hermione's question about the volunteers started running through his mind. Severus' eyes narrowed slightly, and his elbow rested on the table while a hand caressed his chin.

"There's a thought," he muttered aloud. "We could run an advertisement, to either sex, really, offering to help them in their love lives. It could turn a pretty galleon or two at the same time we're solving the puzzle. The volunteers wouldn't really *be* volunteers in that sense; however, as we would be paid by a third party to perform the service, any damage settlements could, *and would*, revert back to the party who hired us. It would have to be put in a iron-clad contract, of course."

Severus sent Hermione a congratulatory smirk.

"You are, indeed, living up to your press, my dear."

--8--

For a split second, she almost believed him. Her biscuit nearly got caught in her throat as she gave him a wide-eyed, horrified look. Then she realized he had to be joking *Didn't he?* and began to giggle.

"You had me going for a minute."

She took another biscuit and nibbled on it for a moment. "Speaking of press, I just wanted to reassure you that I haven't said a word to any of the vultures who have come by Marks and Sons looking for a juicy quote or two, and I've asked my staff to do the same."

--8--

How would I have had her going, when I didn't move, and neither did she? pondered Severus. A quick glance under the table confirmed that she hadn't moved as much as her feet. He decided *against* having her explain the comment and took the initial expression on her face and the giggling to mean she was against using witches and wizards as volunteers.

"Why did you bring it up if you didn't want to use... Never mind," he mumbled shaking his head. Once again, he would have to adjust and try to take into account the wishes of a soft-hearted Gryffindor if he wished to share her company, which he did.

"I have a number of mice that will work. You'll have to name them, I suppose, in order for the potion to take affect," he stated while briskly putting their lunch dishes in the sink.

Turning, he leaned back against the cabinet and sent her a gentle smile.

"I've had no concerns about what you would or wouldn't say to the press, Hermione, and while I do appreciate you cautioning your staff, the press will do as it pleases."

He straightened and held out a hand.

"Shall we begin?"

--8--

He held out his hand. Hermione stared at it for a second, blinked, told herself that the world would not shatter apart if she were to touch him, and stood up to take it.

The world won't, but I might. To distract herself from how good he felt to her touch-starved person, Hermione asked, "How many mice are there?"

--8--

Frowning slightly, Severus led them to his lab. Once there, he paused, released her hand, and considered the room. It was a far cry from the private one he'd had access to at Hogwarts, but it had served him well.

"I have a dozen, six of each, in the cages over in that corner. We may need to rearrange the tables. I'm used to working alone, so I haven't allowed enough walking space for two," he commented absently while pondering how best to move them.

He turned and regarded his new working partner.

"I wonder. Would Minerva..." The sentence broke off, and he shook his head fiercely. "No. I want to owe nothing to her *or* that institution. This will have to suffice."

--8--

She bit her lower lip to keep from telling him that Minerva McGonagall probably would have loved to allow him access to the castle and anything he might need.

"Your set-up will be more than adequate, I'm sure. I'll do my best to stay out of your way."

Hermione drifted over to the mice and bent to look at them. "I apologize in advance for what we're going to do to you. If it is any consolation, it shouldn't hurt." One of the mice noticed her and wandered to the side of the cage. "Oh, look at that little itty nose; you're a cutie. I think we'll call you Juliet."

She tilted her head and looked a bit closer. "Or Romeo from the looks of things."

Eleven little tails were counted, which made Hermione frown. She counted again. "Either you miscounted when you got them, or one of your volunteers has had second thoughts and run away, Severus."

--8--

"Again! Blasted, flea-bitten Accio rodent!"

The frightened little mouse flew into Severus' outstretched hand.

"I warned you before, did I not?" he asked while staring into the small face peeping out of his fist. "I'm sure Yorick would love an indoor hunt for his dinner. No snow. No icy winds blowing his tail feathers around."

While he didn't imagine the mouse understood, it was given a satisfied nod before he approached the cages.

"You misunderstand, Hermione. It's not a matter of you staying out of my way or me out of yours. We have to work together, in the same space, to properly brew these potions. There are at least three stages in one of the potions that require..."

Severus' eyes narrowed slightly, and he paused in the act of putting the runaway mouse back in its cage. His head tilted as he considered the witch beside him.

"You know all this. Why are you acting like the scared little mouse in my hand?"

--8--

Poor mouse. She wondered if he'd really let Yorick eat it and decided that there was a very real possibility that he might.

Then he had proceeded to lecture her as if she were a first year student once more.

"Perhaps because I spent six very tense years under your tutelage, in which every single mistake I made, no matter how infinitesimal, was held up for ridicule in front of a classroom full of my peers, by you? Five of those years were in a potions lab. Add to that, I haven't really brewed anything of actual consequence in more than a year, and you tell me why I might be a little tense."

--8--

"Fair enough," Severus commented as he secured the fastening on the cage after putting the mouse away. Turning to face Hermione again, he said, "I'll not apologize for my teaching methods, Hermione. I'm not Minerva, Flitwick, Sprout, or any of the others. Potions is too dangerous a subject to make stupid mistakes when you're out on your own. I wounded the psyches to save the bodies. Plus, to a small extent I enjoyed it, but I'll wager you never made the same mistake twice."

Unsure if it was wise, he continued, "I don't want a brewing partner with a swelled head, but of all the able-bodied witches and wizards *currently* at my beck and call in light of the *honors* they're so anxious to bestow upon my head why would I chose a know-it-all such as yourself, Hermione? Keep in mind that while I'm not proud of the situation I'm in, I'm not striving to keep it a secret either. Those that revere Dumbledore will do that well enough if it ever comes out."

--8--

"I don't think anyone would ever make the mistake of confusing you with McGonagall, or Flitwick, or the others." She sighed and forced herself not to reach for something to toy with to keep her hands busy.

It would probably kill him to give her a compliment that wasn't some sort of twisted, backhanded almost-insult, assuming she understood him correctly in the first place.

"I didn't ask you to apologize for your teaching methods; I was merely answering your question as to why I was skittish, if you will. It's an ingrained response. I'm in a lab, about to brew, with you, therefore I'm tense."

She found a clean piece of parchment with their notes and began to write. "Before we start, you wanted me to name the mice. Let's see, I've already decided on Romeo and Juliet."

Hermione bent down to examine the rest of the mice in the cage, pointing as she named them. "Petruccio and Kate. Othello and Desdemona. Lorenzo and Jessica. Antony and Cleopatra. And finally, our little escape artist and his mate shall be ... Clyde and Bonnie." She finished scribbling on the parchment and set it next to the cages.

Hermione spoke without looking up at him. "I feel that I should remind you that I am not a Potions Master, and there is a more than fair chance that I may make a mistake at some point during all of this, and while I do not expect you to hold your tongue should that happen, I do hope that you will endeavor to remember that we are no longer in a classroom and we are friends."

--8--

"Again, fair enough," Severus said after he rolled his eyes over her choice of names.

Clyde and Bonnie? I don't recall anything by Shakespeare using those names.

"You are my colleague, not my student, and not a Potions master. Would you like to know how you disappointed me the most and get it out of the way before we begin?" he asked carefully.

--8--

Would she like to know? Of course not.

Was she going to ask him not to tell her? Of course not.

"Will this be in essay form, or will a simple, bullet-point list do?"

--8--

Severus smothered a laugh and shook his head, but couldn't contain the dark merriment evident in his eyes.

"Not an essay or a bullet-point list, Hermione. You disappointed me the most when you became quite a good bookseller instead of an extraordinary Potions master. I should try harder to find a substitute for Acromantula venom in my duplicating potion and force you to change professions, perhaps?" he asked with a small smile.

"But then, that wouldn't be your choice, would it," he said sobering suddenly. "You and I both have done far too many things we'd rather not in the last few years."

--8--

"Yes, we have," she whispered and reached for one of his hands, cradling it between both of her own.

"But things are going to be different from now on. Trust me."

Part Twenty-Seven

Chapter 27 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Greetings! I know you're all probably quite tired of excuses by now, and I have to apologize yet again, I'm afraid. Real life does get a bit testy at times, and the last few months have proven that fact beyond a doubt. Darnedchild had an operation to remove her tonsils, and my hubby was diagnosed with cancer of the prostate. All is well for now, so our little tale can move forward again. Many thanks go out to our dear, darling Lariope. You are a wonder. Enjoy!

"Clyde and Bonnie, Clyde and Bonnie..." Severus muttered under his breath while running a finger down a list of characters contained in Love's Labour's Lost by The Bard. Slamming the book closed when he was unable to find the cursed names, Severus glared at Yorick before rising, book in hand. He strode over to the bookcase and pushed the offending volume back in place. Crossing his arms and staring at the tips of his shoes, Severus walked back and forth between Yorick's perch and the desk several times before stopping. The level of his head didn't change as he twisted his neck to glare at the bird again.

"She's still punishing me, isn't she?" Severus asked with a calculating look on his face. "She had to have known I'd research those names."

He walked back over to the books and ran a finger over the volumes, counting them down. "I've searched Shakespeare's histories, tragedies and, finally, the so-called comedies and I'm *still* unable to locate the irritating Clyde and his blasted wench, Bonnie!" Throwing his arms wide, Severus turned and started walking again.

"I wonder if the Muggles have squirreled away some of Shakespeare's works and kept them secret?" he questioned the bird. "Some vast library containing a small assortment known only to them. It would fit. Hermione loves reading, loves books, and if there's one somewhere she *hasn't* read..."

The clock in the living room struck the quarter hour, broke Severus's train of thought, and pulled his attention.

"Blast! She'll be here in a matter of minutes, and I haven't started logging the results from yesterday's trials yet," he told the bird as he started moving in the direction of the lab. Severus stopped, turned and pointed a finger at his falcon.

"You hold your tongue, my chicken, or you'll end up like the original Yorick did. Not a word peep, squawk, or whatever sort of noise you make to Hermione. Understand?"

--8--

It was easier to get ready this time. She and Severus had worked together comfortably the night before. It wasn't too difficult to let herself ease back into the role of friend.

As for their work, she concentrated on their experiment as if it were a puzzle that needed to be solved, rather than thinking of the potentially life altering consequences of failure. Or success.

"Severus?" Hermione called out the moment she appeared in his sitting room. "I had a thought during my bath last night; do you think we need to give the mice some sort

of contraceptive potion?"

She pulled a biscuit out of her pocket and offered it to Yorick. "New recipe Leontes liked it, but he'll eat just about anything. Anyway, about the mice? I was just thinking that if the love potion does what it's supposed to, and we're not careful, we may end up with loads of new test subjects. What do you think?"

--8--

If he'd been a suspicious man, and unfortunately he was, Severus would be inclined to think Hermione had mentioned her *hath* to further punish him. Pushing memories of their one and only bath together out of his mind, Severus walked into the sitting room and leaned against the door jamb. Crossing his arms, he raised a brow.

"I think that I've already had the *pleasure* of being a master brewer for a snake. If you don't mind, I think I'll pass at adding the rodent population to my resume. If we keep them separated, in charmed cages, it should help control the population. Of course," he added while scratching his chin, "we could avoid the issue entirely if we pair off, say Romeo with Petruccio, Juliet with Kate and so on."

--8--

For a moment, she wondered if Severus had made contraceptive potion for Voldemort, and that wonderful thought was enough to momentarily short circuit her brain as she tried to keep any and all mental images from forming.

She blinked twice, then shook her head to clear it.

"Well, keeping them separated would probably work on most of them, but I was concerned about Clyde. He seems to be a very determined little fellow, and if he continues to be able to find his way *out* of cages, who is to say that he won't be able to find his way *in* to a completely different cage. Namely, Bonnie's."

--8--

There were *those* names again. The insufferable Clyde and his merry wench, Bonnie. Severus' eyes flicked over to his bookcase, the bookcase that had *failed* him, before they fastened on Hermione. Walking toward the kitchen, he attempted to stifle his irritation at not being able to find a reference to them.

"Why did you choose those names out of all the other names available?" he asked conversationally while preparing a pot of tea. "Clyde and Bonnie seem so mundane compared to the others."

--8--

"I don't know, they just seemed to fit. Don't you think so?" She followed him into the kitchen and leaned her hip against a counter.

"Besides, not everyone can have names as interesting as Petruccio, Desdemona, Hermione or Severus. Anything I can do to help?"

--8--

He held his tongue long enough to organize the tea tray, gather the chocolate biscuits Hermione liked, and head for the dining alcove with their tea. Setting it down, he pondered the wisdom of asking about Clyde and Bonnie. There had been so many different times he'd not asked what she meant, whether from the fear of appearing ignorant or foolish, he didn't know. Perhaps it was the key he needed to finally understand her.

Like the time on the roof. What was it she said, and I didn't...

"Cake," he said while turning to look at Hermione. "What did you mean by *cake*, when we flew on the roof?"

--8--

"What?"

She had no clue what he was talking about at first. Hermione remembered the night they had flown above the roof, that was something she would never forget; but she had no idea what that had to do with Bonnie and Clyde or the names of the other mice.

"Cake?" Hermione reached for a biscuit as her mind tried to think of what she could have possibly meant by the word. She bit into the treat, then swallowed as it came to her.

A blush crept up to warm her cheeks. "I meant cake as in 'piece of cake'. I was terrified, and I was trying to convince myself that I could oh, I think you wanted me to take my foot off of yours at the time and I was trying to boost my courage somewhat. I told myself that I'd already done so many other dangerous things that taking one little step should be a piece of cake."

She tilted her head and gave him a confused smile. "What brought that up? Are we going back up to the roof?"

--8--

I was terrified... trying to boost my courage... already done so many other dangerous things...

"No, no roof."

Severus shook his head slowly. For not the first time, he felt wholly inadequate, a fraud wearing what were supposed to be a war hero's robes.

"Cake," he muttered absently while wandering back over to his desk. Picking up the letters he'd fully intended to send to Kingsley, Minerva and Potter, Severus glanced at them before he tore them into quarters and tossed them into the bin next to his desk. With his head lowered, he began speaking.

"You were terrified, but you didn't let it stop you," he said soberly. Turning, he leaned against the back of the desk and finally looked up at Hermione. "I've read accounts of what Potter did in the forest. When he thought he was going to die."

A few moments of silence passed before he began again. "I don't know that I could have...walked of my own accord toward death and that," he stated while picking up the medal he'd been sent not once, but twice, "makes me unworthy to accept this."

When she opened her mouth to speak, he held up a hand and said, "Please, let me finish."

Rising, he walked toward Hermione, took one of her hands, placed the medal on her palm, and closed her fist around it.

"It should go to Creevy, or Weasley or any one of those who were willing to, and did, pay the ultimate price, not me."

Walking back toward his desk, Severus turned and pointed a finger at Hermione before shaking it.

"Don't start telling me I risked my life by being Dumbledore's spy. It was different, and we both know it. I was *never* in real mortal peril until the very end, and that that I'd

taken into account. I cheated death, Hermione, and I knew it was possible before I faced it. I *stopped it, if you will*," he advised with an almost nasty laugh that ended abruptly. Taking his position against the desk again, he knew the time for all pretenses had vanished.

"I've always been able to *plan*, take everything I could into account, and I'm telling you all this because...now I am terrified, Hermione," he stated while throwing his arms in the air and walking briskly back and forth between the desk and Yorick's perch. "And I don't have that piece of *cake* you Gryffindors seem to be able to find. I don't know if I can survive without...without Lily. I don't want Dumbledore's influence, but if my love has been sustained by a potion and it dies... I've never been without her at the heart of me," he said while bringing both arms to his chest. "I'd even thought to sabotage our efforts to find a cure, but I can't bring myself to perpetrate Dumbledore's last, best jest." His arms dropped to his sides, and Severus turned to face Hermione again.

"Will...what is *me*...cease?"

--8--

Her heart was breaking once more, this time for Severus. The poor man, he'd been through so much already, been betrayed by those he thought closest to him, used by so many, and now...

She should be angry that he had even thought about ruining the cure just so he could keep his fantasy, but listening to him speak, she finally began to realize a fraction of what he must be going through.

Right now, he needed reassurance, and as his friend perhaps his only friend, other than Yorick she would provide it if she could.

If he would let her.

Hermione moved to stand in front of him. "There is so much more to you than just who you love, Severus. So much. If we find the cure, and if your feelings change, you'll still be Severus Snape."

She reached out and placed one of her hands over his heart. "I think, even with the cure, you'll still love her in here; it just might not be in exactly the same way. I think Lily will always be part of your life, but if we find a cure, you'll be able to remember the good parts of your time with her without the potion dredging up the bad."

Hermione bit her lower lip and took a step closer, opening her arms to hug Severus if he would allow it.

--8--

Even as he accepted and returned Hermione's embrace, Severus realized that she couldn't know how much and how long Lily Evans Potter had been the *whole* reason for his continued existence. The fire that had burned inside him to finally and completely destroy the monster who'd slain her had been fueled by that love. Harry Potter had been the vessel, and he'd been charged with keeping that vessel alive. Severus had done so to the best of his ability for as long as possible. Seeing *James* alive again, but not her, had been almost unbearable. The occasional glimpse of her green eyes in her son's face had made it slightly less painful.

Hermione's embrace, and her words of wisdom, settled some of the imbalances within his soul brought about by the paralyzing fear of losing the *core* of his being. The soft vanilla scent she still wore gave him the courage to give her a firm squeeze before loosening his hold. Now now a pair of brown eyes gazed up at him, offering hope, comfort and friendship that he'd never hoped to find. Pulling back enough to meet those eyes, he murmured, "I'll not hold it against you either way, agreed?" with a trace of a small smile.

--8--

Hermione smiled back, "Agreed."

Reluctantly, she took a step back and ended the hug completely. "Tea, then we've got a dozen love struck mice to tend to before we can start working on creating the impossible."

--8--

Throughout their tea and the long, tedious hours spent in the lab, Hermione's words kept teasing the edge of Severus' thoughts. Always just barely out of reach, refusing to fully emerge from one of the back rooms in his mind, was the quote he knew he'd read or heard somewhere before.

The craving this created was extremely strong by the time they shared a light supper, but it was almost overpowering when their labors for the day had ended. Severus had the needed presence of mind to make arrangements with Hermione for the next session prior to seeing her off, and tend to the relatively small wants of his chicken, before ending his day as it had begun: hovering and reaching into the shelves of the bookcase in search of that small tidbit of information to fill the gnawing void. This voyage of discovery ended quite differently than the one at the beginning of the day.

'The difficult is that which can be done immediately; the impossible that which takes a little longer.'... George Santayana

Part Twenty-Eight

Chapter 28 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

Hermione was frustrated.

Not that she wasn't doing everything in her power to keep it from showing, but she was growing more frustrated with each passing day.

Their early success with recreating the topical love potion had spoiled her, and now the tedium of each experimental brew that ended in failure was getting to her *Isn't that*

how it always is, so easy to mess something up, yet so difficult to put it back to rights?

She found her gaze slipping toward Severus more and more on the nights and weekends when she would come over to help him brew another difficult potion, found herself wishing things might be different, that she might suggest that they take a break one night and go out for a bite to eat, or even just a walk to get some air. Anything, really, as long as she could spend time with him and have his attention focused solely on her, even for a brief moment.

Oh yes, her frustration wasn't just aimed at their failures in the lab.

Enough! Hermione wiped the back of her hand against her sweaty forehead and stretched, feeling the abused muscles in her back protest the hours she had spent bent over the lab table assisting Severus that evening.

She drew her eyes away from him once more and noticed a hint of movement from behind several vials, just a brief hint of moving rodent tail really.

"Clyde!"

Hermione used her wand to summon the escapee, then gently returned him to his cage. "I swear, if there is a rodent equivalent to a kneazle, then Clyde has to be one."

Clyde's cage mate, Lorenzo, paused in his grooming as she tapped on the edge of the cage. "This is strange. Severus, Jessica is right there in her cage, trying to attract Lorenzo's attention, and he's ignoring her." Hermione quickly examined the rest of the cages and found the other animals to be acting pretty much the same as they had been since Severus had administered the love potion to them sleeping as close as the cages would allow, eating and drinking with at least some of their attention focused on their love.

She put her hand between the two cages, and while Jessica began to run in distressed circles when she couldn't see Lorenzo, he merely continued to groom himself.

"Severus?"

--8--

While watching Hermione's struggles with the errant Clyde, Severus had had a small smirk on his face, which vanished the instant she mentioned there had been some progress made. A tight, panicky feeling formed in the center of his chest, and he had to force himself to take normal, regular breaths of air. The initial panic faded, but there was a core of tightness left behind that whispered he that *they* should leave well enough alone.

Walking toward Hermione, and the apparently carefree Lorenzo, Severus frowned while studying the two mice. He hadn't enjoyed watching their behavior these past few months wondering all the while if he had mimicked their besotted actions in his non-pursuit of Lily wondering if she and Potter had laughed at him while enjoying their blissful domesticity. Even worse, he'd wondered if the mutt and the werewolf had enjoyed the spectacle provided by *Snivellus*.

"Indeed," Severus muttered.

This is a good development, he told himself, trying to convince that tightening feeling in his chest to go away.

"Fuck," he stated, while turning and walking as far away from the proof of initial success as he could. "Hermione," he ground out. "Don't misunderstand, please. I'm having difficulty tight panic..."

Whirling around, slightly wide eyed, he glared at her.

"I can't deal with any further efforts in the lab tonight. Would you care to accompany me on my first foray into the public eye this evening? A pint of whatever at the Leaky Cauldron, perhaps? I'll understand if you decline."

--8--

Her joy at what appeared to be the first sign of headway toward a cure quickly turned to concern at Severus' distress. She wanted to rush to his side when he walked away, but was glad that she'd contained the urge when he quickly turned to face her.

"It's all right, I understand." *I think*. "I'm not really dressed for Actually, if you don't mind waiting, I can pop over to my place and change and meet you back here?"

If he was serious about wanting to go out as Severus Snape, then she wasn't about to let him go alone. Not while he was like this *Who knows what sort of trouble he might get himself into*, she told herself.

It didn't even occur to Hermione that perhaps it wasn't her place to worry about him quite so much.

--8--

"Yorick! Nothing I have is suitable!" Severus bellowed from inside his bedroom. The wardrobe had failed to produce anything he felt would be appropriate to wear on his first official foray into the public eye. "What in the bloody, blue blazes was I thinking? I'm not equipped to traipse about, especially with Hermione Oh, good gods!" Severus almost ran out of the bedroom and paused before the falcon's perch with a pair of trousers still in his hand.

"Would this be considered a *date*?"

When Yorick didn't answer, Severus threw the offending article of clothing toward the dining alcove.

"You've got an opinion on everything else! Why use any decorum now, you sorry excuse for a reptile?"

Yorick merely turned on his perch and looked pointedly at a closet near the front entrance. Severus without turning his head, as he didn't want to give the bird the satisfaction of making him look glanced in the same direction, and realized his salvation might be inside.

Bloody know-it-all-bird! He must be taking lessons from Hermione.

Poking the bird in the side to make sure it was aware he hadn't turned his head, Severus waited until Yorick looked back at him.

"You're no help," he stated bluntly. Striding into the dining alcove, Severus reached down and picked up the trousers he'd tossed there earlier. Being ever so casual, he deliberately walked over to the closet.

"I should hang these up," Severus said while brushing them off and opening the door to obtain a hanger. "There's no reason... Well, well. Look here, Mister I-know-everything. I'd almost forgotten about these. Why didn't *you* remind me?"

Satisfied that the bird could take no credit in *his* discovery, Severus proceeded to shuffle through various shrunken boxes.

"No, not those," he mumbled to himself as another box was returned to its shrunken state and placed in the pile he'd already gone through. "Why, with all your continual nagging, didn't you advise me to *label* these bloody boxes, you ungrateful chicken? It would have been the least you **Ah, ha!** At last."

One last tiny little box was kicked back inside the closet before the door was slammed, and Severus, holding an enlarged carton, turned in triumph to glare at Yorick.

"No thanks to you, I might actually be presentable."

Stalking back over to Yorick's perch, Severus lifted his chin and prepared to lambaste the bird again. Instead, a small smile lifted the corner of his mouth.

"All right, you wretched blackmailer, I'll leave you an extra mouse in the usual place as long as you keep your beak shut," he said with a note of genuine affection in his tone before turning and heading into the bedroom.

Once there, the carton was reopened, garments were withdrawn, sorted, and a Freshening Charm used on the ones that were deemed appropriate. Seeing them laid out on his bed waiting for him, Severus paused and was drawn to the wardrobe containing his Muggle clothing.

"Enough," he muttered, fingering the fabric of a shirt between his fingers. "I am **not** Simon Sopohorous, and I no longer have to dress as though I am." Severus released the shirt and closed the door with a click. One of his hands caressed the wood for moment. "I shall in a way miss you, Simon, but I no longer need your protection."

A quick shower and shave proceeded the donning of Severus' personal *armor*, although he didn't see it that way. Each layer added to the feeling of rightness, and by the time the black, full flowing cape was added, a broad grin graced the face of one Severus Snape. Walking back and forth, turning briskly, he was overjoyed to feel the whip and snap of the beloved robes around his legs once again.

Throwing open the bedroom door, Severus jumped out into the sitting room arms and hands spread wide, feet spaced accordingly and yelled, **Ta-da!** in Yorick's general direction.

"What do you think, my chicken?" he asked while walking toward the perch. A small fleck of *something* was picked off the immaculate black sleeve, and he turned slowly to give the falcon the full view.

"Don't you think these are much better than the clothes you're accustomed to seeing me in?"

Sliding his wand up the type of sleeve it was *supposed* to be housed in felt bloody wonderful.

"Good night, my chicken. Don't wait up," Severus advised with a cheeky grin before he turned and *Apparated* to Hermione's door.

--8--

She had told Severus that she would just be a few minutes, but once she had arrived at her place and taken a good look at her messy hair and sweaty face, Hermione had made the split second decision to take a shower.

Her hair was magically dried and shoved up with hairpins, potion-brewing clothes exchanged for something nicer *But not too nice!* and Hermione was trying to decide if she had time to put on something more substantial than a bit of lip gloss before leaving for Severus' when someone knocked on her door.

"Now is not the time, Mrs Carmichael," Hermione muttered as she rounded up a pair of shoes with a low heel. The knock came again, and she stopped to slip on her shoes before pulling the door open. "Just a second, Mrs Carmichael!"

She was already thinking of excuses to hurry the older woman on her way when the opening door revealed Severus.

"Oh! Oh, my I wasn't expecting Would you like to come in for a moment while I fetch my wand?"

Hermione had become accustomed to Severus as Simon in his Muggle-style clothing, but this was familiar to her, although she had had the nearly uncontrollable urge to add "sir" to the end of her question out of habit.

--8--

"I would," Severus stated quietly while glancing down the hall toward Mrs Carmichael's door. He held onto the secret wish the old crone would stick her head out the door for as long as it took him to cross Hermione's threshold. Severus was back in his *proper* attire and felt invincible, even to the odd, old biddies that inhabited both the Muggle and Wizarding world.

Shutting the door behind him, in case the aforementioned biddy tried to make an appearance, Severus turned and got his first real look at Hermione. The burning itch to take her hair down was quashed with no small effort when he reminded himself he no longer had the right to do so.

"I know you indicated you'd return to my flat when you were ready, but..."

Prepared to give a scathing comment concerning women who took too long to dress, Severus floundered for a moment, checked the shine on his boots and raised his head to meet Hermione's gaze.

"I decided I wouldn't change my mind about going out if I met you here instead of waiting there."

--8--

Part of her wondered if staying in might not be the better choice. There was no way to predict how people would react when they saw Severus out and about, but she suspected that it would not end well. There might be glares and muttered threats from cocky wizards, or fawning and calf-eyes from silly witches who didn't know any better. Neither would please him, she was sure, and both would annoy her terribly.

Hermione tucked her wand away and looked at her companion. She made a point of taking in his appearance from head to toe and back again. Her grin was flirty she hoped, although knowing her luck, it might have been closer to slightly deranged and her tone matched, "Look at you. All those buttons. It's almost enough to drive a poor girl to distraction."

She sighed melodramatically. "I guess I'll just have to do my best to keep my wits about me this evening. Are you ready?"

--8--

Severus didn't quite know how to feel when Hermione inspected him. Insecurity fell neatly onto his shoulders, making him want to check every aspect of his attire. The smile on her face let him relax slightly, but he didn't quite know what to make of the button comment.

Button, button, who's got the button?

Surely not.

Blast.

The sigh brought out a quirky little half-smile to his face and allowed him to refrain from delivering a sarcastic comment about *not* being ready and returning to his flat.

"If there was ever anyone who always had their wits about them, Hermione, it's you, so I don't imagine you'll have anything to worry about."

Holding out his elbow, Severus opened her front door.

"Shall we give Mrs Carmichael something to tell the other neighbors about?" he asked with an almost mischievous smirk on his face, "or would you rather play it safe and walk out of the building?"

--8--

When he asked if they should give Mrs Carmichael something to gossip about, Hermione felt her breath catch. Then she realized he was talking about Apparating, not snogging in the hallway. She tried not to let the tiny flicker of disappointment show.

Hermione locked her door and then took his arm. "As much as I'd like to pretend I'm the daring sort, we should play it safe."

And you had best remember that, young lady. You are two friends, going out on a friendly outing, doing friendly things. As friends. Save the naughty thoughts for later, after you're home. Alone. Again. Bugger.

"Lead on, Severus."

--8--

Several hours later, Severus murmured, "After you," as he held open the outer door of Hermione's building and allowed her to precede him. As far as Severus was concerned, the evening had been a resounding success. He wasn't quite as sure Hermione shared this opinion. She hadn't objected to the occasional arm around her shoulder or the quick hand on her waist that had pulled her out of the drunken sot's way, but the other things...

Perhaps she didn't notice?

Time will tell.

--8--

If her "Thank you," was a bit more stilted than usual, Hermione thought she should be forgiven. She led the way to her flat, telling herself she really shouldn't be annoyed with him. After all, he really hadn't done anything *too* bad, and most of those idiots had probably deserved what they got.

Hermione stopped outside her door, and turned to face him. "Well, that was certainly an interesting evening." There might have been a hint of amusement in her voice; she wasn't sure.

"Are you-" *Proud of yourself?* "That is, did you have a good time?"

--8--

She noticed.

Leaning against the wall next to Hermione's door, Severus pondered only a moment before replying.

"I, my dear Hermione, had a *wonderful* evening in your company. Those that attempted to share it with us would probably describe it a tad differently," he advised with a decided smirk on his face. "It was quite refreshing to see old acquaintances and to add a few faces that I will definitely remember in the future."

Tilting his head, Severus studied the indignant look on his companion's face before exclaiming, "Oh for Merlin's sake, Hermione. Nothing I used will last beyond mid-day, and you have to admit most were deserved, were they not?"

--8--

It would probably be pointless to remind him that, deserved or not, it was still considered rude to hex people in polite company.

Of course, the way a few of them acted, they probably wouldn't have counted as polite company anyway.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "All right, I may be willing to concede that *some* of them might have possibly deserved some sort of behavioral adjustment."

Hermione felt a smile creep over her lips as she leaned just the tiniest bit closer to Severus. "Other than the hexing, I had a wonderful evening, too." She wanted to suggest doing it again sometime, but didn't want to seem overeager. Or desperate. Or desperately overeager.

--8--

The mood had shifted again, and this was one that Severus approved of. Hermione's demeanor seemed to have softened, more like the lover she'd been, and not the *friend* she'd become. Hope arose in Severus' chest, but a trace of fear accompanied it. The wrong move could set them back firmly in the no-touchy land of friendship.

One of his hands rose slowly to grasp a bit of her hair that had escaped the dastardly pins she'd used earlier. The silken strand was gently placed back in its prison, but his hand didn't return at once to its owner's side. It stayed and gently caressed the side of Hermione's face.

"We'll do it again, soon, shall we?" Severus asked with one raised brow. "After all, the sooner they get used to seeing us *me* out and about, the sooner the need for the *behavioral adjustments* will end."

--8--

It was difficult, but Hermione managed to keep from leaning into his touch. Somehow, she was even able to keep her eyes from fluttering closed.

Even more spectacular, as far as she was concerned, Hermione refrained from jumping up and down in glee when he said "us." Yes, he corrected himself, but the slip still made her irrationally happy.

She nodded her agreement, not sure she trusted herself to speak until she'd cleared her throat. It wouldn't do to squeak like a giddy schoolgirl, after all.

"That would be lovely," Hermione replied, pleased to see that she sounded relatively normal, if a bit breathy. "Although, it may take several attempts before that one lout who spilled his ale figures it out. He struck me as the type who only seems to learn through repetition and negative reinforcement."

--8--

Ah, good. Missed that one, did she?

Relieved that she'd agreed, even though his *reason* for going out again was clearly transparent even to him, Severus slowly nodded his head in agreement. He pulled away

from the wall and inched slowly closer to Hermione.

"Saturday next?" he asked quietly, knowing it was less than a week away and not sure he wanted to wait *that* long. "Perhaps after dinner we'll find a worthy play or one of those Muggle movies to attend?"

--8--

Is he moving closer? She thought that he was. She also thought that if she were truly the exceptionally bright young woman she was rumored to be, she would take that as her cue to put more space between them. The sort of space that was acceptable between friends.

Perversely, her feet didn't seem willing to move. "Saturday. I believe I have no other plans for Saturday."

Hermione quickly moistened her lower lip. "Whatever you want to do, I'm sure would be fine. I mean, a play or movie or something like that. After dinner. Would be fine."

Could I be any more incoherent? Focus on the conversation, not on how good Severus smells. Or the thought of opening all those buttons! Her gaze dropped down to the front of his frock coat before jerking back up to his face. Her cheeks began to flush with embarrassed heat.

--8--

Encouraged by the flush, which he firmly decided was a sign of attraction and not anger, Severus moved ever closer, watching as though he were Yorick for the prey to corner itself. His patience was rewarded when Hermione's slow, infinitesimal retreat had her back meeting the door of her flat.

Not looming, but not giving up any spare space, Severus' head slowly lowered to hers. Keeping eye contact, while trying *not* to stare at the moist, appealing lips, he used what wiles were within his power when he whispered roughly, "Our evening, it seems, has come to an end. A *proper* date ends with a kiss, does it not, my siren?"

--8--

Thankfully, the door at her back provided some support when her legs threatened to get wobbly. It had been far too long since he'd used his voice to tempt her like that.

She knew she should open the door and duck into the relative safety of her flat. Her hand actually made contact with the door, in search of the knob, before she remembered that there was a sofa in the living room. And a bed just down the hall.

Safer to stay where she was, she told herself.

"That is how proper dates end, so I've been told." Hermione wasn't sure if their evening counted as a proper date, but she wasn't really in the mood to quibble about such a silly matter.

There were a thousand and one reasons why she should make her excuses and run away, and one very tantalizing reason for why she was tilting her head up to better align with his.

Severus had called her his siren.

Just a kiss. I've been so good for so long; surely I deserve one tiny, little kiss?

--8--

His heart skipped a beat when Hermione's hand started to search for the knob of the door, and his withdrawal was partly planned when she apparently changed her mind.

Thank the gods.

Permission, of a sort, had been given, and now the kiss was taken, taken softly and sweetly with a thousand blessings bestowed upon the head of the one it was being taken from. An ominous creak down the hall had Severus thanking his lucky stars that he hadn't, as yet, taken Hermione into his arms. The wand slid quickly and quietly from its sleeve, and a small Sticking Spell was applied to Mrs Carmichael's door. The resulting rattle of her doorknob was efficiently silenced a moment later.

Not this time, you nosey old bat.

His left hand had risen to take possession of Hermione's graceful neck and, hopefully, distract her from what his wand hand had done. The right hand, sans wand, joined the left and tried to persuade its master that the ugly pins needed to be removed from her hair.

Next time.

Severus deepened the kiss as much as he dared while his thumbs traced the bones of Hermione's jaw. Slowly releasing her mouth, he pulled back enough to again meet her gaze. Saturday was a long way away, and if she was willing, he'd be a fool not to try.

"I could make you a cup of tea if you like," he advised, knowing full well she wouldn't misunderstand, especially since his thumbs were still tasting her flesh.

--8--

Hermione felt bereft of something vital when he drew back from their kiss. Her mouth wanted to follow his, to urge him to continue with his delicious assault.

Her tongue slipped out to flick across her lip, and Hermione thought she could still taste him. She placed her hand on his chest, fingers tenderly stroking the material of his frock coat for a moment before she gently nudged him to give her space.

"I think I've had enough to drink tonight." Even she could hear the regret in her words. "I should probably go to bed. Alone."

Her fingers stroked one of the buttons on his coat before her hand fell back to her side. "Will you need me in the lab before Saturday?"

--8--

He admired the way she attempted to change the subject and the move designed to make him retreat. He admired them, but it didn't mean he was going to let her change the *subject* up for discussion.

A small smile bloomed, and he nodded his head.

"Need you? Yes, I'll *definitely* need you before Saturday, my sweet siren, but I will manage to blunder through until then if you have other commitments."

He leaned down far enough to give her one last chaste kiss before stepping back and preparing to Apparate.

"Ah, before I forget and a small tragedy occurs after I leave you might want to remove the spells I placed on Mrs Carmichael's door. You'll have no difficulties just a Sticking Spell accompanied by a small Silencer," he stated with a larger smirk before he turned and disappeared.

--8--

She watched him leave, shaking her head at his audacity.

Of course, she was also grinning like an idiot.

"Which I am, for agreeing to go out with him again. Friends do not go out on dates with friends they are trying not to fall into bed with. Again. Especially ~~not~~ *not proper* dates that end in oh-so tempting kisses. Damn it. Where is my self control? Where is my will power? Why can I not resist that man when he turns on the charm?"

Predictably, the empty hall offered no answers to her questions. Hermione pushed herself away from the door and unlocked it. She slipped into her flat and then leaned out of the doorway to flick her wand at Mrs Carmichael's door, removing the spells Severus had cast.

Part Twenty-Nine

Chapter 29 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Thank you, Lariope, for all your patience and excellent beta work.

A bright, crisp morning greeted Severus when he exited the building housing his flat. A steadily increasing demand for potions from his primary customer had instigated the necessity for a fact-finding trip to the local apothecary. The written reply from Fingalnoth's Apothecary Suppliers claiming they were simply increasing their customer base was believable, but in Severus' opinion, quite unlikely. He had played with the idea of opening his own shoppe a number of years prior, but there were an adequate number already in place. There had been an increase in the number of wizarding babies being born according to the Quibbler it was considerably large but as they weren't of age to imbibe spirits or worry about any of the other little habits that would necessitate the purchase of a contraceptive potion, a hair dye, a weight loss potion or a number of others, Severus was highly skeptical it had caused a boon of new apothecaries to fling open their doors.

The neighborhood shoppe, Wirestone's Potions and Notions, was only three blocks from his flat, but Severus had never entered its door before today. The bright greeting from the clerk behind the counter had been completely ignored, and Severus slowly strolled through the aisles of the items offered for sale. What he *didn't* find *anywhere* puzzled him, and Severus heaved a great sigh before he turned and approached the too-cheerful clerk.

"Good morning, sir! It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" the clerk bellowed in his direction.

Severus stopped a fair distance from the counter, studied the smiling young man and stated, "It was until your voice shattered the calm. If you require assistance terminating a Sonorus, I suggest you visit St. Mungo's immediately."

The clerk laughed and shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said in a normal speaking tone. "I just assumed that you might be deaf since you didn't return my greeting when you entered."

Rolling his eyes, Severus approached the counter and raised a brow. He'd had to deal with idiots his whole life, and it appeared the burden would never be lifted. This particular wit might have some useful information buried somewhere under his curly blonde locks, and the effort of digging it out might prove amusing. Glancing at the flashing tag attached to the man's shirt, he waited until it got past the *I'm here to help!* and the *Ask me!* before it finally flashed the grinning baboon's name.

"Stewart. There is a notable absence of any Fingalnoth potions on your shelves. Are they of an inferior blend, or are you merely unable to acquire them?" Severus asked with a raised brow.

The baboon broke out into a gale of laughter and actually had to wipe tears from his eyes before he gasped and said, "Oh, that's a good one, sir. I haven't had a laugh like that in ages."

"And what exactly is so amusing about my questions?" Severus asked in a deadly tone while his wand slid down into his hand.

Stewart, still grinning madly, turned and plucked a brightly colored folder off of a shelf behind the counter. Flicking it open, he stated, "There is a full line of potions available to the discerning customer. We have to keep them under lock and key to prevent pilfering. We have them all in stock, so if you'll tell me which ones you'd--"

He'd started to hand the folder to Severus, did an obvious double-take from Severus to the folder, and started to stammer, "Oh, my! It's it's oh, **my!**"

"Oh, your *what*, you bloody imbecile?" Severus asked while snatching the folder from the still outstretched hand.

"I can't believe it!" Stewart yelped before he turned and almost ran through a door behind the counter. "Margaret! Where are you? You'll never believe it! Grab the camera! Margaret, **move!**"

Stewart's voice, as Severus could attest, carried well even from the rear of the building. Not stopping to look at the folder now clenched in his fist, Severus turned and left the shoppe before Stewart could drag Margaret to the front.

"What in the bloody hell was that all about? It's not like I have a price on my head," he muttered as he turned several corners before slowing down. "On second thought, there is the possibility, I suppose."

Feeling suddenly exposed, he glanced around and noticed a shadowy area between two tall buildings. Not quite an alley, but it was more than adequate for Apparating away from Muggle eyes.

After he had returned home, Severus flung his cloak in the direction of the magical coat rack that had stood unused for so long. It creaked and muttered, "Merlin, I'd forgotten how heavy these things can be."

"Shut it," Severus stated firmly as he walked toward his desk, "or you'll find I can replace you with a Muggle hanger. How would you like to stand on a corner for eternity providing restroom facilities for the canine population?"

Yorick, who'd been preening his feathers, glanced over at the oaken structure and fluffed once before taking off and landing on one of the outstretched branches of the rack. Severus, noting this, shook his head.

"No, Yorick. Your perch is quite satisfactory; there's no need to dismember it quite yet."

A small whimper sounded under Severus' cloak, and the branch holding Yorick suddenly collapsed, dumping the falcon on the floor. When Yorick squalled and made as if to attack the rack, Severus turned and said sternly, "Stop it! Both of you! Immediately!"

Yorick returned to his perch and continued preening while glaring in the direction of the rack. With order restored, Severus pulled out his chair and sat down at the desk before straightening the crumpled folder he'd taken from Stewart. *Fingalnott's Marvelous Potions* graced the top of the folder and brought a frown to Severus' face. He'd chosen Fingalnott's, when he was Simon, because it was an older firm that was circumspect, quite solid and used a number of brewers a safe haven for one who wanted to retain their privacy. He'd never heard of them sending out gaudy colored folders to sell their wares. The accompanying pictures beside the descriptions and prices of each potion made it clear that Fingalnott's was no longer quite so circumspect. The vials were fancy, swooping containers rivaling those that might contain scents.

"Good gods, what a vulgar waste of glass and glitter," Severus muttered. His brows rose when he noted the price listed beside a potion that was indecently cheap to make.

"My gods, Yorick. They're making a fortune if these are actually selling at those outrageous prices. What fool would pay *that* for a fancy bottle?"

He continued down the front page of the folder, shaking his head at the folly of the average witch or wizard and then opened it up fully.

"What the bloody fucking hell is **this**?" he bellowed as he jumped to his feet. His own visage stared back at him from a corner, and the words *Brewed by none other than our own Severus Snape* flashed under the scowling face.

The folder was inspected and an address noted before a furious Severus crossed the room, grabbed his cloak and slammed the door behind him. The coat rack caught off guard by the sudden act tilted, scrambled its three feet to try and maintain its balance, and ended up landing with a loud crash. Yorick started, gave what for him was a snort, and turned his back.

"I begged and pleaded with that damned carpenter to give me another foot, but would he listen? Nooooo, of course not," came the muffled voice from the floor.

--8--

Mornings were not her favorite time of day specifically, that horrid moment when one had to leave the sleepy comfort and warmth of a good bed to face the cold reality of day. On a weekend, Hermione would most certainly have pulled the covers over her head and burrowed into her pillow for a few extra moments of blissful sleep, but this was a work day, and she had no choice but to roll out of bed and stumble into the bathroom.

That her flat seemed to be completely without tea did nothing to improve her mood.

An hour later, she strode into Marks and Sons, greeting her employees with a smile she didn't really feel. Once safely hidden away in her office, Hermione took a moment to fold her arms onto her desk and rest her head. Perhaps if she just closed her eyes for a second...

The enticing aroma of a well brewed cup of tea teased her into wakefulness. Hermione cracked an eye open and spotted the cup that was being held just in front of her face. She lifted her head and offered her first genuine smile of the day to Mister Fitzgerald. "What time is it?"

"Quarter past. I saw you come in and thought I'd give you a few minutes to collect yourself before jumping into last night's sales numbers and this morning's minor emergencies." The older man smiled back, placing the tea at her elbow on the desk.

"You, sir, are a gift from the gods."

"So you've told me, more than once. Drink your tea, and we'll get started."

--8--

Darrel Wallingford Fingalnott III was not the wizard *Simon* had made his initial agreement with. He'd taken over from his father only the year before and had increased the profits of the company seven hundred percent since then. This gave him the mistaken impression that he was a great deal more important than he really was and only had to smile long enough and hard enough to obtain what he wanted. The fact that Severus Snape was currently waiting in his office had him slightly apprehensive, but he was confident the other man was there to formally sign a contract. He was quite sure Snape was going to be properly grateful for all the free publicity he'd been given.

"Wait a moment," Fingalnott muttered to himself and stopped in the hall. "I should put a stipulation in the contract that he has to pay for a third...including the monies already spent. Yes!"

Jubilant that he'd be able to save his company even more money, Darrel hurriedly unrolled the detailed contract he'd had drawn up. Glancing through it, he grimaced once when he saw the section dealing with payment. After doing some quick calculations in his head, the section he added demanded that Snape pay for half of all advertising, including the monies already spent.

"That works out to us paying him almost *exactly* what we were paying before," Darrel said with a smirk on his face, fully aware it was actually less. A small skip and a soundless whistle carried him the rest of the way down the hall to his office.

"Hello, Helen. Have you made our guest comfortable?" he asked the young woman sitting at the desk in the outer office.

"He didn't want nothing," she replied quietly and peered closely at the letter she was holding. Truth be told, she hadn't asked and was glad to retreat after showing Severus inside Darrel's office.

"Helen," Darrel said with a small trace of exasperation in his voice. "What have I told you time and again about the use of double negatives?"

When Helen looked up with a slightly confused expression on her face, he sighed before stating, "You should have said he didn't want *anything*, not nothing."

Not waiting to see if his words of *wisdom* had penetrated, Darrel swept on to his private office. Swinging the door open, he bounded into the room and stopped dead when he didn't see anyone there.

"Helen," Darrel called over his shoulder, "did he leave?"

Helen didn't have to answer, as the door slammed behind Fingalnott. Darrel spun and almost fell over before grabbing the back of an armchair to steady himself.

"Good gods, you scared me half to death!" he shouted at the man standing next to the portal.

Tapping the tip of his wand against the palm of his left hand, Severus raised an eyebrow, pulled away from the wall he'd been leaning against, and said, "I could rectify that quite easily, *Mister* Fingalnott."

--8--

Once the sales figures from the night before had been scrutinized and added to the weekly report for the store owners, Hermione dove into the rest of the paperwork that Mister Fitzgerald had brought her.

When she had taken the manager position at Marks and Sons, Hermione had gone to a lot of effort to establish a friendly relationship with several auction houses. Once a week or so, those houses were kind enough to dispatch a list of recently acquired books and tomes to her office. Comparing those lists to the special order requests of her customers took some time, but she insisted on doing the work herself. It gave her a chance to make note of any texts of interest that the store might wish to purchase outright. There were several titles that were routinely in demand, even if no such order was currently in the books.

Lunch was going to be a sandwich from up the street, but one of her afternoon clerks owed in sick, so Hermione found herself behind the counter and on the sales floor, pitching in.

She smiled as a family came through the door, two parents and a small, dark haired boy that reminded her of Harry. The little boy adjusted his glasses and gazed around the bookstore with the same amount of wonder that she used to exhibit at Flourish and Blotts. His parents looked somewhat lost, and all three were dressed in perfectly ordinary Muggle clothes.

With a smile, she moved to greet them.

"Welcome to Marks and Sons. How may I help you today?"

--8--

"I'm quite all right." Darrel replied. "There's no need to apologize." Pasting a broad smile on his face, he stepped forward and held out his hand. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Severus."

Narrowed eyes glanced at the extended hand before they flicked back to Darrel's face. Severus' eyebrow rose slightly higher as he tilted his head and studied the other man.

"I do not recall offering one," Severus stated in one of his more dangerous tones as his wand kept up the same steady pace, "nor do I recall giving you permission to use my given name. I also do not recall giving your company permission to use my full name *or* my image in your vulgar advertisements. Would you care to explain?"

For a few moments, Darrel was transported back in time to a classroom housed in a dungeon, and he hastily pulled in his hand.

"No, sir! I mean, yes, sir!" he stammered before remembering *who* he was, and more importantly, *where* they were.

"I mean, no," Darrel stated almost firmly. When Severus' eyes narrowed again, Darrel retreated behind his desk and stammered, "I mean...there's no explanation needed, is there? It's merely a way to get the best prices for our products. Even you should...I mean, you understand the business angle, don't you?"

Darrel raised his hand to wipe the perspiration off of his forehead and became aware of the contract still clenched in his other fist.

"Here," he said quickly while holding it out and taking a seat. "Sign this and you can have your own copy."

"I don't believe that will be necessary, Mister Fingalnott," Severus stated in the same quiet but deadly tone.

Relief spread over Darrel's face, and he nodded briskly. "I quite agree," he said quickly. "There's no need for contracts between us, is there? I mean...our association has worked quite well as it is. There's no need to tie it all up with legalities."

Severus snorted and gazed around the opulent office. It was quite clear that Fingalnott hadn't spared any expense in outfitting it while Severus had squirreled away every spare Knut available his whole life.

"You misunderstand, you ignorant twit. Shall I correct you, as you corrected Helen earlier?" Severus asked. Not waiting for an answer, he grabbed the rolled parchment and read enough to make his already thin lips thin even further.

"I stand corrected," Severus stated firmly before wadding the document up and tossing it toward the fire in the grate. "You're not an ignorant twit." Severus leaned down and placed both hands on the top of Darrel's desk. Glaring the other man in the eye, he shouted, "You're a bloody fucking **moron** if you imagined, even for a moment, that I'd sell myself to your company so cheaply!"

--8--

As she had expected, the little boy was Muggle-born and had recently received his Hogwarts' letter.

Hermione knelt down to look at the boy eye-to-eye. "Have you purchased your school books already?"

She smiled when he nodded shyly. "Have you had a chance to look at them yet?" Another silent nod was her answer.

"Was there anything in them that seemed really interesting to you? Something you wanted to learn more about, perhaps?"

"Dragons," came the quiet reply.

Hermione stood and offered her hand to the boy. "I have just the thing for you. Come with me." She led the family into the children's section and inspected the shelves until she found a large book that appeared to be covered in iridescent green scales. "Here we are. *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Dragons*"

The boy took the book and carefully opened it to a random page in the middle. A Hungarian Horntail blinked its yellow eyes, then breathed flame all the way into the next page.

She escorted the family to the cash register, chatting with the parents as the boy continued to examine the pictures of dragons. Once they had purchased the book, she bent down to speak to the boy once more. "When you get to Hogwarts, find Professor Hagrid and tell him Hermione said hello. Will you do that for me?"

--8--

Darrel's head had retreated as far as it could, and it now rested against the back of his chair. His eyes had widened, and he was extremely thankful he'd paid a visit to the lavatory before meeting with Severus. "I'm sure it's a mistake," he stammered. "I'll have them double...no, triple the amount, shall I?"

Severus rose and glanced toward the ceiling as if asking for strength before glaring down at the other man. "Listen *very* carefully, Fingalnott. I shall *not* repeat myself. My association with your company has *ended*. Not only have you abused my name and image, you've sold products made by other, possibly inferior, brewers **using** it!"

Fingalnott shook his head furiously before daring to rise from his chair. "No, I haven't! Truth in advertising is something we take very seriously here! As soon as I knew you were making potions for us, I fired all the others. You're our only brewer!" Fingalnott clapped a hand over his mouth and groaned before sinking down in his chair.

"Well, well, well," Severus said with a smirk. "That puts quite a different spin on things, doesn't it, *Mister* Fingalnott? I was prepared to grant the Quibbler an interview

they've been seeking in order to expose your shenanigans, but we might be able to come to an amicable agreement after all."

Darrel swallowed hard and nodded his head while a shaking hand reached for a fresh sheet of parchment. He wondered briefly if he'd be able to talk his wife into selling the new house they'd purchased just last week.

A few hours later, as he strolled along Diagon Alley, Severus almost wished for a cane, even one as gaudy as Lucius possessed. He could have swung it as he walked along in the late morning air. Almost carefree, and decidedly much better off financially than he had been earlier that morning, he'd come to Diagon Alley to make a rather substantial deposit in his vault at Gringotts. Rather than hurry home, he'd decided to waste a little time looking in windows before taking his favorite bookseller some lunch. Stopping in front of Dingberry's Fine Magical Antiques, a delicate set of ivory hair combs caught his eye.

"Perfect," he muttered under his breath. "They'd be a great deal easier to abide in her hair than those blasted pins." A short time later, he emerged from Dingberry's with a shrunken parcel in one of his pockets, quite pleased with the transaction, and set off to acquire their meal.

--8--

After one final wave for the departing young boy and his parents, Hermione returned to the counter and began restocking the shopping bags that were stored beneath it. Her impromptu shift on the sales floor would be over soon enough, and then she could escape to the warehouse to dig through the new shipment of books to see if there was anything that piqued her interest.

Hermione was kneeling behind the counter, out of sight, when the door opened to let in another customer. She was going to let the other clerk help them, but the way he stood next to her frozen and staring toward the door as if Death himself had appeared told her that her presence might be needed. She peeked over the counter and felt a grin spread across her lips.

Severus was there, dressed much as he'd been the night they had gone out.

Which probably explained why her poor employee looked as if he was ready to bolt. The poor man was only a bit younger than she and had most likely been at Hogwarts for Severus' last few years there.

Severus was also carrying a basket over one arm, and she wondered if he'd been shopping.

She quickly stood, brushed any stray dirt off of her knees, then came around the counter to meet him.

"Severus. Looking for a book?"

--8--

Severus returned Hermione's grin with a modest smile of his own.

"No, I've actually brought along a celebratory lunch in the hopes you would join me. Although," he stated while casting a questioning look in the direction of the counter, "I admit I'm assuming the mannequin behind the counter will be able to handle things in your absence."

--8--

Hermione glanced over her shoulder at her clerk and gave him a look. He blinked twice, then quickly found something fascinating to study near the cash register.

"Must you intimidate *all* of my employees?" Hermione eyed the basket with great curiosity, then cast a critical eye around the nearly empty store. "The lunch rush is over for the day, and my replacement will be here soon enough, so it should be safe to hide in my office for a bit."

She almost reached for his free hand to guide him, then thought better of it. Then, in a fit of mischief, reached for it anyway.

--8--

Severus allowed himself to be towed along in Hermione's wake while giving the young man behind the front counter a glare that promised death if he snickered.

"I should resent that remark, but as it's my goal in life to intimidate any and all fools that I run across," Severus remarked in an almost teasing tone, "I'm actually quite pleased that you've noticed."

--8--

She shook her head and ushered him into her office. "Oh, I've noticed, Severus. I think everyone who has ever met you has noticed."

A flick of her wand had her chair padding its way around her desk to join the chair she kept for visitors to her office. Hermione released his hand and quickly cleared a space on the top of the desk.

"I thought you might prefer sitting here to attempting a picnic on the floor. Unless you'd rather?"

--8--

Severus snorted lightly before placing the basket on the desk. "No, the chairs are fine. *If* we ever decide to picnic, it won't be on a hard floor in the middle of London. We'll find a nice, soft patch of grass that will be kind to my middle-aged body."

Sandwiches, fruit and biscuits were placed side by side on the desk before he produced a small bottle of champagne.

"You will have some, won't you?" Severus asked and pulled out a set of wine glasses. "I'm not an expert on champagne, but the clerk advised it was an agreeable year."

--8--

Champagne? He really was celebrating something.

It can't be the antidote. After his reaction to Lorenzo's progress, she didn't think he would be nearly as teasing and pleasant if the antidote was finished.

"It would be a shame to waste an agreeable year. Not too much, though, I am still at work." Her fingers caressed the soft fuzz of one of the peaches before plucking a grape. Hermione popped the small fruit into her mouth as she settled into her chair.

"All right, I'm dying of suspense. Tell me your good news."

--8--

After removing the cork and pouring a good measure in each glass, Severus handed one to Hermione before sitting down. He raised his and held it out in front of him.

"First, a toast to Fingalott's Marvelous Potions, the founder of our celebratory feast," he said while holding the preposterous folder in the other hand out of sight.

After Hermione touched his glass and they both took a sip, Severus held out the advertisement for her to take.

"I'd like your opinion on this, please."

--8--

It was a good thing she had swallowed the champagne already, or there would have been a serious choking risk when she saw the picture of a scowling Severus.

Hermione quickly flipped back to the front of the folder and noted the prices listed next to each bottle of product.

She cleared her throat and tried to come up with a tactful way of expressing her thoughts.

"Well... It's all a tiny bit garish. The bottles are very - ornate," Hermione rushed to reassure him. "Are you dead set on this for your marketing strategy?"

She certainly hoped not.

--8--

"Not at all," Severus advised with a broad smile on his face. "In fact, I was quite furious earlier today when I obtained the folder. Due to the stupidity of the current owner of Fingalnoth's Marvelous Potions, I will not only be getting paid a percentage of *their* profits with them supplying *approved* ingredients but I have control over all the advertisements with my name appearing anywhere."

Reaching over, Severus plucked the offending folder out of her hand and said, "*This* monstrosity has already been pulled from all the apothecaries they supply."

As they ate their lunch, Severus gave her a brief run down on his morning, including the fact that he was now the *only* brewer being employed by Fingalnoth.

Narrowing his eyes, he glanced at Hermione before he admitted, "It puzzles me that the same witches and wizards that damned me before would pay these exorbitant prices to obtain a potion *made* by me. Frankly, I thought the exact opposite would occur, and I'd have to sell my potions abroad. Did you, and the others, have to deal with this type of...foolishness?"

--8--

"Yes. And no."

Hermione finished the champagne in her glass and held it out to Severus for a refill.

"There are those who would still worship the ground the 'heroes of the war' walk on, if we would let them. It's more of a problem for Harry, as you can imagine. The rest of us still get more than our fair share of uncomfortable attention don't imagine that we're free of scrutiny but it has died down somewhat over the last two years."

She shifted in her chair, trying to make herself more comfortable. Her foot bumped against Severus' boot, and she left it there, liking the small contact.

"The public has had time to adjust to us, you see. We were heroes and did extraordinary things, but now we're just normal, every day people again, and that is, well, boring. Interest in us never really goes away, but it does ebb and flow, until someone does something to bring themselves back into the spotlight. You should have seen the circus that surrounded Harry and Ginny's wedding.

"You, on the other hand, with your miraculous resurrection from the dead, are fascinating. The public has had time to digest the stories, both good and bad, and to form their opinions of you. Harry spent a lot of time and energy convincing anyone who would listen that you were a good, brave man. I imagine you've been romanticized in the minds of women and men alike, and now, here you are. In the flesh. If they can't touch and hold you, they want the next best thing: something you created."

Hermione nudged his ankle with her foot. "If it makes you feel any better, I wouldn't pay those prices for something I could get at any common apothecary no matter who made the potions."

--8--

As tempted as he was to scoff when Hermione mentioned heroes, Severus held his tongue and listened while he refilled their glasses. All in all, it sounded like he'd managed to avoid two years of hell.

When Potter's name came up time and again, Severus thought he did quite well in merely clenching his jaw. To hear firsthand how Potter had used his influence on Severus' behalf was annoying, to say the least.

It's not like I'd rather be spending the remainder of my years in Azkaban, but...

Fuck it all, I'm beholden to another Potter.

This realization soured his mood slightly, but her use of the word *romanticized* drove it out of his head and left his mouth gaping open a slight amount. Clicking it closed, he listened to the rest of her words before taking a large gulp from his glass.

Nudging her foot back, Severus gave her a half-smile and nodded. "It does, indeed, make me feel slightly better that there's at least one other person who hasn't taken leave of their senses.

"I don't know how happy I am that Potter apparently blew the proverbial smoke up their arses, but I am...satisfied not to be in Azkaban," he admitted while dropping his head. Bringing it back up rather sharply, he added, "He'd still better not name any of his spawn after me!"

Sitting back in his chair, one arm supporting the one that held his glass, Severus narrowed his eyes slightly before leaning forward again.

"I take it that this *phenomenon* may completely end within a year or trickle down to a mere handful of orders. Good to know," he said before draining his glass and setting it on the desk. The action of leaning forward allowed the small package in his inner robe pocket to bang against his side.

"I almost forgot," he stated while bringing it out and enlarging it. "I picked up a little something for you today. Something I hope you will use," he said as he presented it to her.

--8--

She bit her tongue to keep from telling him that he had better enjoy his 'adoring' fans while they were still willing to overlook his sparkling personality and biting wit.

Instead, Hermione reached out and took the package he offered. "What is this?" Her eyes flicked from the package to his face, searching for some hint. All she saw was his smile, which didn't tell her much.

Carefully, she unwrapped the package and was unable to stifle the soft gasp that escaped.

"Oh, Severus. They're beautiful."

She looked up, blinking hard. "Would you mind?" She gestured toward her hair, then reached up and started pulling out pins with her free hand.

--8--

Never let it be said that Severus Snape couldn't learn. He was stubborn and very opinionated about numerous things, but when something was to his advantage, he learned quickly. Instead of the slightly sarcastic comment her question conjured up in the arse-hat section of his brain, he merely smiled a little and shook his head.

"I wouldn't mind in the slightest, Hermione," he stated while watching the strands fall free. It was tempting to think of assisting and being able to run his hands through them, but he remained stalwart and just observed.

I should point out that their beauty will only enhance hers.

That would be laying it on with a trowel, and she's not stupid, idiot.

It's the truth.

Suited for a dinner with candles and not a basket lunch at her desk. I'll keep it in reserve for later. Now shut it.

"I'm pleased you like them, Hermione. I was told that you only have to state what style you desire while holding all four in your hand, and they will do the rest. Of course, they date from the last century and might require a bit of assistance with any modern styles, but I have to believe they're far better at following instructions than the imitation ivory they use now."

--8--

The final pin slid free, and she shook the last few curls loose to frame her face. Hermione *knew* she was making a mistake asking him to touch her, but she couldn't bring herself to care enough to put a stop to it. They were safe enough in her office, she thought, even as a voice deep down admitted that they could have been locked in a room with only a large bed for company and she would have still sought out some excuse to touch him, or have him touch her.

Oh, crap. I've got it bad. I know I'm going to end up hurt when this is all over, and I still can't stop myself as long as there is that teeny, tiny twinge of hope... This is so much easier when he's been a bastard.

And now I'm lying to myself. I still love him, even when he is a bastard. Perhaps because he's a bastard, and that's just part of what makes him Severus.

I'm screwed either way, aren't I?

Might as well enjoy it while I can, right?

She offered the combs to Severus.

"I just need to keep the hair out of my face for work whatever you think would be best."

--8--

After taking the combs from Hermione's outstretched hand, Severus rose and stood behind her, pretending to lift the mass of hair in order to determine the best style for her *armor*. In reality, he already knew the perfect one and was taking the opportunity to reacquaint himself with the silkiness that was Hermione's hair.

Deciding he'd delayed as long as he possibly could, Severus cupped the combs in his hand and whispered, "Gibson girl, with long strands by her face," before stepping back and watching the magic begin.

He gave the antique dealer credit, they were indeed wonderful combs as they flew, tucked and puffed Hermione's hair into the desired style. In the time he took to walk back around and sit down in his chair once more, they had almost finished. He frowned, cleared his throat and watched, slightly amused, as one of the combs flew out and gently fixed the omission he'd specifically asked for.

"Much better," he said while sending a very smug smile in Hermione's direction. The style not only kept *most* of the hair out of her face, but it was for lack of a better word romantic, in his opinion. It had always been one of his favorites, even if it was considered old-fashioned.

--8--

With remarkable restraint, Hermione did not purr when Severus slid his hands into her hair. In fact, she made herself sit perfectly still until he took his seat.

His frown made her worry slightly, and she almost reached up to see if she could tell what was bothering him, but then she had felt tendrils of hair caressing her face and his frown had disappeared.

Sensing that the combs were finished, Hermione stood and leaned across her desk to open the center drawer. She pulled out a small hand mirror and inspected the ivory combs' work.

The style was older than she normally wore, but she thought it gave her face a softness that she found appealing.

Hermione settled back into her chair and offered Severus a pleased smile. "Thank you, again. I almost feel guilty. This is your celebration, yet I'm the one who received a gift."

--8--

It surprised Severus how much it pleased him that she liked the combs. Giving a small snort, he stood and gave her a kiss on the nose. His right hand slid under her chin and gently moved it back and forth. It gave the appearance he was studying the combs' work, when in fact, he was doing nothing more than touching her skin.

"I believe the old saying, 'It's much better to give than to receive,' would fit in quite nicely here," he advised before removing his hand. Glancing at the mess they'd left on her desk, he used his wand to clean it up and pack it neatly back in the basket.

"I should go and let you get back to work," he told her with a gentle smile. "What time should I call on Saturday?"

--8--

She didn't want him to leave.

Good gravy, woman. Act your age. You are not a simpering adolescent in the throes of your first real crush. You are an adult; now act like it.

Besides, Saturday isn't that far away.

Hermione stood up, too. She would have helped him clean up, but he seemed to have taken care of everything already.

"I'm expecting a shipment of books Saturday morning, but I should be done by early afternoon. Would five or six work for you?"

--8--

"It would," Severus stated and then tilted his head. Saturday was too blasted far away without something to hold him over, especially if he had to work on that damned love potion of Dumbledore's. Giving her both raised eyebrows while one hand played gently with a strand of hair, he asked, "What are my chances of obtaining a nice, long goodbye kiss from the lovely Gibson girl now standing in front of me?"

--8--

Her eyes flicked toward the closed door, and Hermione tried to remember if she'd locked it when they came in.

It doesn't need to be locked for a kiss. And that's all you're going to be offering, so don't get any ideas.

Hermione couldn't help but think that, even in her own thoughts, she was a dreadful spoilsport.

Her tongue flicked out to moisten her lips. "I would estimate your chances are pretty good, actually."

She lifted both hands to rest against his chest, then dug her fingers into the material to pull him slightly closer, raising herself up on her toes so she could reach his mouth with her own.

--8--

The morning had been beautiful, and the afternoon promised more of the same as Severus strolled along the streets of London on his way back to his flat. There were times when he barely refrained from giving those he met a broad smile, if their disposition was at all friendly, and that would *never* do. He decided then and there that his next purchase would be a cane.

A long black one.

With a pointy end.

Part Thirty

Chapter 30 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Thank you, dear Lariope, for the use of your wonderful beta skills.

A frantic glance at the clock told her that she was running late.

"Assuming Severus arrives at five. If he doesn't come until six, then I've got plenty of time," Hermione tried to reassure herself, even as she dug through her closet to try to find something that would work for dinner and some sort of amusing diversion. Nothing too dressy, because she didn't want to seem like she was trying too hard, and nothing too casual, because there was no reason to look like a frump if she could help it. Something that would go well with the ivory combs that Severus had given her.

She looked at the combs, safely kept on a dish on her dresser.

Hermione remembered the knowing looks she'd received when she'd emerged from her office the day that Severus had visited. She had been flushed, her lips slightly swollen, and her hair had obviously been rearranged. She had tried to explain to Mister Fitzgerald that Severus had merely stopped by to share some good news and to give her a gift, but he had only nodded and told her that what happened behind the closed door of her office was really none of his business. At least Mister Fitzgerald had spoken to her; the clerk at the counter had watched Severus leave and then turned the most unappealing shade of puce the moment he'd looked her way, ducking behind a book display and wheezing so violently Hermione was afraid he might hyperventilate.

With another worried glance at the clock, Hermione slipped into a dress she found near the back of the closet. It came to her knees and was a shade that seemed to flatter her coloring. She topped it with a soft cashmere cardigan since there was still a bit of a chill in the April air, especially in the evening.

She let the ivory combs manipulate her hair into a French twist. After a moment's scrutiny in the mirror, Hermione had them do it again, this time leaving a few strands down to brush against her face and neck because Severus seemed to prefer her hair that way.

Her wand was safely tucked into her purse, and her feet into a pair of low heels, just as the hands of the clock hit five.

--8--

"Yorick!" Severus bellowed as he exited the door of the lab. "Did you Yes, you did."

After picking up the parcel the falcon had left on the dining table, Severus pulled a not-quite stale biscuit out of his pocket and dropped it in the cup attached to the bird's perch. Yorick fluffed his feathers and gave a small poke at the treat before turning his back.

"Don't grumble or you won't even get *that*," Severus stated grumpily as he headed back toward the lab. "I've been too busy with orders to even contemplate shopping for *my* needs, let alone yours."

Stepping back into the controlled chaos that was now his lab, Severus placed the parcel on a bench before he split it open and checked the contents for freshness. Unlike Darrel Fingalnott, who apparently liked placing all his eggs in one basket, Severus *hadn't* dropped all his other customers and was pleasantly busy. The others were still

under the assumption they were dealing with Simon, and until it was determined how successful the Fingalott potions remained they would continue dealing with him.

"Good enough," he grumbled before it was whisked into a glass jar. A Stasis Charm was applied before it was roughly shoved into its proper place on the shelf. A glance at the lab clock showed he had plenty of time to check on the other occupants of the lab. He yawned and stretched before approaching the cages holding the mice.

"If you *ladies* and *gentlemen* don't give me any difficulties, I might have time for a nap," Severus said while peering into the interiors. "Well, bugger."

Lorenzo was back to being a love-sick rodent. Hermione wasn't going to be too happy, and it didn't take a Sybil to know that. What Severus didn't know was how *he* felt about it. On the one hand, they apparently were on the right track on the other, they were apparently on the right track.

A few hours later, Severus, sans nap, raised his fist to knock on Hermione's door. It was precisely five-fifteen in the afternoon. He hadn't wanted to arrive exactly at five, since in his opinion, it would make him appear desperate, but he hadn't wanted to wait until six either. Five-thirty would probably have been a good compromise, but he wasn't a patient enough man to endure those extra fifteen minutes.

--8--

She rushed to the door at the sound of his knock, then forced herself to pause and take a deep breath before she reached for the knob. One deep breath turned into two, then three, until Hermione felt sufficiently calm enough to open the door without looking like she had bolted across the living room at the first indication of his presence.

Which she had.

Right, then. Door.

She opened the door and smiled. "Hello, Severus."

Hermione almost invited him in, thinking that a good hostess would offer her guest something to drink, perhaps tea.

Considering the way her thoughts immediately skittered from "tea" to "on the kitchen table," she thought it best to just ignore the temptation all together and was even congratulating herself for quickly stepping out into the hall and locking her door.

Then she had to ruin her brief moment of self-discipline by turning to face Severus and shyly nodding toward Mrs Carmichael's door. "Mrs Carmichael is visiting her nephew this weekend. She won't be home until tomorrow," she blurted, barely managing to bite off the rest of the sentence, which would have ended in something similar to "in case you wanted to kiss me again."

--8--

Severus' head, thanks to Hermione's nod, turned in the direction of Mrs Carmichael's residence, and one brow rose.

"Pity," he said after meeting Hermione's eyes. "I'd been rather looking forward to outfoxing the old her again. Should I thank her for keeping any other suitors away from your door? I doubt many would brave such a persistent busybody camped on your step."

Severus realized, too late, the wording he'd used and hoped Hermione wouldn't call a halt to the evening before it had even started. They were supposed to be *friends*, and he had classed himself as a suitor.

"I've made early reservations at a fairly new wizarding restaurant in the hopes it will enable us to make the opening act of what I've heard is a delightful comedy," he stated almost hurriedly as he held out his arm. "It's supposed to be based on the rather ludicrous Mister Janus Thickey."

--8--

She took his arm, grinning as she thought of Mrs Carmichael's increasingly transparent attempts to match-make since Hermione had moved in to the building. "Oh, I wouldn't thank her. If anything, she's dragged more unsuspecting but 'nice and respectable' her words, not mine young men over my threshold than mum, dad, Aunt Imogene, Ron and Harry combined. First she was convinced I was perfect for one of her male relatives, someone named Hershival, I think. Then, one night when she'd been into the cooking sherry, she'd dared to ask if I might be interested in meeting her second cousin's daughter, Drusilla. I think she's even dragged the poor bloke who delivers her groceries over here on some pretext or another."

In her enthusiasm to share a bit of humor about her neighbor, Hermione managed to completely overlook Severus' slip of the tongue.

She squeezed the arm he had offered and tilted her head to lean against it for a tiny moment, then straightened up.

"Janus Thickey as in the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's? I know I've read something about him before, what was it? Oh, I'm sure it will come to me, probably during the play."

--8--

The conversation en route to The Ivy, in Severus' opinion, was quite entertaining as he attempted to discover *exactly* what was wrong with each of the prospective beaux Mrs Carmichael had brought round for Hermione's inspection. One other name she'd mentioned had him asking, "Who is Aunt Imogene?" as he held open the door of the restaurant and waited for her to enter.

--8--

"Aunt Imogene is my father's sister, blissfully married to 'the perfect man' for nearly three whole years. I always get shushed when I bring up her prior husband, who must have been 'the *nearly* perfect man', or the first husband who I like to call 'the almost but not quite perfect man.'"

The interior of The Ivy took Hermione's breath away. The walls and ceiling were nearly covered in long, ropey vines of some sort of ivy. The vines seemed to pulse and sway ever so gently, moving to some rhythm only the ivy could recognize. Flowers bloomed, then closed tight moments later.

The rest of the decor was lovely and tasteful, but it was immediately obvious that the star feature of the establishment was the plant-life. As they stood, waiting to be seated, Hermione saw two plates emerge from the kitchen, carefully passed along the ceiling by finger-like tendrils of ivy, before being deposited on an occupied table near the center of the room.

She was just about to ask Severus if he'd eaten there before when the host approached the podium they were standing near and asked if they had a reservation. Dressed in light green dress robes that made his skin take on a sickly hue, Hermione couldn't help but think he looked awfully familiar.

Her eyes widened in horror, and she ducked behind the relative safety of Severus. "It's Cormac; hide me!" she gasped as quietly as possible, irrationally contemplating an attempt to burrow her way into the concealment of Severus' voluminous cloak and robes.

--8--

Severus had been studying the huge plant that dominated the room, attempting to determine its parentage before moving within its range, when Hermione hissed and dove behind him. Having no idea who Cormac was and sure that nothing short of an escaped Death Eater would have elicited such a response from the level-headed Hermione

Severus tensed, and his wand slid out of his sleeve. He glared at the approaching man, but didn't see anything about him that appeared threatening other than his size, which was considerable.

"Good evening. Do you have a reservation?" the man asked as he stopped behind the podium. He opened a book on its surface before running a finger down a list, all without glancing at the people waiting. His eyes widened before his head jerked up to finally meet Severus' glare.

"Snape you're Snape of course you are. Party of six for two? I mean party of two for six?" he asked nervously. "Will your other party be along shortly?"

Is he blind as well as stupid?

"No," Severus replied while grabbing Hermione's arm with his free hand and pulling her back beside him. "My party is here now."

--8--

Her foot *itched* to connect with Severus' shin, but Hermione settled for using the arm not currently being held captive to smack him in the arm. Hard.

Aware that her aborted disappearing act might have drawn more attention to her presence than she wanted, Hermione immediately called forth the most vacant and un-Hermione-like smile she'd ever managed and cast it in Cormac McLaggen's general direction. If luck any luck at all, even the teeniest tiniest glimmer was with her, the overgrown heathen would continue to concentrate on Severus and just ignore her completely.

Her eyes strayed toward Cormac's lips, and she shuddered with revulsion at the memory of Professor Slughorn's Christmas party her sixth year, when Cormac had pressed his open mouth against her tightly closed lips and proceeded to drool and slobber until she'd had to pull her way free. She'd proceeded to spend the rest of the party no, the rest of the year avoiding him and his fish lips, just in case he got the idiotic idea to try for a repeat performance.

Surely that's all in the past now? He's probably forgotten me entirely. Please, for the love of all that is good in the world, don't let him recognize me.

--8--

Severus turned his head to glare at his companion, wondering all the while what in Merlin's name he'd done to warrant an attack on his person. He missed the delighted expression that flew across Cormac's face, but it would have been impossible not to understand the glee in the other man's voice when he said, "Hermione? It is you, isn't it? I *knew* your reply to my owls must have gotten lost or you wouldn't have known where to find me."

Severus expected the lout to start jumping up and down in joy at any moment and, in an attempt to forestall that moment, commented dryly, "I made the reservation of Miss Granger. Are you at all capable of doing what your employers actually pay you for, or should we attempt to find our own table?"

The fact that his arm went around Hermione's shoulder had nothing at all to do with the other man and everything to do with the fact Severus thought he'd detected a trait belonging to Devil's Snare in the giant plant dominating the room. At least that's what he told himself.

--8--

Crap. Crap crap crappity crap.

Her unease at being put on the spot, coupled with the way her mind raced to try to come up with a polite excuse for why she had never answered any of his owls, made her jump slightly when a weight settled on her shoulder.

The moment she realized it was Severus, Hermione thanked the heavens and shifted to lean against his side. Surely even Cormac could hear Severus' words, see how close they were, and put two and two together.

When he did nothing more to acknowledge Severus than give him a brisk nod before turning his eager attention back to Hermione, she knew that somehow impossibly Cormac must have grown even more clueless since he left Hogwarts.

"I was in George's shop the other day, and he let slip that he still talks to you from time to time, which is nice, considering the way you and Ron split. He said you used to be a lot of fun to hang out with, but lately you're far too busy with work. You know what they say, all work and no play." He flashed her what he probably thought was a killer smile.

Hermione made a mental note to kill George Weasley.

"I'm uh," was as far as she got before he started speaking again.

"Maybe you and I could get together sometime, take a break from the work day drudge, catch up on old times?"

--8--

Severus wasn't used to being ignored, especially by a wizard intent on chatting *uphis* date for the evening. If McLaggen had been paying proper attention, he would have ceased his prattle when Severus' right eyebrow rose. The wand in Snape's hand cast a silent, but effective, *Langlock*. The astonishment reflected in the other man's eyes caused a small smirk to lift the corner of Severus' mouth, and the attempt by McLaggen to release his tongue by using his fingers drew a small snort.

"Unless you want to literally rip your tongue in two," Severus advised with a small snarl, "I'd desist. *If* by the end of our visit within this establishment you have ceased being an utter bore and a buffoon who apparently doesn't know when his attentions are not welcome, I'll release you."

When McLaggen eyes promised murder and the man stepped closer, Severus raised his wand in warning.

"If you care to continue our *discussion*, we should probably step outside as I'm sure your employers wouldn't care for the *mess* my next move would leave on their floor."

McLaggen stopped, looked mutely at Hermione, and apparently tried to use his eyes to ask for some help.

--8--

Her answering expression very clearly said, "Don't look at me." Then she thought about how the evening would most likely end if the two did go outside. She rather preferred a nice play to spending the night trying to convince a couple of Hit Wizards to not take Severus into custody for hexing the living snot out of Cormac.

She could try suggesting they go somewhere else, but since running away and hiding from this particular Cormac-sized problem obviously wasn't the correct tactic to take, she felt they should stand their ground.

With a sigh, Hermione stepped between the two wizards, facing Severus and his wand. "There's an empty table over near the wall. Unless it's reserved?" She turned her head to see Cormac narrow his eyes, then grudgingly shake his head. "Wonderful. Severus and I will go ahead and seat ourselves and let you get back to work, Cormac."

She turned back to Severus. "Please?" she whispered for his ears only.

--8--

Irritation at the dolt who had tried to spoil their first *realigning* had made Severus' mouth pinch together, and the words that trembled on the tip of his tongue at Hermione's interference were guaranteed to quash her efforts to salvage the night. The soft *Please* that reached his ears made him look into her eyes instead of at the stupid wizard he'd been prepared to duel. His mouth gradually relaxed, and while he was severely tempted to leave the hex in place until they left, he growled, "Very well," before removing it.

Cormac, apparently not willing to turn his back on Snape, backed away and returned to the room behind the podium. Just before he disappeared, he said, "I'll send you an owl tomorrow, Hermione."

"He's a bloody imbecile!" Severus advised heatedly and took one step forward to follow the twit into the back room. He stopped when he realized it would be inadvisable to follow a cornered rat into its nest.

You never know what little traps they've laid.

Turning back to Hermione, he slid one arm around her waist before propelling them in the direction of the table Cormac had indicated would be acceptable.

"I think not," he muttered almost to himself as he changed direction and found one on the opposite side of the room.

"Tell me," he asked with a smirk as he seated Hermione and then sat down opposite her, "is that what they call hen-pecking? If so, I shall have to revise my opinion of Arthur Weasley."

--8--

Hermione rolled her eyes at him.

"Are you comparing me to Molly Weasley?" she teased.

--8--

"Hardly," he commented dryly. "Although," Severus added as his eyes narrowed slightly, "I do see some similarities."

He picked up the menu in front of him, opened it, and silently read the list. "I fail to see what the fuss about this place is, other than the plant, of course, which might be a variant of Devil's Snare. There's nothing listed here that..."

He stopped speaking as a leaf-green Quick-Quotes Quill zipped to their table and hovered over the small piece of parchment at the edge of their table.

"Good gods," he exclaimed while meeting Hermione's eyes. "I sincerely hope that dunderhead isn't the *only* staff person on duty."

--8--

The urge to kick him returned with the comment about seeing similarities, but she restrained herself. Again.

To distract herself, Hermione looked up to examine the ivy. Severus might be right; it did look a bit like Devil's Snare. She eyed one of the lower tendrils suspiciously.

"As mobile as the ivy appears to be, I doubt it can cook, Severus."

Since the plant didn't appear to be doing anything hazardous, Hermione turned her attention to the menu in front of her. "Some people appreciate ambiance over fancy dishes and unpronounceable entrees. I would wager that Professor Sprout would be tickled pink to dine here."

She glared at him with narrowed eyes over the top of her menu. "What similarities?"

--8--

"You're both female, both witches with a great deal of talent, and both of you tend to try and take care of those you love, warranted or not," Severus replied with a sly smile before turning his attention back to the menu. "Now, what shall we dine upon, my lovely siren? Protocol demands that I order for you; however, since we both know you're quite capable of choosing what you want to consume and I've never been fond of the practice ladies first, as they say."

--8--

Listening to his list brought a smile to her lips, and her glare completely melted away. The things he mentioned were some of the very things she liked and respected the most about the Weasley matriarch.

In a better mood, Hermione turned her attention to the menu. She frowned slightly, scanned the options again, then looked up to ask Severus, "Have you noticed there are no salads offered?"

In the back of her mind, she registered a strange rustling sound from above, but didn't think much of it.

"No salads, and there doesn't appear to be a vegetable option for any of the meals, either."

Again, the strange rustle, only this time it was far more pronounced. Almost... agitated.

Hermione glanced up at the ivy. Were some of the tendrils getting closer?

"Salad?" This time she saw the way the plant shuddered and twitched. She carefully closed her menu and set it on the table. "Right then, I'll have the steak."

--8--

Lack of a salad had never bothered Severus, but the reactions of the plant... were quite interesting. If he'd been there alone, he might have mentioned other leafy greens to see exactly what it would have done. As it was, he'd watched as the Quick-Quotes Quill had taken Hermione's order, and it appeared to have written far more than just steak.

"I'll have the steak as well, medium rare," he advised while keeping an eye on the quill, "with a side of stuffed mushrooms and rice." When it continued to write far beyond what he'd considered appropriate, he grabbed the parchment. The quill rose in the air turned left, and then right before it hovered in place, not quite sure what to do.

One eyebrow rose as he read aloud, "The nice young lady in the coral dress with the soft looking sweater draped so delicately over her shoulders has ordered the delicious, flame broiled steak. No sides have tickled her fancy as of yet, but she'll surely want something spectacular for dessert."

"The grouchy, black-garbed man accompanying this fair lass has ordered the same delicious, flame broiled steak, however, prepared only half-cooked. The fresh wild mushrooms stuffed with delectable cheese and served on a bed of fresh rice will accompany this poor, undercooked steak. It's unlikely he'll want something sweet for desert."

Raising his eyes to meet Hermione's, he chuckled slightly before putting the parchment back for the agitated quill, which swooped down and soon found its place.

"Would the fair lass like something to accompany her delicious, flame broiled steak before our *waiter* whisks the order away?" Severus asked with a smirk.

--8--

"Verbose little thing, isn't it?" Personally, Hermione found the quill oddly charming. Not that she was going to share that little detail with Severus.

"If it's not too much trouble, I would like to add the stuffed mushrooms and rice to my order, as well. They sounded rather good."

Once they were finished ordering, the parchment, quill and menus all disappeared from the table, leaving Hermione and Severus alone.

There was silence for a moment as Hermione worked up a bit of nerve. "How is the antidote coming along; any more progress?"

--8--

Reaching across the table, Severus picked up her hand and said quite softly, "Tonight, there is no antidote. There is only you, me, a wonderful dinner punctuated by brilliant conversation, followed by a delightful play, and a stroll after to savor it all."

Squeezing her hand gently before releasing it, Severus took a sip of water and asked, "Will that meet with the lady's approval, and if so what brilliant work of literature have you recently read and why would I hate it?"

--8--

Part of her, a very small part, wanted to protest. The rest of her found the idea of having the sort of evening he described to be delightful.

"The lady approves." She gave him a warm smile and almost reached out to take his hand again, craving a repeat of the earlier contact.

"I was recently revisiting an old favorite, *New Theory of Numerology*. Are you familiar with it?"

Part Thirty-One

Chapter 31 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Thank you, Lariope, for taking time away from your own projects to beta for us. We really do appreciate it.

Surprisingly enough, Severus had been more than mildly amused by the play and had to stifle a few laughs that had threatened to escape. He was quite curious how they were going to portray Thickey getting zapped in the arse by his wife after she discovered the full extent of his duplicity. He sincerely hoped they wouldn't leave it up to the imaginations of the audience, as they did the love scenes between Thickey and his mistress, but it would be rather difficult to give a convincing performance without the proper spells.

When the lights came up and signaled it was time for intermission, Severus found he was quite ready to stretch and perhaps obtain a glass of brandy. Rising, he smiled gently down at Hermione and asked, "Shall we?"

When Hermione agreed and they'd made their way to the aisle, Severus found a few well-placed glares opened up the crowd quite nicely. They made their way to the stairs without being hindered. His left arm was loosely around Hermione's waist as they approached the bar.

"What would you like?"

--8--

Hermione was in too good of a mood to be bothered by the way people seemed to trip over themselves to get out of Severus' way. Dinner had been rather nice, even after the less than perfect start, and the play was just as humorous as the advertising had promised. She made a mental note to look up the playwright and see if he or she had any other works.

The real reason she was in such a splendid mood probably had more to do with her current company than with food or the play. Unlike their other outing, or the times when they had visited her flat or his, this had nothing to do with books or Potions or even the burning desire to fall into the nearest bed.

After a very brief moment's reflection, she admitted that last one was still valid, but it wasn't an all-consuming need like it had been that night at her place. Not that she had any intention of doing anything about it because friends did not do things like that even when they *were* out on a date.

Which this was. A date. With Severus.

Hermione grinned and let her hip bump against his as they walked. "Wine. Something red, I think?"

--8--

The actions of the witch at his side made the small smile return to his face as they approached the bar. Since this was Severus' first visit to the theater, he'd been slightly apprehensive that he would commit an error of epic proportion in Hermione's presence and, therefore, had done what research he could. He knew, for example, that there would be an intermission during which they were free to move around until the next act was ready and so had been prepared when the lights were turned up. He *hadn't* realized what outrageous prices the vendors behind the bar would be charging and was relieved he'd prepared for unexpected expenses.

After giving Hermione the glass of wine she'd requested, Severus held his small glass of brandy up to gaze through the liquid to determine if he'd been thoroughly fleeced. He turned slightly to bring a chandelier filled with lighted candles into line and quickly dismissed his concerns over the brandy's questionable quality when he noted who was *arranged* under its reflected glow.

"Oh, *joy*," he muttered mostly to himself and turned his head to look at Hermione. "Are you ready for a baptism of fire? We have a mutual acquaintance across the room, and it's already too late to pretend I haven't seen *him* because he and his date are both staring at us."

--8--

She looked around for a familiar face and quickly spotted the unmistakable blond of a Malfoy. Draco was standing with someone Hermione didn't immediately recognize, which told her it probably wasn't Pansy Parkinson, at least.

Unless Pansy finally had something done about that awful nose of hers.

A squint confirmed that even with some mind-bending magical adjustments to the infamous pug nose, there was no way Draco's companion could have been their former classmate.

"I don't suppose we could get away with a polite nod of acknowledgement and then a mad dash back to our seats or the loo?"

--8--

Taking a sip of his brandy, Severus studied the young man for a moment. He hadn't seen Draco since that last disastrous year when Snape had been headmaster at Hogwarts. He'd attempted to keep the damage to the students at the hands of the Carrows to a minimum, and the little shit hadn't helped. Remembering some of the overtures he'd made to perhaps not befriend the swot but keep him from being killed, Severus' eyes narrowed slightly.

"No, Hermione, that wouldn't be a wise move," he said with a small shake of his head. "If we do that, it's the same as admitting we can't stand up to his scrutiny, regard or whatever he happens to feel makes him superior, and he'd be one step ahead in the eternal chess game of Slytherin House from the Malfoy point of view. I've actually miscalculated the youngest one, it appears, so it would be wise to be on your guard. I would have wagered my salary for an entire year at Hogwarts that he batted for the other team, but it appears he *doesn't*, if the comely young witch by his side gives us any indication."

Turning to gauge her reaction, he raised a brow, along with his elbow and added, "We shall, if you're willing, take the appropriate steps and allow them the idea they're holding court as they probably won't budge from their *spot*. From what I gather, Lucius and Narcissa used to do the same."

--8--

The thought of giving Draco Malfoy the upper hand in anything was repugnant, but Severus had made an excellent point that disappearing without a word would give the wrong impression.

She could stubbornly stand her ground and attempt to force Malfoy and his girlfriend to come to her... or she could go over there and get things over with so she could go back to enjoying her evening with Severus. Plus, the sooner they finished a brief conversation with Draco, the sooner she could drag Severus away and ask him what had made him think Draco Malfoy was gay. Somehow, she doubted it was anything as juicy as having walked in on a full-blown orgy in the Slytherin Quidditch locker room, but there had to be *something* for Severus to base his opinion on, surely.

Hermione linked her arm with his and plastered a polite smile on her lips. "All right, let's do this."

--8--

Ah, the infamous Malfoy tilt to the chin. He's managed it quite well for one so young.

Stopping a comfortable distance away from the self-appointed *royalty*, Snape raised an eyebrow before tilting his own head to the side. "Mister Malfoy, what a... pleasant... surprise. You remember Miss Granger, do you not?"

Draco's nod of acknowledgement at their approach, in Severus' opinion, had been only slightly condescending, and because of that his initial greeting to the Malfoy heir had lacked any malice. Draco's opening salvo, "Mister Snape, Miss Granger. Allow me to introduce Astoria Greengrass. Miss Granger, you may remember her sister, Daphne. She was in the same year we were, back in our school days," had him thinking it might be a tolerable exchange if they were able to depart in the next few moments. Then Draco widened his eyes a trifle and a little smirk appeared on his face.

There's a saying somewhere about counting ones chickens before they're hatched.

With that disgusting little smirk still on his face, Draco said, "But of course, we were *children* then and much has changed. Just look at the two of you. I would certainly never have imagined this turn-about in relations."

Snape, once again, acknowledged a mistake, and while he would have dearly loved to wipe the floor with the sorry little bugger, there were too many witnesses about and words would have to do. His arm slid back around Hermione's waist, and he bowed his head a few degrees in the other woman's direction.

"Miss Greengrass, a pleasure, but I should point out that Draco omitted a few things in his *summary* of their school years. Miss Granger, unlike the vast majority of her contemporaries," and if Severus' eyes lit on Draco before moving back to Miss Greengrass, it was merely to make sure he was paying proper attention, "not only possesses an extremely high intelligence, but the graciousness to forgive old wrongs."

--8--

The young woman with Draco spoke. "Charmed. Rest assured, Mister Snape, I've heard much about Miss Granger's... talents... over the years. Her exploits are almost as legendary as your own." Hermione thought the smile Astoria gave them was far too placid to not be hiding something.

Draco let out an amused laugh and shook his head slightly. "Hardly a summary, *Severus*, merely an observation that much has changed over the years although not everything. Miss Granger, I think read that you're a librarian or some such now?"

Severus' compliments, prompted by Malfoy's contemptibility as they were, had warmed Hermione. As did the arm Severus slid around her waist.

Of course, Malfoy and his annoying little chit who was just as obnoxious as Pansy Parkinson would have been, if not more so, in Hermione's opinion had ruined the moment by opening their mouths again.

"A librarian? That's... closer than I expected from *you*, Mister Malfoy. It's almost as if you've made an effort to keep track of what I've been doing. Another woman might be flattered." She turned to address the girl. "I'm the manager of Marks and Sons."

Hermione waited a beat to give that a moment to sink in. "It's a bookstore."

--8--

The perfectly justifiable irritation building in Snape's chest at the cheeky *Severus* uttered by the other wizard melted in amazement, and he was forced to swallow a snort. Not only had Hermione held her own quite beautifully, in fact but she managed to insinuate they were both dullards with nary an insult in sight. The timing had been impeccable.

"Yes, well as *nice* as this has been, I'm sure you'll forgive me if I whisk Hermione away so we won't miss the opening of the third act. *Draco*. Miss Greengrass."

Once he had drawn her away from the other two, his hand gently squeezed her waist, and he whispered, "There may be hope to make you into a Slytherin yet, my siren. Well done."

--8--

Hermione rolled her eyes at his newest "compliment," but smiled nevertheless. "I wouldn't have lasted long in the Slytherin dorms. Someone like Draco would have kept pushing my buttons and then I well, then I'd probably lose my temper and hit him. Again."

That memory never failed to conjure a phantom ache in her knuckles and a wide grin. She flexed her hand as they made their way back to their spots in the theater.

Hermione perched on the edge of her seat, waiting until Severus was settled into his to scoot back and get comfortable. If that comfort meant that her leg and arm were pressed against his, so be it.

--8--

Hermione's actions necessitated the placing of his arm around her shoulders, which wasn't at all a hardship. As the curtain rose on the third act, and the lights finally dimmed, Severus allowed himself to relax enough to play with the strand of hair that trailed from the elegant French twist and hung so temptingly close to his hand. Leaning slightly closer, he whispered, "I've been negligent in my attentions and should be taken to task. You look quite enchanting this evening, Hermione."

--8--

For a moment, Hermione was completely oblivious to the action on the stage; all her senses were tuned to the man next to her. The way he touched her hair. His voice, whispering her name.

"Thank you." Her voice was far too husky for her liking. "You look very nice, yourself."

Feeling emboldened by their earlier encounter with Draco and the young Miss Greengrass, Hermione kept her unseeing gaze locked on the stage and very casually placed her hand on Severus' thigh.

--8--

After returning home, taking off his robe and hanging it on the blessedly silent rack, Severus slowly unbuttoned his frock coat while he walked toward the windows in the sitting room. "Your master is an idiot pretending to be an intelligent Potions master, Yorick," Severus advised the quiet bird as he passed the perch.

"It was an almost perfect evening, aside from that twit at the restaurant, of course. I think my chances of persuading Hermione that a perfect ending would have been in her bed were quite good," he remarked absently while leaning one-handed against the frame of a window. "When she put her hand on my thigh... Well, it was rather difficult not to suggest we change locations then and there. It must have addled my brain or drawn away enough blood that it scrambled what little wits I have left because instead of pressing my advantage I attempted to hide my amorous attentions by asking her when she wanted to work on the antidote, which in turn made her ask how *dear* Lorenzo was doing. I couldn't avoid the subject again without arousing her suspicions, so I told her the truth. Unadorned truth truly bites one in the arse at times," he mused. "She became somewhat distant and only allowed me to kiss her once before she let me know that she'd be here on the morrow and slipped inside her flat."

Standing up straight, Snape pressed both of his hands on the small of his back and leaned back until he heard a faint crack. Releasing a small sigh, he turned and started toward his bedroom.

"You're lucky, you stupid bird," he muttered in passing. "Your type of mate would only protest if you *didn't* service her when mother nature dictated." He stopped just outside the bedroom, turned his head, glared at Yorick and added, "There'll be no room in this inn for your mate or any spawn the two of you have. Find a tree or a rook or whatever the hell it is falcons use for a nest and bloody well build one *before* you do anything foolish." Satisfied he'd had the last word, Severus closed the door behind him and prepared for bed. Alone.

Damned inconsiderate of that stupid mouse. I should cut off his tail and feed it to him for breakfast.

Party Thirty-Two

Chapter 32 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: In addition to the normal, unending thanks that go out to Lariope for her wonderful beta work on our behalf, I wish to thank all of you who have reviewed and kept up with our story. It was born over two years ago, but the process of bringing up it, so to speak, has been delayed and convoluted by real life stubbing our toes. There will be one more chapter after this one and it may be slightly delayed. Not as long a delay as there has been in the past, by any means, but a few weeks may pass. Enjoy.

Rationally, Hermione knew that it was not Severus' fault that Lorenzo had reverted back to a love-sick rodent. Therefore, she hadn't been upset *with* Severus the previous night, she'd just been upset. Period.

When he informed her that their progress had only been a temporary thing, she'd felt an ache an actual physical ache in her heart.

Perversely, the more it looked like they might never find a viable solution to Dumbledore's horrid love potion, the harder Hermione wanted to work on the antidote.

She needed Severus to be free, no matter what the outcome. Even if he couldn't bring himself to care for her the way she someday hoped he might, she needed to know that it was his true, untainted feelings that kept them apart, not the love potion.

Hermione spent most of the night sitting on her bed, surrounded by her notes regarding the antidote. She managed to catch a few hours of sleep before she Apparated to Severus' flat at some point during the late morning, arms full of calculation-covered parchments.

Her hair was haphazardly pulled up, and she considered herself lucky that she'd remembered to change out of her pajamas before leaving.

"Severus? Where are you? Are you in the lab?"

--8--

"I am!" he yelled back for her benefit. "What choice did you leave, you mangy rodent?" he asked Lorenzo snidely. "Here I am again, chopping and crushing, because *you* couldn't be bothered to make up your tiny little brain."

He'd set up four cauldrons and was preparing the exact same ingredients they'd used on the last attempt. Severus knew that it was probably a step in the brewing process that might make the antidote more effective.

Merlin only knows how long it will take to find which little step will make the difference.

--8--

"Sorry, I didn't catch all of that." Hermione had heard him saying something after letting her know where he was, but she hadn't been able to decipher the actual words.

She stopped just in side the doorway of the lab and frowned at the four cauldrons.

"What are you doing?"

--8--

"What you didn't *catch* which I assume is a quaint Muggle way of saying you didn't hear all that I said wasn't meant for your delicate ears, Hermione," he said while shooting a glare in the direction of the cages. "I merely told Lorenzo he was failing miserably as a test subject."

Wiping his hands on a soft lab cloth, Severus raised a brow and reminded himself that she was there to assist. It helped to curb his irritation at what he thought was a very silly question.

"As far as what I'm doing, I thought it was rather obvious even to one who isn't a Potions master. We need to examine the brewing process itself, changing the order of the additions to begin with, then possibly the heating times and if *those* don't work, the directions and numbers of stirs," he managed to say for once without any sarcasm.

--8--

"Or, she began, "we could try it my way. I admit that I'm not a Potions master, but I do know my way around an Arithmancy equation, and I spent the night trying to understand why Lorenzo's version of the antidote worked, then why it eventually failed."

She dumped her notes on a table, careful to find a clear spot first.

"If my way doesn't work, we're out one potion full of ingredients and time. If it does work..."

If it worked, Hermione was fairly certain she would either cry or throw herself at Severus in joy. Or, perhaps, both.

--8--

It took a great deal of restraint on Severus' part to hold his tongue. Who did the chit think she was to advise *him* how to adjust a potion. He'd been devising improvements to standardized potions before she'd been born. Potter's use of his old text book during their sixth year, and his subsequent meteoric rise in the ranks *surpassing* Hermione's efforts should have been enough to make her keep her Arithmancy nonsense far away from his lab.

Severus, however, hadn't been sorted into Slytherin by accident. On the off chance her equations produced a viable antidote, he would have to apologize again. If it didn't, which he thought would most assuredly be the outcome, he would always have the upper hand and be able to rub that *delicate* nose in it forevermore.

He sniffed once, nodded his head and said, "Very well. We'll give your equations a trial."

And then we'll burn them.

--8--

She had his agreement, however grudgingly given. She nodded and began to sort through her parchments, looking for the one that contained the rewritten brewing instructions, pausing only to stick her tongue out at his back.

"What I ended up with is remarkably similar to the version you used on Lorenzo, but with these alterations. I've charmed the changes to green ink so you can see the differences."

Her hair began to slip free from its pins, the ivory combs left on her dresser because she did not want them damaged while they brewed. Hermione batted the loosened hair out of her face.

"I need coffee. Do you have coffee or should I make some?"

--8--

He was already studying the notes she'd indicated, and everything inside him, all of the years of experience, hunches, and just plain common senses *cried* that they shouldn't attempt that many changes at once. The tried and true method, one step at a time, would ensure they didn't stray too far from the original. Deep in thought, attempting to determine beforehand what effects would be brought if all the alterations *were* done at once, Severus made a shooing motion with one hand in the direction of the kitchen without taking his eyes off of her notes.

"There's tea in the pot coffee's in the cupboard you'll need to make it," he muttered absently as he turned a page. His head popped up, and he added, "Secure your hair, Hermione. We don't need any accidental additions."

--8--

She shuffled toward the kitchen, muffling her yawn with one hand. Once the coffee was ready and she had her first sip, Hermione dealt with her hair.

"We don't need any accidental additions," she mimicked in a high pitched voice that sounded nothing like Severus.

Coffee mug clutched between both hands, Hermione returned to the lab. "So, is it feasible? It's not going to cause an explosion or a toxic gas or anything, is it?"

--8--

His own hasty notes added to the side of hers were irritating Severus more and more as he realized the changes her equations called for were, in all likelihood, the same he would have taken in shorter stages.

If this gets out, Vector will be entirely too pleased with herself.

He looked up at Hermione's entrance and raised a brow.

"It is, and it shouldn't," he advised shortly before removing three of the cauldrons, along with three sets of supplies, from the main lab table.

"Are you going to lollygag around all morning or did you come here to brew?" he asked before using his wand to light a fire under the remaining cauldron.

--8--

Well, someone is a cranky pants today.

"Actually," she began. "I came here for some sweaty, naked frolicking on the living room floor, but brewing it shall be, I guess," Hermione finished with a sigh and another gulp of the all important caffeine.

She set her empty cup aside and double checked to make sure her hair was properly contained. "All right, where do you want me, and what do I need to shred first?"

--8--

She's not only a temptress, but a wicked one, Severus decided as an image of precisely what Hermione'd described teased him and made his body respond in a way that *wasn't* conducive to brewing. Not only was she trying to show him up by using her superior Arithmancy skills, she was now taunting him with what they'd once shared.

"Under me panting on the living room floor, and my clothes. Although if you want to be efficient, the latter should probably come first," Severus snapped while sending Hermione a glare. "I was under the impression you'd left your foolishness behind you at Hogwarts, Miss Granger. Prove me wrong," he stated while stepping back from the table and crossing his arms.

"I will assist. You brew."

--8--

Back to Miss Granger, again.

She thought of protesting that she had only been joking, but she suspected her words might ring false if she did. There was a teeny, tiny *Liar. Not tiny at all.* part of her that longed for exactly what he described. She, underneath Severus, sweaty and panting and hungry for more.

Right. We'll just ignore that part, then, and move on.

She returned his glare with one of her own and moved into the space he'd vacated. "Fine. You shred the belladonna and I'll prepare the base for the antidote." Then, she turned her back to him and began to work.

If she muttered under her breath, who could blame her? And if the words she muttered sounded suspiciously like, "Not my fault he can't take a joke," who could blame her for that either?

--8--

Every move Hermione made, every stir of the cauldron, was watched with an intense regard by her former professor. Severus was waiting for one infinitesimal mistake on Hermione's part to swoop in, scalding remarks ready, to prove that he and only he was the Master of Potions. The longer she labored correctly the grouchier and testier he became.

They had taken a small break when the potion needed to sit for fifteen minutes, and he'd wolfed down a sandwich and a tepid cup of tea for lunch. He'd left Hermione at the dining table and gone back to check the ingredients they would need for the next stage, sure that she'd make a mistake in the hours remaining.

She didn't.

It was all he could do to contain his ire, when a thought occurred to him. A small smirk appeared on the corner of his mouth as he set their cold supper on the table and waited for Hermione to appear from... wherever she'd gone after they'd set the potion aside to cool.

Of course she's exceptional. I, after all, instilled in her how important it is to be careful and guided her the first five years. What other witch or wizard could brew a Polyjuice potion correctly as young as she was?

A fresh pot of hot tea, along with a bottle of what he thought was Hermione's favorite wine, joined the dishes on the table.

"Hermione!" Severus bellowed as he sat down in an almost good mood. "Dinner will be getting warm if you don't move that talented tail of yours."

--8--

Hermione didn't remember Potions class at Hogwarts being nearly as nerve wracking as today had been. She knew it was utterly ridiculous, but it felt almost as if Severus were watching her every move, just waiting for her to make a mistake, no matter how small.

She stepped out of the loo just in time to hear Severus yell. "Talented tail? You know what, I'm not even going to ask."

The table was set when she arrived, and Hermione flicked her gaze from the bottle of wine to Severus. His earlier grumpy mood seemed to have waned somewhat.

"Tell me you've got chocolate biscuits hidden somewhere for afters and I'll I'll think about moving your name to the top of the waiting list for the Thorndike manuscript you've been wanting." She had been about to tell him that if he had biscuits she would be his, but that would have been too close to the truth for comfort.

--8--

Severus' eyes narrowed slightly while he nodded his head. "I see how you are. I can't believe you're attempting to blackmail me out of my minuscule stash of chocolate biscuits." Heaving a great sigh, he returned to the kitchen and rummaged around for a bit before he returned and placed the packet on the table. "Happy now?" he asked

with a small smile. "The last box of chocolate biscuits in the place and I have to use them in order to have an opportunity to laugh at Thorndike, worthless blowhard that he is. Although, he did come up with the cross cut on the"

Severus' words cut off as another thought occurred to him.

"Have you ever thought of using Arthimancy to improve other potions? Wolfsbane for example?" he asked while passing a dish in Hermione's direction. "I've tried for years to make it non-perishable, as its potency diminishes when you put even a common Stasis Charm on it."

--8--

Biscuits! Score!

The hand that had been about to sneak out and snag the package of biscuits got diverted by the dish that Severus passed her. With a longing look toward the biscuits, Hermione answered, "After sixth year, when Harry had the infamous Potions book, I will admit to trying some calculations to see if I could improve my results."

She popped an olive into her mouth, swallowed, and reached for her wine glass. "From what I remember, Wolfsbane is particularly difficult to predict. Even the smallest variation can cause unexpected results. You add two symbols that should equal one thing, but when you apply it to the potion, you get something completely different."

Hermione had another sip of wine as she thought, reaching up to pull out a particularly annoying hairpin that had been poking her for the last hour. A bit of hair fell, but Hermione ignored the loose curl. "It's quite puzzling, really."

--8--

"Wolfsbane is a very unforgiving potion. The smallest error cannot be corrected," Severus stated as he helped himself to a sharp dill pickle. He relished the crunch as he bit off a portion and chewed. "I knew at one time how long it took Damocles Belby to perfect it, but I was astounded that he'd labor that long surrounded by werewolves, not knowing from one full moon to the next if he'd survive to try again."

Severus realized he'd been using what was left of the pickle to gesture as he'd talked, and he glared at it before tossing the rest on his plate. He'd had his fill of their cold supper and realized the talk of werewolves which he'd started had quite killed his appetite. Severus looked toward the clock over his mantle and raised a brow.

"I'll check the temperature of the antidote while you finish," he said before standing up and wiping his mouth. "It should be cooled enough by now."

As he walked toward his lab, Severus pondered the foolish bravery of Mister Damocles Belby.

If anyone earned their Order of Merlin, it was him. Too bad he didn't persist and find a total cure.

I wonder if they've ever narrowed down what causes the damned infection in the first place. They'd have to take a sample of the blood after the actual transformation, since they're not contagious otherwise, and if the werewolf had already taken the potion to make it safe to get the sample...

That would probably skew the results too badly to find the blasted cause.

Bugger.

How many Stunners would it take to knock out a werewolf? If Lupin hadn't gone off and gotten himself killed, we might have had a proper volunteer to find out.

I'll have to check and see if there are any other Gryffindor werewolves on file. It's the sort of foolhardy thing they'd do.

With his mind safely occupied puzzling out how to get an uncontaminated sample of werewolf blood, Severus checked the temperature of the antidote.

"Are you ready to try the new batch, my little band of love-sick rodents? Pay proper attention and I won't have to feed you to Yorick just yet."

--8--

Hermione joined him in the lab just in time to hear his threat to the mice. She hid her amused smile behind her loosened hair. She waited while Severus administered the antidote, her lower lip caught between her teeth as she studied the cages.

"There!" She pointed at Juliet. The mouse twitched, then blinked and sat up on her back haunches. Juliet looked around, then began to groom herself, ignoring Romeo.

Then Petruccio wandered away from the side of the cage where he had been mooning over his mate. Desdemona rolled on to her back and went to sleep. Cleopatra climbed into her food dish. One by one, each of the mice reverted to their natural behavior.

And Hermione barely kept herself from shouting out in joy.

With a deep breath, Hermione mentioned that it was far too early to assume the antidote had worked. She knew she was speaking to remind herself more than Severus.

Still, she felt giddy inside.

Hermione threw her arms around Severus and buried her face against his shoulder. "I really think this is the one," she whispered against the material. She pulled away and with one last glance toward the mice, mentioned that she'd be back the next night after work to check on the antidote's progress. Then Hermione popped up on her toes, pressed a kiss to Severus' lips, and Apparated home.

--8--

After Hermione left, Severus tidied up the lab, covered the antidote and continued to study the behavior of the mice. He'd noticed the twitch Juliet had given as well as the apparent nap Desdemona was taking. When he poked her in the side, she didn't respond, and it was only by watching carefully that he saw the tiniest of movements around her rib cage that indicated she still breathed. After approximately fifteen minutes, Desdemona staggered to her feet and almost drained the water supply in that cage.

Thirsty little bugger, Severus decided after refilling it and making a few brief notes on their behavior. There was nothing left to do but wait.

Wait. That's all I've ever done, it seems.

Wait for Lily to get over her infatuation with Potter.

Wait on the Dark Lord to let her live.

Wait on Dumbledore to protect her.

Wait on the Boy Who Lived to grow up and avenge her.

Wait for the Dark Lord to either kill or be killed.

"I'm bloody tired of *waiting*," he growled at the mice. "Make up your minds and be quick about it," he instructed them before extinguishing the lights in his lab.

Yorick was fed, their cold supper put away, and Severus prepared for bed. He wasn't alone. Too many people, both alive and dead, pranced through and around his thoughts to allow him to drift off to sleep.

"Bugger it all," he said after an hour before getting up and heading to the cabinet in the lavatory.

The next morning, he carried the empty vial into the lab to check on the mice. He'd intended to refill and replace it, but it ended up as shards on the floor.

Stunned didn't begin to describe how Severus felt. True, he'd gone to bed with mixed emotions, and it had taken a bit of Dreamless Sleep to finally shut down all the thoughts that had whirled through his head and allow him to sleep, but to walk into his lab and find the occupants of the cages... dead. He didn't understand what could possibly have gone wrong. They hadn't had to use anything remotely poisonous in their efforts and none of the items they'd used combined to form anything deadly.

"Why are you dead?" he finally yelled at the twelve little bodies. He'd poked and prodded, ran one diagnostic spell after another and still could find nothing wrong with the wretched little mice.

He slammed the lab door closed on his way out, too disturbed to care when Yorick squawked his disapproval. "Shut it," he growled on his way to the bottles of liquor he kept on the side table. "Now what? Hermione will be heartbroken that the little shits are dead, and I don't know **why** they are! It doesn't make sense," he said after letting his hand drop off the container of Ogden's and turning toward Yorick. "It doesn't make any sense at all."

Flopping down in his chair, Severus stared at the ceiling, still thinking aloud. "It won't help to start over with new mice until I we figure out what went wrong. She was right not to allow me to use human *volunteers*, and I'll probably never hear the end" Severus suddenly sat up straight and looked in Yorick's direction again. "Human. Could it be as simple as that?" he asked while staring at the bird. "Nothing more than that?"

The notes they'd taken while running the experiments were hastily grabbed, and Severus flipped back to the beginning. "They always reacted with great stress when they couldn't see the object of their desire, but I don't recall that feeling when I couldn't actually see Lily; of course, she was already dead, but her picture... Her picture was never enough," he added softly. Slowly, he opened the secret drawer of his desk, drew forth the torn picture, and studied the smiling, happy Lily. "Would the potion hold true if I died with it still affecting me, Lily? Would I become a fool chasing the spirit of the woman I love, have always loved?"

The thought of Potter, Black and even Lupin snickering behind his back even in the spirit world was too much to bear. He'd suffered many indignities at their hands while alive, and he'd be damned if it would continue for eternity. The photo was put away, and he straightened his desk quickly. Glancing around the flat, he pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment, a regular quill and his black ink.

April 16, 2001

This is the last will and testament of Severus Snape.

I leave all that I possess, including all patents, future earnings, and the contents of my vault at Gringotts, to Hermione Granger.

Severus Snape

He didn't *really* think that he'd die, but Severus had never been one to leave things to chance. Given the choice of living with Dumbledore's last, best jest or dying with the potion finally beaten he'd choose death.

A second piece of parchment was drawn out, and he gave great thought to what he wanted to say in case it really *was* the last time he'd be able to tell her anything.

April 16, 2001

My dear Hermione,

If this turns out well, you'll never see this note. If it doesn't, I want you to know how much your friendship and trust have meant to this boring old fart. Without your assistance, I'm quite sure I would have gone insane by now and Dumbledore would have had the last laugh again.

You'll be quite angry with me, I'm sure, but I couldn't take the chance you would try to prevent me from taking the potion. You brewed it perfectly I couldn't have done it better myself yet all twelve mice are dead. I haven't been able to determine why they died, but it occurred to me that the reason may be as simple as the fact they're not human. Since we would be unable to obtain humans as guinea pigs, I'm using the one that's available. Me.

If I do die, please don't blame yourself. This is my decision and mine alone. I do not wish to die on some future date with the potion still affecting me, because just the thought of an eternity of Potter, Lupin and Black snickering at the love-sick bat of the dungeons chasing after Lily is something I cannot and will not live with for however long I have. Merlin only knows, I could get hit by one of those Muggle vehicles while crossing a street and there I'd be a laughingstock for all of time.

Ah, my sweet siren, I wanted to do so many wonderful things with you. Teaching you to fly was one of them. I believe, with your mind and the facts I've given you, you'll be able to figure it out on your own if I'm not there, but it might have been what you call "fun" to do it together.

The recipes for your bubble bath and the perfume are in my files in the lab under Hermione. When you make them, think of me now and then, if you would.

As always,

Severus

The note, which had turned into a letter, was quickly folded and placed into an envelope. After her name was written on the front, Severus turned and glared at Yorick.

"This is **not** to be delivered, understood? If and when it's needed, she'll find it."

Severus rose and went into his bedroom. He pulled out his best frock coat, robes and trousers before taking a hasty shower and drying his hair. Looking at his reflection, he wondered what death real death would feel like.

"You're being stupid," he told himself, scowling at the reflection. "There's nothing in the potion that would harm a fly."

Only a mouse.

After dressing, he took the precaution of settling himself in the middle of his bed before downing the vial of antidote and placing the vial on the table next to his bed. Folding his hands across his stomach, he waited, eyes open, for what was in store.

Too bad the little bastards couldn't talk and tell me

A sharp pain lanced through Severus' chest and left him gasping for air.

"That was unexpected," he muttered before another sharper pain followed in its wake, this one in his head. "Crucio still has you beat; try again," he taunted it. And it did again and again until the wizard on the bed was sweaty, pale as a ghost, and unconscious.

Part Thirty-Three

Chapter 33 of 33

Darned Child and Devsgma have combined their talents to tell you the story of what has happened to our favorite pair. It starts with a few letters from one extremely grouchy Potions maker to the manager of a used book store. Canon through Deathly Hallows to the point of Severus Snape's supposed death at which point it becomes AU.

AN: Our undying thanks go out to Lariope for her awesome beta skills.

It was only a few hours before the wizard lying on the bed regained consciousness and groaned. Sitting up and swinging his legs over the side left Severus dizzy and grateful that he hadn't eaten prior to taking the antidote. A few deep breaths chased the dizziness away and settled his stomach, but there was still *something* not normal. It took only a moment for him to realize there was a deep abyss where the fanatical love for Lily used to reside, and Severus understood instantly what had killed the mice.

"Loneliness killed the bloody little buggers," he muttered as he rose, determined to update the notes on the antidote. "They'd had no prior experience with our type of emotions or how to deal with the gaping maw left behind."

He stripped off his cloak and the frock coat before starting the trek to his lab. Stopping by the kitchen, he drank three large glasses of water before his thirst was quenched. Once in the lab, Severus rolled up the sleeves of his shirt before placing the bodies of the mice under a Stasis Charm. He grabbed the appropriate set of notes and flipped to the end.

The subject to be given the antidote will resist due to the nature of the original potion. Bindings may be required to ensure their cooperation. An empty stomach would be advisable. Prior to consuming the antidote, the subject should be placed on a flat surface and advised that the effects are almost immediate. There will be some pain involved, profuse sweating, and the subject will in all likelihood become unconscious. When consciousness is regained, the subject will note dizziness, nausea, and an emptiness where the false emotion resided. It is supposed that the longer the subject was under the influence of the original potion, the larger the emptiness will feel; therefore this antidote should be administered as soon as possible.

Satisfied that his *duty* as a Potions master was done, Severus sat down on one of the lab stools before he started poking and prodding at the emotions he had left. He was quite relieved to realize he still detested Potter, Black and Lupin was still fond of Minerva, Hooch and a number of others he'd put up with over the years but when he thought of Hermione...

"Oh, fucking hell," Severus muttered before his head lowered to rest on the arms he'd folded on the lab table. He loved her. Not as a *friend*, not as a doting Minerva loved her star Gryffindor student, but as a man loved and desired a woman. The way he'd thought for so long he'd loved Lily.

As he brought memory after memory back including some of the ones when she'd still been a student Severus found a difference. The *love* he'd felt for Lily would never allow itself to be doubted. It had been a solid wall of unquestioning devotion, while the whatever it was he felt for Hermione since he hesitated to call it what he thought it might be was a mixed bag of irritation, affection, admiration, lust, and at times exasperation.

Is it real? Is it nothing more than an attempt to fill that gaping hole?

Sitting up, Severus pulled his notes back in front of him to add:

The subject should be advised to carefully monitor their emotions. Any realizations of an immediate new love interest should be tempered with the knowledge that it may be nothing more than the psyche's attempt to fill the emptiness.

He still needed to confront the feelings he had left for Lily, and he was dismayed and then comforted to find ~~he'd~~ still love her. Not with the all-consuming passion he'd grown accustomed to, but with a gentle warmth that acknowledged her rightful place in his past. Severus was quite astonished to realize he was crying when a few tears fell on his hands and the notes he'd been so careful to update. He pulled a kerchief from his pocket, carefully wiped them away and blew his nose.

"And that's quite enough of that," he told himself sternly before he rose and headed for his desk in the sitting room. Severus wanted to further test the effectiveness of the potion, and he knew of only one way. After pulling Lily's picture from the hidden drawer, a wave of sadness passed over him. It was a sadness that mourned the passing of his childhood friend, and was accompanied by regret that he'd ultimately been the cause of her death.

"What now, dear Lily?" Severus asked the laughing, smiling face, and he suddenly knew what he needed to do with the picture. Sitting down, he pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and began to write.

Potter,

I understand you have the other half of this photo. A quick Repario should mend it. For what it's worth, I offer my apologies.

Snape

The letter was folded quite carefully around the photo before being placed in an envelope. Potter's name was scribbled on it and Severus turned to bellow for Yorick.

The perch was empty.

"Of all the times for that blasted bird to decide he was hungry and go out" Snape's mild tirade halted as his hand slammed down on the almost empty desk surface. His hastily drawn-up will was still there, along with the letter addressed to Potter, but the one addressed to Hermione *wasn't*.

"That damned, interfering **chicken** is going to rue the day he disobeyed me!"

--8--

Work was hectic, as was usual for a Monday. Hermione didn't have a chance to sit from the moment she arrived that morning.

She had no idea what time it was when Yorick first appeared. Her hands were full, and the falcon refused to allow anyone else close enough to remove the letter from its talons. Since it was far too early to declare the antidote a success, Hermione assumed the note was merely Severus letting her know that the mice were once again in love and the antidote had failed. He might even have added a post script inviting her over to discuss the matter.

With the idea of dinner with Severus on her mind, Hermione instructed Yorick to wait in her office, and the bird flew off. When she managed to make her way there twenty minutes later, the room was empty.

Some time later, Yorick appeared again. Hermione quickly passed her armful of books to Mister Fitzgerald and snagged the letter, tucking it into her pocket to read when she had her afternoon tea.

Once she finally opened the missive and absorbed the words, Hermione thought she might faint. She was white as a ghost, light-headed and sick to her stomach as she rushed out of her office. There wasn't even time to let Mister Fitzgerald know she was leaving.

If this turns out well, you'll never see this note.

She ran to the nearest Apparation point.

You'll be quite angry with me I'm sure... I couldn't take the chance you would try to prevent me from taking the potion.... all twelve mice are dead..

Something obscured her vision, and Hermione realized she was crying.

If I do die, please don't blame yourself.

If I do die...

Die...

Somehow she managed to make it to his flat without splinching.

She wanted to call out his name, but the word was stuck in the back of her throat, choking her.

Hermione had to blink several times to make sure she was seeing what she thought she was seeing.

Severus. Alive.

"You bastard! You fucking bastard! How could you?"

And then, to her complete and utter humiliation, everything went black.

--8--

The soft pop of an Apparation had drawn Severus out of the lab where he'd been bottling the remainder of the antidote. He'd barely opened his mouth to apologize explain that the bloody bird had disobeyed him when Hermione screamed at him. This, of course, severed only to ignite his own short temper.

Bloody hell! So, now I'm a bastard, again. Fine. Whatever. I knew it would never

"Shit!" flew out of his mouth when Hermione collapsed on the floor. He hurried to her side just as Yorick returned to his perch.

"See what you've done, you stupid birdbrain! This is all *your* fault!" Severus yelled at the bird while he checked Hermione's pulse and was relieved to see she still breathed. He Accioed a pillow from his bed and placed it under her feet, unsure if he should move her or not.

"Where's a bloody Mediwitch when you need one," he muttered after obtaining his cloak from the rack and covering her form. "Hermione?" he asked, while noting the color was starting to return to her face.

I love her. Oh, fucking hell I do, hit him in the chest like a sledgehammer.

What do I have to offer?

A tarnished name and a foul disposition.

Money...but that nonsense will surely end within a year and we'd need to be frugal. No more pretty combs, nights on the town, or champagne for lunch.

Severus rose and gazed down on the witch that had so changed his life for the better.

She deserves...so much more.

I have to make her hate me again.

"No time like the present," he muttered while he attempted to harden his heart. "Yorick, keep an close eye on her until she wakes up. It wouldn't do for her to come around and find me playing the lovesick hero hoping his lady fair opens her eyes."

It took every ounce of will power he had to leave her there alone on the floor as he walked back into his lab. It would be cruel, and he didn't know if he could carry out his plan, but he needed to give it his best effort. The remaining antidote was bottled, but as his hands were anything but steady, there were a few spills to be mopped up. For the second time in the same morning, Severus found himself wiping away a few tears.

I'm so fucking screwed.

--8--

She was dreaming, she had to be. Severus was dead, but he wasn't. He'd taken an untested potion and it killed him, but then he was there, talking to her.

No, not to her. To Yorick.

... the lovesick hero... his lady fair...

Something tugged on her hair, hard. Hermione opened her eyes and found herself nose to beak with the falcon. She squeaked and Yorick flew back to his perch.

Severus was nowhere to be seen. If it wasn't for the cloak covering her, she might have thought she'd imagined him completely.

Where was he?

"Severus?" She sat up and looked around, seeing that the room was empty. "Severus?"

--8--

At the sound of her voice, Severus started to walk back toward the sitting room, but made himself stop. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and pretended he was talking to Yorick, "I'm here. Just a moment while I finish." A few items were noisily moved around, and he picked up a lab cloth on his way to the door. Stopping and leaning against the door frame, Severus made a show of wiping his hands.

"You've come around then, good. I'm very sorry Yorick delivered that letter," Severus said while sending the falcon a glare. "He wasn't supposed to. As you can see, I'm quite fine." He tossed the cloth in the direction of a table before moving to offer Hermione a hand.

"Are you recovered enough to drink some tea? A little added sugar wouldn't be amiss. Later on, if you're up to it and don't have to return to the bookstore, we could attempt another variation on the antidote."

--8--

He had left her there, on the floor? Alone? Unconscious?

For some reason, that just wasn't making any sense to her. There had to be something she was missing.

He offered his hand. Hermione stared at it for a long moment as he offered her tea and mentioned making another attempt for the antidote.

Suddenly, it hit her like a bludge to the head, and Hermione turned her head to look up at Severus, devastation written across her face.

It didn't work.

Hours upon hours of calculations and work and sweat and the sacrifice of the mice... all for nothing.

Severus talked of working on another variant, but Hermione *knew* deep in her heart that there was no other variant, that the formula they had brewed this final time was the last the only hope.

This was it. This was the reality she had been trying so hard to pretend she could change.

There is no cure.

Severus will always love her. He'll never be free.

There will never be any room in his heart for me. He will never love me.

He'll never be free. And he will never love me.

The strain of the day and her new knowledge overwhelmed her.

Hermione curled up upon herself and began to cry.

--8--

He'd been prepared for swear words. He'd even been prepared for a bit of screaming on Hermione's part while she tore through her notes, determined to find the error that wasn't there. Never, in his wildest imagination, had Severus been prepared to witness the heartfelt despair in her brown eyes. Nor had he been prepared for the pain it caused him. It felt as though a thousand splinters had been driven deep inside his chest. His feet seemed to be glued to the wretched floor as he watched the witch he loved, shrink and begin to cry.

His hand, still held out, trembled a bit before his knees finally obeyed him. "Hermione," he said softly while his hand reached out to stroke her hair. "Don't. Please, don't. There's no need."

There was a reason Severus Snape had never tried to comfort anyone. He was completely and utterly worthless at it. Hermione demonstrated that when she started crying even harder.

Well, shit. Now what the hell am I supposed...

Scooping Hermione up in his arms, Severus straightened, swallowed the groan his back was urging him to utter before managing to stagger across to his chair. There, with the sobbing witch sitting on his lab, Severus found himself...

With a lap-full of soggy witch that's breaking the heart she helped me find, he thought irrationally.

"Hermione, please," he whispered hoarsely. "Don't." It wasn't working, and he had no idea what to do. "I lied," he said finally in an attempt to stop the flood. "I didn't actually lie," he clarified hurriedly. "I merely led you to believe the potion didn't work. You're brilliant, and the theory you worked out was spot on."

He closed his eyes, his head bent, resting lightly on hers. "It worked, but I"

--8--

She didn't even register that he had picked her up and they were moving, caught up as she was in her misery.

Distantly, as if through muffling cotton wool, Hermione heard the words, "It worked." Her heart stuttered, the first surge of joy began to run through her body, almost enough to stall the tears, before she processed the rest of what he had said.

She wanted to hate him at that moment, with every fiber of her being, but there was a numbing sort of calmness taking her over, offering its sweet protection. If she didn't feel, she wouldn't hurt.

Her eyes were dull when she lifted her face and finished his sentence. "But you don't love me."

--8--

As easy as that, she offered him the perfect reason for the not-lie. All he had to do was agree with her reasoning and she'd be free. Free to find a wizard worthy of all that she offered.

And I'll never see her again.

Ever.

If he'd had splinters in his chest before, the bloody Sword of Gryffindor had taken their place when he saw the lackluster sheen of her eyes. All hope had died there and *he* was the cause.

"I do," he heard himself say softly and it was too damned late to take it back. "But you... You deserve so much more."

--8--

"You do." Her mouth formed the words carefully, as if they were foreign to her. She heard him say that he loved her, but it made no sense.

None.

If he loved her, why would he hurt her so?

You deserve so much more.

More than what?

More than him? Is that what he was trying to say? That was reason he had wrenched her heart from her chest and nearly destroyed it?

The blessed numbness was beginning to fade away, and Hermione was afraid that she might become sick at the onslaught of conflicting emotions ravaging her mind.

Severus was alive and he *loved* her! He had lied to her and tried to push her away. He thought he wasn't good enough for her. He had scared her nearly to death. Love, anger, sadness, residual fear and more all battled for dominance inside her.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, needing the moment to calm herself. Then, her eyes opened and met his.

"Say the words. I need to hear you say them."

--8--

This was the moment, in those silly romance books, that women dreamed about. Where the "*hero*" confessed his undying love for the heroine. According to Hermione, that's what attracted the majority of the readers for those sorry excuses of literature. Severus didn't know what kinds of scenes the authors would set up for the climatic moment in their stories, but he was fairly sure the current situation he and Hermione were in wouldn't qualify.

Severus did know that he'd never told *anyone*, other than his mother, that he loved them. The last time he'd done that he'd been a boy of perhaps ten. It was before he'd gone to Hogwarts. Before he'd fully realized what a disadvantage it was to have a Muggle father, which had made him almost hate her for a time.

As he looked into the depths of those brown eyes, Severus searched his heart. Hermione wanted him to tell her he loved her. He did. There was no doubt about that, but actually saying it was proving to be more difficult than he'd ever imagined it would be, because those three words were so terribly inadequate for what was housed in his chest.

"I can't," he stated softly as one hand stroked her cheek. "I don't merely love you. You've taken over the part of my soul that had given up on ever seeing the sun again. You've nourished it, healed it, made it whole again, and then stole it out of me forever."

--8--

If it hadn't been for the more than traumatic events of the last hour, Hermione might have had more of a reaction to his "I can't." As it was, there was barely an eye twitch before he had a chance to continue.

It wasn't "I love you." It was better than that.

She leaned into the hand stroking her cheek. "If I wasn't so happy to see you aren't dead, I would kill you myself. You are so very lucky I love you and I'm a sucker for pretty words, Severus Snape."

Hermione slid her arms around his neck and held him close, reassuring herself once again that he was real. "Please don't ever do something like that again. I thought my world had ended when I read your letter. I don't know what I would have done if you really were..."

--8--

"I won't," he promised quietly.

His arms moved to embrace her, and Severus marveled at what one small missive had wrought. If he had known then how it would end, Severus hoped that he would still have been moved to write that first scalding letter to the new manager of his favorite bookstore. He had spoken the truth when he said that Hermione had healed him. If he'd been released from the spell and the potion nullified without her, there wouldn't have been a life worth living at all.

Oh, fucking hell.

I suppose this means I'll have to make nice to Potter. Giving Hermione this kiss on her temple, he decided she was worth every moment of the torture he'd go through being pleasant to the brat.

Yorick, quiet through all of their revelations, chose this moment to seemingly nod his head. He stretched out his wings, gave the coat rack a glare, and left the couple sitting in Severus' chair. He had dinner to find and they needed time alone. He was fairly sure the fireworks were far from over, but his master and Hermione were *finally* on the right track.

AN: There will be no epilogue for this story, but this part of their journey has indeed ended. They will appear from time to time in other stories that come from the Shattered Wands Universe. Darnedchild and I, devsgma, wish to thank all of you that have read and enjoyed our little tale. It's been a joy to write.