

The Silvering Divide

by Somigliana

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

Curious

Chapter 1 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

A/N: This is for Mollyssister, who supplied the clever prompt for this story.

Hermione Granger treats exercise with much the same martyred and leaden-shouldered acquiescence she sees in her classmates when they are asked to do research and reference from more than one source: it's a damn chore, but it has to be done.

She strides quickly around the edge of the lake, through the wisps and shrouds of fog that hover above its mirrored surface, and she talks to herself about the Muggle book she's reading. There is not supposed to be magic in the pages of the book, but she feels its distinct tingle in the cadence and beauty of the prose, nonetheless. She's been reading a lot more fiction now that Harry and Ron are in London doing their Auror training; she often feels like she's almost alone at Hogwarts, now.

A piercing, discordant scream sends an alarm of birds arrowing into the crisp morning air. Hermione freezes on the edge of panic, drawn rudely from a dreamlike place. The scream sounds again, carrying a note of crystal-sharp horror. The sound pulls Hermione's gaze to its source.

A little girl stands at the edge of the lake...her naked skin is pale grey like a pearl in the morning light. Strange words and sounds screech and bubble from her lips like water as she points to the leviathan bulge of the giant squid...it descends beneath the black surface, leaving only ripples. The child's eyes are black and angry, as if the squid has threatened to take her soul away with it, and they bulge with sheer panic...Hermione can see that yellow stains the corneas of her eyes like jaundice. Black, green-tinged hair falls around her like a shroud, and she hugs something slick and silvery to her chest. An eerie growl begins to hiss from her lips.

Hermione's body unlocks slowly as the adrenaline seeps away like a rumour. "What on earth's she?" she murmurs.

She approaches the quivering child with careful steps, like she would approach a wild animal. The green and grey girl bares her yellow teeth...thin, grey lips stretch into a wide grimace...as she regards the young witch with her tightly-bound hair and her surprisingly warm eyes. The morning air chills on the child's ashen skin, sets her crooked teeth chattering. Hermione sees that she tightens her thin arms around the dimly-gleaming silver object; it is patterned and shiny, pearlescent like fish-scales.

Hermione frowns because she cannot recall a magical creature that fits properly with this strange and ugly little girl. She looks uncannily like one of the merpeople, yet she's clearly standing on spindly, knock-kneed *legs*. Hermione wonders...not for the first time...if she made a mistake in giving Care of Magical Creatures up.

The little girl is staring past Hermione at the grey water, now...her eyes are opaque like mirrors...and quick as a flash, her hands darting like little fish, she wraps the silver fabric around her shoulders and dives into the lake.

Hermione gasps. "Wait!" she cries, afraid that the girl will drown in the murky depths.

And then a strong silver tail breaks the surface for a moment...elegant and sinuous, it flicks in the chill morning air like a greeting. Ripples trip over themselves as they race towards the lake's edge; Hermione is left alone with only her gently distorted reflection in the still surface of the water.

"What kind of mermaid was *that*?" Hermione mutters softly to herself.

Hermione does not find the answer she seeks within the comforting orderliness of the neatly-shelved library. There are beautiful merpeople from the Mediterranean who sing like sirens and shimmer like gold when they lie on rocks in the sunlight; there are the sallow, fierce merpeople of Scotland who are dark and dank like the bottom of the lochs they inhabit; and finally there are the Gaelic merrow with their red tresses and magical caps. The little girl from the lake's edge is probably closest to the Scottish variety of merfolk, but she does not fit properly like an answer always should.

Hermione shuts the large book with a snap of leather on parchment and scowls. She strides down the corridors, her hair bouncing like a spring on her shoulders. The first-years *stare* after her, still whispering about her after school has been open for two weeks, now.

"Harry Potter's friend... Went up against Bella Lestranger... Legend." Their excitement flutters against the stones, their nervous eyes rapt on her bobbing curls, the whip of her robes around her ankles.

She is a hero, like Neville Longbottom, only way more intimidating. Only Professor Snape (and maybe Professor McGonagall, they concede when challenged) is scarier than Hermione Granger is, and *he* doesn't warn you with a smart *click-click* of his heels against stone. No, the first-years argue... *He* creeps like a shadow panther, waiting to pounce on your misdeeds with a wicked smirk of triumph.

During the summer, their mothers and fathers talked of the dark professor with the same muted kind of reverence, but they did say they could not understand why he was back to teach at the school. "What keeps him there? What is left for him at Hogwarts? How sad," they murmured quietly between themselves when they thought that little ears were fast asleep.

Hermione knocks on Hagrid's door with the righteous indignation of the knowledge-bereft. Fang howls like wolf and throws his body against the inside of the door, making it shudder on its hinges.

"Hold yer horses," Hagrid booms above the dog's excited yipping. "Hermione!" Hagrid grins at her, his beard curving into denser spots around his smiling mouth. "Missin' the boys, eh?" he asks in a tone that suggests that he is, too. He holds the straining dog at the collar; Fang's eyes bulge with excitement and little drops of his spittle fleck the wooden floor.

Hermione nods and smiles slightly. "Yes, I am, rather," she replies. She forestalls the inevitable offer of tea that always tastes like paint-thinners and dish-water with her burning question. "Hagrid, what lives in the lake besides the squid and the merpeople?"

Hagrid knees Fang back into the hut and joins Hermione outside rather than deal with the hound.

Hagrid scratches his head. "Fish, I reckon... yeah, fish," he says finally.

Hermione stifles a sigh as she is forced to recount her encounter with the strange, sallow-skinned lake-dweller. Hagrid leans against the door (Fang rebounds off of the inside of it every few minutes, punctuating her description of the little girl and her grey-green countenance).

"Ahhh," Hagrid says, nodding sagely. He rubs at his chin; his thick beard makes a scratching sound. "There're two kinds of merpeople in the lake, Hermione. But I forgot... yeh gave up on me classes a long time long ago." He chuckles like he's told a tremendously funny joke, and Hermione struggles not to look sour.

"But I looked in the library under merpeople, and I could only find the ones who helped with the Triwizard Task." The sour expression bleeds through slightly, now, pulling at the corners of her mouth because she's annoyed that she's had to trudge down the hill to see Hagrid for an answer. And it's a steep climb back up to the castle.

Hagrid shrugs, his massive shoulders rising to his ears, and he beams at her because he knows the answer. "That's because yeh're lookin' under the wrong name...yeh need to look fer selkies; that's their proper name..."

"Thank you, Hagrid, bye," Hermione calls as she makes a quick escape before Hagrid has a chance to tell her about the intricacies of their life cycle and his very best selkie friends.

Hermione is halfway back to the library when she's thwarted in her quest again. Irritation bubbles inside her chest like a geyser, but because it's Snape, she keeps her face neutral and calm. She knows he'll only keep her longer if she argues back.

"I hope, for your sake, that you should not presently be in a lesson, Miss Granger," he sneers at her. Hermione finds it difficult to be afraid of him, now...she knows his inner soul and his bitterest secrets, and all of this scholarly chiding seems a little trite after that.

"No, sir," she says dutifully, the image of the perfect seventh-year, "I have a free lesson, and I'm on my way to the library."

Snape narrows his black eyes at her as though he's using his Legilimency to gauge the truth of her words. But no probing, intrusive questing accompanies his glare, so she supposes he's just trying to figure out what she's hiding. She's amused that, due to her long association with the boys, he views her as a bit of a miscreant. He seems to be just waiting for her to take off on the next grand adventure, practically salivating to put her in detention for the remainder of her school days, in all likelihood.

Snape grimaces, baring crooked, yellow teeth. "Get along, then, Miss Granger," he says as if he is not the one who caused her delay.

"Yes, sir," she says, resisting the urge to salute. As he turns on his heel and stalks away, it occurs to Hermione that Snape could be the very image of the little selkie's curmudgeonly uncle or something...in the murky gloom of the castle's corridor his skin is grey-pale, too.

Hermione flops down in an armchair and crosses her arms over her chest. She clicks her tongue in an annoyed fashion as she stares at the fire. She hates to admit that she should have stayed at Hagrid's a little longer; the library only gave her more questions.

Ginny sits next to her, writing a long and flowing letter to Harry. She's tiny and coppery in the golden firelight. She glances up when Hermione starts to jiggle her leg up and down. "What's wrong?" she asks in her bell-clear voice. "Ron hasn't owled again?"

Hermione glances up at Ginny. Her friend is right on that account, but it's not what is bothering Hermione tonight; she is tired of fretting about Ron. She is too weary to ask Ginny if Harry has mentioned Ron in his latest letter. "You take Care of Magical Creatures, right?" Hermione asks instead.

"Yes?" Ginny tilts her head to the side like a little bird.

"I saw a little selkie today by the lake..."

Ginny grins and leans forward with excitement lighting her pretty hazel eyes. "Oh, lucky you; they're *very* shy."

Hermione ignores Ginny's excitement and forges ahead. "But the library says that selkies are *seals* that can remove their skins, not that they look like merpeople!" In all of the research she's done, the same words repeated themselves, circling back to the same basis of fact.

Ginny smiles knowingly...Hermione has seen Ginny's smug smile before... like when she's dodged her mother's delegated chores or she has a big secret swelling inside her chest or she knows the answer and holds it gleaming in her tiny hands. "Those are saltwater selkies," she says as if it's the simplest fact in the world. "The ones in our lake prefer to mimic the merpeople. But really, they can take any aquatic form they want to."

Despite her relief that the facts line up neatly, now, Hermione is still a bit disgruntled. "Well... the books should say that," she grumbles. She thinks back to that morning. "It... She was very upset. I think that the squid was chasing her."

Ginny hums softly, already magnetically drawn back to her looping words and pieces of love. "Yeah... the merpeople and the selkies hate the giant squid," she murmurs softly. "I think it likes the taste of them. It must have escaped from its part of the lake again."

Hermione feels the tight edge of her anxiety relax: the world makes better sense again, now. She pulls out her Ancient Runes textbook and starts on her homework, smiling softly to herself and ignoring the soft buzz of activity around her.

A/N: Thank you, as always, to my darling friend, Gelsey. Your support means the world to me!

Beneath

Chapter 2 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

Hermione pushes the encounter with the selkie child to the back of her mind for several months, preferring to concentrate on the intricacies and day-to-day minutiae of being a NEWT student.

Of course the Battle of Hogwarts left its mark...bruised on the hearts of every magical person the wizarding world through. But Hermione feels oddly unbalanced sometimes to see the unexpected overspill (things she had never considered) of what she now calls the 'Horcrux Year' bleed into her daily life (although when she's feeling grumpy and uncharitable...which is alarmingly often...she refers to that year as the 'Never-ending Camping Trip in Hades').

The castle Healed itself...magic slowly mending the fallen walls with invisible determination and strength. From a Muggle perspective, Hermione's dad would have gone the sci-fi route and said that futuristic nanites must have swarmed everywhere, constructing grace from the rubble a micron at a time. But the new walls are pristine, and they sparkle in the sunlight like a jewel, so out of place against the rest of the age-darkened castle...a blinding memorial to those who died, a striking reminder of the folly of power.

Her classes are disconcerting; the mix of her old classmates and Ginny's compatriots makes her feel edgy. Some of her classmates are bored (and thus disruptive): there are those who attended Hogwarts last year but failed their NEWTs, there are those who left school halfway through, and there are those who just can't be bothered with the tedium of studying after an adrenaline-spiked year on the run from the Muggle-born hunters. Professor McGonagall, in all her glorious wisdom, has let some of the students do subjects from sixth-year *and* seventh-year so that Ginny is in Hermione's Potions class but has stayed back to redo Charms.

Perhaps the most startling reminder of the battle is Severus Snape...not because he is different but because he is *thesame*. One would swear the scene in the Shrieking Shack had been a nightmare the way he goes about his life *just the same as before*. Hermione vividly remembers the heavy, soaked edge of her robes where his blood seeped into the fabric, leaving an indelible stain; the coppery scent of his life-force metallic on her tongue as if she could taste his blood in the air; how he'd given up his every defence to see Voldemort fall.

But all that is left of that heroic and desperate day is a faint, pink scar that slashes across his throat. Like the castle rising from the ashes, the constituents of an experimental potion Snape had developed and taken daily had rebuilt his body from the inside-out so that when they went to fetch his body from the Shrieking Shack he'd only needed Blood-Replenishing Potion and his wand. *He certainly didn't lose his sarcasm and spite along with all that blood* Hermione often thinks.

She *does* think of the ghostly child now and then, idly, particularly on her morning walk when she sees the giant squid sunning its tentacles in the first tentative rays of dawn. Hermione used to accept the squid as part of Hogwarts' magical and fantastic scenery, much like the lake or the forest or even the Quidditch Pitch. But now she finds her lip curling with disgust and dislike when the bloated piece of calamari unfurls its mottled and suckered limbs.

It's only when Professor Slughorn announces that the NEWT Potions class is going to spend the day collecting potion ingredients in the lake that Hermione begins to wonder about how the selkies live. Do they have stone dwellings just like the merfolk? What do they eat? How do they learn?

Professor Slughorn's news is greeted with a rising tide of questions and comments (it's lucky he's a bit deaf so he can't hear some of the bitching going on). Slughorn placates the class with his fat palms, looking like a jolly ringmaster in his velvet and lace suit, and chortles. "Oh, ho! So much excitement!"

The class settles down as he tucks his hands into his waistcoat and rocks on the balls of his feet. "Tomorrow will be a joint class with Professors Sprout, Snape and I," he announces. "Happily, this means you have the entire afternoon to collect as much Algae Grass from the lake as you can manage."

Hermione recalls using the mucus-covered aquatic plant in a fourth-year potion...it is slick and bouncy like rubber when you cut into it, squishy and springy when you prod it with a finger...and she feels slightly nauseous.

Next to Hermione, Ginny shudders delicately. "Ugh. Snotgrass," she mutters.

"I have procured sufficient Gillyweed for everybody," Slughorn announces as if it's a huge privilege he's bestowing upon them, "and Professor Snape is double-checking the squid's wards as we speak." He taps the blackboard with his wand. "For those who are not aware of the lake's territorial divisions..." Hermione is mortified to be one of these students and leans forward in her seat, paying perfect attention. A map of the lake appears on the blackboard, shaded into divisions with several colours. "The red area is squiddy's, and his perimeter is generally warded, although he tends to wear holes in it rather quickly... to the disgust of the rest of the lake-dwellers." To Snape and Flitwick's disgust, too, Hermione imagines. "The green area belongs to the merfolk and the yellow area to the selkies."

Hermione notices that the merpeople inhabit the deeper, central part of the lake, whereas the selkies have the shallower waters as their home. "We will be...with explicit permission, of course...harvesting in the selkies' territory tomorrow. Please respect their privacy and do not go wandering into their village." Slughorn beams out from under his glorious moustache. "I can't guarantee they'd give you back," he says, chuckling like Father Christmas after one too many whiskies.

Ginny grimaces. "Now I'm going to smell of lake-scum for Hogsmeade weekend. Perfect." She sighs softly and leans closer to Hermione as Professor Slughorn starts to describe how the harvested grass will be stored. "I can't wait to see Harry... aren't you excited to see Ron?" she murmurs.

Hermione forces a smile before she turns her attention to the teacher again. "Thrilled."

"Disgusting," Hermione mutters. Her protest is carried away, drifting up into the murky green water on a stream of bubbles. Her webbed hands gather the slimy, olive-green water grass into fat bundles, which she stuffs into a bag slung across her shoulders. The most interesting thing about the Gillyweed transformation are the tiny fins that wind down the backs of her legs like a skewed stocking seam; they ripple gently with each kick. Hermione *loves* it down here in the gentle quiet, where the outside world seems to barely intrude. If only she could explore instead of having to touch the most repulsive plant she's ever seen.

Slave-bloody-labour, she thinks, wobbling in the water as she struggles to get her balance with her flippered feet. She drifts sideways to another glutinous growth and grumbles to herself about the teachers, who are sitting nice and dry at the lake's edge, 'supervising' the collection and storage as the students rise from the rippling surface. A gleeful moment of insane amusement crosses her imagination as she tries to envisage how Slughorn would look if he took a mouthful of Gillyweed...a fat, bloated fish sinking to the muddy bottom, likely.

A ripple of movement crosses her skin like an invisible wave, and she turns to see which of her classmates is encroaching *other* gathering ground. But there is nobody there...she can see only the tiny, green specks of algae that float and shimmer and dance in the muted shafts of sunlight that pierce the surface of the water like spotlights. *Huh.*

And then a flash of movement at the periphery of her vision has her turning back to the sea of grass, alarmed. Her heart starts to race at her pulse point. She moves closer...the tendrils of the grass send a shudder of revulsion through her as they seem to reach for her. And then she sees it: a shimmer of silver scales deep in the grass and two black, glossy eyes focussed on her. Hermione instinctively knows that it's the little selkie, her little selkie, watching the strange witch in the water, a human outside of the comfort of air.

Hermione freezes, bobbing gently in the murky water as her hair fans out from her face in the lake's gentle tide. Slowly, she raises her hand, beckons with her hand. "Don't be afraid," she says. Her words blur into the water, distort like a wave. And she waits again...she'd be holding her breath if she knew how to control her gills.

When the selkie swims closer, Hermione can see that she's got a lovely fish-like tail, but unlike the merpeople Hermione has seen before, her human-shaped torso also shimmers with a subtle luminescence as if pearl dust has been rubbed into her skin. *She's beautiful under the water*, Hermione thinks. The greenish hair blends in with the water and the grass around her...the selkie looks like she belongs here, like she's home. She stops when she's a few metres away, still watching with wary eyes, ready to dart away at the first sign of danger. "I know you," the selkie says suddenly. Down here, her voice is like a symphony, fluid and beautiful, and it carries across the water clearly.

Hermione nods. "Yes," she replies. She waits again, afraid that if she asks the questions that are filling her throat like a swelling sponge, the selkie will disappear again.

"Kraken was chasing me. He saw you, so he left. Thank you." The selkie ducks her pearlescent face downwards, as if she is ashamed. "My mother was very angry. I am not supposed to explore by myself."

The giant squid was named Kraken? For a moment, Hermione doesn't answer as she absorbs the mild amusement that arises and flickers around her clever mind. "You're exploring again, aren't you?" she points out gently.

"Yes." The selkie lifts her chin defiantly, now. "But it is safe today...you are all here. And I like to watch humans. You are... interesting but very funny under the water." She laughs and drifts closer to Hermione with wide, curious eyes.

"What is your name?" Hermione asks. "I am Hermione." She smiles, now, truly charmed by the little selkie and her curiosity.

"I am Syrena," she replies. She swims around Hermione in a circle, giggling softly. "Your hair is pretty," she tells Hermione. "But it was different in the air that time, wavy." She makes little circles in the air with her green-tipped finger.

Hermione snorts and it escapes her nose in a large bubble, almost making her choke. "Yes, it's very curly in the air." The mention of the morning at the lake's edge reminds Hermione of a question she has.

"Why was... Kraken chasing you? Did it want to eat you?" she asks.

"That fat thing will eat anything," Syrena says scornfully. Her tail flicks up and down in agitation. "He chased me out of the water, and he wanted to steal my skin to eat, like Leenash."

Hermione frowns. "What is a... Leenash?"

Syrena giggles again, flashing yellow teeth. "Who, not what," she says. Her thin, shimmering arms dance through the water as she keeps herself hovering gracefully in place.

"Leenash was my..." The selkie frowns, as if in intense concentration. "My suka's sister."

Hermione raises her eyebrows in question.

"My suka is my mother's mother," Syrena clarifies.

"Ahhh." Hermione wrinkles her nose as she considers the familial relationships. "So... Leenash was your great-aunt, then."

Syrena shrugs elegantly, sliding a long tendril of Algae Grass through her little hand. "If you say so. My mother told me the story of Leenash many times; it is a scary story to make little selkies be good." She smirks.

"It didn't seem to work in your case," Hermione teases. She likes the selkie's spirit and her feisty sense of humour. She's a delight to interact with.

"Hah!" Syrena bares her jagged line of teeth again. "Leenash liked the sunshine too much," she begins. Her tone is almost sing-song, now, as if it's an oft-told tale. "One day when she was out of the water in the yellow sun, Kraken snuck up on her and stole her skin away; ate it up right in front of her while she screamed and screamed. From that day on, Leenash walked on two legs and learned to use the human magic. She lived in the castle, but she did not come down to the lake to visit her family because the water made her sad, and she missed her skin too much."

"What happened to her?" Hermione asks, enthralled by the melancholy tale. There's a tightness starting to band around her lungs, and she realises that her time is almost up. She wants to stay, though, to hear the end of the story, so she grits her teeth together stubbornly.

Syrena lifts her narrow shoulders. "I don't know," she answers. "One day she left the castle, and she never came back again. But then many years later..."

"I... have to go," Hermione gasps with her last lungful of breath, her head feeling light and faraway. She feels her feet tingling, the webs between her fingers dissolving away. She kicks hard, fights her way upwards towards the silver divide.

Syrena stares up at her for a moment, looking disappointed, and then the selkie darts off through the water, fast as a flash. Hermione breaks through the surface and gasps

in a cold lungful of air with a grateful splutter. Then, feeling like a drowned rat, she swims to the shore. Her robes are waterlogged and heavy as she wades towards the professors...she scowls when she sees they sit in brightly-coloured deckchairs with a steaming pot of tea set on a spindly table between them. Professor Sprout is nowhere to be seen... probably warm in her greenhouses again.

Hermione's shoes are squishy when she slides her wrinkled feet into them at the lake's edge, and her hair hangs in heavy clumps around her face. The wind is icy and it bites into her chilled skin, now, setting her teeth chattering. *If I need to take Pepper-Up after this, I am going to sue the school, I swear... It's bloody November!*

"Ah. Granger," Professor Snape says, folding his long, spidery fingers around his teacup. "Let's see your harvest, then." He lifts his chin and peers down his nose into the bag she holds open. She realises that there are only three slippery rolls of Algae Grass curled up in the very bottom of the bag. His lip lifts in a curl of disbelief and derision. "A poor effort," he sneers. "And perhaps a Poor grade, too," he adds spitefully.

Hermione drops the bag with the rest and folds her arms, rubbing her shoulders vigorously and shivering as she presses her lips together in an effort not to earn herself a detention. Professor Slughorn sips his tea, his pinky finger riding the air. "Och," he says, his fat fingers reaching for a buttery piece of shortbread. "I'll give her an 'A'." He gives her his Slug Club smile, and Hermione's lips curve into a grim little smile. At least she's favoured by *one* of the teachers out here.

Snape snorts but doesn't argue with his mentor. "Off to the castle with you, Miss Granger," he snaps. "And wipe your feet before you go inside, for Merlin's sake."

She hears him muttering about Filch getting up his nose as she hurries away, casting a surreptitious Drying Charm as she goes. *There's enough space up that nose, for sure*, she thinks maliciously.

"You've got something green stuck in your hair," the mermaid in the Prefects' bathroom informs Hermione in a superior sort of voice.

Hermione glares at the pretty creature with her golden hair and her aquamarine scales. "You're the *east* interesting kind of mermaid there is," she tells her. "And your nipple is showing," she adds with a fake smile.

The mermaid makes a hasty adjustment of her clamshells and pouts huffily at Hermione, who is lounging in the large bath pool, up to her ears in bubbles.

Yes, she thinks. The selkies are fascinating. If only I'd had longer to speak with Syrena... to hear the end of her story She ducks her head under the bubbles, feeling the water press around her, her lungs start to burn. She thinks of ways she can speak with her selkie friend again. A Bubble-Head Charm won't give her the mobility she'd like underwater, and Viktor's half-shark trick was just not an option. *What I really need to do is to get hold of some more Gillyweed.*

A/N: Thank you to Gelsey for proof-reading. You are made of awesome!

Parted

Chapter 3 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

Ron's hand burns like a brand on Hermione's thigh. Since she met up with him at the Three Broomsticks half an hour ago, it has inched up from her knee to the very top of her leg, and his long fingers curl around the inside of her thigh, the side of his hand uncomfortably snug against the vee of her jeans. He's wearing his trainee Auror robes like a medal, and the Firewhisky shots he's downed have risen to warm his face like a red tide.

"Bloody hell but I've done all right, I 'ave. Oi, tell Hermione about the time what I beat you at duelling, 'arry!" Ron crows. A ragged surge of irritation grates against Hermione's nerves, and she wonders who he's picked the new accent up from...one of the older hardcore Aurors he admires, perhaps? She wonders if conking him over the head with the HP sauce bottle will fix it. "Go on, then!" he urges Harry, smacking the surface of the table to catch Harry's attention.

Harry turns his head from the shell of Ginny's ear. His eyes are heavy-lidded and hazy with love, like he's absorbing every moment he's missed with Ginny and he's drunk on the heart of her. "Good one, mate," Harry drawls, his voice thick like syrup, and then he turns back to murmuring softly at Ginny's ear, like he'll forget the honeyed scent of her if he turns away for one more moment.

Ron moves his hand from her thigh...her anxiety fades away almost instantly...and takes her hand. "I've got a surprise for you," he says huskily.

And in that moment, Hermione remembers the endearing warmth of his smile and the guileless blue of his eyes and the open honesty of his heart and the uncomplicated frankness of his mind. And she remembers why she's longed for his embrace, dreamed of having him close to her. *A late birthday present!* she thinks with delight. It would certainly make up for the generic card he'd owed a day late.

But her excitement dwindles with each step he leads her up until they stand on the second floor outside a door. "Got us a room," he says as he fumbles the key into the lock. He's barely led her into the room with its pine headboard and faded quilt and shut the door when he pulls off his robes and hooks his thumbs into the elastic waist of his y-fronts, stripping them down his legs. When he stands up, it's impossible to miss that his hard cock is bobbing against the ginger thatch of his pubic hair. The grin he wears plainly says: "Come and get it, luv."

Hermione gapes at him, disappointment and ire burning like acid in her throat. As he reaches down to curl his hand around his cock and give it one, long stroke, her patience...stretched thin and tight like an elastic band...snaps.

"You write to me *twice* this term, Ron, *only twice*, never asking how *I'm* doing, always bragging on about what a big-man-Auror you're becoming, and then you come up here this weekend and expect me to just..." She gestures angrily to his hand, now frozen in mid-stroke.

Ron is gaping at her, looking absolutely dumbfounded, like she's struck him with a Stunner or something. "Whachyou on about, luv?"

Hermione's eyes narrow dangerously. "Don't you 'luv' me, Ron. It's not about love for you, is it?"

"Course I love you," he says plaintively, his cock drooping a little as he pleads with his palms outstretched.

"No, you don't, or you'd have owled more often. You'd have respected me and not wanted to just jump straight to the sex the moment you got the chance!" she says coldly, her disappointment pulling the corners of her mouth down.

She turns and leaves him with his underpants around his ankles, his red Auror's robes pooled on the floor like blood. Their relationship, which had been dying by degrees and withering to a dry husk, snaps off abruptly with the sharp slam of the door.

It feels almost like relief, the anger she feels, when she stalks up the winding path from the gates, her legs burning as the muscles stretch and pull with the effort of keeping up with her determined pace.

Hermione Granger wants many things, but the thought that she does not want Ron or the sick feeling of realisation that had curdled in her stomach earlier is concrete. "I deserve better," she huffs, and she slams the Entrance Hall door behind her.

"Tem-per, Miss Granger," Snape draws, his sinuous voice slithering into her ire like smoke inciting a bee's nest.

She turns on her heel to see him standing at the hourglasses, the emeralds in the Slytherin one reflecting in green shades off the hawkish planes of his face. His lips quirk thoughtfully as he seems to consider removing House points.

Oh, she's had *enough* of him pretending he's the same miserable bastard as always! It's like he's taken an Obliviate to the head. Or maybe he's just embarrassed and especially careful to maintain his sharp-edged armour around *her* because she saw him that morning all defenceless and martyred like a sacrificial lamb.

She jabs her finger at the Gryffindor hourglass. "Go ahead, *sir*...it would make the perfect end to my week."

"Detention would be even better, don't you think?" he enquires in faux-artless fashion. He slides off towards the dungeons, smiling sardonically. "Let's make it six 'o clock, shall we?"

Hermione doesn't go to dinner. Instead, she munches her way through a packet of chocolate-covered digestive biscuits with grim determination. For a nostalgic moment, she wonders when her mother will send another package from Down Under because Tim Tams actually make for much better sulking food than McVites.

Her anger eventually fades, and the ache in her heart becomes evident as it does. It's not that she's mourning for her relationship with Ron because, really, that hadn't been on the go for that long at all. Somewhere in the process of growing up, her love for her friend and her hormones got all mixed up... twisted her perspective, endangered her friendship.

And she doesn't like the discomfort of the change that's facing her: Ron's going to be stonily silent; Harry's going to feel awkward about where his loyalties belong again; Ginny's probably going to feel sorry for her brother and side with him. And then Hermione knows life will be even more empty here than before.

"Catalogue and sort the publications in that box," Snape says abruptly when she enters his office, pre-empting any niceties. "By title and date. And then shelve them on those empty bookshelves." He goes back to his work, ignoring her rather decidedly.

For a moment Hermione thinks maybe he *has* gone soft after all because the box isn't very big, really. *Maybe*, she thinks as she opens the lid, *he'll disappear for long enough to let me snoop in his office for Gillyweed. I can't believe Slughorn didn't have any in his stores when I snuck in there this morning. I wonder if Snape even still keeps a store for potions?* But then she sees the sea of thumbnail-sized publications inside the box and stifles a sigh.

After she's Enlarged all of them, she's surrounded by several waist-high stacks. The publications...everything from the *Happy Herbologist* to the *Prudent Potioneer* to some Dark Arts publication written in blocky Russian...are hopelessly mixed up. She takes a moment to stare at them all in bewilderment; it isn't like Snape to be this disorganised. He's the most pedantic teacher she knows. It's like he chucked shelves and shelves of Reduced publications into the box without a thought as to whether he'd ever want to read them again. And then realisation twists in her stomach: It's entirely likely he really did think he'd never need them again because he thought that he would die helping Harry, fulfilling his promise to Lily and to Dumbledore.

Suddenly filled with soft sympathy, she glances up at Snape. In the Lumos light, his black hair is so oily it looks wet and slick like crude oil, waterproof like a seal's pelt. He's reading a piece of parchment...his eyes are narrowed in concentration, his lips pulled into a thoughtful line...and Hermione's eyebrows lift in surprise when she recognises Harry's awkward scrawl.

So, Harry is writing to Snape, she thinks, not overly surprised at the fact. Harry has done a one-eighty...from blind hatred to awed respect...when it comes to Snape. She respects Snape, too, yes, but he's worn it a bit thin with his snide commentary over the last few months, to be honest.

And then she feels a twinge of guilt when she recalls something her father always says with the concrete conviction of a true believer: "If you want respect, you have to earn it." She smiles; her father reads a lot of those Muggle self-help books. It's annoying when he comes up with those gems of regurgitated advice, but Hermione has to accept her culpability in the matter; she did take the easy way out and buy him one of them for Christmas once, after all.

"Sir?" Her question curls in the air tentatively.

"What is it, Granger? I did not give you an arduous enough task?" Snape doesn't lift his head.

"No, sir... it's just that..."

Hermione *hates* being in the wrong; she does not take any criticism well, constructive or well-meant or harsh; it goes against her every stubborn grain to apologise. So, her next words do not slide easily from her soul: "I just wanted to apologise for being disrespectful earlier; I shouldn't have brought my temper back into the castle. I don't know what got into me."

It's hard to read the expression on his face when he does look up at her. His mouth is set into a thin line, but his eyes aren't hostile or blazing with black fire. "Sometimes it is not that which gets into us that is the problem... it is that which we have lost," he says evenly. His voice is low and deep and it winds around her nerves like a velvet cat. His dark eyes hold hers for a moment, and then he goes back reading Harry's letter.

Hermione presses her lips together, disconcerted and surprised. *Well... where did that little bit of philosophy come from?* She rubs her thumb across her palm, thinking about Snape's words. *That which we have lost*, Hermione repeats to herself, and her heart aches because she's probably just lost one of her best friends forever. *Is that why they say that it's not a good idea for best friends to fall in love? Does he regret loving Lily like that, now?*

"Harry has been writing to you, too, sir," Hermione notes quietly. A piece of lavender Ministry memo paper arrives once a week for her...the warmth of his friendship cramped into tight lines...and its arrival always heralds a smile and a lightening of her heart.

Snape's shoulders stiffen, and he folds the letter up and drops it into his top drawer. "Incessantly," he allows.

Before Hermione can make what is sure to be the mistake of enquiring whether Snape writes back, there is a fluttering knock at the door.

"Enter," Snape says curtly.

Professor Flitwick heaves the heavy wooden door open and hops across the stones to stand next to Snape, where his head just reaches desk height. "Severus, I need your

help, please," the Charms teacher squeaks.

Snape flicks his dark eyes over to where Hermione stands, and then he gestures to the corridor outside of his office. Hermione longs to look for the Gillyweed or sneak a peek at Harry's letter, but she's also keen to hear what Professor Flitwick wants.

She listens hard as she lifts another armful of periodicals to sort. She strains her ears until all she can hear is the steady *thump-thump* of her own heart. She actually jumps slightly when Flitwick speaks, his voice high-pitched and anxious: "The squid's rubbed a hole in the Bounding Ward again; we'll have to recraft it tonight, Severus."

Snape sighs. "I'll let the others know... We're going to have to do something about that damn thing, Filius. It's worse than a bloody first-year."

The stone corridor echoes their words strangely, like the castle's magic is bending the laws of natural physics.

Flitwick chuffles a bitter laugh. "Learns faster, too."

Argh! Is the squid loose again? Will Syrena be all right? Are the wards really that weak? Concern for her little friend twists and wriggles through her mind. Hermione quickly starts to pretend like she's working when she hears Snape pushing the door open.

"You will have to finish that tomorrow evening, Miss Granger," he says distractedly.

"I don't mind finishing it alone if you have to go somewhere, sir," she says, hugging the stack of magazines to her chest and trying to smile innocently.

His staccato laugh is mirthless. "Out," he says blandly, gesturing to the door with an uncompromising expression.

Well, she thinks as she puts the periodicals down again, he never was anybody's fool, was he? She slinks round-shouldered to the door. Her hand on the door handle, she pauses and clears her throat.

"Sir?"

"What *is* it, Granger?" he asks impatiently.

"Can I do anything to help with the wards for the giant squid?" she blurts out.

His expression sours as she all but confesses to eavesdropping. "Do you really think you could do better than Professor Flitwick or I?" he asks scathingly.

A resigned expression flitters across her lips, and she turns to go.

"Granger."

Hermione's expression is quizzical when she turns to face her teacher again, and she raises her eyebrows in a silent question, wondering what nasty commentary he's going to mark their parting with.

"If you can come up with a viable solution, I'll give you an 'O' for your DADA year-mark."

Wow, she thinks as she climbs the stairs to Gryffindor Tower, he really cares about helping the merpeople and the selkies for some reason. She smiles, and her broken heart mends just a little at the sign that Snape seems to have a heart, after all.

Hermione sits in the window seat and stares out of the window at Hogwarts' frosted grounds. In the bright glow of the almost-bloated moon, a flicker of movement at the far edge of the lake catches her attention. She Transfigures a pair of binoculars and lifts them to her eyes. She watches quietly with a sense of satisfaction and longing while Professor Flitwick reconstructs the Bounding Ward and Professor Snape wrangles to keep the giant squid...the beast named Kraken...bound in the glittering web of a Confinement Charm. A short distance away, lake-dwellers keep silent guard...dark skinned merpeople with wickedly sharp spears and glimmering selkies with long-handled tridents...along the edges of their respective aquatic territories.

I want to help, she thinks as she climbs into bed. There shouldn't be a reason for there to be another Leenash in the world.

That night Hermione dreams she is swimming in the quiet green, and the peace presses around her like an embrace. She gazes up at the undulating surface, the silvering divide, and wishes that she could stay down here forever, where life seems less complicated and so much more serene. But then a dark shape appears overhead, trailing tentacles and blocking out the sun, and she screams herself awake.

The birds have barely heralded dawn's approach when Hermione rushes down the steep incline to the lake. Its surface is pale lavender in the ghostly light. "I'll find a way," she promises. "I'll find a way." She doesn't quite know if she's talking about fixing the wards or finding a way to get beneath the surface of the lake again.

She's almost finished on her walk when a dark head breaks the surface. Syrena's warbling greeting and crooked smile stops her in her tracks.

"Hello, Syrena," she says with relief. "I see the squid is back in his place; I was worried about you yesterday."

Hermione struggles not to wince when the selkie replies...Syrena's melodic voice is jagged and high-pitched and harshly unintelligible in the thin air.

"I'll come and visit you soon so we can talk," Hermione promises. "I want to hear all about the rest of Leenash's story."

Syrena nods vigorously and says something excitedly, making rapid hand movements in the air, punctuating her speech. Hermione shakes her head. "I wish we learned other languages at school," she says wryly. Although she's not entirely sure she'd have picked Mermish as a first choice.

As Hermione turns to walk back up to the castle, Syrena shrugs, waves, and the selkie flicks a sparkling spray of water in goodbye.

As the rest of the castle begins to wake around her, Hermione pens a letter to Harry. She asks him to send her some Gillyweed. But she doesn't tell him why, and she doesn't ask him if Ron is as angry and hurt as she imagines, and she doesn't ask him if he thinks she was in the right or not, and she doesn't ask him what he's been writing in his letters to Snape.

A/N: As always, thank you to Gelsey. You are a star!

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews The Silvering Divide. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Revealed

Chapter 4 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

When Harry's owl arrives almost a week later, Hermione tucks the lumpy little parcel into her robes like a secret. She allows a slight, triumphant curve of her lips before she reads the letter that accompanies it over her morning toast and tea.

Dear Hermione,

Sorry about the delay. Gillyweed isn't in season at the moment and it was bloody hard to get hold of. I had to flash my Auror's badge and use the Potter-factor to get to the top of the list at the apothecary. What I do for my friends, eh? Do I even want to know what you want in the lake, anyway? Don't worry about paying me back: Merry Christmas, Hermione.

Yeah. Talking about Christmas. Do you have any idea of what I could get Professor Snape for Christmas? I was thinking a dose of Anti-Stubborn Potion would be good because he still hasn't answered any of my letters. I've locked his memories in my safe for now until he lets me know whether he wants them back or not. It is kind of awkward to write to him when it feels like my letters are disappearing into a black hole.

Talking about awkward. You and Ron have put me in the worst kind of middle, you know. I'm grateful that you didn't say anything in your last letter because it's not like my head doesn't hurt listening to Ron go off about it all. I told him I'm not taking sides. Because, really, you both treated each other like absolute shite. Yeah, he was inconsiderate and selfish, but to leave a bloke bare-arsed like that was just cruel. I just wanted to say that I hope you're all right and I'm sorry about what happened.

Take care of Ginny. And yourself.

Love, Harry.

Hermione stuffs the letter into her pocket with the Gillyweed and bites into her last piece of toast, feeling grim fondness and exasperation all at once. Harry's letter reminds her that Christmas is only three weeks away, now, and the thought of staying at Hogwarts alone for it is sharper than the Marmite that stings on her tongue.

Defence Against the Dark Arts is absolutely fascinating at the moment. Despite his surly and abrupt manner, Professor Snape really is an organised and capable teacher. Some of the class grumble about this month's topic because there is no practical aspect to it and it feels like History of Magic at times. But Hermione thinks that the history of Dark wizards who used magic to gain power is very relevant, given what all of them went through last year.

Hermione is shocked and unsettled to learn that most Muggle dictators, from Lorenzo de' Medici to Napoleon to Nazarov to Hitler, had a Dark wizard lurking in the shadowed background like a fat spider, either subtly influencing them or completely dancing them on puppet strings. She starts to wonder how many of the world's ethical problems and wars have had the taint of shadow magic on them. And then her stomach twists uncomfortably when she considers that some of her own actions have not been entirely ethical, so she concentrates on the fact that her parents are safe and happy and very content to stay in Perth, bugger how they got there in the first place.

"After decades of isolated confinement in Nuremgard, Grindelwald was ultimately killed by this century's most recent Dark wizard." With a twisted grimace, Snape drops the piece of chalk onto his desk with a clink. "And in preparation for next week's lectures, your assignment is four feet of parchment on Tom Riddle's *raison d'être*." Snape rolls his eyes when several expressions register nervous uncertainty. "Write about his reason for wanting power, you idiots... his ultimate motivation for his actions. And if you quote Rita Skeeter's new book at me, I'll give you a 'P' and mark backwards from there."

Hermione lingers after the rest of the class has filed out to go to lunch. Snape pretends to ignore her for several seconds before sighing dramatically. "I am not going to have a philosophical discussion about Voldemort with you right now, Miss Granger," he snarls. "I want *your* thoughts on the issue."

Hermione can't actually believe he's going to teach them about the Dark Lord, given his rather close association and history with the man and the awkward questions that the class is sure to ask. But she's oddly respectful of the fact that Snape would round out the lessons in this fashion.

"Ah, no, sir," she says quickly. "I didn't want to discuss that at all. I had another thought about the giant squid..."

"Does your new theory have sound theoretical basis, Granger?" he says with no small amount of exasperation.

Hermione dithers for a second. "Ah, well, maybe. I was just thinking..."

Snape pulls a face like he's seriously regretting having invited her to come up with a solution. "Like you thought that Shrinking it, moving it to another loch, chilling the water to make it lethargic and putting up an Electrification Ward were good ideas?" He ticks them off on his long, chalk-dusted fingers. "Next you'll be telling me that you'd like the house-elves to serve it up for supper with tartar sauce!"

Hermione puffs out her cheeks and decides to get out while the going is good because he's right...she really doesn't have a good enough idea at the moment. She hesitates at the door, though. "Harry wants to know when you're going to write back, sir," she says, her words tripping over each other.

She moves quickly enough to avoid the piece of chalk that shatters against the door jamb. "Touchy," she mutters to herself *He hasn't thrown chalk since third-year, when Remus and Sirius were looming around the castle*. She's actually smiling as she considers that she's got a special knack for getting under Snape's skin.

Hermione is impatient for the evening to be over so that the morning can come. She's decided to wait until then to visit Syrena because she can't be sure of where the selkie will be, now...Syrena is young, and Hermione expects that living in the lake wouldn't preclude a bedtime.

She sits next to the fireplace...winter is digging its icy claws into the castle, and the cold hovers everywhere like mist...trying to make a start on her DADA essay. She's probably got a lot more insight into Voldemort than the rest of the class has; Harry filled a lot of the empty camping hours telling her about his sessions with Dumbledore and what he'd seen of Riddle's life.

Argh, she thinks with frustration, *I wish we had access to the internet*. A fascination with psychology is another of her father's quirks (sometimes she wonders if teeth are really his calling in life) and she remembers him catching her reading a dark and gritty book about serial killers, once. After that he moved his collection to his office. Hermione's starting to think that Voldemort might have been a psychopath...not in the general sense that Muggle movies talk about serial killers and criminals but in the classical and clinical sense. She just wants to reference a list of behavioural characteristics, though. She's almost sure that Voldemort's pathologic egocentricity and incapacity for love is a big tick mark in the psychopath column.

Ginny intrudes into her pondering: "What's wrong, Hermione?"

Hermione gives Ginny a quizzical look. It's not that Ginny's been avoiding her...more like it's vice versa, actually...but this is the first time they're talking since The Incident.

Ginny points to where Hermione's quill has bled ink into the parchment...a giant Rorschach stain has eaten her scribbled notes. "Gah," Hermione grumbles, Vanishing the piece of parchment with an irritated wand flick. "I was thinking about how I'd like to speak to my dad," she says with a sigh.

"You're... not going home for Christmas?" Ginny asks carefully, treading around the fact that Hermione was invited to the Burrow. But that was Before, and Hermione isn't stupid enough to know it's still a valid option.

"No. It's too far to go for the winter hols, and getting a Portkey at this late stage is..." Hermione shrugs. And anyway, her parents are going white-water rafting in New Zealand or something, and she doesn't want to interfere with their plans.

Ginny's face falls a little and worry creases between her arched eyebrows. "You're not staying here alone for Christmas, are you?" She presses her lips together for a moment. "Look, I'm sure that it would be..."

"An utter disaster if I came to the Burrow, Gin. But thanks for that." Hermione smiles at Ginny. She's touched that their friendship doesn't seem to have been built only on the bonds that had connected Ron and her. "Look. I've got loads of research to do, and I'll persuade Professor McGonagall to let me go to the Muggle village to phone my folks. I can even make a start on our Potions project for next term."

Ginny smiles. Despite extending the invitation, she does look relieved that Hermione has rescinded. "You're a real brick, Hermione," she says.

Giving Ginny what feels like a strained smile, Hermione nods, and then she discards her DADA homework in favour of writing back to Harry:

Dear Harry,

Thanks for the Christmas pressie, Harry. I appreciate all the trouble you went to for me. I'm doing some research on the giant squid, actually, although I'd rather nobody knew about it, if you know what I mean?

Professor Snape would probably appreciate Volume 63 of the Prudent Potioneer if you can get your hands on it. I'm sure he'll write back to you eventually...I think he's the type of bloke you just have to keep chipping away at until he's too tired to fight you off.

Yes. It's horrid to be in the middle. I remembered fourth-year and how difficult it was with you and Ron, and that's why I didn't want to vent about it all to you. I'm doing OK, really. I suppose it was bound to happen eventually. I'm just sorry there wasn't an easier way, a way that I could keep his friendship, I guess.

Happy holidays, Harry.

Love, Hermione.

Even a Warming Charm doesn't relieve the crystalline chill that has settled into the very core of her bones. Hermione's well-prepared this morning...she's even Transfigured a wetsuit...but standing up to her knees in ice-cold water and chewing on what feels like a mouthful of elastic bands with an amused little selkie watching isn't her idea of a good time. Hermione's wondering if her feet have just gone numb or if it's the Gillyweed starting to work when her chest seizes up and the world starts to sparkle with little flecks of light. Yes, *the Gillyweed*, she decides, throwing herself into the water to join Syrena.

Syrena swims around her excitedly, circling in a dizzying spiral. "Oh, you came before the freeze," she trills. "That's what I was trying to tell you the other day... to come before the freeze or I wouldn't see you until it warmed again!"

"Of course," Hermione says, feeling a bit stupid for having lived in the castle for so long and never really thinking of the implications of winter when the silver-grey surface of the lake freezes like steel with the snow. "Will you be all right?"

Syrena's laugh bubbles merrily. "The lake doesn't freeze solid, silly," she says simply.

"Well, yes, I knew that," Hermione allows. "I mean, won't you get cold?"

Syrena shrugs. "We are made for the water. My father likes the freeze because Kraken is slow and stupid, then."

Hermione smiles. "Well, that's good." She really does want to tell Syrena that she, Hermione Granger, will fix the Kraken problem once and for all so that the selkies will never have to guard their borders from anything more malevolent than an idle shark again. But she bites her tongue because she knows what it's like to be promised the world and then have it taken away. "Will you tell me the rest of the story?"

"Come." Syrena executes a graceful back flip and drifts towards deeper water, moving slowly enough to let Hermione keep up with her. Hermione struggles to keep her exasperation in check; the selkie seems unperturbed that Hermione's time is limited and that Hermione is impatient for the rest of the tale. Syrena stops abruptly and smiles her beautiful-ugly grin, and then she calls out something in burbling Mermish softly and watches the green haze around them expectantly.

A moment later, a green-skinned demon with sharp horns and sharp teeth comes bubbling towards them, almost cartwheeling over its spindly, ugly long toes in its haste. Hermione draws her wand quickly, her eyes wide with alarm.

"No, no, no," Syrena says quickly, darting between the Grindylow and the wand. "I wanted to show you to Balrog." The Grindylow comes to a dead stop, making a panting *gristle, gristle, gristle* kind of noise deep in its throat. It licks Syrena's hand and flexes its long, bony fingers. "He's my friend, see?"

Hermione flashes her weak-fake smile at Syrena. "Yes, I see," she says, her relief drifting to the surface on a stream of bubbles. Grindylows set her teeth on edge for some reason, like those *Gremlin* movies. It must be the somewhat fiendish, unblinking stare. But because Hermione wants to please Syrena, she says, "Hello, Balrog. Nice to meet you."

Syrena murmurs to Balrog in Mermish again. The Grindylow makes that gristling noise again and seems to contemplate licking Hermione's hand. Hermione folds her arms across her chest. "Leenash?" she reminds Syrena. She's all for getting the tour of selkie life eventually, but if she leaves the lake without the answer she's going to stew about it all winter. "You said that she went away and you don't know what happened. But then many years later..." Hermione raises her eyebrows.

"Many years later, Silver Beard came to my father with a big box. He said that Leenash had gone to the water above the sun but that she would want her body to come home to her family." Syrena points to a dark pool of shadows under a towering copse of rock that seems to grow from the bottom of the lake. "There. I can show you."

Hermione follows Syrena, wearing a distracted frown. *Silver Beard. Dumbledore?* She's relieved to see Balrog kick lazily away, drifting towards where he'd come from. From what she can remember, there's a fairly large selkie village in that direction. The visibility isn't good enough for her to see it, though.

"Syrena? Was this Silver Beard like me?" she asks, kicking furiously to keep up.

"Yes," Syrena says. "He was an Air Magicker, like you. But he went to the sky also."

Hermione nods with a wistful and nostalgic little smile. "Yes, he did. He was a very wise old man."

"My father was very sad. The whole lake was very dark, even though it was the warmest time." Syrena stops at what can only be an underwater graveyard. "Leenash is here," she says, swimming away again, this time deeper into the graveyard.

Hermione is careful not to touch any of the dark stones that are arranged in regular patterns as she follows Syrena. "Syrena," she bubbles nervously, now feeling a little like she's intruding where she shouldn't.

"Here," Syrena says, stopping next to an algae-dappled stone. She traces her little finger over the lettering on the stone *Leenash Banaphrionnsa*.

Hermione dips her head closer, her hair drifting in a tangled net around her head. "What does that second word mean? Is that her... last name?"

Syrena tilts her head to the side, frowning so that her thick, black brows draw right together. "No. She only has one name...Leenash. That word tells you about her family's place... I am also Banaphrionnsa, like Leenash." Syrena reads the question on Hermione's face before it can leave her mouth. "It means her father was the Chieftain. The leader, yes?"

Hermione can only lift both of her eyebrows in surprise.

A/N: Balrog: Unashamedly borrowed the name from *Lord of the Rings*. Except the poor Grindylows are much littler demons, of course.

Banaphrionnsa: Scottish Gaelic for princess.

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews *The Silvering Divide*. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Thank you to Gelsey for proof-reading.

Exodus

Chapter 5 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

Winter has settled in, bringing fluffy blankets of snow to curl in, almost like it's protecting itself from the icy wind that bleeds through the Shuttering Charms and makes the windows look like they've been fitted with frosted glass. The lake is frozen over, the surface hard and grey like steel.

As she steps into McGonagall's office, Hermione's ears are still steaming gently from the morning dose of Pepper-Up that Madam Pomfrey made her drink. Her bird's nest of hair, which is fluffed wildly around her head (overenthusiastic Drying Charm) looks like it's on fire. She's feeling horrid...a cold and the echoing emptiness of the castle after the Christmas exodus just exacerbate her melancholy mood.

Hermione returns Dumbledore's cheery wave with a little smile. The rest of the portraits are sleeping, or huddled in scarves and jumpers, or imbibing stiff drinks that shimmer in vivid hues of red and purple oil paint.

"What can I do for you, Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall asks. Hermione's almost gratified to see a wisp of steam leaking from McGonagall's right ear. At least she's not the only one who's unable to wiggle out of Madam Pomfrey's kind-yet-surprisingly-hard-and-determined grip.

"I... want to make a phone call to my father, please, Professor McGonagall." It's still difficult for Hermione to make the paradigm shift and call her Headmistress. "I can probably ask somebody at the Muggle village..."

"That will not be necessary, Miss Granger."

Hermione is horrified to feel her misery swelling in her throat, prickling behind her eyes.

But McGonagall stands up and walks towards the fireplace, where she opens a Floo connection. "Come with me, Hermione," she says gently.

The cottage is small and quaint, with a low, beamed ceiling and a wide fireplace. The armchairs are chintz-covered and there's a big bookshelf against the wall. Hermione notices a large copy of *Hogwarts: A History* on the coffee table...it's the illustrated version she's always told herself is an extravagance she can't afford. Incongruously, there's a large desk in the corner with a Muggle telephone and an old Pentium I sitting squat and plastic on it...they match the telly and a video machine gleaming modernly in a cabinet opposite the couch.

"Is this... your house, Professor?" Hermione asks.

McGonagall smiles. "Oh, no...it belongs to Hogwarts. Some of the Muggle parents wish to see Hogwarts for themselves before they'll concede to sending their children to the school, and this is where they stay when they visit. We pay a local Muggle lass to cook and clean for them." Her lips twitch as though she wants to smile. "The house-elves are usually a bit much for them, at first."

Hermione eyes the computer. If it's connected to the internet then that would be easier than asking her father about psychopaths (he'd skyrocket Hogwarts' telephone bill in his enthusiasm and verbosity on the topic, she's sure). "Does it have internet access?"

McGonagall nods. "I had it installed when some of the Muggle parents complained about receiving owls...I come here to use the electronic mail system sometimes." She grimaces as though it's a tedious chore.

"Would you mind if I... used it after I've phoned my parents?" she asks, looking hopeful and cautious. "I wanted to do some research for my DADA assignment."

McGonagall looks very surprised that Hermione would require the Muggle internet for magic homework, but she nods and mutters something that sounds like, "You're welcome to use it if you can get the damn demon box to work." McGonagall leaves Hermione alone in the living room, telling her that she's making a pot of tea for them.

Hermione smiles gratefully and sits at the desk, then dials her father's mobile number after taking a long minute to try and remember the bloody international dialling code

for Australia (sixty-one). She just hopes to Merlin his mobile is set on international roaming.

"Kia ora?" her father answers. His voice is husky and lazy.

Hermione suddenly remembers that it's probably pretty late at night there if it's nine in the morning here. "Hi, Dad," she says timidly. "It's... Hermione." She's an only child but she feels compelled to clarify.

There's a long pause...it's either her words travelling halfway around the world or her father swallowing his surprise. "Well, this is a nice surprise! How are you doing, luv? Your mum and me, we're sweet as!" Her father's voice is liquid, like he's well into the bottom half of a bottle of red. Hermione stifles a groan. This sounds worse than the time her dad spent a month dropping his h's after the trip to France. Although *nothing* could be worse than when her parents had visited Italy and he'd spent a month dressing like Fabio.

"I'm all right, Dad," Hermione says. "Just cold."

"Well, the sun's a bloody scorcher here. Your Mum is soaking in the bath, trying to chase her sunburn away," her father says with a chuckle. "Where are you phoning from? I thought the Weasleys didn't have a phone?"

Hermione can't bring herself to darken her father's cheery mood by telling him she's going to be alone at Hogwarts for Christmas, but she doesn't lie, exactly: "They don't have a telephone. I'm phoning from the Muggle village. I charmed a lovely lady into letting me use her phone."

"I hope that means you used your winning personality and not your wand, my girl," her dad says, pulling a little sharpness and edge back into his drawl.

Yeah. So he's still a bit put out with her. "Of course, Dad." She sighs. "Look, I just wanted to say hullo and wish you Merry Christmas in case I don't get a chance to ring on the day."

"All right, luv. Merry Christmas to you, too." He pauses awkwardly, the broken trust between them heavy on the line between them. "Well, I won't keep you, luv. Goodbye, Hermione."

"Love to Mum... Bye..."

Hermione is left with a disconnect tone buzzing in her ear. She stares at the receiver for a moment, really feeling the distance from her parents and then sets it down with a click. She switches on the computer and waits for it to hum to life. Glumly, she watches the four-coloured logo ripple lazily on the screen. Professor McGonagall comes in from the kitchen and sets a tray onto the coffee table. "Ah, there's something to be said for doing things the Muggle way," she says, patting the tea-cosy fondly. "How are you getting on with the pentagram?"

"So far so good." Hermione presses her lips together in an effort not to giggle and turns back to the screen, clicking on the connect button she finds after a minute of frown-accompanied searching for the right icon. The dial-up modem leaps to life with an unearthly screeching noise, and Hermione waits patiently for the connection. Behind her, Professor McGonagall switches on the telly and settles into an armchair.

Hermione goes to the Google search engine (her father says it's the best thing since sliced bread) and spends ten minutes reading about the general characteristics that go with psychopaths. "The mask of sanity," she murmurs to herself, nodding because it makes perfect sense.

Then she switches the computer off and stands up. She goes and sits in an armchair next to McGonagall. The Headmistress is watching a videotaped episode of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Hermione sits with her and they drink tea and answer their way up to sixty-four thousand quid before the contestant chooses the answer wrong.

"I like that Chris Tarrant," McGonagall says, rolling the presenter's name around her broad Scottish accent. "Although I'd prefer to have Tony Blair to tea...Kingsley says he's a pleasant sort of man, and nice-looking, too."

Hermione sticks her nose into her teacup to hide her smile.

Later, when Hermione's thanked Professor McGonagall and is about to go and write her DADA essay, McGonagall says, "Ah, Hermione? If I were you I wouldn't reference a website in your homework... I'm not sure Severus knows what a computer is."

Hermione can't stop giggling all the way back to Gryffindor Tower. For one lovely morning she's forgotten that she's been feeling lonely and sad.

"Good God," Hermione mutters to herself several days later. "Why on earth is there *ink* in this potion?" She notes it down, sure that the student added the ink to make sure their potion was the right shade of blue. *Cheater*, she thinks.

She's sitting in the Potions classroom analysing the constituents in a long line of little potion vials. Slughorn cornered her in the Entrance Hall earlier, resplendent and rotund in a dark-green velvet suit, and asked her to do him a 'big favour' since he was going to a Christmas function at the Ministry and didn't have time to finish marking the third-year potions.

"Isn't it the staff Christmas party tonight?" Hermione had asked, remembering the anticipatory air about Professor Hooch and Professor Vector at dinner.

"Well, yes," Slughorn had allowed. "But one has to prioritise, young lady."

Hermione eases the stopper out of the next vial, and she almost drops it when Professor Snape sharply demands, *What* are you doing in here, Granger?" He's looming over her with a ferocious scowl on his face and his hands planted on his narrow hips. His cheeks are stained with warmth like he's been sitting close to the fire, and there's a whisper of port on his breath.

"Professor Slughorn asked me to do a Constituent Analysis on these potions, sir," she says.

His expression sours even further. "Did he promise you an 'O' grade?" he asks snidely, plainly insinuating that she'd whore herself in Hogsmeade for a neat row of Outstanding NEWTs.

"No, sir," she says with a tinge of reproach in her voice. "I've already got an 'O' for Potions. He just... sort of implied that it would be career-limiting in future if I didn't seem to be the helpful sort."

"Of course," he says, looking like he's eaten a mouthful of Doxy droppings. To her surprise, though, he doesn't chase her out of the dungeons. He settles on a stool opposite her, plucks a vial from the end of the row, unstoppers it and begins a Constituent Analysis. Quietly, as if moving too loudly will break this fragile peace, Hermione continues with her own analysis. Snape is very quick, and Hermione finds herself working a little faster in an attempt to match his elegant and effective pace.

"It's not a race, Granger," he drawls as he holds a vial up to the light. A curl of hair is coiled in the bottom of it and Snape sighs dramatically. "If you will recall, I've had years of practice at this."

Hermione nods slightly and a question tumbles from her lips, straight from the part of her brain that is recalling how effortless he'd always made brewing look. "Why aren't you teaching Potions this year, sir?" She doesn't really expect him to answer her, so she looks away and reaches for another vial.

"Vector is always bragging about the fact that you're practically an Arithmancy prodigy," he says, though, making her breath catch with surprise because he's answering

her and complimenting her all in the same sentence.

"Yes, sir?" She's confused about what he's alluding to.

"And yet... can you envisage slaving for eight to ten hours a day over Runic matrices?" he asks smoothly.

She folds her fingers around the icy glass of the potions vial, considering his question. She's good at Arithmancy, but she cannot imagine finding joy in spending the rest of her life solving Transfigurative integrals. "No, sir," she admits.

The smallest smile curves the corner of his lips. "Just so, Granger. Just so."

And then she understands: Snape is brilliant at Potions, but it is not his passion. He just brings his natural competence to everything he does, even if he doesn't necessarily *like* it. Taking advantage of his unnaturally benign mood and his apparent willingness to answer questions, she asks, "Sir, why did Slughorn stay to teach this year?"

Snape hesitates, his quill hovering just above the piece of parchment he's making notes on, and Hermione quickly unstoppers the vial in her hands, hoping she's not just invited a lecture about being a nosy parker. "The post was offered to Mrs Wood initially. But then she and Mr Wood decided that they would prefer to procreate." Snape writes: *Miss Smith continues to shed hair like a Kneazle into her potions* before he licks his lips and adds, "Because he likes it when people beg."

Hermione glances up quickly, unsure of whether her ears are working properly. She swallows her amazed amusement and says, "I'm very happy for Penelope and Oliver," in a prim kind of voice.

"I suppose somebody has to ensure my job security," Snape says wryly. He hasn't lifted his eyes to meet hers once during their conversation, still smoothly doing his analyses like talking to Hermione Granger in such casual fashion is routine. Hermione wonders how much he drank at the staff party, how much alcohol is warm in his blood, relaxing his iced over demeanour.

"Why did you stay to teach at Hogwarts, sir?"

"*That is none* of your business, Granger," he says sharply, and Hermione can practically hear the armour chinking into place. He sighs heavily. "Is there a limit to your insatiable curiosity?"

"Sorry, sir."

His only answer is a tight twist of his lips as he returns to frowning at the potion he's testing. They work in silence again for a long while. But it's an awkward sort of silence, now...Hermione's stomach is fluttering with an odd and new sort of pleasure because all she can hear in her mind is the deep and sinuous echo of him saying, 'Insatiable'.

There are three potions left to be analysed when Snape speaks again. "I was interested to read about some of your thoughts on Tom Riddle's early years," he drawls like she hadn't tightened his temper in the least earlier.

Hermione's eyes widen. She'd dropped her essay into Snape's slot outside the staff room yesterday but just because she submitted her homework early doesn't mean she expected that he'd read it straight away. More like he'd save it for last, just to be spiteful, perhaps.

Snape glances up now, and there is no admonishment in his eyes. There's merely a glimmer of interest like she's genuinely caught his attention with her research and thoughts. "It's impossible to know if he truly did wet his bed as a child, but it's a valid enough extrapolation from your quoted research..." His lips quirk almost like he's fighting to hide his glee and amusement that she'd be precocious enough to suggest the very thought of it.

Hermione concentrates on the oily meniscus of the yellow-green potion she's testing, struggling against the warmth she feels in the light of his regard. "Well, it is one of the triad of early markers for antisocial personality disorder," she says hesitantly, unsure of whether he's actually inviting conversation or not. "From what Harry's told me about what he saw in the Pensieve memory of the orphanage, Riddle was definitely abusing animals, which is one of the markers."

Snape continues to work, his hands flowing through the motions with practiced ease. She can't help but watch them, the slender, thin-tipped fingers so very different from Ron's broad, freckled hands or Harry's small, efficient ones.

"Your conclusion," Snape says slowly, "was unique."

Hermione swallows nervously. She'd taken the research and just hypothesised from there. That wasn't to say it was the truth of the matter. Severus Snape would invariably have more insight into Voldemort's motivations than she or Harry or even Dumbledore. "Well, sir, I think I understand why he was like he was," she says, frowning thoughtfully. Tom Riddle was put into an orphanage because his Muggle father discarded his mother and then she died. So Voldemort sought to eradicate the source of his bitter childhood. "I just think..."

She stoppers the last vial and sets it down carefully, forming the words in her head like a potter making a delicate vase. "I just never saw that he had a huge, grand plan beyond taking over the British Ministry and getting rid of Muggle-born magic-folk. And concentrating on Harry, of course, because he was an obvious obstacle." She shrugs, feeling self-conscious because she's babbling and he's staring at her with his head tilted to the side slightly. "He made Horcruxes because he had 'a sense of extreme entitlement' and he wanted to live forever. But I do think a lot of his actions were impulsive and not well-planned at all."

Snape drums his long fingers on the bench, and he rubs his lips with his index and middle finger for a moment before curtly nodding. "That is the general view that most of his Death Eaters took, in the end," Snape says quietly.

And then he leans over and takes her notes. "I'll give these to Professor Slughorn, shall I?" he asks rhetorically, and then he slides out of the Potions classroom, silent as a shadow.

A/N: I absolutely do not claim to be an expert on the matters of Psychology. I am merely blindly good at plucking things from places like: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisocial_personality_disorder. From what I've read there, I truly do think that Voldemort ticks very many of the boxes for the disorder, yes. Voldemort's childhood certainly matches with one of the suspected causal factors listed.

Thank you, as always, to Gelsey.

Kiwi-speak:

Kia-ora...Maori greeting

Sweet as...a term people say instead of "cool" or "awesome" or "I confirm that what you are proposing is good by me..."

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews The Silvering Divide. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Presents

Chapter 6 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

Hermione is awake early on Christmas morning. She stares up at the canopied shadows for a moment, and then she decides that it feels just like any other ordinary December morning because there is nothing in the air...no tingle of red excitement or golden joy...but a slight chill where the cold has seeped through the dormitory's Warming Charm. She supposes she could fix that; her wand is right next to her on the bedside table, but she's too snug and comfortable beneath the weight of the covers to move right now.

She sighs softly, her breath hovering above her in a light mist, and she remembers other Christmas mornings here at Hogwarts. If she closes her eyes, she can almost hear the ghosts of the past, almost feel the giddy urge to throw on her robes and run skidding into the boys' dorm to wish them. And now she knows that there's a special, wicked kind of loneliness to be had at Christmas, and although she's always liked her quiet and solitude, she can't help but feel the wistful, dull ache that settles around her heart with a grey and leaden weight.

A soft *pop* jolts her from her thoughts, and a gasp of surprise squeaks from her lips. One of the Gryffindor Tower house-elves (Hermione knows all their names; this one is called Dory) stands next to her bed, her arms full of brightly-wrapped presents. She's wearing a flimsy paper hat, like those you find in Muggle crackers, and a wreath of silver tinsel is wound around her neck.

"Oh, sorry, Miss... Dory is waking you." The gifts levitate to the foot of Hermione's bed, and Dory wrings her long hands in apologetic consternation. "Dory is sticking her hands in the oven for punishment."

Hermione grimaces and rubs her hand across her eyes wearily. She's still no closer to bringing forth a wave of house-elf enlightenment on the issue of payment and punishment. "No, no, Dory," she says quickly, "I was awake. Do you think you could bring me a cup of coffee instead?"

Dory seems to consider this trade in punishment for a moment...her ears twitch nervously...and she nods timidly. "Yes, Miss."

Hermione smiles and sits up in bed after the house-elf has gone. She takes a moment to fix the Warming Charm...her goose-bumps smooth away in the glow of renewed warmth...and she starts to open her small pile of Christmas presents.

Her parents have sent her a boomerang and various bits of Kiwiana; the gifts practically scream duty-free shopping. What *does* amaze her is the fact that *Hermione Granger, Hogwarts, Scotland*, is how they've addressed the parcel and it's still managed to arrive here. It's almost like Hogwarts is just as mystical and surreal a place as the North Pole is. So, her parents still have a little faith in magic, after all. The thought cheers her up a bit. She wrinkles her nose at the kiwifruit-flavoured chocolates and sets the box aside to give to Hagrid this afternoon. He invited her to Christmas tea, and she said she'd be delighted because Hagrid is good company even if he can't cook.

A cup of coffee materialises on her bedside table. Hermione curls her fingers around the mug and takes a sip. It's bloody Nescafe. Tears start to prickle in her eyes, and she drops her nose to the rim of the cup, breathing onto the surface of the coffee so that damp steam warms her face. She really bloody misses the coffee she had in a little cafe in Australia in July. She puts the coffee cup back down and snuffles a bit. It was the rich, bitter kind of coffee that comes from an espresso machine...the kind that comes with company and the warmth of her mother's smile.

The next present she opens is a Christmas card with a red-nosed Crup wearing a Father Christmas hat on it, and a packet of lime Opal Fruits... from Ron. Hermione's suddenly reminded of the snide miserliness of the presents Harry used to get from Vernon and Petunia Dursley. She taps the Crup's Rudolph nose. "I hope he's not insinuating that I'm a bitch," she mutters. She wonders if Harry made Ron send her a Christmas present, and then she feels a moment of smug superiority for being the 'bigger person' and having sent him a proper present (the special edition Chudley Cannons Uno deck that she bought *Before* for him and sent anyway because she hates Quidditch even more than she hates Uno).

Harry's present is the one that makes her really cry...the kind of tears with huge sobs that hurt when they swell up her throat. She brushes her fingertips across the gilt lettering on the hardcover of the illustrated version of *Hogwarts: A History*, and then she cries some more as she hugs the book to her chest and longs for the unabashed warmth of his friendship and the comfort of his smile. He makes so much space in his life for all of them...the Weasleys and Teddy and Snape and her and even the Malfoys...that she's almost ashamed of her tendency to selfishness and bitterness sometimes.

She opens his card and smiles as she reads:

Dear Hermione,

Merry Christmas.

I know that I said the Gillyweed was your Christmas present, but I've seen you drooling over this book so many times that I got it for you, too.

I hope that you have a nice day at Hogwarts. Hagrid said he invited you for afternoon pudding, and I hope you go. Please try and eat whatever he makes because I know that'll make him happy on Christmas, too. I'm sorry we can't all be together. We will all miss you.

I sent that potion book to Snape...you never told me how hard it would be to get hold of. It was printed in 1975! I hope he likes it. He actually wrote back last week. His letter was short and sour, but I guess I was glad to get it anyway. He made me feel like a bit of a stupid git... sort of made me miss DADA class with him for a moment. He told me to chuck his memories away because, and I quote: If you don't understand how memories work by now, Potter, I'm astounded that you're still in the training programme. Pensilver threads are only copies of memories. I do not have a hole in my memories simply because you are being bloody sentimental. He forgot to add, you idiot, but the implication was there. Merlin, I'm glad he lived.

Well, you have a good day, Hermione. Me and Ginny are going to Godric's Hollow to visit my Mum and Dad. When she suggested it, it sort of made me remember last Christmas and that snake and breaking my wand. And then I realised that any Christmas will only be better after that, yeah?

Love, Harry.

Hermione opens the rest of her presents and mulls over Harry's words. In the end she decides that he's absolutely right: Being at Hogwarts, alone, is better than walking into one of Voldemort's traps and only just escaping with your life. A life without that fear, a world that's painted in fresh hope, is a much better place to be right now. She's smiling as she climbs out of bed to face the day.

Hermione runs into Snape on her way to Hagrid's hut. He's standing on the stairs just outside of the Great Doors, gazing out at the frozen-over lake like some brooding and dark anti-hero from a Jane Austen novel. *Never mind that*, Hermione thinks, *he looks like Count Dracula with his collar flipped up like that*. The ends of his Slytherin scarf ripple in the winter chill, and she nods politely as she walks past him. He may have been positively gregarious the other day, but Hermione knows that this is Snape, and he's not likely to be predictable about being in a good mood today.

"I suppose that I have you to thank for Potter's gift this morning, then?" he says suddenly when she's two steps below him.

She tucks her hands into her pockets and turns to look up at him. He's still staring off at the lake. Hermione can't blame him for escaping the Great Hall; Hermione heard the teachers still lingering over their Christmas cheer as she passed through the Entrance Hall. He hasn't escaped entirely unscathed, she notes: there's a speck of red glitter on his shoulder.

She pauses for another beat, waiting for his thank you, but when it's not forthcoming she smiles and says, "Merry Christmas, Professor Snape."

While Fang gnaws on a huge ham bone, Hagrid serves her a fat wedge of Christmas pudding and tells her about his upcoming visit to France for New Year's Eve. Hermione gazes down at the dark fruit pudding and prods it with her spoon. She's surprised to note that it feels soft. Although, from the fumes that sting the back of her throat, she suspects that he's drowned it in half a bottle of Butterbrandy. She declines Hagrid's very generous offer of a bit of custard skin, so she gets the lumps instead when she spoons a dollop of custard onto her plate. When she takes a tentative taste, she knows where the other half bottle of Brandybutter has gone to.

"Mmm, good," she lies, and she takes another mouthful for good measure to make Hagrid smile. But she frowns when she bites into something very hard, and she's surprised to pull a Knut from between her lips.

"Supposed ter be a Sickle," Hagrid tells her. There's a wobbly blob of custard nestled in his beard, and Hermione looks away from it because it looks very much like a glob of snot. "I didn' have a Sickle so I put a Sickle's worth of Knuts into the puddin'."

"Well, that makes sense," Hermione says, and she digs through her slice of Christmas pudding and finds nine more Knuts. "Did you get any nice Christmas presents, then, Hagrid?" she asks.

Hagrid beams at her and wipes his mouth (removing that blob of custard, thank God) before he stands up and goes to stand next to a new painting...a huge scarlet and gold Chinese Fireball that is roaring realistically on its canvas. "Harry gave me this one... innit somethin'?" He strokes the frame gently, and Hermione's sure that the same ache she'd felt this morning is bruising his heart right now. "He's grown into such a good man."

Hermione smiles at the painting...it is exactly perfect for Hagrid, yes...and she nods. "He has, Hagrid," she says. While he's got his back turned, she feeds her pudding to Fang quickly.

"Did yeh wan' some more puddin'?" Hagrid asks her when he sits down again. His eyes are rather red-rimmed, and Hermione suspects he's missing both Harry and Dumbledore very much. She's glad she came down this afternoon, and suddenly she doesn't feel quite as selfish and self-absorbed any longer. Relief winds through her like a smooth ribbon, and she relaxes in the warmth of Hagrid's hut. Fang lopes over to the little wood-burning fire, collapses, and starts snoring loudly. "Tha' dog's stuffed 'imself today, he has," Hagrid comments.

"I suppose that's sort of a Christmas tradition," Hermione allows. Although the alcohol in the pudding probably did the trick, too. She hopes it's not counted as cruelty to animals. She gazes out the frosted glass at the snow drifts and the slick expanse of the wintery lake. "What do the merpeople do during winter?" she asks suddenly.

Hagrid stops cleaning his teeth and shrugs his mountainous shoulders. "Much the same as we do, I 'spect," he says. "Stay indoors. Keep warm." He gets up again and puts a kettle onto his Aga. "Tea always does the trick," he adds with a hearty chuckle.

Hermione asks how they keep warm, and Hagrid tells her that all Beings and creatures have their ways, which Hermione takes to mean that Hagrid doesn't know the answer. She lets it slide, though, and nods. "Hagrid?" she says instead, her mind drifting back to Syrena like the thought is anchored to a Summoning Charm. "Did you know the selkie who lost her skin, the one who went to school at Hogwarts?"

Hagrid almost drops the sugar bowl. "How did yeh know abou' that?" He shakes his shaggy head. "You and Harry and Ron always knew more than yeh should've."

Hermione shrugs. "When we were gathering Algae Grass last month, I met a little selkie. Syrena told me about her... the selkie who lost her skin, I mean."

Hagrid snorts loudly. "Shoulda known! Syrena and her adventurous little heart." He sighs. "Her parents should put 'er on a leash the way she's always swimmin' about." He gives her what she can only describe as a long-suffering look. "So, yeh've made friends with Syrena, then, have yeh?"

Hermione nods. "I take a walk around the lake most mornings, and she keeps me company a lot. I've only spoken to her a couple of times."

Hagrid gives her a weak-hearted lecture about the dangers of swimming in the lake, but then he grins. "Syrena is me favourite, really." He sets a mug of bitter tea down for her.

"So, did you know Leenash, then?" Hermione asks again, leaning forward, her eyes alight with renewed curiosity because it had slipped her mind to ask Hagrid about the mystery of the lost selkie and what had happened to her before Dumbledore had brought her back to the loch.

"Not s'posed ter talk about it," Hagrid prevaricates. But then, true to form, he lets a secret slide from his lips like a silvery lining. "She was very sad after Kraken ate her skin, Eileen was. Broke me heart ter see her comin' onto the grounds fer Magical Creatures an' never so much as lookin' at the lake."

But Hermione wasn't listening to Hagrid as he spoke about how she'd dropped CoMC like a hot potato as soon as her OWLs were over and done with and never come onto the grounds again... because Hagrid hadn't called her Leenash.

He'd called her Eileen.

Hermione's fingers flick the through the pages of the book quickly until she finds the picture of Eileen Prince that she'd shown Harry in sixth-year, and she knows that she's cracked the puzzle. Eileen's long, sallow face and dark hair makes her almost a mirror image of Syrena. Hermione holds the truth of the selkie who lost her skin and learned magic like a jewel in her hands, and she stares at the girl's sad face.

And then Hermione tries to imagine...and the new mystery blooms like a Lumos in the dark...what happens when a selkie and a Muggle have a child. Because she can see the strange facets of Severus Snape in a new light, now... his winter-grey complexion and his lank, dark hair were no doubt inherited from his mother.

But is that all he inherited? she wonders.

A/N: Mentions of custard skin and Opal Fruits are dedicated to my favourite non-achieving Brit: Adrian Mole.

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews The Silvering Divide. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Thank you to Gelsey for killing stray commas and being a wonderfully supporting friend. Big hugs.

Return

Chapter 7 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

It's the last day of the Christmas holidays, and as far as Hermione is concerned, the new term can't start quickly enough. The days have dragged, drawn brittle and thin like translucent threads of bitter-burnt toffee. The emptiness of the castle; the lack of cooperation from the library; the thinly-veiled concern of the staff, most of whom have invited her for Christmas tea and academic natter during the last week; the disconcerting quiet of Gryffindor Tower... all of these things have waited around the corners and in the shadows, eager to pounce upon her and bruise her bitter heart.

There *are* a few Gryffindors staying at Hogwarts for Christmas, but they seem to scatter elsewhere just as soon as they sense her approach because she's only ever seen them at meal times. She realises that she doesn't even know the names of most of the first-year students. Asking for the salt or the butter is a minefield of awkward moments and stilted pauses that take the place of names. It's because she's not a Prefect this year, she tells herself.

The family-bereft students are sharing a single table in the Great Hall at the moment, but they gather in clumps along its length like they're still pigeonholed into their Houses. However, the exception to any rule will invariably be Gryffindor or Slytherin, and the two tiny students seated a little way down the table from her only compound the proof of this. At least they're well-behaved and conversing quietly, unlike the Hufflepuffs down at the end of the table, who are squealing and giggling childishly about the house-elves' unfortunate choice of pudding today (Spotted Dick and custard).

Hermione's eating her custard (she hates currants) when the two girls start to whisper urgently, stealing glances at her from beneath their fringes. The Slytherin elbows the Gryffindor as if to point out that being brave isn't her job at all. The little Gryffindor clenches her teeth and leaps off the cliff of courage: "Did you really ride a dragon, Miss Granger?"

For a singular, suspended moment, Hermione is stunned at the facets of respect and reverence and fear in the child's voice. "Ah... you can call me Hermione," she says because she's still a student, just like them. "And yes, I did ride a dragon."

The Slytherin gives her a calculating look. "Weren't the goblins cross that you stole their dragon?"

Immensely. Thank Merlin for Bill Weasley and his diplomatic intervention. "They were, yes, but we sorted it all out in the end."

"Did you really stay in a tent with *Harry Potter* the whole year?" the Gryffindor asks, her blue eyes wide and wondering.

Hermione hides the quirk of her lips by dipping her head, and she takes a mouthful of custard, only answering with a brief nod.

"Ask her if he's really got a Hippogriff tattoo on his chest," she hears one hiss to the other.

"Are you *mad*?" the other whispers back.

"So, why are you still at school?" the Slytherin child asks instead. "You're pretty old to be at Hogwarts, aren't you?"

"Because you can't finish school and save the world all at once," Hermione says with a touch of asperity.

"Harry Potter did," the little Gryffindor says, pride puffing her skinny chest.

The child is saved from a scathing lecture on how Harry Potter didn't really finish school...he was *given* a nice set of NEWTs like free sweetsies...when the post owls swoop overhead, dropping letters and parcels like missiles from the reflected sky.

"Talk of the bloody devil," Hermione mutters as she opens a letter from Harry.

Dear Hermione,

Happy New Year! Did you watch the fireworks display they put on in Hogsmeade? I heard it was really good. Did you make your usual list of resolutions? I only made one: to keep my family close and safe. If I break that one, then I don't deserve to be an Auror, yeah?

We had a good party at the Burrow. George spiked the punch in Fred's memory, but Molly hardly noticed because she was too busy flapping about catching Draco and Charlie snogging in the garden shed. I just think they're lucky she caught them early on in the evening so she didn't see Charlie's tattoo, as well.

Listen, I'm writing to give you a heads up before the Sunday Prophet arrives. Ron and Lavender are seeing each other again... it really was an eventful New Year's Eve. All I can say for them is they're lucky Molly didn't go up to the attic that night. Anyway, Parvati managed to snap a picture of them before that, and you know that she works for the Daily Prophet, now, yeah? I'm sorry to be the one to tell you about it, but I'd rather you heard it from me than from anybody else.

Take care of yourself... and Ginny when she gets back this evening.

Love, Harry.

A delivery owl lands at her elbow like a feathered harbinger of doom. It's clutching the *Sunday Prophet* in its talons and gazing at her with expectant orange eyes.

"I'm not sure I really want the newspaper today," she says with a grimace as she tucks five Knuts into its leather pouch.

The happy news is tucked neatly next to Parvati's gossip column in the gutter of the newspaper, just where it belongs. She can taste something metallic and bitter on her tongue, like spite or envy. Ron looks drunk and Lavender looks slutty with her boobs almost leaking out of her low-cut Muggle blouse. The curve of her jaw is blurred in the photograph where she's obviously applied a heavy glamour to hide the scars of the war.

Hermione tries to fold up the paper neatly but gets frustrated when the sports section tries to escape. She ends up Vanishing the entire paper with a little snarl of frustration. She's just calmed her breathing again when she notices that Professor Vector (one of the few teachers who have not yet trapped her for tea) is eyeing her with a sort of pitying intent. Actually, she's getting that look from most of the teachers except Slughorn, who has been studiously avoiding her since before Christmas (maybe this means

a grateful end to Slug Club meetings) and Snape, who is not at lunch.

Hermione quickly makes an escape to the Entrance Hall, clutching Harry's letter in her fist. She runs into Snape just as he's coming up from the dungeons. She is surprised to see him wearing Muggle clothes: black trousers and a Slytherin-green jumper over a white shirt. It's a bit old-fashioned and staid and predictable, but it's better than McGonagall's jacket from Christmas day (the double-breasted cherry-red one with the power shoulder-pads straight from the 1980s).

She nods and murmurs, "Good afternoon, sir," and she quickens her step because she just wants to go and sulk in peace. At a different time and in a different mood, Hermione would probably pause and search for an excuse to talk with Snape; she's been watching him this last week, looking for clues that might indicate he's anything but human. Sadly, aside from his pallor and his hair, he seems to be a living, breathing, ordinary (if a little sarcastic and sour) wizard.

"A moment, Granger," he says, though, halting her flight.

She turns to face him. She tries for a neutral expression, but there's a strained trace of pained impatience leaking through. "You're not going to invite me to tea, too, are you?"

"I *beg* your pardon?" he says, and his black eyebrows wing up sharply.

"It's just that all the other teachers have thrown a pity party for me all week..." And she's sure it's a conspiracy of concern that has been plotted and pondered in the staffroom. She hates the thought of the teachers talking about her and her issues there.

Snape's expression hardens into sharp annoyance. "Would you prefer if they bluntly stated that you are directly responsible for your parents' relocation, or perhaps that you should have had the sense never to have taken up with Weasley in the first place?"

Hermione feels a hot spike of indignation, and she glares at Snape, who has just reverted to spiteful again after months of seeming uncharacteristically mellow. Her bottom lip sticks out in a petulant pout and quivers lightly. She clenches her teeth. What she really wants is to be alone right now, and she's damned if she's going to let him make her cry.

"Dropping lip like that is childish, Granger," he snaps. "You have long been an adult, and it would reflect well upon you to behave as such."

"Being here at Hogwarts makes me feel like I'm still a child," Hermione retorts.

The muscles in his face tighten into a bitter grimace, and Snape mutters something under his breath as he turns and moves smoothly across the Entrance Hall. A crystalline gust of winter air chases up the staircase as he opens and closes the Great Doors with a *bang*.

Hermione rubs her arms and wonders about two things: What he'd wanted in the first place and what she'd said to make him mutter and flee like that.

Although the library has not yielded much in the way of research on the giant squid, it does hold pools of quiet peace like a church. And most of the other students are relaxing in their common rooms or playing on the grounds. She has to smile when she sees that Crookshanks lies curled in a slant of wintery light, almost like he's been waiting for her to arrive.

"Hello, boy," she says, scooping him into her lap. He rumbles his contentment beneath her fingertips as she stares out of the window and thinks about her reaction to the rekindling of what she can only recall to be an intensely physical relationship... She comes to the conclusion that it has to be a rebound thing. She also decides that it's not that she wants Ron back at all, not in that way (that deeply unsatisfying way). In the end, it's that she's bitterly envious of the fact that he can move on...with his life and career and plans...and she feels like she's stuck here, stagnating, even though it was her choice to finish her NEWTs in the proper fashion. She was always part of the Trio, right from that first Halloween, and now she's feels like she's been left behind. She feels like the lonely first-year in that bathroom, all over again.

She can see Hogsmeade station in the distance, and she's been watching the horizon for the tell-tale puff of engine steam, which will herald the returning stampede of students. To the left of the station, she can see the thatched roofs of Hogsmeade shivering under a blanket of snow and the little columns of wood-fire smoke that rise lazily from each household. The lake, which has so captured her attention, is still frosted over, capped with a thin, cracked slick of ice.

"It's like a fairytale out there, Crooks," she murmurs. "And I'm the ugly stepsister."

Time slides past like a lazy cat, and before she's even thought to check her watch, Hermione has half-dozed the afternoon away in the library window seat with Crookshanks warm on her lap. Under a mushroom cap of white smoke, the Hogwarts Express flashes scarlet in the distance. Hermione sighs softly. "There they are, boy," she murmurs, touching the glass with her fingertips.

Another blur of movement, closer this time, draws her gaze, and she watches Professor Snape stride up the steep path from the gates. From the stiff line of his shoulders and the brisk snap of his walk, it looks like he's in a grim mood. "I wonder where he went to today?" she murmurs. Crookshanks *meowr/s* an indistinct answer and jumps to the floor. At the door to the library, the half-Kneazle turns and looks at her as if to ask, "Aren't you hungry, too?" She chuckles at her beloved familiar. "You go on ahead to the kitchens, Crooks... I'm sure the house-elves are wondering where you've been."

Hermione meanders up to Gryffindor Tower to put on her school robes. *It'll soon be hellishly noisy in here*, she thinks as she passes through the silent common room. She finds herself looking forward to that blur of activity.

On her way down to the Entrance Hall, a note materialises in front of her nose with *apop*. It's from a teacher, she knows, because they're the only ones who are allowed to tag things like that to a student's magical signature.

Granger,

See me in my office before dinner.

Prof. Snape.

In the spare lines of his note, it's easy to see what she's missed for several months: Professor Snape stopped calling her Miss Granger a while ago, replacing it with the more concise and brusque Granger. Whether it's due to increased familiarity or contempt is a mystery to her. Hermione shrugs and wonders what he wants as she trots down to the dungeons; she assumes it's about what he didn't get around to asking her earlier on.

The teachers never seem to realise how, in the empty and chill air of the castle, their voices carry like birds on the air; secrets spill up the staircase in a whisper.

"Severus is in a choice mood," Professor Sprout murmurs. There's a petulant edge to her voice that indicates she's probably recently been slighted with the full weight of Snape's dark mood.

"He's probably got good reason today; his father passed away in one of those awful Muggle homes this morning," replies Madam Pomfrey. "But don't let on, Pomona... you know how tetchy he can be about personal issues..."

"Oh, yes..." It's then that they hear Hermione's footsteps, and they cut their conversation short and smile at her from their gossip knot as she passes them in the Entrance Hall.

Snape's office is still a juxtaposition of all the things she loves and hates: bookshelves and rare books; dead things with metallic, dead eyes in glass jars. Hermione cannot fathom why he still keeps his office in the dungeons when there's a lovely office on the first floor next to the DADA classroom.

Snape stands at his desk, shrouded in his black teaching robes. The tight lines of his face bracket his grim expression; he looks so tightly wound she's afraid he's going to snap and shatter into tiny pieces all across his tidy office. She remembers the day her Granny died, how the strain of it all seemed to blur her mother at the edges like she was made of plastic. But Snape's grief looks brittle and hard.

"Yes, sir?" She almost says, "You Summoned," but she stops herself in time because it's only Dark Lords who summon, not mourning teachers, and she doesn't think that Snape will appreciate the reminder of Voldemort right now.

Snape nods slightly, and he gets straight to the point, as always: "I will not be here tomorrow, Granger. I'd like you to chaperone the DADA classes for the day; you have Professor McGonagall's blessing, of course." He sees the concerned look that flitters across her features. "Missing a single day of classes will not kill you, Granger. Make sure all students are in attendance and doing something constructive. I do not care if it is homework for other teachers. No wands out, though, which means absolutely *no* duelling."

"Yes, sir," she says, realising the trust that is inherent in the request.

"Out," he says tiredly, rubbing at his temple like a headache is eating his brain alive.

Hermione is halfway to the stairs when his secret expands like a balloon in her chest. It swells and it swells until she feels like she will burst. She wants to turn around and tell him she's sorry, but she's sure he'd hate the slightest flicker of pity from her. So, she touches the rough wall of the corridor and breathes past the pressure around her heart. "I'm sorry," she says softly, and she wonders if it will carry on the air like so many secrets do at Hogwarts.

Hermione and Ginny snag the best armchairs, right near the fireplace in the common room. It's good to see Ginny again, and although their conversation spirals away from Ron continuously, Hermione enjoys hearing about the rest of the holiday.

Ginny looks beautiful and radiant; it's like she's filled up with Harry's light over the holidays and now it's spilling over everywhere... It's in the radiance of her smile and the lilt of her voice. It even seems to wash over Hermione, so that the warmth of Ginny's companionship and conversation is more comforting than the soft glow of the fire.

"So... Harry told me about your brother and the... dragon," Hermione says blithely.

Ginny breaks into a peal of golden giggles. "Oh, Merlin," she groans, covering her eyes. "What a way to break the blood feud, eh?" She leans closer and murmurs, "And now Mum's wondering what Charlie's really been doing all the times he tells her that he's going to *ride his broom*..."

Hermione stomach is sore by the time she stops laughing, and tears of mirth are wet on her eyelashes. She presses her hand to her chest to ease the giggles. It feels so wonderful to have her chest hurt from laughing this time around.

Later, when she's on the edge of sleep, she realises that her top New Year's resolution will mirror Harry's. Harry and Ginny's friendship is precious to her, and she will always hold it close to her heart.

A/N: Thank you to Gelsey, as always.

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews The Silvering Divide. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Complicated

Chapter 8 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

The first Saturday after the Christmas holidays is traditionally very quiet; most of the students burrow into the warmth of their beds and grumble about how it was much warmer at home. Even Hermione can't see herself skidding and shivering her way through a walk around the lake this morning. The snow is dull grey and waterlogged, just like the pewter sky above the handful of breakfasting students.

Harry's owl looks wind-blown and disgruntled when she arrives; even a rasher of bacon doesn't quell her querulous hooting, and she refuses to relinquish the letter from her sharp grip before Hermione soothes her with a Warming Charm. Godrica (it was Godric before Harry discovered he was a she) hoots happily, steals another piece of bacon, and wings off towards London with alacrity. Hermione sighs when she sees that the owl has shirked her duty and left Hermione with all of Harry's correspondence. "Bad Rica," she mutters as she wonders when Harry finds the time to write to her and Ginny as well as to Professor Snape, Dean Thomas *and* Luna Lovegood.

Hermione pockets the other letters, resolving to play mail-elf later on, and she reads her letter:

Dear Hermione,

I hope that the first week of the term was okay. Work has been really busy, and I actually miss Hogwarts at this time of the year because I haven't flown properly for months now. I was thinking about coming up in February to watch Gryffindor v. Hufflepuff if Professor McGonagall says it's all right. Hopefully it'll be on Valentine's Day this year so I can see Gin. I can't wait for both of you to finish NEWTs...you're more than halfway there, though, so chin up, yeah?

It's Professor Snape's birthday today. Hopefully Slug & Jiggers manage to deliver his present on time. I used my own initiative to buy him a gift this time; I hope he likes it, even if it is a bit tongue in cheek, you know. You remember that time I buggered up the Legilimency lessons with him, yeah? Well, I got him a replacement jar of dead cockroaches. And a year's subscription to that potion magazine; I hope he doesn't have one already.

Take care of yourself and Ginny, and make sure Snape isn't too much of a sour git on his birthday.

Love, Harry.

Hermione thinks that Harry's gift is more cheeky than tongue in cheek, but it makes her smile anyway. She leaves the Great Hall after breakfast and notes that Filch is stationed near the Great Doors, wearing his most anticipatory smile as he waits for the Quidditch teams to drag slick trails of mud and snow in when they return from their morning practice. Mrs Norris is a grizzled sentinel at his side, yowling a dire warning to any student who ventures into the cold morning.

After traipsing the length and breadth of the castle to deliver Harry's letters, Hermione pauses outside the Ravenclaw common room, wondering where Snape would be on a grey Saturday morning, a Saturday morning that was also his birthday. "Hiding from the harpies," she murmurs to herself with a slight smile. *So, not in the staff room, then.*

On the way down to Snape's office, Hermione stops on the first floor and peeks into the DADA classroom, just in case he's there. The classroom is empty and quiet, but Hermione feels a gentle tingle of magic wash over her face like a whisper. She winds through the desks and steps into the interconnecting DADA practical room, where Snape has now permanently installed Cushioning Charms on the walls and floor so that the students don't injure themselves on desk corners when they're trying to jinx each other.

Snape is alone in the practice room, sending a rapid-fire stream of hexes and jinxes towards one of the walls, which shimmers with an iridescent, blue quality each time it is hit, before the spells bounce back at Snape at random angles, forcing him to dodge the jets of light or flick up a quick Protego in response. *It's like squash for magicians,* Hermione thinks with surprise, and she wonders why she's never seen anything like it before.

A hissing Stinging Hex rebounds quickly, too quickly for a Shield Charm, and Hermione winces because it's at waist-height and she can't see that he's going to move quickly enough to avoid its scorching tendrils. Hermione's jaw drops when Snape bends backwards underneath the streak of orange light, touching the floor with the fingertips of one hand before he straightens up in an impossibly fluid movement.

"Woah, Neo," Hermione gasps because the move almost mirrors that beautiful and graceful slow-motion movement from *The Matrix*, and although she knows it was a special effect, she has always thought it was a little like magic, the way Keanu Reeves moved like that.

Snape turns quickly, his wand ready at eye-level, his reflexes obviously lightening sharp from his adrenaline-filled duelling practice. He drops his wand when he sees it's her at the door, and he makes a frustrated sound. "It's Saturday morning, Granger...will my free time never be sacrosanct?" he grumbles, raising his dark eyebrows dramatically.

He tucks his wand into an arm holster, and Hermione takes a moment to absorb the fact that he's barefoot and robeless, wearing only a loose pair of black pants and a charcoal t-shirt. His long, black hair is also fastened into a knot at the back of his neck, baring the sharp lines of his face and the long curve of his neck to open sight. He looks much younger like this, even though he's technically a year older, today. "What is it?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir," she says, retrieving Harry's letter from her pocket. "Godrica dropped all of Harry's post with me this morning. I think she wanted to get home to her perch." Hermione smiles at Snape as she hands him his letter. "Oh, and Happy Birthday, sir."

Snape scowls at the letter for a moment before his lips twist into an ironic smile. "Potter has the biggest mouth I have ever had the misfortune to witness," he says darkly.

"Oh, no... I think Hagrid's probably got an advantage over Harry," Hermione says, shaking her head. Over the years, Hagrid has certainly let some ~~ouge~~ secrets slip, including the most recent about Snape's mother. Harry is simply honest and open, and he's the type of guy who thinks that Snape should be wished many returns of the day.

Snape's lips quirk slightly. "Perhaps," he allows. "Thank you, Granger. Now, give me the gift of peace and go away..." His tone carries only dry amusement; there's not a single trace of scorn or spite.

Hermione pushes her luck for a moment longer: "What was that charm you were duelling against?" she asks curiously, gesturing to the now quiescent wall.

Snape folds Harry's letter and slides it into his pocket. "I knew it was too much to ask," he says sardonically, but he answers her question: "It's a Rebounding Charm. Professor Flitwick gets arthritis during the winter months, and he's not inclined to get out of bed on a Saturday to duel, anyway."

"Why haven't we learned it in DADA?" Hermione asks.

Snape snorts with dark amusement. "Madam Pomfrey is busy enough as it is." He shakes his head. "Until the students can learn to shield and defend themselves during a simple duel with a classmate, this type of tool is not only unnecessary, but dangerous. The charm does not just reflect a spell...it intensifies both the magnitude and speed. It is primarily used by defence experts and duellists. Potter has mentioned such a charm being used for Auror training, as well."

Hermione bites the inside of her cheek as she considers the information Snape has given her. She is the best duellist in her NEWT DADA class, but that isn't really saying much because Snape never pairs them off with friends, and so she never gets to duel against Ginny, who is probably a close second. "I'm really good at duelling, though, sir," she wheedles. "Couldn't you teach just me?"

Snape narrows his eyes, and for a moment Hermione thinks he's going to revert to bellowing at her for being presumptuous ~~and~~ intruding upon his precious privacy. "Duelling is more of an art form than a sport, Granger, far different from warfare or hexing your classmates," he says, still staring at her intently. Then a smile curves his thin lips...it's the sly type of smile that Slytherins must practice in front of their mirrors...and he gestures towards the wall. "If you can last for five minutes, I may consider teaching you how the charm works..." He takes three paces backward and leans against the side wall with his arms crossed, that quasi-amused smile still firmly in place.

Hermione dithers for a few moments, feeling a thread of anxiety twist through her stomach. She can feel the weight of his stare, the intensity of his regard, and the smug expectation that simmers from him. She curls her fingers around her wand, feeling the tingle of magic against her palm as she stares the challenge down. She shifts her weight to the balls of her feet, feeling her muscles tense. "*Diffindo.*" The spell rebounds from the wall with lightning speed, and Hermione ducks underneath it, feeling the sharp blade of magic whistle over the top of her head with crackling intensity. It defuses into the Cushioning Charm behind her, and she straightens up with a victorious smile.

"No gloating, Granger," Snape snaps from behind her. "Defend and attack in the same moment; your opponent will never allow you that moment to revel in your cleverness..."

Hermione whips her head around to give him a baleful look before she applies his suggestion *hex-shield-jinx-duck-curse-shield*... She gets tired more quickly than she'd ever imagined, becomes absorbed in the exercise, starts using reflex and instinct rather than pausing to contemplate her next move, forgets that Snape is watching like a hawk. Her muscles burn and a flush rises up her neck to burn in her cheeks. "*Stupefy!*" The streak of scarlet magic whips back towards her with a visceral snarl... she's a fraction of a second too slow, and it clips her mid-chest. Her vision is flecked with scarlet sparks before everything fades to black.

The world roars back to vivid life as the bright spark of an Ennervate jump-starts her mind. "Come on, Granger," Snape is murmuring. "That's a girl..." She feels the cool tap of fingers against her cheek, and her eyes flutter open.

Snape is bending over her, wisps of dark hair falling forward to slant over his cheekbones. He gives her a look that tells her he's incredibly long-suffering and patient to put up with her like this, and he offers his hand. She takes his long-fingered hand and hauls herself to her feet with his help. She winces, feeling her muscles ache where the Stunner hit her.

Snape crosses his arms over his chest again and gives her an ironic look. "That was sixty-three seconds, by my count," he tells her.

Hermione hefts a big sigh. "Thanks for letting me try, anyway, sir," she says glumly, feeling a little inept and stupid, now.

"Oh, don't sulk, Granger," he chides. "It was a lot better than Lockhart ever managed."

She refrains from rolling her eyes. "Now that's a big achievement," she says with a slightly sarcastic edge.

Snape smirks. "It's not politically correct to speak ill of the mentally-challenged," he informs her.

Hermione smothers a giggle. *Perhaps*, she thinks with amazement, *Harry's stupid present really did please him*. Whatever it is, she can appreciate this side of Snape. *His* backside, *too*, her mind adds as he turns away and walks over to face the wall once more, pulling his wand from its holster as he goes.

"Be off with you, Granger," he says. "We'll see if you can last a bit longer next Saturday, shall we?"

Hermione would love to stay and watch him duel, but she's already been given a gift of such magnitude that she feels like she's swallowed an Engorgio. "Thank you, sir!" she calls, and then she races up the stairs to the fourth floor and the library.

Hermione has decided that while the lake is quiescent and she cannot visit Syrena, that she will attempt to learn Mermish so that she can speak to her friend without resorting to begging Harry for more Gillyweed.

She finds the appropriate textbook in the Language Section fairly easily, and she settles at a desk and opens the book. Each word is written phonetically beneath its English counterpart, and Hermione discovers that if she touches the typescript with the point of her wand, the word is sounded (well, screeched and clicked, more like) audibly. It's a very good thing because she cannot seem to work out exactly which letters go with which vocal intricacies.

Hermione's only managed to repeat the first word...a generic greeting for all races...twice before Madam Pince swoops into sight around a bookshelf, looking absolutely scandalised. "Silencing Charm, Miss Granger," she says, her lips pursing into a disapproving little pucker.

Hermione...with a serene smile because she's in a very good mood even after being felled by her own Stunner...flicks up a Silencing Charm and continues to try to wrap her mind around a language that is cumbersome and otherworldly on her tongue.

Five days later, Hermione lingers after DADA to talk to Snape.

"Do you have a moment, please, Professor?" she asks.

Snape shrugs elegantly. "It's what I'm paid for," he replies, Conjuring a chair for her, which tells her she's probably more welcome than his expression suggests. "Sit, speak," he says. "I have first-years in half an hour, and I need a cup of tea to fortify myself before then."

Hermione sits down and pulls her bag into her lap. She sighs. "I'm having some... issues with this week's assignment," she admits reluctantly. They're studying the Ethics of Magic in DADA at the moment, and Snape has given them homework that has had her staring into the common room fire as she juggles the questions in her mind.

Snape puts down his quill and flexes his fingers. "What is your particular issue?" he asks, watching her with dark eyes. There's a flicker of curiosity there, and she can read his interest in the way he leans forward slightly.

"Well, it's easy to see what the 'right' answers are to the scenarios," she begins. He'd given them five 'what would you do in this situation' scenarios. This has become a hallmark of NEWT DADA lessons: rather than research a topic, Snape has begun to ask the students to give their own opinion, to think rather than to simply regurgitate facts. It's a challenge for her because it makes her think about many things that she doesn't always want to consider. "It's just that some of the cases are... in some of the scenarios I know that if I were in that situation I probably wouldn't do the 'right' thing at the time."

Snape tilts his head slightly. "Why?"

Hermione bites on her thumbnail. "Because life is more complicated than that; most situations don't actually have one clear answer; some answers that are easy might have unforeseen and long-term effects; sometimes it's very personal and people can't apply an objective, clinical approach; sometimes you do things that feel right but are wrong, in the end."

"Yes," Snape says.

Hermione frowns. "Yes?"

Snape drums his long fingers on his desk, and then he clucks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Yes, life is more complex than we realise," he says simply. "You have the benefit...or perhaps the misfortune, really...of having experienced the difficulty of choice under duress. Your view on this exercise is vastly more complicated than a student who has never faced war. And such things also depend upon upbringing and conditioning, of course," he adds with a wry twist of his lips.

"Like the children of Death Eaters," Hermione says quietly, thinking of Draco Malfoy.

Snape nods. "In the end, it is a matter of perspective... and choice."

Hermione thinks about Dumbledore and the concept of the 'Greater Good' and how the whitest magician she'd ever known had made choices that had ultimately been detrimental to Harry.

Snape spreads his hands and shrugs. "But, Granger, you have to remember that there are always consequences to whichever choice you make. And ultimately, attempting to justifying your choices or seeking atonement for the consequences thereof are often heavy crosses to bear."

Hermione presses her lips together as she considers the stark lesson in his words, the sharp edge of experience that he brings to their classes with his own choices and his lifelong atonement. She thinks that it will take a long time for her to rationalise her own actions with regard to her parents, and she doesn't know where to start with making it right.

"So, there isn't really a right answer, then," she says.

Snape's smile is wry. "There isn't really an easy answer, ever, Granger."

A/N: We are going to pretend that *The Matrix* wasn't released two months after this chapter takes place, yes? It's the right year at least, yes?

Thank you, as always, to Gelsey.

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews *The Silvering Divide*. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Discovery

Chapter 9 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

The brisk wind chases little ripples across the lake's black surface so that the water looks like it is shivering beneath the swollen clouds. Hermione hopes that it doesn't start raining before she gets back up to the castle. With every few steps she takes, her eyes flick towards the lake, hoping that Syrena will surface today. The Freeze passed several weeks ago, but Hermione has not seen any of the lake-dwellers since the morning she glanced out of the dormitory window and the ice seemed to have sublimated into the rain.

Hermione wonders if Syrena is on a tighter parental leash than she used to be, or perhaps if she has been bound by post-Freeze chores. Hermione wants to learn more about how the selkies live; they're intelligent Beings, and she suspects they have a civilised and structured society.

Hermione sighs wistfully and turns back towards the castle; there's just time for breakfast before another Saturday morning duelling lesson with Professor Snape. And she wouldn't miss *that* for the world, even for a chance to practice a little Mermish on Syrena. Hermione's a little nervous about her proficiency with the difficult language; it's one thing to memorise scores of individual words and sounds but quite another to string them together in a semblance of coherency.

"*Wait!*" comes a piercing cry from behind her. The sound of Mermish in the open air is far more guttural and discordant than the muted cadence of the textbook, but Hermione is thrilled that she understands it; she's smiling brilliantly as she turns.

Syrena's skin is darker than when Hermione had seen her last...it is flecked and mottled with patches of green algae. Hermione wonders if it has to do with the period of inactivity during the Freeze or if the chemistry of the water is just different during the winter. Hermione drops to her haunches so that they are closer and almost at eye-level with each other. Syrena could choose to come out of the water, to slide out of her shimmering skin, but Hermione knows that she's still rather skittish about walking with the Air Magickers after her fiasco with the squid.

"*Hello, Syrena,*" she says, and she laughs with delight at the astonishment that makes Syrena's black eyebrows wing up sharply.

"*How did you learn?*" Syrena bubbles, pirouetting in the water with excitement.

Hermione doesn't understand the entirety of what Syrena says, but she picks familiar sounds out of the air and pieces them together so that the essence of Syrena's question sparkles into focus. "*Book,*" Hermione says, miming the opening and closing of a book because she hasn't learned about Mermish pronouns and grammar yet; one-word answers discount the likelihood that her meaning will be lost in translation.

"*I thought maybe Gallchobhar teach you.*" Syrena smiles her crooked-yellow smile. "*But book is good also. I am happy we can talk.*" Syrena spins in the water, her green hair trailing lazily behind her.

Hermione frowns. "*What is Gall...?*" she asks, tripping over the strange and unfamiliar term.

"*Gall is a selkie who is not born in this loch. A Stranger,*" Syrena explains.

"*Much... happen?*" Hermione struggles to express the question that is bursting on her tongue, to twist it into sounds that Syrena will understand. She feels frustrated that she cannot express herself better; that language does not blossom into bright comprehension in her mind as quickly as Charms theory or Transfiguration variations.

Syrena shrugs. "*Sometimes. Some selkies go to other lochs for work, to make new family. Others come here, join our people.*"

Hermione nods because a little biodiversity sounds healthy to her; she's always wondered how limited the merpeople or the centaurs' gene pool is. But she cannot begin to fathom why Syrena would think that she'd learned Mermish from another selkie. "*Why...*"

A warbling call in the distance cuts Hermione's question short, and she glances up to see a selkie woman gesturing impatiently to Syrena. "*Mother is early,*" Syrena explains with an annoyed little click of her tongue; her gills flare with annoyance much like a human's nostrils might. "*Tomorrow?*" she asks hopefully over her slim, pearl-grey shoulder.

"*Yes,*" Hermione says with a nod. Syrena streaks like a silver arrow towards her mother, and Hermione is half-relieved, half-annoyed that Syrena's mother knows that she has an Air Magicker friend she visits with. But relief wins out, in the end, and until the squid is taken care of with adequate wards, Hermione supposes it's for the best. As Hermione hurries up to the castle, she wonders if Hagrid has been true to form again and blabbed to the selkie Chieftan about his daughter's wandering habits.

"Did you know that Harry's coming to the Quidditch game tomorrow?" Hermione puffs as she Shields against a rebounding, wiggling Trip Jinx. Since Snape accused her of having a very limited repertoire of spells up her sleeve a couple of weeks ago, she's gone out of her way to prove him wrong. "*Tarantallegra!*" Again, a flick of her wand is sufficient to raise a Shield against which the returned hex dissipates with a soft sparkle of green light.

"*Stop,*" Snape says abruptly, stepping forward from his usual position...just to the right and behind her.

Hermione drops her wand hand and turns around, pulling the edge of her t-shirt straight. She's taken to wearing tracksuit pants because the jeans she wore the first time she tried her luck against the wall just didn't allow her enough range of movement. Snape hasn't changed his mode of dress since he's started teaching her to duel; he usually falls in with his own practice after she leaves. Today, he's wearing a dark purple Pride of Portree Quidditch supporters t-shirt. It suits him.

Hermione rubs the bottom of a bare foot against her calf and pulls a face that obviously says, "Whaaaaat?"

"You are Shielding yourself four times out of five, Granger," he says, spinning his wand through his fingers idly. "You're obviously more witch than Muggle."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment, sir," she tells him, lifting her chin slightly.

"Take it whichever way you wish, Granger," he says with a smirk that pulls at something in her chest like there's a magnetic field attached to his smile. "Be that as it may, relying on a Shield too heavily is foolish. Aside from the fact that there is often no time to use *Protego*, Conjuring a Shield is also a waste of vital energy. Additionally, it slows your return attack because you can dodge a hex and non-verbalise a return volley in a single moment. A *Protego* almost doubles your reaction time."

"I know," she says with a sigh. "I think it's just a habit to use my wand if it's in my hand."

Snape taps his wand against his palm, considering. "Let's try an Anti-Shield Jinx on you...that should remove the temptation entirely," he says. "Keep your jinxes fairly innocuous, Granger." She feels a rush of magic tickle across her skin as his non-verbal spell takes effect.

Snape lingers behind her, now, his wand at the ready...perhaps in case she lets a nasty hex let fly by mistake. After several minutes of semi-efficient ducking and weaving, Hermione wobbles unsteadily in the firm grip of a Leg-Locker Curse. She mutters the counter-curse in aggravated fashion.

"That's probably enough for today, Granger," he says. "Not bad, but you're probably going to need to do some concurrent exercise if you're serious."

"I am," she says determinedly. "What type of exercise?"

Snape hums softly...the sound is a velvet rumble deep in his chest. "Improve your flexibility," he says. "You need to have greater fluidity in your movements."

"Okay." Hermione sighs wistfully and blows a curl out of her eyes.

Snape really looks like he's moving in water when he duels. He makes the sport look like a ballet of sorts...absolute economy and grace of movement. With a sexy, deadly edge to it, of course. She starts to put her shoes back on.

Snape touches the palms of his hands to the floor as if to make his point about flexibility, and then he straightens up, sinuous as a cat. "Granger," he drawls. "Potter told me he was coming to the Quidditch tomorrow, yes."

Hermione's smile lights up from her soul.

"Five Galleons Harry acts like an idiot tomorrow," Snape says.

Hermione laughs. "I'm not sure that's a fair bet, but I'll take it." She lingers at the door, wondering if he'll let her watch for a while this time. It's such a dangerous pursuit...every moment she spends in this room with him, every civil exchange and quirked smile, changes the intrinsic nature of their association...but she can't help wanting this tenuous thing, this gossamer friendship, to stay, to grow, to shine.

"Now, go and do something constructive," he says, flexing his wrist as he prepares to face the wall. "I'm not providing your morning's entertainment."

Harry watches the Quidditch match with his *entire* body, visibly tensing when Hufflepuff take possession of the Quaffle, *leaning* forward on the edge of the bench as he urges Ginny on towards the goals. "Weasley is our King," he bellows, and most of the first-year students in the Gryffindor stand titter and stare; they do not remember the Weasel King days, nor do they know Harry Potter as a friend, as a real-live and vital person. Most of them don't have any qualms about staring at the Chosen One instead of watching the game.

Harry's certainly more animated than the announcer, who is a dour and sour-faced boy from Ravenclaw, who delivers dry commentary on the game without an inflection of emotion in his voice. "And Ginevra Weasley scores for Gryffindor," he drones. "The score is fifty-ten to Gryffindor."

Hermione can tell that Harry is dying to be out there on his broom...watching the match from a sky-high angle, watching for that victorious glint of gold. His fingers twitch when the Golden Snitch whirs past behind them.

"Watched the Bats against the Arrows in Appleby on Wednesday night," he tells her, "but nothing beats Hogwarts' Quidditch matches."

Hermione smiles. She's sure the Quidditch World Cup does, but she understands what he means. "It's good to have you here, Harry," she tells him. Harry grins at her broadly for a moment, but he turns back to the game when the crowd seems to pull their heads into their shoulders as they wince pre-emptively, hiss with expected pain.

"Move or you're gonna get hit, you git!" Harry moves his shoulders stiffly, miming how he'd move if he were the Seeker being chased by the leaden Bludger. "Ooh, ouch." He winces as the Bludger connects with a dull, fleshy thud. "Who is that, anyway?" he asks her.

"Erm..." Hermione shrugs; the Seeker is a tiny second-year, and she doesn't know his name. The Ravenclaw announcer comes to her rescue, though; he dryly informs them that Connor Jones has been Bludged, and it looks like medical assistance is required.

Madam Hooch calls for a time-out as Madam Pomfrey runs out to do a quick Diagnostic Charm on the befuzzled Gryffindor Seeker.

"Have you decided what you're doing next year?" Harry asks. Tension unspools from his body like a ribbon, and he leans back lazily, his green eyes following Ginny's lazy circling as the teams wait for play to resume.

"I think I'm going to take that job in Beings and Beasts," she says decisively. Although the words seem to tumble from her lips like they've just been Conjured in her mind, she knows with concrete certainty that her decision is right.

Harry grins. "I knew it," he says with satisfied smirk. "Kingsley owes me ten Galleons; he reckoned you'd take up with the Unspeakables or St Mungo's, for sure."

Hermione snorts. "I don't think I have the ideal bedside manner," she says.

Harry runs a hand through his hair...it sticks up from the latent static magic that clings to his fingers. "So, it's the house-elf crusade, then?" he asks.

Hermione shakes her head. "No, I'm going to ask for an assignment in the Water Division." Down on the field, Madam Pomfrey Ennervates the Seeker and gives him a motherly pat on the shoulder. He wobbles a bit on his ascent, but he seems to be all right to finish the game.

"Merfolk?" Harry asks, looking bemused.

The whistle blows again, and Ginny streaks down the pitch with the Quaffle under her arm. Harry's on his feet in a flash and shouting, "Use the Porskoff Ploy, love! Oi, that was blatant cobbling, that was!"

Hermione waits for Harry sit down after cheering Ginny on to a fabulous goal before she replies: "I'd like to work with the merpeople and selkies and kelpies and the like...maybe act as the Ministry liaison with the water-dwellers. I'm not really that keen on doing the census and wearing wellies all year, though, but I might have to work my way up from that."

Harry gives her a suspicious look. "And this sudden interest is why you asked me for Gillyweed, yeah?"

Hermione smiles. "Of course."

"You'd have to learn Mermish, you know," Harry says, leaning to the left and willing the Gryffindor Keeper to save a half-hearted attempt at goal by the Hufflepuffs.

"Yes," Hermione replies in Mermish.

The expression on Harry's face is priceless. "Wha..."

At that moment, though, the Gryffindor Seeker seems to fall from the sky towards them, and Harry focuses his attention on the rocketing red streak. Hermione slouches into her chair a bit because it looks like he's diving right for them.

"Go, go, go," Harry urges. The Seeker pulls up from his dive metres above their heads, holding the Snitch above his head in a triumphant gesture. Hermione puts her hand to her heart and breathes a sigh of relief.

"Jones catches the Snitch; Gryffindor wins the match," the announcer says, although that fact is patently obvious from the crowd's reaction...his words are lost in the commotion around Hermione.

Harry is on his feet again, grinning like an idiot and doing the Gryffindor dance with Dean, and she watches with a bemused smile. Dean's the only other Gryffindor at Hogwarts from her year, and he was thrilled to see Harry today, too.

Then her gaze drifts across to the teachers' stand, where Snape stands watching them, his expression blank and neutral. Then he raises one eyebrow at her and smirks as he pulls his hand from his pocket, making the unmistakable gesture for 'pay up'. Hermione giggles and can't soften the mad width of her returned grin.

Hermione stands with Harry while they wait for Ginny to get showered and changed. Professor Snape stops to greet Harry on his way back to the castle.

Hermione watches the two dark-haired men shake hands, exchange pleasant greetings and small talk, and she marvels at how the world has seemed to tilt on its axis, how it seems to have found its perfect groove... the magical place where anything seems possible, where the magic of healing and reconciliation is bright and tangible.

Hermione bears the post-Quidditch din in the Gryffindor common room with uncharacteristically good grace. She sits in one of the armchairs, her legs flung over one arm, and she listens to Ginny's enthusiastic babble about how much better she plays when Harry is there to watch and how she's sure she saw one of the Holyhead Harpies sitting in the teachers' stand.

"Oy, can you lot shut it for just two minutes, please?" Dean demands grumpily from where he's scowling at a chessboard.

Little Natalie McDonald smirks at him. "They've got nothing to do with the fact that you're losing, Thomas; you fell right for my diversion and into my second tier of attack. Hah!"

In telltale fashion, Hermione tilts her head to the side, her lip caught between her teeth...something Natalie has said has drawn her clever mind back to an old problem, which been circling her brain like a hawk for months, now. The frown lines on Hermione's forehead ease a little as the fractured pieces of the puzzle start to slot together in her head. "Gin... I've... got to go..."

She *knows* what solution she's going to propose to Professor Snape, and she's positive he's not going to think her new idea is silly or unsound. That horrid old squid has finally met his match!

"Enjoy the library," Ginny says with a grin, saluting Hermione with her Butterbeer bottle as she turns back to the party.

Hermione's heart is pounding against her ribs when she reaches the dungeons. She knocks twice, but there is no answer. The wooden door merely creaks inward under the light weight of her knuckles. Her eyebrows draw together in a frown; it's not like Snape to leave his door open, let alone unwarded, when he's not in his office.

"Sir?" she calls. She presses her fingertips to the door and opens it halfway, spilling a dancing pool of light around her feet and into the corridor. "Professor Snape? Are you here?" Her voice carries that eerie dungeon echo, and she suppresses a shudder.

"God, it's creepy down here at night," she murmurs. A whisper of a draft tugs at the single, flickering light, and the long shadows shift and slant menacingly. She takes a couple of steps into Snape's office, trying not to look at the dull, unseeing eyes that gleam in the specimen jars.

"Professor Snape? Are you all right?" His office is empty, though...only the light and the shadow make any movement at all. *Maybe there's a disaster in the Slytherin common room, she rationalises. Maybe he's just gone to bed and forgotten to lock his office.*

Hermione dithers in the middle of Snape's office, overly aware that she's *not allowed to be in here like this*. She decides that it's probably better to go, to come back tomorrow. She's a little disappointed because her idea really was brilliant this time; she's sure it's the one, the solution to help Syrena and her family.

She eyes the bookshelf nearest to her, thinking about how she'd love just half an hour with some of these books. A large, green book catches her attention, and she steps closer to the bookshelf, into the shadows. The title of the book is striking and simple: Selkie, and it's not one that she's seen in the Hogwarts library. Her heart starts to beat faster again, and excitement drowns out her caution. She reaches for the book with greedy fingers, pulls it forward from the shelf.

Click.

She triggers a hidden mechanism and before she can step back, the bookshelf is spinning quickly on a central, hidden axis, and the edge that is moving away from the wall has pushed her hard into the dark so that she stumbles forward blindly before catching her balance on the edge of a frightened shriek.

Click.

The air around her is black and dense and cold, and she's got a sense of something wet and slick beneath the soles of her shoes. It feels like the icy air is frozen in her lungs before she remembers she's holding her breath, and she has to concentrate on using her lungs. The sound echoes dully with an otherworldly quality, now. Fear pounds at her temples, and she knows she's going to be in a world of trouble for this.

"*Lumos*," she whispers, and the flare of her wand is small and sickly in the dark. She's in a secret passage of some sort...a narrow tunnel that curves steeply out of sight around a sharp corner. The stones around her look like they're bleeding moisture, and they're slimy and green with algae. There's a muted *plink, plink* of dripping water; it sets her teeth on edge. "It's not blood," she soothes herself as all her worst childhood nightmares flare to life. Panic presses around her, heavy and oppressive.

She turns around and searches for an exit mechanism on the wall that must back the bookshelf, but she cannot find a seam in the rock, let alone a lever. "All right. All right," she says to herself in a rational and calm voice (it quavers at the edges slightly, quivers like her hands). "The tunnel has to lead somewhere... Hogsmeade probably, like all the other secret tunnels... so you just follow it and it'll all be fine... just fine..."

So, she follows the curve of the tunnel, soothing herself in low tones that seem to absorb into the walls the deeper she goes. When she spots the barrier ahead, she stops and utters a cry of frustration. It looks like slick, green glass, curving in a smooth, concave bulge towards her. She can't tell if it's solid or magic, liquid or air. A spell doesn't reveal anything about it, and she spends five minutes arguing with herself about the stupidity of touching it.

After attempting to cast a Patronus messenger and failing (the dark and her fear kill the light), she presses her lips together and tries to approach the problem rationally. Eventually, her desperate half wins, the half of her that wants to escape from here, *now*. She's shivering as she reaches a trembling hand towards the barrier, and when her fingertips touch it, it pulls at her hard and sucks her in. She spins and spins like she's caught in a vortex, and then it's black-green and freezing all around her, and she can't tell where is up or down, and the weight of the world seems to press in on her lungs, and they really *must* be frozen this time because she can't breathe and she can't scream.

And then the world is full of glitter... pinpricks of dazzling, white light that flash around her while her lungs are burning. She can't find her wand and the encroaching blackness at the edge of the prickling light feels like something dark and malignant; it's the monster that eats hope.

The last thing she sees before the dark floods in around her is a flash of silver... a familiar face, and there's the faraway feel of somebody carrying her away, upwards,

away, towards the silvering divide.

And then there's only the dark.

A/N: Gallchobhar: Gaelic name composed of the elements gall (foreign, strange) and cabhair (help, support).

Thank you to Gelsey!

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews The Silvering Divide. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Frozen

Chapter 10 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

It feels like she's floating in a leaden fog, drifting in a hazy realm that spans the endless dark and the tangible world. She's too tired to move, and her eyelids feel like they've been glued shut. The voices fade in and out; they sound like they're being transmitted from far away, scattered through static, and they drift and wisp around her like smoke on the wind.

"Why has she not yet woken, Poppy? Would it not be best to *Ennervate* her?" She recognises that voice; it's the one she carries with her to her dreams. But Snape's voice sounds damaged somehow, like crushed velvet.

"Her body has been through enough of a shock as it is, Severus; she needs to recover naturally. The water out there was probably close to freezing; she's lucky you got her out of the water as quickly as you did, or we'd probably be dealing with hypothermia."

"If you are absolutely sure..." Snape doesn't sound like he is; there's a note of scepticism that twists his words so that they have a narrow and snide edge.

"I am... I *am* the mediwitch," Madam Pomfrey says with a returned edge of reproach in her voice. "It is lunchtime, Severus..."

"I will stay and watch her while you eat, then."

"That's not what I meant." There's an annoyed click of her tongue and an exasperated sigh. "Impossible, stubborn..." Footsteps, quick and sharp, echo away, and a door thuds mutely.

A breath of a sigh washes softly across her skin, and she hears a scrape as he pulls his chair closer to the side of her bed. A scent winds into the haze around her, soft and green like herbs.

"I should be furious with you, you foolish, curious, impossible woman." Hermione feels warm fingertips stroke through the wispy curls at her hairline. The touch is soothing, relaxing, and she feels herself begin to drift away. She flails against the tug of unconsciousness, struggles to cling to his voice.

"You could have drowned, Hermione." His voice is husky and thick like the words hurt as they swell up his throat. "You could have drowned and it would have been my *fault*."

There's a soft touch at her wrist as his fingers trace the map of veins beneath her skin.

"I... I cannot..." The fingers slide across the swell of her palm, and he takes her hand. His hand fits with hers so perfectly that she's sure she's in a dream, now. "And now... You..."

Hermione struggles against the narcotic pull of the fog because her entire body is yearning to listen to Snape's whispered words, to stay in this dream, to hear what he will never say to her in the stark light of day. But she's sliding away, and his voice is a blur...a soft, smoky blur...and then she drops back to the dark and the lonely quiet.

When Hermione wakes, the light that filters through her feathered eyelashes is golden and muted... the grey night folds around the soft glow of a Lumos globe on the table next to the hospital bed. There's a soft *beep beep*, and Madam Pomfrey steps out of the night shadows and touches a button on the Charmed sensor that is set into the frame of the bed.

"Ah, good, you're finally awake," she says with a gentle smile. "Now, just you lie still while I check your vitals." She begins to run a series of scans with her wand; the glowing tip ebbs with a gentle green light, and the mediwitch makes a satisfied sound. "How do you feel, Hermione?"

Hermione flexes her fingers, her feet, feeling the lazy pull of muscles as her body responds to being awake and alive. "I'm fine," she says. She's about to ask why she's in the hospital wing, but then she remembers the dark cold and the sparkling panic and how she'd thought she'd never breathe again. But the memory of almost drowning fades into insignificance when she remembers *who* saved her...how the last thing she'd seen in the depths of the lake had been the beautiful, subtle shimmer of pearlescent skin, the quicksilver fluidity of a selkie's tail. "Where is..."

"You've missed dinner, and I'm sure you must be hungry," Madam Pomfrey interrupts. "Sit up and you can have something to eat before you go up and see Professor McGonagall. She'd like to have a word with you, she said." Madam Pomfrey slides the bedside drawer open and retrieves Hermione's wand. "Professor Snape managed to find your wand for you...you're a lucky girl, in more ways than one."

Hermione doesn't taste the soup, and she absently picks the crusty bread into little bits. Her mind is too distracted to contemplate Professor McGonagall's impending ire because all she can think about is Snape and how beautiful he looked in that dilated, final moment when her panic had twisted inside out, becoming stark and fascinated relief.

"I cannot imagine *what* you were thinking, going into a teacher's office when they were not there, and worse, blindly touching a magical barrier without a shred of

knowledge about its nature!" Phineas Black punctuates Professor McGonagall's words with sharp little nods, and many of the other portraits are muttering things like "Absolutely," and "Hear, hear," and giving their opinion on suitable punishments.

Hermione drops her eyes from the pontificating portraits and picks at a hangnail on the side of her thumb. "I panicked," she says. "I couldn't see a way out, and I just... didn't think properly." And she cannot bring herself to be properly sorry about what she did because now she *knows*.

"*That much* is patently obvious," McGonagall says, but the bitter-sharp edge of her voice eases slightly, and the tight pucker of her lips relaxes, and then she sighs. "Look, Hermione... I know that this year has not been a particularly easy one, but the NEWT exams are only months away, and you should be concentrating on completing your studies to the best of your ability. Leave the lake alone and focus on why you are back at Hogwarts, for Merlin's sake!

"I was just trying to help." Hermione can't keep the dip of sullen petulance from her voice. "And I want to work with the Water Division next year."

McGonagall's eyes narrow. "You are aware that B&B probably requires you to have a Care of Magical Creatures NEWT."

Hermione sighs and returns to that singular regret. She can't imagine ever having found Ancient Runes more interesting than magical creatures. She feels a tiny throb of remorse for blaming Hagrid's terrible teaching, but she knows it's her primary reason. "I wanted to ask if I could sit for the NEWT; I can study from the textbook by myself."

"You would not have a year mark, and that accounts for thirty percent of your final NEWT score," McGonagall reminds her.

Hermione shifts in her chair and presses her lips together. "Well, I was hoping that Hagrid might agree to give me a year mark if I managed to learn Mermish properly...I've come quite far already, and I just need practice..."

"Practice in the library, Miss Granger, not out at the lake's edge." Hermione's guilty-shocked expression must have been plain to read because McGonagall gives her a pointed look. "I'm well aware of what goes on in the grounds of my school, Hermione. And I've had the selkie Chieftain expressing concern about his daughter always disappearing off to talk to you..." She shakes her head, and her face pulls into grim and tight lines. "With the squid escaping the wards on a regular basis, we hardly need to be inviting a tragedy..."

"Like Leenash," Hermione murmurs.

"Yes." McGonagall shoots her a stern look...it's more of an icy reproach for knowing more than she should than for interrupting.

Hermione bites the inside of her cheek as she thinks about Snape again. Professor McGonagall obviously knows the whole truth of him if she knows about the tunnel and the magical barrier that leads into the core of the lake.

"Professor McGonagall," she says carefully, and Albus Dumbledore's admonitory expression catches her eye. She glances away from his knowing blue eyes. "I know that Leenash was Eileen..."

"It is *not* my story to tell, Miss Granger, and neither should it be yours," Professor McGonagall says sharply. "I must ask that you respect Professor Snape's privacy; that the nature of his family remain his secret to keep or tell. Do I make myself clear?"

Disappointment drags on the corners of Hermione's mouth and she nods her acquiescence.

Before Hermione goes up to Gryffindor Tower, she goes down to Professor Snape's office...to apologise, she tells herself.

But there is no answer and this time his door is firmly locked.

No light spills from under his door, no sound.

"You *fell* into the lake?" Ginny's voice is swollen with disbelief and... amusement.

Hermione sighs and reminds herself that the price of silence is always high. "Yes," she says defensively. "I felt like a walk, to think, you know, and the ground was slippery."

Ginny eyes her for a moment with a look that is an uncanny mirror of Mrs Weasley. "Well, you should be more careful...that squid's big enough to eat people, you know."

"I know," Hermione says grimly.

Ginny hands her a letter from Harry. "This arrived for you this morning... it's probably a lecture," she says apologetically.

Hermione scowls at Ginny. "You *told* him?" she accuses.

Ginny shrugs and spreads her little golden hands. "You shouldn't lie to somebody you love," she says simply, and for some odd reason that makes Hermione's heart ache.

"Thanks," says Hermione with a soft sigh.

Dear Hermione,

That's it. I'm not sending any more Gillyweed, I swear. What the hell happened that you almost drowned? Don't you know you can't go off on adventures without me to save you?

Gin said she'd write as soon as she knew you'd woken up, so if you're reading this then I'm glad you're okay. You just gave me a fright is all. Ron's in a choice mood, as well, so I assume that means he's worried about you, too.

Just get through this year at Hogwarts, and then next year we can do the adventures of Harry and Hermione in Ministry Land. I promise, mate.

Take care of yourself. I mean it!

Or else I'll sic Professor Snape on you.

Love, Harry.

Hermione struggles to get to sleep because she technically slept the entire day away. Her body is not averse to sleep, though... her limbs feel languid and liquid. It's her mind that's awake and practically smoking at the ears with the burning questions that are smouldering.

Something else is bothering her mind, too, beyond the obvious, but it's like something made of shadow and light; it shifts and dances away every time she tries to focus on it. Perhaps it is a dream she had or a conversation her mind overheard while she was unconscious, but the memory is buzzing with white noise and blinding light and she can't decipher it at all.

Hermione remembers how the surface of the loch froze over like steel, became impenetrable and hard and cold. And now it's like Professor Snape has undergone the Freeze, but you cannot see his brittle covering except in the shuttered reflection of his eyes.

Hermione had been afraid Snape would be angry with her...hot temper and fiery words would be so much better, familiar, comforting than this brittle and frozen silence, this icy resentment that burns more sharply and deeply than fire.

On Monday, he moves so quickly from the DADA classroom to the staffroom that Hermione wonders if his shadow had time to catch up with him.

Tuesday is Hermione's busiest day, and she does not have DADA scheduled. Hermione glances up during dinner, and she watches Snape for a moment. He eats like an automaton, like all the grace has bled from his limbs.

On Wednesday, Hermione approaches Snape's desk during the lesson. "Sit down, Granger," he says impassively. "You should be completing your case study on 19th century Dark Lords, not bothering me."

"I'm sorry, sir," she says quickly, "but I just wanted to tell you about the wards and then..."

A muscle tics in his cheek, denting his veneer, and the tips of his fingers whiten around his quill. A drop of red ink falls to the parchment like a teardrop. "Speak to Professor Flitwick," he says tightly. "He is the one who will weave the wards."

Hermione presses her fingertips to her lips. It feels like there's acid eating its way through her heart, like there's something bitter and agonising burning her throat.

"Sit, Miss Granger."

She sits at her desk and drops her head, hiding her face behind a waterfall of curls. And now there's the taste of red copper on her tongue from where she's bitten the inside of her cheek, and her tears are salty and warm on her lips.

On Saturday morning, Professor Flitwick beckons to Hermione. She always feels slightly absurd talking to him because she feels inclined to bend over a bit and tilt her head, although that would probably be terribly rude.

"Miss Granger, Miss Granger," he squeaks, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "The terribly clever Miss Granger. Who would have thought that Kraken might be bored, that he enjoyed the challenge of picking the wards apart, and that we just had to give him multiple Bounding Wards as entertainment?"

For the first time that week, something yellow and warm lights up inside her and it floods through her blood, bright and beautiful like sunshine. "Oh, he still hasn't escaped?" she asks.

"It's the fourth day, now, Miss Granger," Flitwick says, beaming at her. "He managed to break through the first layer yesterday, but that's what it's there for, is it not?" Flitwick clucks his tongue. "We never gave him enough credit before, you know... I think Kraken is rather more intelligent than just raw calamari."

Hermione nods enthusiastically. "I'm so glad I could help."

Flitwick sighs. "Well... I repaired the first ward this morning and he's back behind that now; it's still a little labour intensive but at least the rest of the lake is better protected. Professor Snape and I are most grateful to you, young lady."

Despite the tendrils of relief that light through her body, Hermione's mouth twists into a wistful smile.

She leaves the Great Hall and stares up at the staircase with a soft sigh. It's Saturday morning and the empty, tempting hours stretch ahead of her like infinite, flickering filaments.

Determinedly, Hermione marches up to the third floor before her legs become heavy and the stubborn set of her jaw eases. She stands frozen on the stairs, her eyes screwed shut with frustration. "Arrrgggghh," she snaps. "Bloody hell, dammit, fuck!"

"Language," murmurs an old-fashioned looking portrait, pressing her fan to her bosom as she adopts a highly affronted-looking grimace in a blush of florid brushstrokes.

Righteous anger flushes to Hermione's cheeks...a whole week's worth of exasperation boils over like red-hot lava. "When I grow up and get my own house, I'm not having any portraits because the lot of you just stick your noses in where they don't bloody belong!"

"Well, I never," mutters the painting, and she turns her rounded shoulder on Hermione, sniffing disdainfully.

Hermione gives the painting the two-fingered salute along with an acid smile, and then she turns around and marches down the stairs again. "Just wanted to help, to say I was bloody sorry," she mutters to herself. "It's not like it's my fault that Syrena and Hagrid talk too much... secretive, snide, sarcastic selkie..."

She strides determinedly into the DADA classroom, bumping her hip painfully on a desk on her way to the practice room.

Snape is there, practicing against the Rebounding Charm, and he ignores her arrival even though she's made enough noise to rouse the dead. The hexes that sizzle off the wall are orange and red and angry, and the wash of magic that surrounds Snape makes her hair stand on end.

"Go away, Miss Granger," he warns, not pausing for a singular moment in his solitary assault.

Hermione's fists clench at her sides. "I just wanted to say that I was sorry," she shouts above the snarling and whining magic.

Snape ignores her, ducking, twisting, hexing, cursing...a savage and vicious magical dance.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," she shouts in Mermish, a high-pitched shriek that strangles through her anger pierces the air.

She catches Snape by surprise... his body stiffens, falters in its fluid defence, and a jagged, maroon streak grazes his side, making him grunt with pain, double over as he tries to catch his breath.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry," Hermione cries as all the anger bleeds from her in a rush.

Snape straightens up, his face tight and strained. "So you said," he says, wincing. He's wearing a tight black t-shirt today, and it hugs the corrugation of his ribs, moulds to the swell of his pectoral muscles. He lifts the edge of his shirt to reveal a bright red welt painted across his ribs; a flat and nearly convex stomach; a dark line of hair that runs from his navel to the waistband of his pants.

A flush heats Hermione's cheeks...it's a juxtaposition of mortification and attraction...and she puts her hand over her mouth. "Sorry," she mumbles again.

Snape scowls as he touches the tip of his wand to the angry burn and hums a Healing Dirge. He sighs as the inflammation recedes, and then his black eyes snap up to hers. "Say you're sorry again and I *will* hex you." He pulls his shirt back down and slides his wand into his holster (perhaps to avoid being tempted into that hexing, she thinks).

"Well, I am," she says, frowning. "Very."

Snape folds his arms across his chest. "Fine. Apology accepted. Now, go away, Miss Granger."

Hermione mirrors his expression and his pose. "Why are you being so horrid to me?" she asks.

"I'm Professor Snape," he says with a wicked twist of his lips. "It comes naturally."

"But..."

"Look," he snaps, "I am *not* your friend, Miss Granger. I am your teacher. I have office hours... you should never have felt that you could just pop down to my office for a chat at any time of the godforsaken night..."

"But I did," Hermione interrupts, throwing her hands into the air. "We were becoming friends," she says, her voice becoming more shrill and indignant with each passing moment. She is angry, furious, that he would discount the tentative bond that had fostered bets and smiles and duelling practice together.

"And because of that," he shouts, contradicting himself in one fell swoop, "you almost died! Because of me! Because I was careless enough to leave my office unlocked on one night out of the entire year!"

Hermione shakes her head vigorously. "It was *entirely* my fault. I went into your office, I touched the book, and I got myself trapped in that tunnel and you *saved* me..."

"And in the process, you saw what I am," he finishes for her, something grim and bleak climbing into his voice, tensioning the lines of his jaw. He turns away from her, his entire body stiff and taut.

Hermione frowns, watching the way his arm muscles bunch as he clenches his fists, how static magic sends stray, black strands of his hair floating into the air like he's underwater. And she remembers the bright fan of his tail, the light that seemed to pulse from under his skin, and the dance of his hair in the water. "You're a selkie, and I thought that you were beautiful," she whispers.

A/N: Thank you as always, to Gelsey.

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews The Silvering Divide. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Closer

Chapter 11 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

"You're a selkie, and I thought that you were beautiful."

Her words seem to seep under his skin, freeze him from the inside, steal all movement...his body is tense and drawn in steel lines. Hermione steps forward carefully, like she's walking on tender bubbles of hope, and she presses the flat of her hand to the tight cord of his spine, right in the valley between his sharp shoulder blades. Severus' muscles twitch under her palm like he's a nervous horse. Latent magic tingles against her fingertips, and she feels the way his torso expands and then deflates on the curve of a long sigh.

"Granger... Hermione," he murmurs. He turns to face her...his expression is hauntingly serious and intense...and her hand hovers on the uncertainty in the air between them. He takes her hand and captures it in an embrace between both of his palms. And then, with another soul deep sigh, he slides his fingers across her skin as he lets her hand go again.

"We cannot do this," he says softly, shaking his head.

But even she can see it in his eyes, now, that he feels this connection that shimmers between them like the purest promise. And surely he, the accomplished Legilimens, can see through the hopeful transparency of her eyes and read how she cares for him.

She rubs her fingertips together, touches them softly to her lips. "Why?" she whispers through the tingle of magic that lingers like a kiss.

"Aside from what Minerva might do to me for considering..." He shakes his head and his mouth twists into a grimace. "More importantly, I should think that, given the content of the DADA curriculum this year, you are now overly aware of what happens to an alliance when there is an imbalance of power between the partners."

Hermione blinks as she navigates to the core of what he has just said. Is he aware that he does that...that he reverts to intricate and convoluted sentences to hide the intimacy of what he means?

Hermione's a logical woman, and she actually agrees with him about the folly of initiating a student-teacher liaison. But she will not be...thank Merlin...a student for much longer. "So, you're saying that we can't do this *now*, not that we can't do it *ever*?" she presses.

She can wait, she thinks, until June. The warmth and the scent of summer is always a tantalising thing to look forward to. Adding the anticipation of what this could be would almost be a hedonistic pleasure.

Severus presses his lips together, and he shakes his head. "I am not fully human..."

Hermione shoots him a frustrated glare. "Fleur is a quarter-Veela and Bill loves her; Remus was a werewolf and Tonks loved him and..."

"Hermione," Severus says with a warning threading dark notes through his voice. "I have already stated that we should not be having this discussion right now and especially not until you have gone away and thought *long and hard* about the implications of..." Severus rubs his long fingers across one black, slanted eyebrow. "I am a half-breed... this is a complication that a bright and beautiful young witch does not..."

She narrows her eyes at him, feeling a spark of ire warm her temper. "I'm old and clever enough to make an informed decision for myself, thank you..."

"I am sure that you are *not* fully informed," he argues stubbornly.

"Well, then, will you inform me?" she pleads. "We can surely talk about other things before the summer... will you please talk with me... Severus?" Her heart flutters like a butterfly at her pulse.

He closes his eyes for a moment as if he is praying for strength. Then he licks his thin lips and nods. "We can talk, yes," he concedes. "This time next week we can talk... if you still want to, that is."

His last words seem to wrench unwillingly from his lips, as if an admission of uncertainty is an unforgivable weakness, as if it pains him to consider that she might change her mind.

Hermione spends Monday on a seesaw.

Sometimes she watches Severus Snape and marvels at the traits that made him the consummate spy...he goes about his day as if the world has not shifted under his feet; his face does not display a glimmer of recognition or emotion when he calls upon her to answer a question during DADA; he blends into the familiar rhythm of his day without missing a beat. But these things also make her stomach twist with anxiety; cause her to question reality and wonder if it was all a whimsical dream; set her to wondering if it is he who has changed his mind overnight.

When Hermione returns to her dormitory on Monday afternoon, she's got her robes pulled halfway off when she notices the book on her pillow. With her robes hanging around her neck like a heavy black mantle, she picks the book up and stares at it for a disbelieving moment. Then she traces the title...Selkie...with a silly little jab of trepidation, as if the book will pull her into another tunnel again or transport her right into the black belly of the lake.

There's a folded note tucked between the cover and the first page. His handwriting is not as angry and as hard as she's used to seeing it*A frame of reference for your perspective.*

"Oh, where did you find that book, Hermione?" Ginny asks later that evening. "I don't think I've read that one before."

Hermione has the large, green book cradled in her lap like a treasure, and Ginny is doing a Muggle Studies assignment. She's been peppering Hermione with questions all evening, and Hermione is starting to feel like a reference book for Muggle trivia.

"I found it in the library," Hermione lies because the silk-thin thread that is weaving itself into complexity between herself and Severus Snape is still brittle and new, and it needs time and solitude to grow into something breathtaking.

"If you're going to work with the water Beings and Beasts next year, it's probably a good thing you found it...I swear that library plays hide and seek with books you really need," says Ginny. She sighs with tedium as she labels a drawing of a video machine (insert VHS tape here; stop button; power cord). "I don't see why we have to learn this when it's just going to be replaced by those DVD things."

"Because, Gin, whether we like it or not, the wizarding world is anything from a couple of years to a couple of centuries behind when it comes to those sort of technological things." Hermione thinks that Ginny only knows about the existence of DVDs because Arthur Weasley covets the rainbow shimmer of shiny things.

Ginny snorts and rolls up the length of parchment. "Anything interesting in there?" she asks, gesturing to the book by raising her arched eyebrows in Hermione's direction.

"Most of it is interesting in an anthropological sense," she says. Ginny doesn't bother to hide her eye roll. "You know... like the rules according to how their villages are arranged and built, the structure of their family units and their social divisions, and then there's also information about how they farm and what they eat..."

"Raw fish. Ugh. We learnt the basics of all of that last year with Hagrid." Ginny groans. "Very, very exciting." She starts to gather her things together, lazily Accio'ing a quill from under the couch...Ginny's belongings always seem to scatter around her, ranging further and further the longer she sits.

Hermione sticks out her tongue, and then she says casually, "Did Hagrid ever teach you about how they procreate?"

Ginny drops her quill and it rolls back under the couch as if it likes the dark and the quiet. "No... You know Hagrid never gets into the mechanics of things like that." She shudders dramatically. "Not that I really want to imagine Hagrid saying things like sex and penis."

Hermione pulls a face at Ginny because *that's* an image that she really did not need inside her head, even for a singular bloated and disgusting moment.

Ginny edges forward and leans her elbows on her knees, her eyes alight with wicked interest. "Their naughty bits aren't openly visible... so how does it work, then? I guess we all assumed they... laid eggs or something."

Hermione sighs. "It's actually *very* romantic," she says as if she's being prim and scolding Ginny for wanting sordid and graphic details. "When it's the New Moon, the selkies come out of the water into the dark night..."

"Shame, only once a month," Ginny interrupts with a snicker.

"Well, it says that they can do it when it's clouded over, too," Hermione says thoughtfully. "And we do live in Scotland, you know..."

Ginny and Hermione look out of the common room window and down at the lake at exactly the same moment, and they burst into rippling giggles...it only takes eye contact or a waggle of eyebrows to resurrect the levity for the duration of the evening.

Hermione presses her hand to her chest...it feels like it's full of glitter and champagne...after she's gone to bed, and she considers that their behaviour wasn't childish at all; it had tasted too much like joy and relief, a giddy celebration of life and friendship.

"Where are we going?" Hermione murmurs as they descend the stairs from the first floor the following Saturday.

"Patience," Severus says calmly.

Hermione shoots him an incredulous look...he's got some things to learn then, too, it seems. But she presses her lips together because the walls have eyes and ears, and she drops her gaze to the hem of his teaching robes and how the black material flutters and shivers as it catches against the buckled ankles of his leather boots with each step. *Black is for mourning*, she thinks with idle resignation. *I'm mourning for the absence of his practice pants.*

They pass Filch and Mrs Norris in the Entrance Hall. "Good morning, Professor." Filch eyes Hermione with gleeful animosity. "Detention, eh, Professor?"

"Hmm," Severus hums noncommittally, and he watches the duo disappear down the dungeon stairs before he opens one of the Great Doors. "After you," he murmurs.

Hermione glances up at him with astonishment, her lips parted with surprise, and the amusement she sees in the hint of his smile is for her, and she holds the novelty of it...it is starkly different from the derision that usually rides on the curl of a sneer...to her heart like a gift.

Severus links his hands behind his back and begins to stride down the steep incline towards the lake, slowly enough for Hermione to keep abreast with him. "It seems that

Hagrid suggested to the Headmistress that I might be the best person to give you Mermish lessons," he says conversationally. "I agreed, albeit under a large burden of duress," he adds dryly.

Hermione wrinkles her nose as she goes about the complex business of deciphering Severus Snape. "So, where did Hagrid get the idea from, then?" she asks as the truth begins to coalesce into sense.

Severus gives her a convincingly blank look and shrugs. "Additionally, I informed the Headmistress that practical application of your lessons would be necessary. Fortunately, this has been facilitated by the successful implementation of ungraded Bounding Wards on the perimeter of the giant squid's territory," he continues blandly. "The Chieftain has consented to teacher-supervised visits with his daughter."

Joy ripples on the morning breeze like a bright and colourful streamer. "You organised visits with Syrena?" she says with delight.

"I have no idea of what you could be alluding to, Granger," he says turning his head and raising his eyebrows. "I am merely following the Headmistress' directive." But as he turns his head again, she is positive she sees him give her a whisper of a wink.

Syrena is waiting for them in the shallows, and she waves excitedly before she executes a perfect backward flip...her silver tail sends a spray of water sparkling to the air.

"*You do learn from Gallchoobar,*" the little selkie admonishes Hermione, pointing a green-tipped finger at Severus.

As another piece of information clicks neatly into place...and brings another mystery into stark relief...Hermione turns to face him, a question tingling on her tongue, but Severus shakes his head minutely.

"Yes," Hermione answers, swallowing her curiosity for the moment.

"*Gallchoobar helps us, and now you help us also.*" Syrena gestures across the lake to where Kraken floats behind his triple-guarded waters. "*Father is happy... there was a celebration in the village... the selkies say thank you.*"

"*I am happy also,*" Hermione manages to string together, and she lets the selkie's joy bubble and click into the air around them as Syrena tells of the great feast and the dancing and the peace that her people enjoy. Hermione realises she's only probably ever felt more proud of her role in Voldemort's demise; that doing this for these gentle people means the world to her. Severus is quiet, and he stands behind her like a sentinel, watchful and sombre. Hermione remembers the unorthodox way he requested her help with the wards and the squid, and she knows that allowing this moment...facilitating it, even...with her friend is his silent thank you, his way of expressing his gratitude and his trust.

Syrena's mother surfaces all too soon to take Syrena home, and Hermione is almost startled when the Chieftain's mate smiles at her today, then calls out in a croaking echo: "*Thank you, Cass.*"

Once the selkies have disappeared beneath the divide, Hermione turns to Severus and asks: "Cass?"

He looks like he's hiding a smile as he says, "It means curly," he tells her, and his eyes shift to the unruly spring of her hair like a caress. "They like your hair and find it uniquely charming because selkies generally all have black, straight hair."

Hermione smiles. "I like the name."

Severus nods. "Good. It is an honour for a witch or wizard to be recognised as a friend of the tribe... they are generally rather shy and inclined to steer clear of human involvement."

Hermione thinks of how Syrena had a special name for Albus Dumbledore, and she nods. "Realise that, yes." Hermione stares out across the mirrored surface of the lake. "Why did she come and fetch Syrena if they're safe, now?" Hermione asks.

Severus quirks a wry smile. "Likely for discipline's sake," he answers. "You're not the only young woman with a taste for adventure, and I'm sure you are aware that it can lead to trouble."

Hermione likes the way he calls her a woman, can even appreciate his gentle teasing. She's almost sorry when they turn to walk back up to the castle. She chews the inside of her cheek. Severus had said they would talk today, but he seems quite content to walk quietly beside her. She has to admit that the silence is comfortable; it isn't filled with the tight silence that surrounds strangers sometimes.

"So, do none of them know who you are?" she asks eventually. "Who your mother was?"

The wind whips his hair into a fan, and he reaches up to tuck it behind his ears. "No," he says tightly, "they do not. To them, I am just a gall... and one who has the silly inclination to practice magic, too." He shoots her a sidelong glance and shakes his head in wry disbelief. "You gather information better than an Auror might, Granger," he says with a hint of grudging admiration.

Hermione chuckles, and from his rather mild reaction, she suspects that Professor McGonagall warned him about the fact that she knows. "I think it's luck, really. Syrena and Hagrid both talk too much. So, why didn't you tell them that you are Leenash's son; that you're family?" she asks.

Severus' shoulders stiffen slightly. "Another day, Hermione," he says simply, and she's sure a shadow haunts across his face for a moment.

Although Hermione's dying to know the entire story of his life right now, immediately, at once, she nods and presses her lips closed against the flood. "Slow and steady wins the race, my girl," her father always said.

She sees him relax, and an expression that might be surprise flickers in the lines of his features. Halfway up to the castle *hmm*'s in a considering manner. "We may as fit a vocabulary lesson in while we're at it... so I won't have to lie to Minerva."

"Okay," Hermione agrees because she has to admit that she does need the practice if she's going to become fluent.

Severus tilts his head to the side and his eyes narrow with thought. "Translate this sentence into English," he draws, and then he pauses and turns to her. *Someday, the storytellers of the water will tell of the beautiful Air Magicker who bound the Kraken and who captured the Gall's attention so well.*"

Hermione's mouth drops open and she feels a rush of pleasure and surprise prickle at her skin and her nerves. "You're... cheating," she manages to whisper. "You said we could not talk about... this."

Severus' chuckle is low and husky. "It was an indirect reference in a hypothetical selkie tale, and in an entirely different language," he counters, and then one side of his mouth lifts in a skewed smile. "When are you going to give me the list?"

This time, Hermione cannot keep up with the convoluted maze. "What?" she asks blankly, stopping dead on the flight of stone stairs that lead up to the Great Doors.

"Give me your list of questions," he says. "The one in your pocket, and I will see which I can answer for you in future."

Hermione gives a small huff of disbelief and digs the list out of her pocket. She presses it into his waiting palm. He folds his fingers closed like a trap, fast as a flash,

catching the tips of her fingers. "Just remember... reciprocity," he murmurs, and he lets her hand go again.

And then he smirks as he opens the Great Doors for her again and leaves her dithering in the Entrance Hall as she wonders about what he meant by that impossibly vague comment.

A/N: A million sparkles of appreciation for Annie Talbot, who soothed my wibbles and made the horrid typos go away.

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews The Silvering Divide. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Questions

Chapter 12 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

Hermione is lost in that soft and hazy place where thoughts glide gently across the surface, barely rippling into a coherent stream at all. It's really very pleasant; the sounds around her are muted, and she stares past a sea of students into a beautiful nowhere place that only she can see.

"Hello! Earth to Hermione." Ginny's high-pitched voice shatters the floating bubble, and Hermione drops back to the plane of reality with a start.

She frowns at Ginny. "What?" she asks, feeling a little peeved at the intrusion.

"You don't take sugar in your tea," Ginny says tartly.

"Huh?" Hermione glances down and sees that she's holding a spoon; a cascade of sugar crystals are sliding off the silver edge and into her morning tea. "Oh," she says in bemused fashion, shaking her head as she puts the spoon onto her saucer. She doesn't stir her tea and takes a minute sip. It's not entirely tainted by sweetness, so she decides it's good enough to drink.

"What is wrong with you?" Ginny murmurs. "You've been drifting for two days, now. If I didn't know better I'd swear you were in love..."

Ginny's words cause Hermione's stomach to twist into a riot of slippery knots, and her heart gives a fast and panicked flutter. *Am I?* she wonders. "I was just thinking about my Mermish lessons," Hermione says, and she glances up at the teachers' table. It looks like Severus is bickering with Professor Sprout about something. Amusement lifts the corners of her mouth because it's funny to see him in snide action when you're not on the receiving end.

"Mhmm," Ginny mumbles sceptically through a mouthful of toast.

Severus glances up at that moment, well before Hermione hears the approaching rush of wings, and he plucks a spiralling letter from the air with graceful nonchalance.

"Letters incoming," Hermione says, glad to distract Ginny from the fact that she's been caught daydreaming *again*.

"Impervious Charm," Ginny mutters, quickly swishing a wash of magic across their food. Ginny's eyes narrow as she watches the cartwheeling owls above. "Here we go," she mutters darkly.

Godrica delivers Hermione's letter happily enough, but it's with spiteful and unerring aim that she drops Ginny's letter straight towards the tureen of porridge. The letter bounces off the charm, and Ginny's little hand darts out to snatch it. The tip of the owl's wing clips the top of Ginny's head, and Hermione winces at the loud, disgruntled hoot that blasts in her ear as the Godrica rockets past to the Ravenclaw table.

"Owl stew," Ginny mutters. "With potatoes and carrots."

Hermione watches as Harry's owl settles at Luna's elbow and accepts a scratch-scratch and a piece of bacon. "She's jealous of you," Hermione says, hiding her amused smile behind her hand. This is a conversation that she and Ginny have at least twice weekly.

"Well, it's getting to the stage where it's going to be me or that owl," Ginny snaps as she opens the letter and begins to read.

"You just need to find a way to get along with her... find a way to her heart..." Hermione's gaze flickers up to Severus again, and a vibrating sense of nervous realisation jitters in her stomach. *When did it happen?* she wonders. She knows that she is fond of Severus; that awe and respect have twisted into a different sort of yearning; that she wants to get to know him better; she wants a chance to find a way to his heart. But along her journey through the paradigm shift, she's lost her heart to him without even realising it until now.

Severus gives Professor Sprout one last, mocking smirk, and then he leaves the Great Hall. Hermione watches the straight and proud line of his posture, the liquid slide of his walk, and she sighs softly as he disappears from sight.

Hermione opens Harry's letter and raises her eyebrows at the neat and unfamiliar handwriting that flows across the parchment in straight and regular lines.

Dear Hermione,

Yes, it's really me...I hurt my hand during duelling practice today, so I have to use a Dictoquill tonight while the potion mends it properly. That Rebounding Charm is a real bastard some days. I'll give you a go on it next year; I think you'll like it.

I'm glad you had a good weekend and that the wards for the squid are still holding. I could almost see your triumphant smile for that conquered crusade. Gin says you're much happier lately, and your letters are less cynical, which is good except for the loss of the amusement factor on my side. For a while there, you were neck in neck with Snape for the most sarcastic comment of the week! I'm very glad things are going well for you because I was really worried about you for a bit.

Thanks for sending Ron a birthday card yesterday, by the way. I know it's going to take some time for the tension and resentment to go away, but I really hope that you guys can be friends again. Ron mentioned that he missed you when we went to a new club just off Diagon Alley on Saturday night...it was a combined birthday for Ron and a celebration because we passed the Investigation Techniques class.

I know you said that you want to take the quiet time to study, but are you sure you don't want to come and stay over the Easter hols?

Take care of yourself, and Gin.

Love, Harry.

Hermione smiles at the warmth of friendship that shines through the Charmed script. Harry might be a little self-righteous in his concern sometimes, but it's obvious that he genuinely wants her to be happy. She folds his letter again and gives a whisper of a sigh as she hopes that Ron is just missing their old friendship and not the disastrous romantic turn it had taken towards the end.

After she's finished with classes on Thursday, Hermione finds that a house-elf has placed another item on her pillow. She drops her schoolbag onto the dormitory floor with a thud as she gives a soft *oooh* of surprise.

The box is exquisite...silky, shiny wood with inlaid panels of silver and shell, and a midnight velvet lining. The shell holds all the mysterious colours of the water in its luminescent shimmer, and when Hermione tilts the box, the colours and patterns shift like there's light dancing under the lid.

There's a note curled up in the bottom of the box like a secret:

This is one of a matched pair. If you place your reply in the box, then press the central panel, it will transfer between the boxes.

In answer to one of your many questions, no, I would not choose to live below the divide indefinitely. I am far too attached to my wand and the affairs of the wizarding world, although I do appreciate the quiet and peace that the water brings. However, it is not a choice that I consider having, anyway...while I have inherited several selkie characteristics, impervious skin is not one of them. I do not wish to live my life looking like a prune, which begins to occur after I have spent perhaps eight hours in the water.

Quid pro quo, Clarice... I have a question for you.

I suspect that it is entirely your fault I had such a hellish time getting the sword to Potter last year. Which combination of safety wards did you use?

Until Saturday.

Hermione smiles at the compliment, which is typically wrapped in the prickly guise of an insult. She realises that she's never considered how much Phineas Nigellus told Severus last year. Of course, there had never been anything of tactical importance discussed during the evenings they'd taken the snotty portrait out, but they'd bickered and debated with him about many other things to pass the time. She can imagine Severus listening to a recounting of those conversations in the shadows of his isolated office and gnashing his teeth at reports of their utter incompetence.

It seems rather apt that Severus was so close to her through that lonely time... always just a veneer of canvas and paint away. He's always been there in the background of her life like a shadow; she'd never realised how intricately their life threads had intertwined, circling around each other like a double-helix, until they'd run finally out of slack and come to stand face-to-face at last.

Hermione comes to the conclusion that Severus is picking the easiest questions from her list...and asking her fairly complex ones in return...when she opens the box the next day to find another note:

While I am partial to sashimi and oysters, I do not enjoy the thought of eating whole, raw fish, no.

Why did you choose Gryffindor over Ravenclaw when you arrived at Hogwarts?

Hermione strokes the cool patina of the shell inlay as she closes her eyes and remembers the tingling and humid dark beneath the brim of the Sorting Hat: "If you weren't Muggle-born, I'd stick you in Slytherin with your ambitious streak of yours, but keeping in mind the current political climate... no, that would not be wise. Right, then. Ravenclaw with that mind... or Hufflepuff with that resolve... or Gryffindor with that heart... All three would suit you well, although perhaps Gryffindor may stretch you beyond your comfort zone. But it is your choice, Hermione Granger. There is no doubt you belong in this magical world, know that."

I've always been keen for a challenge, Hermione thinks, and hungered for an extraordinary life. She opens her eyes and watches the shifting gleam of light under her fingertips. And now I think I've fallen in love with Severus Snape... He's probably the most complicated and challenging person I know. Hell, he's even half-selkie on top of that. But I want the chance to evaluate this attraction I have for him because the most remarkable things have come to me when I've taken on a challenge, haven't they?

On Saturday, Hermione is surprised when Severus leads her into the cool shadows at the foot of the cliff below Hogwarts. She gazes up at the castle, which seems to grow from the top of the cliff and soar, fairytale like, into the clouds. "Oh, I haven't been here since first-year when I arrived at Hogwarts," she murmurs. She remembers the expectant yearning she'd felt that night; what she feels now is similar, except that the moment is full of adult expectations and importance. "Where are we going?"

Severus steps into one of the small boats and extends his hand to balance her as she joins him. "I thought that, given your future career, perhaps you would like to meet the Chieftain of the merpeople," he says with a hint of a smile.

Hermione sits on the small bench, and she's surprised to note how much smaller the boat seems, now; how her knees almost brush Severus'; how this feels like an exceptionally romantic moment rather than the lesson it is supposed to be. "I would, yes," she says. "Thank you."

"It is my pleasure, Hermione." His suave voice sends a warm flood of awareness chasing through her blood. "Have you heard from the Department yet?"

The boat begins to glide into the sunshine again, leaving only the slightest ripple in its wake. "Yes," she says with a nod, "they've offered me the job in the Water Division, contingent on my NEWT results."

"Well, that should not be an issue," he says, idly flicking his elegant fingers.

"No," she agrees softly, thinking of the promise that the time beyond Hogwarts holds...bright and shiny and hopeful, like magic. They lapse into restful silence for several minutes; the noise of the world fades until there's only the two of them and the water. She thinks that he does this on purpose... draws them away from the castle where there are rigid lines to divide them. She wonders when he ever began to see beyond those lines, when he first looked at her and saw a grown woman with promise and not a recalcitrant show-off.

"Severus?"

She seems to draw him from his own nowhere place...perhaps he's looking into a possible future, as well...and he blinks and raises his eyebrows.

"I was just wondering..." His lips quirk as if he's holding back some wryly amused comment, and she gives him a rueful smile. "When did it change... the way you saw me?"

Severus dips his fingertips into the water so that they drag through the silvery divide as the boat moves. He seems to be searching for the answer in the shimmering surface of the water. Hermione bites the inside of her cheek as she tries to be patient. She's already learned that Severus likes to take a moment to formulate the fullness of

an answer in his mind; to taste the words before they leave his lips; to measure the weight and feel of each syllable. They're different that way; her own words often spill in the air before she's even thought them.

"I always thought that you were a student who liked to absorb knowledge like a sponge just to be able to state that you knew a particular fact," he says slowly. "I suspected that you had somewhat of an eidetic memory, actually." He glances up and raises an eyebrow.

Hermione nods slightly. "Partial," she admits.

He nods. "I found your brash eagerness to share your brilliance... annoying," he says, and there's no trace of spite in his voice... no hint of apology, either.

It's a rather difficult thing to hear when you're a perfectionist who wilts under the sharp light of criticism, but Hermione nods again. He's telling her the truth, which is something she values more at this moment than the bruise to her tender ego. She dips her own fingertips into the water, feels the way the stream of disturbance in the water from his fingers tickles against her skin, like they're connected in some fundamental way.

"You proved me wrong last year...your fortitude under pressure and your inventive application of magic... well, that impacted directly on the outcome of the war, Hermione. You grew from a needy child into a competent and strong witch." He tilts his head and gazes straight into her heart. "I noticed, and when you returned here in September it was impossible to miss that you carried that new competency with grace and maturity."

"Oh," she breathes. *For so long.* "You really didn't treat me any differently until just before Christmas." *And sometimes he was even more spiteful and vitriolic than usual, perhaps just to make up for the softening of his heart?*

Now, Severus' face tightens into a grimace and his lips twist into a sneer. "I did not particularly care for the manner in which Professor Slughorn handed his teaching duties off onto you."

Hermione sighs. "Neither did I, really. At least he hasn't invited me back to the Slug Club meetings." She gives him a wide and impish smile. "I do have you to thank for that, I'm guessing."

Severus just smirks at her as the boat slows to a stop in the centre of the lake. The forest is a thin green blur in the distance, and the water is black-green and smooth around them like the thickest glass. A moment later, a merman appears, and Severus introduces her to the Chieftain. While they exchange pleasantries and the merman tells Hermione that he remembers her from when she was smaller, from when she slept through a visit to his village, Hermione has a chance to compare the selkies with the merfolk. While both species have the blackest hair and eyes, the merman's skin is a dull, uniform grey, and it lacks the lustrous shimmer that makes the selkies gleam in the water. The merman is bigger, too, and his Mermish is rougher and more guttural, like he's swallowed a handful of sand and stones. *They're more... brutish and savage-looking,* she thinks as she waves goodbye and the merman disappears with a flick of his powerful tail.

"Thank you," Hermione says. "Do the merfolk and the selkies ever have disputes?" She wouldn't think so... Severus seems to get along with the merpeople well enough, and Syrena has never mentioned them in any slanted light.

Severus shrugs elegantly. "It is in the best interests of both settlements to co-exist peacefully. There are some minor resource disputes that arise at times, but for the most part each tribe keeps to their natural territory. The merfolk do not often surface; they are more comfortable in the deep. The selkies, however..."

Hermione feels a warm blush burn at her throat. "Yes... I read something about that," she admits.

Severus' deep and delicious chuckle echoes in pleasant notes off the water. "The selkies cultivate some surface plants in the forest, as well," he says blandly, now, although there's wicked mirth glinting in his eyes.

The boat begins to slide back to the castle, silent as a whisper. The blush tickles hotly in her cheeks, and she presses her palms to her burning skin. When she lifts her eyes with determined bravery, he's still watching her, although his expression is serious and contemplative, now. "I have a question of my own for you," he says, leaning his elbows on his knees.

Her heart flutters because he's leaning so close to her that she can smell the warm hint of spice and musk on his skin. "You always do," she says, inviting him to speak with a slight widening of her eyes.

"Why would you want an old, scarred, cantankerous half-man when you could easily have your pick of young and bright and whole wizards?" he asks softly.

Her heart begins to ache in her chest at his words and the starkly melancholic expression that settles into the sharp planes of his face. *Please, please don't pull away, now... not when we've just started!*

"Because when I'm alone with you," she says, trying very hard to pull her feelings into adequate enough words, strong and powerful words that will slide into the web between them and reinforce their bond, "the world isn't like a black and white movie without sound any longer."

His expression relaxes minutely. "Ah," he murmurs, and he nods before sliding back into silence, staring past the tree line, far beyond the horizon. When they're almost back to the castle, Severus sighs. "That was such a Muggle metaphor, you know," he tells her, and a smile plays across his lips.

"I don't know any selkie ones yet," she retorts, and she revels in his softly amused chuckle.

As Severus takes her hand to help her out of the boat, she asks in what she hopes is artless fashion: "Could we do duelling practice again next week?"

A/N: Mini Disclaimer... I have read a lot of fanfic and come across many wonderful types of magic boxes. I can't recall having read of one like this, but I'm sure a magical device of this type surely does exist somewhere in somebody's Pottverse.

Thank you to Gelsey, as always.

Closure

Chapter 13 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

Sometimes, Hermione thinks, it's like time is holding its breath on purpose.

Hermione is desperately impatient for June to arrive, when she can take her NEWTs, leave her extended childhood at Hogwarts behind and finally begin her adult life.

She wants to have her own home, where she can leave a familiar clutter of books in a corner and scatter her cosmetics across the bathroom counter without having a house-elf tidying it up with what feels like silent and longsuffering reproach. She really doesn't mind the thought of wearing wellies to work, and she cannot wait to utilise her newly-acquired proficiency with Mermish. She longs for a time when she can explore the attraction that pulses warmly between herself and Severus; wrap herself in the glittering threads of promise that are tensioned so tightly, now, that they vibrate when she and Severus are together, almost snap when he touches her hand, guides her wand, quirks a smile at her.

But March has oozed by with deliberate sluggishness, each day clinging stubbornly to the last with a tacky resilience. The bright beads of colour on the grey ribbon of time are her renewed visits with Syrena when the morning is dew-fresh and Hermione believes it might finally be a sprightly day; the new ease with which a warble of meaning issues from her lips as she speaks to her water-dwelling friend; letters from Harry; Saturdays when Professor Snape becomes Severus, just for her; the daily exchange of questions and answers that gives her another piece of Severus to add to the beauty of him that she is building in her heart.

So, when April finally dawned yesterday, it felt like the world's biggest practical joke, like she was a grand April fool for imagining that the castle would empty again that afternoon; that the Easter holidays would finally arrive as the Hogwarts Express huffed away towards London.

Hermione opens the box again...it's still empty...and she sighs as she strokes the luxurious lining. She closes the box again, and her eyes flick to her clock automatically, challenging time to pass.

Hermione would gladly exchange notes several times a day...in the beginning she would rush up to the dormitory after lunch, between classes, to see if a new note had arrived to be treasured. But Severus is far more disciplined about this trading between souls. His letter arrives once a day, an hour after supper time, like he's made a space in his schedule just for her.

She's learned so many secrets. She knows that Severus is a morning person; he likes the grey dawn best of all, when the darkness is tinged with a lavender hint of light; he only ever has one alcoholic drink on any given occasion; he doesn't like bitter, dark chocolate as she imagined but the sweet and cloying white chocolate that her parents preach against; he dislikes using red ink and only grudgingly follows the teacher's tradition of doing so; he likes Muggle horror movies; his middle name is Tobias, after his father; he has dinner with Draco Malfoy twice a month; the lake calls to him like a siren if he stays away too long.

But sometimes it feels like although she knows the intricate shades and subtle facets of his soul, she's colouring a secret picture she's never seen the whole of. These are the stark outlines of him that she hopes will become apparent when time steps aside and allows their relationship to turn into focus.

She opens the box again and smiles. The box holds a simple enough Transference Charm, but when her fingers curl around another secret slip of parchment, it feels like the work of the most pure and elemental magic has fashioned it from the air and her soaring hope.

My favourite potion constituent is Serpentine. Because many wizards fail to recognise that minerals can add a vital fourth dimension of intricacy to potion crafting, that there is more to a potion than the sum of its organic components. And because I also find the name ironic, yes.

I think your idea for developing a purification charm to counteract the effects of pollution in the water-dwellers' territories would be a good way to impress your new boss, yes, Cass. Of course, the outcome of such a charm would be greatly appreciated by the merfolk and selkies, too. Which root were you planning on crafting your charm around?

Until tomorrow, and enjoy the peace and quiet that Easter brings.

Hermione glues Severus' latest note into the notebook with a Permanent Sticking Charm. As she flicks through the thick collection of pages, she sees that maybe she is wrong to rush these moments. Time *is* passing and she would not trade a single page from this book; this is the beginning of her story, and although the pace of it seems ponderously slow, the details are rich and bright like jewels, and the end of the first chapter promises to be enthralling and filled with dazzling sunlight.

Hermione remembers fifth-year when the threat of the approaching OWL exams loomed like a dark shadow, when the imagined taste of failure sat bitter on her tongue, when she closed her eyes and saw a line of fat and round 'O's shimmering in her near future like a string of pearls.

It's different this year. Less urgent. Perhaps it's the perspective of the year away from Hogwarts, a time when knowledge wasn't a competition but a vital necessity, when the value of practical magic outstripped the intricacies of theory. Now, it feels less important to do well for excellence's sake. She is seeking the reward her NEWT scores will bring...Hermione can see that her studies are stepping-stones rather than the ultimate goal.

Hermione is going about the tiresome task of revising for Ancient Runes over breakfast. The castle isn't as empty and melancholy as it was over Christmas, and a number of students have remained at Hogwarts to study or to cram in as many hours on the Quidditch Pitch as they can manage.

Hermione even joins in on the wicked tradition of eating chocolate for breakfast this year; Ginny sent some of her mother's lovely caramel eggs yesterday. Sitting in the early spring sunshine with sugar spiralling through her veins makes the misery of Christmas seem a million years away, now.

"An interesting interpretation on the theme of having eggs for breakfast, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall says primly, although a touch of amusement softens the prune of her mouth.

Hermione smiles up at the Headmistress. "I'll work it all off at duelling practice this morning, Professor."

If Severus has taught her anything, it's that secrets are best kept in proximity to the bright truth. Professor McGonagall is aware that Hermione has duelling lessons in addition to Mermish lessons on a Saturday morning. The Headmistress has even expressed the hope that Hermione will eventually become a friend to the dark man because, "Merlin knows, he needs a good friend."

The only thing that kept Hermione from being annoyed with McGonagall was the tinge of regret and sadness in the older witch's voice that day. It's easy to forget that the school terms forged ahead in her absence last year; impossible for her to imagine what it must have felt like to live in an atmosphere of savage hatred, of bitter betrayal, of resigned endurance. It's obvious that McGonagall did not trust Headmaster Severus Snape, and it's clear that although he may have forgiven her for her fractured stance, that he will never really forget the loss of trust from a once faithful friend, even if it is what he had intended all along.

"You will have to cancel your lesson this morning, Miss Granger...I have already let Professor Snape know."

Hermione glances up at the teacher's table, but she sees that she's missed Severus' exit from the Great Hall. "Why, Professor McGonagall?" Hermione asks, struggling against the disappointed frown that weighs heavily on her brow. There's also a sickening flutter of unease in her stomach at the thought that something might be terribly wrong.

Professor McGonagall's face pulls into tight creases of disapproval. "Young Mr Weasley is waiting for you at the gates; he insists that he be allowed to speak with you most urgently."

If something were seriously wrong, Harry would have owed, Hermione soothes herself as she strides down the grounds towards the gates. *What the hell does Ron want?* she wonders apprehensively. *What is so important that he can't just owl me about it himself?*

Ron is taller and older than Hermione ever remembers him being. It's difficult to process that she's older than this rugged-looking man who has traded his beloved Auron's robes for pair of jeans and a Slytherin-green jumper this morning. His hair flickers like a flame on the wind as he strides up the hill to meet her halfway. "Hi, Hermione," he says, shoving his hands into his pockets as if he's struggling against the urge to give her a hug.

Hermione keeps her temper in check...the horrid part of her who wants to demand to know what he wants and why he's interrupted her plans for the morning...and she greets him on the outrush of a sigh. "Hello, Ron."

She waits for him to break the tense silence, the awkwardness forged by months of distance and disdain. "Let's take a walk by the lake," he suggests, leaning his entire body in that direction.

"What is it, Ron?" she demands as her patience finally snaps. She doesn't know what it is about Ron that makes her tolerance seem even shorter than Flitwick...Ron just seems to invite argument with his mere presence sometimes.

Ron runs a large, freckled hand through his hair. "Look, Hermione, I've got something important to talk to you about, and I reckon I'll be able to talk better if we walk and if you're not glaring at me like that."

Hermione folds her arms across her chest and begins to stomp towards the lake. Ron lopes beside her like a Great Dane. "What did you want to say?" she prods, eager to get this conversation over and done with. If he wants to get back together with her, her answer is going to be in the resounding negative. If he doesn't sense that already then he's even more of an imperceptive idiot that she'd ever imagined.

He coughs nervously. "What happened last year at the Three Broomsticks..."

Oh, God, here we go...

"...that was insensitive of me to treat you like that, and I'm sorry."

Hermione stifles a sigh, slightly mollified by his apology and the relative ease with which he's given it. She stops walking and turns to face him, surprised by the lack of petulance in his features. "Look, Ron, I'm sorry about what happened, too," she says. "But I still don't understand why..."

"It's important for me to sort this out with you right now," Ron interrupts, and a flush begins to creep up his neck and soak into his earlobes. "I want things to be right between us."

Hermione begins to feel a headache creep along her hairline, along with a dull sense that she'd rather be anywhere else but here. She wishes she could Silencio Ron right now. But Ron carries on talking in a low and earnest voice.

"I just wish things could go back to the way they were before, you know?" Ron sighs and cracks his knuckles loudly in a telltale gesture that indicates he's exceptionally nervous. "Anyway. I was hoping that someday we could get back to that..."

No. No. No.

"...friendship we had before it got all complicated with sex and snogging."

What? Hermione glances at him, feeling utterly wrong-footed and confused. It's not often that Ron says something she doesn't expect. He's surprised her today. He's different in some essential way, too. It's like his brash arrogance has melted over the winter, along with the snow.

"I hope so, too," she says softly, nodding slightly.

Ron grins at her...she hasn't seen that open smile in so long it makes her heart ache. "I wanted that whole mess to be, I dunno, tied off at least, before I carried on with things."

"What things, Ron?" Hermione asks as curiosity begins to replace her ire.

The deep flush suffuses through to his hair line, sets the tips of his ears on fire. "Tomorrow... I'm going to ask Lavender to marry me."

Surprise hits Hermione like a Stunner. A nasty touch of envy and a dollop of spiteful, bitter scorn fight for dominance, but concern washes over them like a gentle wave. "Are you *sure*, Ron?" she asks with a sceptical little grimace. She remembers how Lavender smothered Ron during sixth-year, how he'd ended up hiding away from her eventually.

But Ron nods. "The war didn't just affect you and me and Harry," he says, shoving his hands into his pockets again. "Lavender's different since then... she's less self-absorbed and flighty. What happened with Greyback during the battle left her with more than visible scars. She's working at the wizarding orphanage, and she's training to become a mediwitch."

Hermione's mind flickers to the picture of Ron and Lavender in the newspaper, and she retains the sharp edge of disbelief. "It's... awfully soon, isn't it?"

Ron shrugs. "At first I thought that New Year's might be a one time thing, you know? But then we started really talking the next day... it's the first time I ever really listened to her, was interested in what she was saying." Ron cracks his knuckles again. "I've always been a bloke who wanted a wife and kids early, and I can really see that happening with Lav... so why wait?"

Hermione considers Ron's words for a moment...she was certainly never the woman who would have wanted to marry and procreate straight from school, no. They were never a perfect and natural fit.

"If that's what is going to make you happy, Ron," she says with a genuine smile, "then the best of luck to you both."

Hermione feels lighter, somehow, when she runs up to the castle. It's like an invisible and sullen weight has been lifted from her heart. Hermione can't say that she's overly fond of the idea of Lavender, but that's a kneejerk reaction from several years ago. She does believe that Lavender might have changed, and if Ron thinks that he will be content with her, then Hermione is happy for him.

Hermione's excited smile when she feels a wash of magic at the doorway of the DADA classroom is evidence enough that her own life has changed recently, taken a sharp turn to a place that is more thrilling and unexpected than she'd ever have dreamed.

Severus looks like he's been duelling against the wall since breakfast; there's a liquid edge of fatigue to his movement, and his face is flushed with exertion, shiny with sweat.

"I'm sorry I missed duelling this morning," Hermione says from the doorway.

"I was under the impression that you were visiting with Weasley this morning," Severus snaps sharply, and he seems to find a dose of energy from somewhere that ratchets

his aggressive assault on the wall up a notch.

He's jealous, Hermione realises after gaping at him for a moment because it's been a long time since he's directed that level of acidity at her. She's almost ashamed at the rush of delight the knowledge brings, the way it dances in her heart and tugs at her lips, wanting to make her smile. "I did speak to Ron this morning, yes, but he's gone now," she says.

"Huh," Severus grunts, and he flicks a vicious hex at the Rebounding Charm, dropping low to the floor to avoid its rapid-fire return.

"He's going to ask Lavender to marry him tomorrow," Hermione tells him simply, deciding not to bait him and test the limits of his jealous snit. She thinks she knows when it's not a good idea to tease a man, especially this prickly variety of man who does not like to appear vulnerable and out of sorts.

"Ah," Severus grunts again, and she's sure she sees a little tension bleed from his limbs.

"I think he wanted some closure," she adds.

Severus drops his wand hand and turns to face her, his chest heaving with laboured breath. His black, drawstring pants sit low on his sharp hipbones, and his green Slytherin Alumni t-shirt is dark with sweat.

"Closure..." Severus holsters his wand and wipes his hands on his pants. "Yes, that is important," he says with a nod. "Without closure, certain events and actions have the ability to haunt you for decades."

Hermione steps closer to him and nods. "Like Lily?" It's not a question from her list, but it is something she is very curious about.

Severus sighs, and he lifts the hem of his shirt to wipe his face. Hermione can't help but take in the tight shift of his abdominal muscles under his pale skin, the subtle curve of his pectorals, the scattering of black hair around his flat nipples.

"You're staring, Granger," he says with dry amusement and a wicked smirk as he drops the edge of his shirt again.

"And *you* did that on *purpose*," she accuses in turn as a flush warms her face. "To distract me from what we were talking about."

His lips twist wryly and he concedes her point with a nod. "It seems that we have both been caught out, then." He sinks to the floor in a smooth movement, sitting cross-legged. "Sit," he says, splaying a long-fingered hand on the floor next to him.

Once Hermione's sitting next to him, she gives him a tentative smile. "Okay?" Hermione's not sure what he wants to tell her, but she lets a moment of silence carry her question instead of pushing him; she's found it works better on him...Severus tends to fill the silence with words eventually.

"I blamed James Potter, Albus Dumbledore, Sirius Black...I despised them all for their perceived part in Lily's death. But it was essentially my fault, though, my mistake. And it took nearly twenty years to make it right so that I could finally feel free to move past that burden of guilt. Because after so many years, love begins to feel very much like guilt, you know."

Hermione nods because as much as she knows his bitter past, she also senses that now he's open to their burgeoning bond; he's looking forward to the future, too.

"I did not have the chance to apologise, Hermione, to find the closure I needed then." His fingertips slide across the floor and come to rest against hers so that they're connected by the lightest touch. "So, if you can ever find the smallest measure of closure in your life, then I am delighted for you." A smile twitches at the corner of his mouth. "Even if it meant that you abandoned me to the wall this morning."

Hermione tilts her head and returns the smile. "Thank you," she says, and then she sighs softly because although she's achieved a tentative sort of closure and healing with Ron, she has a larger regret that digs at her heart with sharp claws.

"You should visit them," Severus says.

"I hope you're not using Legilimency," she grumbles, glancing at him askance.

"That would require sustained eye contact," he retorts. "I'm just uncannily perceptive."

"Hmmp. I'm just easy to read, I think," she says with a grimace. "I'm not sure visiting my parents would help, Severus... I've apologised to many times..."

"Have you ever explained the entirety of the situation to them?" he asks.

"Sort of," she prevaricates, and then she sighs with resignation. "No. I've never told them the whole truth about why sent them to Australia."

"People rarely enjoy having decisions made for them, Hermione. The only way they may ever understand is to hear all of it, to know that you did not make that decision lightly, perhaps even to hear that you did not have much time to consider the ramifications of your actions completely." Severus taps her index finger with his.

Hermione shifts slightly, her discomfort arising from much more than the hardness of the floor. "It's too late to get a Portkey," she says, shaking her head and feeling the smallest sliver of relief that it's the truth of the matter.

"Brady at the DMT owes me a favour," he says. "I am sure that he would be delighted to arrange a Portkey from Hogwarts to Perth for you, as well as one for the return journey next weekend." He smirks. "By now you should have realised that the world frequently works more smoothly in the trade of favours than of Galleons."

"But..." She wants to stay at Hogwarts and study for her NEWTs; talk to Syrena in the mornings and practice her Mermish; spend time with Severus; stay here where she's happier, now. She's afraid of having that conversation with her parents, so nervous that her stomach feels like it has twisted inside-out.

Severus takes her hand...thank Merlin for the absence of portraits in his classrooms...and he presses a chaste kiss to the hollow of her palm. Butterflies and bubbles join the confused tangle in her stomach, and she struggles to find coherent words. "Cheater!" she gasps.

Severus sets her hand on her knee, and he shrugs with effortless nonchalance. "I would urge you to go and make your peace with your family, Hermione, and come June we can discuss sufficient punishment for my sins."

A/N: Thank you, as always, to Gelsey.

DMT = Department of Magical Transport.

Family

Chapter 14 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

The thread of truth has spooled into the space between herself and her parents, and now it lies there, snarled and twisted, in a complicated knot. The ensuing silence has a stunned quality about it, almost like each word Hermione uttered has woven into the fabric of a complex and slow-acting Petrificus Totalus. Hermione's mother sits, ashen and unmoving like a statue, with the fingers of one hand fanned across her slack-lipped mouth. Her father has adopted a more reflective pose: his chin rests on the knuckles of one hand like The Thinker, and his eyebrows are drawn together sharply over his brown eyes.

Hermione hugs her knees more tightly to her chest, and she reaches for her cup of tea to soothe her parched throat. It's ice-cold, with a filmy, milky residue skating across the surface and a bitter, tannic edge that makes her grimace, but she drinks it anyway.

"Well," her father says, clearing his throat. "Well."

Hermione isn't surprised that her father is the first to speak; he's always been the more flexible of the two, the gregarious optimist. Her mother is the circumspect one, the logical pessimist. They've tended to balance one another nicely through the years, Hermione knows, but the heart of their differences does mean that she's naturally gravitated towards conversation with her father; their relationship is generally free of the tension that her mother tends to invoke.

Her father clasps his hands together and leans forward with a bemused frown on his face. It is an expression that is soothingly familiar, one that has marked most of their discussions concerning the wizarding world and magic (and the more recent ones about the utter vagaries of men).

"Are you sure you're not having me on, Hermione?" he asks. "The idea of Harry dying and then coming back to life to kill this Dark wizard off sounds a bit..." He glances at the bowl of Easter eggs on the coffee table...bright and shiny in their foil wrappers...and shrugs. "Well, it honestly sounds a bit derivative, my girl."

Hermione stifles a hysterical giggle with a spluttering cough. "There are some people in the wizarding community who call him the Saviour, yes, Dad."

"Well, that's a tad blasphemous," he comments rather piously for a man who is largely Agnostic, who adopts science and philosophy as his primary religion, and who never sent his daughter to Sunday School.

Hermione's mother unfreezes so suddenly Hermione imagines she can hear her mother's spine snap into place as she straightens into perfect posture and shakes her head. "That's entirely beside the point, Jeff," she says sharply. "I don't really care about the semantics of the Second Coming..."

"Well, you have admit that it defies belief, Angela!" Jeff argues.

Hermione watches Angela give Jeff a long-suffering and exasperated look, the one that Hermione knows she's inherited from her mother...right down to the aggravated flare of nostrils...along with that wild halo of curls. "*Everything* about the magical world defies conventional belief, Jeff...you've known that since that very first visit from Professor McGonagall. As surely as I've seen things vanish into thin air, I believe that everything Hermione's told us is entirely possible."

Hermione's watching her parents argue back and forth like she's at Wimbledon. She's surprised to find that her expectations of them have been neatly inverted; it's usually her mother who needs an extra dash of evidence to make any magical concept more palatable.

"What I *would* like to know is why we have never heard it before." Angela turns to Hermione. "Telling us that it was for our own safety and our own good was just as bad as those pureblooded fascists in your world saying that Muggles like you are too stupid to understand the intricacies of magic. It's just another form of prejudice, in the end." Angela spreads her hands and raises her eyebrows. "Your father and I are not inflexible people, Hermione, and we raised you to believe your opinion would always be taken seriously. So, why on earth would you feel the need to hide the truth from us for more than four years?"

Hermione sighs and she rests her chin on one knee. A hundred easy lies rise to the surface like toxins bubbling up from a fetid swamp. Her fingers even twitch at the thought of her wand, which is locked in the safe in her father's office...if she had it with her would she take the easy way out again and just Obliviate them of this conversation? Has the ease of magic eroded the principles her parents instilled in her? The honesty and introspection that these questions demand of her makes Hermione feel jittery and anxious. She curses the moment she allowed Severus' calm and earnest concern to persuade her that this was a good idea. She feels like she's a Doxy trapped between a window and the wrath of Molly Weasley.

Hermione closes her eyes for a moment and brushes all the flimsy fragments of justification aside. There, at the centre, at the bitter and razor-sharp heart of it all, lies the stark and ugly truth.

"I *was* worried about your safety, just like I told you last summer, but I know that I should have handled everything differently, let you make the decision to leave or go into hiding for yourselves. I just..." Hermione's voice wavers, and she grits her teeth and looks up to face her parents like she should have years ago. "I didn't want to take the chance that you would make me leave my world."

Her father groans and runs both hands through his hair so that it sticks up around his receding hairline like a martyr's crown. "You don't have any A-levels, let alone O-levels; you're hardly qualified to live anywhere else, now," he says dryly.

"Like you've ever had much of a use for calculus again," Angela says curtly, and her glare silences the retort that is rounding on Jeff's lips. Angela takes a deep, fortifying breath like she's drawing molecules of strength and patience into reserve. "Although I don't like what you've just said very much, Hermione, I have to appreciate that it's finally the truth." Angela gazes unblinkingly at Hermione and she nods solemnly. "And that is always a good place to start from."

Later, when she's lying in bed in the guest room, Hermione pulls the box Severus gave her from the embrace of her beaded bag. She traces the edge of the cool inlay and considers that while this evening's conversation was excruciatingly painful...*Worse than the vicious agony of the Cruciatius Curse*, she exaggerates in her mind...her parents seem to be open to frank discussion, now. They want to heal the rift that has splintered and widened between them, fill in the black and endless chasm that yawns between their disparate worlds.

But all of this honesty and emotion is so tiring...it's fuelled by energy and liquid sighs...and she yawns and stares through the window at the unfamiliar sky outside. The hint of magic beneath her fingertips is tangible, and she smiles at the thought that the connection between Severus and herself is real enough to feel, to touch, to draw strength from, even from half a world away... where the stars are written in different patterns, where English sounds like it is altogether another language.

She surrendered her wand voluntarily when she arrived...a gesture meant to engender renewed trust...but she misses the warm tingle of magic against her fingers and how time seems to have curved the handle to the exact shape of her hand. She opens the lid of the box as if the magic is stored there and will feel more vital if she touches the midnight lining, and she gasps with delight when she finds a roll of parchment in the box.

Hermione leans over and switches on the bedside lamp, tilts the note into the golden pool of light:

In the end, my mother was a bitter and wicked witch and my father was a forgetful drunk. How much trouble could two dentists be? Thinking of you.

Joy suffuses through Hermione's leaden limbs like glitter, and she fishes a pen from her bag and replies beneath his bold and confident scrawl.

When I get back, will you tell me about the beginning, please?

She drops the note back into the box and presses the central panel with a besotted smile. She doesn't notice her father standing in the doorway until he knocks gently and gives her a tentative, fatherly smile.

"Come in, Dad," she says, reluctantly setting the box on the bedside table as she turns her attention to her father.

"Who is he, the giver of beautiful jewellery boxes and the inspirer of truth?" Jeff asks, sitting on the edge of Hermione's bed like he'd done on so many nights before she'd gone to Hogwarts that she'll never be able to count the beauty and warmth of them all.

Hermione grins. "He's just a friend for the moment, but it's growing into something so..." She's lost for words to describe how perfect Severus is without sounding like a lovesick preteen. And because tonight has been full of truth and admission, she adds, "And he's a half-merman."

Jeff snorts and he leans forward to kiss her forehead gently. "I thought that the time for whopping fibs was past, my girl."

Hermione decides that the day is probably overflowing with candour already, and she simply smiles and says, "You're right, Dad."

"So, my daughter is going to be a Ministry minion, you said?" he comments. "What happened to studying magical medicine or law?"

Hermione chuckles softly; her parents will always measure career success against the Muggle scale. They're both professionals, and without directly guiding her in that direction, they've held the hope up to the light, all the same. "It's probably more like being a Marine Biologist, Dad," she tells him.

"Ah, well, then," Jeff says, and he nods to himself as satisfaction pulls his lips into a grin.

After he's said goodnight and his shadow has slipped around the corner, Hermione touches the box again and whispers, "Thank you."

When Hermione emerges from the dizzying grip of the Portkey into startlingly bright and hot daylight, her heart kicks into a panicked patter because she *should* have arrived to the blanketed dark of early morning in Scotland. When a hand touches her shoulder, a high-pitched shriek spills from her lips, and she clutches the treasure-trove of her beaded bag to her chest.

"Relax, Granger," a low and familiar voice murmurs.

She turns quickly, astonishment widening her eyes and parting her lips, and she finds herself standing nose-to-nose with Severus. "Where... What...?" she breathes, confusion and pleasure twisting and writhing around each other in her mind like sinuous ribbons.

Severus gestures towards the graceful stretch of an enormous, steel, arched bridge. "I thought that an afternoon away from the castle would be... pleasant," he says as a smooth slide of smugness curves his lips. "It was a simple matter to arrange that your Portkey made a slight detour here." He drops the Privacy Charm that has just shielded her arrival from the stream of Muggles that are walking past, and he slides his wand into a Disillusioned arm holster, where it shimmers into invisibility.

Hermione turns slightly and gazes across the stretch of water, past the parallel wharfs, towards another curved and characteristic landmark that confirms their location with its quirky grace. "Sydney..."

"Yes, Sydney," Severus confirms, and warm amusement infuses his beautiful and deep voice.

Hermione finally pulls away from her astonishment and really *looks* at him, now. He's wearing faded blue jeans that hug his slim hips and black dragon hide boots. But it's his green t-shirt that really catches her attention: a printed line of text announces that he's *Bottled Glory*. The way the fabric stretches across the strong line of his shoulders makes her think that nothing could be closer to the truth. She's never seen him looking this young, not even when she first arrived at Hogwarts.

"Yes?" he drawls, sliding a pair of dark glasses from the collar of his t-shirt and onto the aquiline line of his nose.

"You're... wearing jeans," she says lamely.

"Given the time period I grew up in, denim is practically a birthright." Severus wraps his long fingers around her elbow and gently begins to guide her in the direction of the quay. "What did you imagine I wore under my teaching robes? Hogwarts is freezing in winter, and Warming Charms are...pardon the pun...a pain in the arse."

Hermione feels distinctly wrong-footed and bemused; while Severus has dropped much of the stark formality from their exchanges over the last few months *this* relaxed and almost talkative man is another matter entirely.

"Polyjuice, much?" she mutters to herself.

He chuckles softly. "No...the castle is just not entirely conducive to open conversation," he says simply. Hermione has to step closer to him to avoid collision with a clutch of women who are gripping bright cups of gelato and pushing a gaggle of prams. She realises that one of his iron-tense barriers has evaporated into the air because her shoulder bumps his, and he casually steadies her with a hand on her shoulder blade before he steps to the side and takes her elbow again. The glare the women earn for their dunderheaded rudeness, however, is vintage Snape, and Hermione smiles at the familiarity of its presence.

She pauses to watch a man who is sitting on a low, brick wall and strumming a guitar. "It's lovely here," she says, finally relaxing enough to absorb the atmosphere of the milling crowd. A gentle breeze wraps around her bare legs, and the sun is warm on her central parting, like the sunlight is seeping into her through a thin, white seam.

"It's even better from the water..."

Once they're on the broad deck of the luxury catamaran, they settle into two of those white plastic garden chairs Hermione's mother has banned from ever disgracing her patio. Severus stretches his long legs out, crossing them at the ankles. He looks like a foreign tourist from a land where it's always winter. He touches two fingers to the shimmer of his wand, and Hermione feels the vague blur of a Muffliato encircle them.

As the catamaran pulls out into Sydney Cove, Severus asks, "How was your week?"

"Long." Hermione stretches out her legs, too, glad that she's wearing shorts. She wants to soak up each moment, now, each ray of sunshine and each delicious, relaxed moment with this flexible and relaxed man.

"How much had you told your parents before this week?" he asks.

"Not much," she murmurs.

His eyebrows rise sharply above the rim of his sunglasses. "Nothing at all about Riddle?"

Hermione shakes her head. "No..."

Severus whistles softly. "Well, then, you must have had a more harrowing week than I'd ever imagined."

"You have no idea," she says ruefully. "But I'm glad that I finally told them the truth; it feels like we're on more of an adult footing, now... I've still got a lot of trust to earn, but I think it was a good start. They asked when I'd visit again."

Severus hms and nods. "A positive outcome."

"Yes." She flexes her sandaled feet and sighs happily as she watches the Opera House grow larger, until she can see the individual tile plates that cover its curved shells. The tourist commentary buzzes around the edge of the Muffliato, but Hermione doesn't mind not hearing about the history of the architecture; she's content to absorb the sense of companionship that fills the air instead.

A tourist standing nearby blows out a long stream of cigarette smoke, which ripples and twists into the wind. She notices the rueful tug of Severus' lips as his hand reflectively twitches towards his pocket before his fingers curl into a loose fist.

"Do you smoke, Severus?"

"I used to, yes," he admits, "but I gave it up last year." Unconsciously, he lifts his hand to his neck and traces the faint remembrance of pain. "I gave up on torturing myself, then, and I thought I may as well put a stop to the process of dying by daily degrees, as well."

As the catamaran cruises past Point Piper and the mansions that seem to grow from the cliffs and sprawl towards the harbour, Hermione thinks she catches Severus looking at her legs at one stage. She smiles with feminine delight at the additional sign that he's wholly male.

"You said you'd tell me about the beginning," she prompts when they turn and skim across the light swells to sail in the direction of the Harbour Bridge again.

"Yes," he agrees softly. He stares down at his hands, and Hermione notices for the first time that he's wearing a silver ring on the thumb of his left hand. He rubs his other thumb along the runes that are etched into the curve of the metal.

After a long stretch of silence, Hermione presses two fingers to her lips to prevent herself from asking the question again, and she lifts her head to gaze up into the complex steel network of the bridge. She notices a line of tourists dotted along the soaring, upper arch of the bridge like Christmas lights, and she shudders.

"Afraid of heights?" he murmurs.

Hermione nods. "I really don't see the appeal. It's probably why I've never felt quite right on a broom."

"I used to play Beater for Slytherin," Severus tells her, "and my mother was never very impressed about that. She probably thought that living above the divide was bad enough, but to fly in the air like the birds..." He shakes his head.

"What happened to your mother?" she asks quietly.

Severus twists the ring on his thumb, and the muscles in his jaw harden. Hermione doesn't apologise for asking, although the compulsion do so builds up inside her chest and presses hard against her heart the longer he remains silent. She's starting to curse herself for ruining the leisurely joy of a warm autumn day Down Under when Severus sighs.

"She took a handful of sleeping tablets and drowned herself in the bath," he says quietly, although bitterness hardens his words; they're so brittle it sounds like they might break into a thousand sharp pieces.

Despite the warmth of the day, a horrified chill freezes her spine, and a wash of goose bumps rise on her skin. "God, that's... I'm so sorry..." Her words sound inadequate to her ears, not whole enough to encompass the dull ache that settles around her heart. She can't see his eyes behind his dark glasses, can't measure the depth of his emotion properly.

"She never recovered from the loss of her skin, being deprived of her natural home," he continues in a quiet and sombre tone. "She began to resort to Dark magic in an effort to restore her Airgead. And when I was born with one..." His harsh laugh is a metallic grate, and he grimaces.

"She must have hated the fact that you could go beneath." Hermione cannot imagine growing up with a mother who was so bitterly unhappy that she'd taken her own life like that. Severus has had such a difficult life, but Hermione's only ever known the mirrored surface of it, never imagined the dark shadows that pooled in the stagnant hollows for so long.

"I imagine that she must have tried to take my skin for her own, but when that did not work, she hid it away, told the Hogwarts staff that I'd chosen not to take on the selkie way. I only ever found my Airgead after she died, and by then..." He rubs the outline of the Dark Mark that has faded to a silvery scar.

Hermione doesn't notice the sights when they enter Darling Harbour and its cosmopolitan gathering of restaurants and Muggle shops. The plate glass windows glitter in the sunlight, though, and she grimaces at the brilliance of the reflected light, tells herself it's why her eyes are watering. "What about your father... didn't he notice anything was wrong with her?"

Severus sighs so deeply his breath must have reached right down into the sadness of his soul. "If he ever did, he probably forgot it soon enough. The Muggles doctors diagnosed him with Alzheimer's a number of years ago, but I realised that it was the long-term effect of continual Obliviation. I saw it too late, though...I'd always thought he was just a drunk bastard who'd bullied my mother to death."

Hermione catches her lower lip between her teeth as she tries to imagine the devastating horror of growing up in a household where the magical parent habitually used her wand on the Muggle parent. "I'm sorry... that he died..."

"You have the uncanny ability for uncovering my darkest secrets, Hermione," he says wryly.

Hermione's not sorry about that fact, so she doesn't apologise. "So, when did you start going into the lake?"

"During the long, quiet years," he says. "The selkies assumed that I was from another loch, and I never dissuaded them of that notion." He shrugs.

"Will you ever tell them who you are?"

He stares out across the water, where the sunlight dances in diamond flickers. "Perhaps."

They lapse back into silence, and Hermione reaches across the narrow span between their chairs, rests her hand on the arm of his chair, palm up. When Severus takes her hand a minute later, her heart thrums like a hummingbird at her throat, but she calmly watches the line of stupid tourists on the bridge and idly strokes her thumb along the warm metal of his ring.

Later, after an early supper at one of Circular Quay's restaurants and a return to less harrowing conversational material, they stand under in the cool shadows next to the Museum of Contemporary Art, waiting for the Portkey to activate.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?" He's pushed his dark glass up and she can see the thick, sooty arch of his long eyelashes.

"I want to see you in the water again," she tells him.

He licks his lips and a faint flush sketches across his high cheekbones. "Come June."

His answer sends heat rushing through her veins, makes it feel like the Portkey is pulling them back to Scotland through the very centre of the earth.

A/N: Airgead is the Gaelic word for silver.

Yes, I've been on that catamaran cruise; I was the tourist blowing smoke into the wind :D

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews The Silvering Divide. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

Thank you so much, as always, to Gelsey for proof-reading and slaying horrible typos!

Victory

Chapter 15 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

"Why aren't you dressed yet?" Ginny demands.

"It doesn't start for another two hours." Hermione glances up from her Transfiguration notes distractedly.

Ginny is standing with her hands on her hips, wearing a shimmering set of gold dress robes and Molly Weasley's patented pointed stare. Only Ginny Weasley, with her golden-freckled skin and her vibrant sun-fired hair and her inherent gracefulness, could ever wear robes like *that* and look like a mythical elf princess; they would be exceedingly tacky on most other witches.

"You look lovely, Gin," Hermione says, closing her textbook as she foresees the inevitable end to her solitary studying.

"You're not going to flatter your way out of this, Granger," Ginny says archly, although she emanates a slightly smug air for a moment. "Why haven't you Sleekeazied your hair yet?"

"I like it curly," Hermione says defensively, brushing her fingertips through the riot of curls that haloes her head like she's a saint from one of the castle's stained window panels. Without her curls, she wouldn't be Cass.

"Curly is *one* thing, Hermione," Ginny says snippily. "It looks like you've been dragged backwards through the forest by centaurs."

"Do not!" Hermione gasps, a little put out that Ginny would resort to Umbridgian insults to make her point.

"Sit," Ginny orders, Conjuring a chair next to Hermione's bed.

Hermione sighs as Ginny begins to tame her hair into a twist of curls with Muggle hair pins and a glitter of magic for good measure. "You're very bossy, you know."

"Takes one to know one," Ginny retorts, viciously wrestling a curl into place.

"Ouch," Hermione whines.

"Sit still," Ginny orders. "Harry is arriving early to check the security for the party, and I want to go down early and meet him."

Hermione smiles; she's looking forward to seeing Harry again, and she thinks she's even ready to see the newly engaged Ron, too. She's already seen Neville this morning...he arrived early to help Professor Sprout with the flower arrangements. "Did you hear that Neville's coming back to Hogwarts next year? He's going to be a student teacher for a year, and then take over from Professor Sprout when she retires next summer." Hermione thinks Neville will be a wonderful teacher, although she wonders how he's going to cope with being Severus' colleague.

"Mhmm," Ginny mumbles through a mouthful of hairpins. A few minutes later, Ginny pats Hermione's head. "There," she says with satisfaction, "now you're neat enough to go up and get your Order of Merlin."

Hermione's mouth is in the process of forming the round notes of a thank you when Ginny leans forward and opens the shell-inlaid box, letting a tumble of hairpins slide into it with a muted, metallic tinkle. "Why is your pretty box empty?" Ginny closes it and pats the lid. "Oops. That central panel is loose... you should get that fixed because it's really gorgeous. Lucky you that your folks got you such a nice pressie from New Zealand. Now, just for a Hairspray Charm..."

Hermione's breath is still swollen in a tight bubble of disbelief as Ginny blasts her hair with a jet of hairspray. When Ginny dances across the dormitory and out of the door, Hermione stares at the box and laughs softly; Severus is going to be absolutely befuzzled when he next opens his box.

A conversation spirals up the stairs as Hermione nears the turn into the Entrance Hall.

"Merlin, Severus, you look like a priest!" Professor Sprout exclaims in a deceptively light tone; one that carries a surprising twist of bitchiness to it. "It's garden party, not a funeral, you know."

"Well, given that *certain* members of staff look rather like they're mutton dressed as lamb, perhaps the Ministry should have made it a *Tarts* and Vicars garden party, then," Severus says, his low drawl etched with acid and irony.

As Hermione turns the corner, the Great Doors slam with a clang of indignation, and Professor Vector's scandalised gasp of, "Bastard!" is still echoing sharply off the stone

walls.

Severus chuckles in decidedly evil fashion, and Hermione *tsks*, although she cannot deny she's unaccountably amused. She does wonder, though, why Severus seems to deliberately antagonise his fellow staff members. *Easy amusement factor or retribution because they were nasty to him first?*

Severus' shoulders stiffen, and he turns with a twisted sneer on his face. When he sees it's Hermione, though, his expression softens, replaced by a definite look of interest as he takes in her pretty aquamarine dress robes and her delicate silver sandals, which flash from the hem of her robes as she descends to Entrance Floor level.

Hermione, for her part, returns the scrutiny without remorse or embarrassment. Severus is dressed entirely in black, although, surprisingly, he's not wearing dress robes. And his dashing outfit is certainly not inspired by the church, as Professor Sprout had suggested...there is a sharp military edge to the narrow, high collar and the double line of buttons that run down either side of his chest to the edge of the knee-length jacket. His dress pants have an elegant line of black satin edging the outer seam, and his shoes are polished to a high shine.

By the time Hermione draws level with him, the attraction that snaps through the air and flickers across her skin like static is almost electric; she's sure a jagged, white-blue bolt of lightning is going to arc between them at any moment. "Happy Victory Day," she says. Longing and awareness glow warm in her cheeks, and she forgets to add the publically obligatory, "Sir."

"Yes," he agrees, inclining his head to hide his flicker of a smile from the wall of portraits. "Come along, Miss Granger, or you'll be late."

Once they're standing in the relative privacy of the stairs outside the Great Doors and gazing across the white marquees and round garden tables dotted from the castle all the way down to the lake's edge, Hermione says quietly, "So, there are the black pants the students imagine you wear all the time."

The light spring breeze carries a teasing scent of his aftershave along with his breath of a chuckle towards her. "No stiffly starched white shirt, I'm afraid," he replies, subtly sliding the sleeve of his jacket up to give her a glimpse of the cuff of a dark red shirt and an onyx cufflink.

Hermione can't stifle her grin as they begin to walk down the stairs towards the freshly spell-mown stretch of emerald lawn. Hermione thinks it's a terrible pity that the Mowing Charm removes the earthy scent of freshly mown grass, Vanishing the cuttings into the air with scentless magical efficiency.

"I think red is a brilliant colour for you," she teases, and a red-robed wizard standing under a marquee catches her eye as he waves and begins to lope over to them, stopping briefly to greet the guests who have begun to stream in the through the gates, their robes bright and shiny like points of coloured light. "You and Harry match today, then."

Severus snorts and dips his hand into his jacket pocket, then raises a curious eyebrow as he opens his hand to reveal a Muggle hairpin in his palm. "I wanted to enquire about the significance of this..."

Hermione laughs merrily and steals the pin away from him. "Ginny thought that the box was simply a box."

"Ahh. No nefarious motive, then," Severus says, and there's a hint of disappointment there that suggests he wouldn't mind finding something surprising in the depths of his box.

"Not this time, no." She turns and grins at Harry, who has stopped to meet them at the foot of the stairs. Harry's dressed in formal Auror regalia today, and he's mitigated the problem of rebellious hair by gelling it all up into a modern array of bed-head spikes. "Nice hair, mate," she says in cheeky fashion.

Harry gives her a look that feels more suspicious than long-suffering or exasperated. "Back at you," he says, breaking into a smile of his own. He turns to Severus and extends his hand. "Happy Victory Day, Severus," he says with so much adult maturity in his voice it's difficult for Hermione to reconcile this man with her childhood friend. "And a First Class day at that."

"That it is, Harry," Severus says formally as they shake hands. His use of Harry's first name indicates their letter writing has progressed to what might be termed a tentative friendship. "Now, if you would excuse me..."

Harry stares after Severus as he makes his way towards the knot of staff who have gathered in the shade of one of the marquees. "*Awful* year, Hermione," he says, shaking his head. "Can you believe it?"

Hermione closes her eyes and lets the warmth and brightness of the day glow through her eyelids. She smiles because today feels exquisitely pleasant in comparison with the sense of horror and numb grief that had twisted and settled between the rubble and the scorched scent of death and anger that red morning. She sighs softly and opens her eyes. "Actually, I can, Harry," she says softly.

Hermione's Order of Merlin, First Class is about as twice as big as a Galleon, and its weight sits heavily on her chest as she stands on the dais and stares out across the crowd. In splendid British tradition, most women are wearing elaborate head gear; Hermione hates to think how many Fwoopers are sitting without feathers in their bottoms to fund this level of finery.

When Neville comes to stand next to her after receiving his medal...making Hermione realise he's grown another foot and now towers over her...Hermione whispers to him, "Well done, Nev," and he gives her a huge, lopsided grin. At Kingsley's insistence, Neville has the Sword of Gryffindor belted at his waist, and Hermione spotted crowds of women asking him if they could touch his sword before the ceremony started. He's got a newfound aura of confidence about him, and Hermione thinks he's going to do very well at Hogwarts next year.

When Harry steps forward from the crowd, the cheers and whistles from the crowd are deafening, and they drown out Kingsley's Sonorous, eloquent words of praise for the Chosen One. The centaurs standing proud at the edge of the Forbidden Forest raise their bugles and trumpet a herald of triumph for Harry as he ducks his head and allows Kingsley to bestow the Order of Merlin, First Class upon him. Hermione tries not to squint too much as Harry walks past her and a flicker of flashes pulse brightly like strobe lights; despite her nonchalance about her appearance this morning, she doesn't want to look like an idiot in the *Prophet* tomorrow.

The applause is more sedate and serious for Severus Snape...Hermione's not sure whether it's the taint of residual hatred or a hush of awed respect, though. She cannot take her eyes off his tall and lithe form as he walks towards Kingsley, and as he bends his head, his glossy hair slides forward to hide the expression on his face when the medal comes to rest on his chest. The palms of her hands burn she's applauding so hard for him, and there's a tight swell of pride in her chest that makes it hard to breathe past her smile.

Severus' face is a careful blank as he turns towards the line of recipients and walks calmly past her to take his place next to Harry. Hermione knows him better by now; inside, behind the meticulously constructed stoicism, he revels in the fact that this is recognition for his sacrifice...it is his glorious moment of vindication.

Hermione palms several hors d'oeuvres that feature salmon as their primary flavour, and she slips away from the cloying attention of the crowd and down to the edge of the lake where it curves into serene silence behind a cluster of trees. She's sure that Syrena, with her delightfully inquisitive nature, is spying on the gathering of wizards.

Hermione slides her sandals off and wiggles her toes into the thick, soft grass. It feels wonderful to relax after an afternoon of sweaty hugs and boisterous backslapping. She slides the heavy medal from her neck and lets it nestle in the scarlet pool of its own shiny ribbon. She's glad the Ministry were circumspect about awarding these medals; they've given sufficient time and distance for healing and grieving, she thinks. His quiet subtlety and guarded strength of character is what makes Kingsley such a popular Minister of Magic.

But Hermione is glad for a moment away from everybody...her mouth is sore from smiling, and she's tired of being gracious and charming. *That*, she thinks with a touch of

fond amusement, *is where Severus has an advantage; nobody seems to expect his Order of Merlin to magically turn him into a charming knight.*

Hermione is particularly proud of herself for being nice to Lavender earlier: they had a brief conversation about the wizarding orphanage; Hermione admired Lavender's engagement ring (gold and rubies, of course); they graciously exchanged cheerful platitudes like 'no hard feelings' and 'I wish you all the best'. Ron's grateful smile made her concerted effort worth it, though...the fond regard in his eyes was for her, and it still glows softly like a comforting nightlight in her mind.

"Cass!"

Hermione breaks off from her self-congratulatory daydream and waves at Syrena.

"*I knew you would be here. I brought you a treat.* Hermione Levitates the salmon morsels through the air in a careful arch, and she laughs as Syrena systematically picks the fish off the crackers. She's learned from Syrena that the selkies do not tend to eat much starch, even when they are out of the water. Watching Severus at mealtimes has confirmed this fact, and she finds it interesting that he'd have the same preferences even though he only found out he was half-selkie after he turned seventeen.

She and Syrena talk about the wizarding guests and their strange and wonderful robes and hats; Hermione tells Syrena about her plans for next year, confirming that she'll be back to visit often, especially since she plans to rent a cottage in Hogsmeade; Syrena tells her about the selkies' summer routines and that they are planting fields of Algae Grass at the moment.

"There you are!" Harry's voice carries to her with a petulant huff of exasperation.

Syrena gives a high-pitched squeak of surprise and disappears beneath the divide with a flash of her silver tail.

Hermione turns around and scowls at her friend. "Harry," she complains, "you frightened her."

"I'll tell you what *is* scary," he tells her, stripping off his heavy robes to reveal a pair of jeans and a faded t-shirt, "is listening to you speak Mermish."

Hermione clucks her tongue in quasi-annoyed fashion and pokes Harry's shoulder with an index finger. "Aren't you supposed to be posing for the *Daily Prophet*, pandering to your adoring public?" Hermione grins at Harry. "Where is Ginny?"

"Weasley family photograph session," Harry says. "I thought I'd come look for you."

"Aren't you practically a Weasley?" Hermione teases, wiggling her hand playfully to indicate that it's about time he started shopping for an engagement ring. Ginny isn't coming back to Hogwarts next year...she's been offered a position as Chaser with the Holyhead Harpies...and Hermione knows, with a conviction that is clear and defined like diamond, that Harry and Ginny are two halves of one piece.

Harry ignores her provocation and stares across the lake with a moody expression twisting his lips. "Hermione," he says carefully after taking a deep breath, "are you shagging Snape?"

Harry's question jolts through her nerves: her heart stutters; her stomach clenches and writhes with a slick and nervous apprehension; a headache begins to pulse behind her eyes. "No!" she exclaims, her voice high-pitched and indignant, sounding a lot like a Mermish warble.

Not yet, her mind whispers, and the knot of nerves in her stomach blossoms into a wildfire of anticipation. The warmth of the heat races along all the nerves just under her skin, setting it aglow with a fierce blush. "Why would you think that?" Severus was going to kill her for being so obvious, for letting her open expression tell a secret and beautiful truth.

"It's just..." Harry says, shaking his head. "It's just that when you were talking to him this morning... He was *smiling* at you. Not smirking or being a smug bastard. It was a genuine smile."

Hermione rubs at her temple. "Friends can smile at each other; you smile at me all the time and that doesn't mean we're shagging, Harry," she points out, skating on the gossamer thin line between telling the truth and the temptation of dishonesty. "Severus and I are friends... you're friends with him, too, aren't you?"

Harry taps her on the arm, and she turns to look into his eyes...they're dark green and cool like the depths of the lake. "I don't smile at you like *that*," he says. There's no anger in his voice...there's only concern and curiosity and the brand of intensity that has evolved from teenaged anger and angst into cool and calm logic.

Hermione sighs. "Fine," she snaps. "There's something between us." She knows it with that diamond edged and frighteningly sharp clarity. "But nothing has happened yet; we'll wait until after NEWTs, when I leave Hogwarts."

Harry doesn't explode like Hermione might have expected a year ago; he nods gravely and his eyebrows draw together in a tight frown. "Do you know what you're doing, Hermione?" he asks. "I've come to know Snape a bit, but that doesn't mean he might not still be a bitter and broken..."

Temper flashes red at the periphery of Hermione's vision, and her burgeoning headache snaps in her words like acid in water: "You don't know him at all well, then, if you can still think that." She shakes her head. "I can't believe that you..."

"Hermione," Harry interrupts, putting a hand on her arm urgently, "I'm just concerned for *you*, all right?" He squeezes her arm gently, and then moves his hand, linking his fingers together over one knee. "I can tell he's changed, but he's still very guarded with me in his letters... I'm just worried that you don't know what you're getting into..."

Hermione's surprised that Harry doesn't argue against the core of the idea of falling for Snape; it's a sharp surprise to have his unspoken, tentative approval, although it does come with a heavy dose of scepticism and concern.

"I know, Harry," she says quietly, watching the way the lake seems to breathe in soft ripples. She smiles as she thinks of seeing Severus in the water, watching his skin shimmer in the green light, being able to touch him, express the depth of what she feels in more than a subtle smile. "I know."

Harry *hmm's* softly. "You know," he says slowly, plucking a piece of grass and twirling it between finger and thumb, "I don't know anybody who has ever been right more often about things. So, I think I'm going to trust you on this one, keep your secret until you're sure."

Hermione smiles at him, and she realises that their friendship is something she treasures beyond words, beyond magic. "Thank you, Harry."

After Harry leaves to find Ginny, Hermione watches Charlie and Draco amble along the lake's edge a long distance away, and she smiles at the startling beauty of unconventional love.

A/N: Thank you to Gelsey, as always. You're a star, honey. No, a sparkle of shooting stars...an entire sky full of wisdom and light.

Thank you to everybody who reads and reviews *The Silvering Divide*. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience.

In case anybody was wondering about Severus' attire in this chapter, I've stolen that from one of my very favourite movies *Equilibrium*. There have to be more fangirls for it than me? Grin. Anyway, Christian Bale (guh) has the best outfit for the movie, and it has always reminded me sharply of our Severus.

Come June

Chapter 16 of 16

Hermione encounters a strange lake-dweller one morning. Her new friend will give her insight into the most mysterious man of them all...

This is the last time I'll ever walk down these stairs as a student.

Nostalgia, nerves, excitement and joy swirl around in Hermione's stomach like an emulsion; the odd juxtaposition of so many different emotions makes her feel a little nauseous. She presses a hand to her stomach in an effort to quell the storm. "Calm down," she soothes herself.

This emotional maelstrom is worse than the dizzying moment she experienced when she sat down to write her last NEWT this morning; worse than the ragged anxiety that made her left leg jiggle for the entire three hour exam; worse than the stubborn streak of desire that shot through her concentration when Severus walked past her table on his way to speak with the NEWT examiners.

Yes, it's true that she's felt a bit like a fish out of water at Hogwarts this school year, but this new world she's about to walk into is even more foreign. The teeming anticipation flips and curls, absorbing even more nervous tension, when the Great Doors come into sight. It feels like she's standing on the edge of a sheer cliff and all her brightest expectations lie strewn so far below it gives her intense vertigo when she tries to look at them for too long.

She jumps the last three stairs in a single bound and lands on the Entrance Hall floor stones with a loud *thump*; her beaded bag bounces off her hip with a muted thud. She pats it as if to reassure herself that her worldly belongings are still Reduced within its cavernous depths.

One of the Great Hall's doors opens, and Professor McGonagall spears a shaft of reproach from narrowed eyes in Hermione's direction. "How many times do I have to repeat that there is to be absolutely no..." Her stern expression softens when she notices Hermione. "Ah, Miss Granger. I was hoping to see you before you left."

Hermione gives her a sheepish smile; she'd forgotten the OWL students were doing their Transfiguration practical exam this afternoon. "I just stopped by your office, actually, Professor." Hermione's already said goodbye to most of the teachers...after Professor McGonagall, she's only got one more office on her list before she leaves.

Professor McGonagall clucks her tongue. "No rest for the wicked, I'm afraid." She clasps her hands in front of her, and a new expression smoothes the tight bracket of wrinkles around her hard mouth, softens her rigid posture. "I wanted to wish you the best of luck for the future, Hermione, and to tell you that it has been one of my life's greatest pleasures, watching you grow into such an accomplished witch."

A rush of pleasure at the high praise makes Hermione grin broadly. "I've had an amazing role model, Professor McGonagall; I wanted to thank you for your mentorship through the years."

Professor McGonagall waves her hand and makes *apshaw* sound, but Hermione's sure that she sees a glimmer of tears behind the old witch's square glasses. "You will be back to visit all of your old teachers?"

Hermione nods. "Oh, yes. I've been assigned to the Scottish Lochs thanks to a request from the Hogwarts Aquatic High Council. So, I'll be here quite often. Syrena, for one, would never forgive me if I didn't visit her at least once a week. I'm renting a cottage in Hogsmeade, so I won't be far."

Professor McGonagall looks mildly surprised. "Hogsmeade?"

Hermione nods and tries to quash the embarrassing thought that a rather large part of her decision to live in Hogsmeade was because she'll be close to Severus. "It's nice and central for all the lochs," she says vaguely, "and I can Floo into the Ministry for office days."

"You're on your way to Hogsmeade, then?"

Hermione nods. "I just need to say goodbye to Professor Snape, and then I'll be out of your hair, Professor."

A look that faintly resembles indigestion shifts across Professor McGonagall's face. "That's very nice of you to say goodbye to all the teachers, but just be warned that Severus is in an... odd mood today. He *smiled* at Professor Sprout in an alarmingly friendly manner this morning, and now she's disappeared off to the greenhouses to check for booby-traps."

Hermione swallows her giggle and nods. "I'll see you soon, then, Professor." She hesitates for an awkward moment, wondering whether to extend her hand or to go with her heart and give Professor McGonagall a hug. In the end, Hermione's instincts win out, and she leans forward and exchanges an inelegant hug with the older witch, smiling at McGonagall's pleased/surprised, "Oh," as she pats Hermione's shoulder blade.

Hermione's grinning when she steps into Severus' office. June has finally come, and it feels like she's been waiting for this moment for a breathless eternity. She's no longer his student, although, ironically, DADA has been her favourite subject this year because his curriculum has challenged her beyond conventional bounds.

"What do you *want*, Miss Granger?" he snaps, thumping the flat of his palm down onto a thick sheaf of exam papers. "Will *hever* be rid of you?"

Stricken, Hermione gapes at him for a moment, feeling crystalline shards of hurt begin to pierce her hope and her heart. But then she sees the slight curve of enjoyment lifting one corner of his mouth and a bold hint of challenge in his dark eyes.

She lifts her chin and returns his stare. "I won't be your student for too much longer, sir," she says, infusing her voice with as much childish exuberance as she can manage. "I just came to thank you so much for the extra lessons this year; I got an 'O' from Professor Hagrid for my Care of Magical Creatures class mark."

He drops his quill to his desk...it's the one she bought for him from Hogsmeade a few weeks ago and delivered via the box...and gives her a perfectly acidic smirk. "It was entirely my put-upon displeasure, Miss Granger. Congratulations. I do hope you enjoy your new job...traipsing about Scotland in the pouring rain sounds delightful." Hermione has to marvel at how much insincerity he manages to inject into his voice.

Hermione suppresses the childish urge to stick her tongue out at him. "It will be delightful, yes, sir, *and* I get to practice my Mermish on a daily basis," she enthuses, summoning her very widest grin. "And I'm sure my NEWT scores will all be wonderful... somebody even gave me an early congratulatory present. Look." She holds up her wrist and shakes it...the silver and shell bracelet glimmers mutely in the low, dungeon light.

Severus grimaces...it looks like he's swallowed a handful of Doxy droppings. "And you are showing me your gift from some lovesick paramour because...?"

Disdain oozes from his every pore, and Hermione comes to the conclusion that he must get some kind of thrill from arguing like this...sarcasm and irony are his drugs of choice, then. Admittedly, she's enjoying herself at the moment, too, although she hopes that he never pushes this game too far...she can see that it could get nasty very quickly.

She smiles serenely at him, wondering if he realises that he's just referred to himself as a lovesick fool. "Tsk. Humbug," she sighs under her breath.

He scowls at her. "Ten points from..."

"I'm not a student any longer, sir...you can't take points from me," she says cheerfully.

"And I am exceedingly grateful that I will never have to teach you again, Miss Granger." There's a note of truth that winds through his words, shiny like Christmas tinsel.

She smiles. "Have a lovely summer, sir, and I hope the future brings you only happiness."

He picks up the quill and slides the long, dark feather between his fingertips. "The same to you, Miss Granger," he says, glancing up at her. Although his lips are set in a thin line, his eyes hold a depth of regard that makes her want to fling herself into his lap and wind her arms around his neck and never let go.

She touches the rough, stone wall to ground herself because (and she hates to admit it) this is not the time or the place for her desires to open and bloom.

"Goodbye, *Professor Snape*."

"Goodbye, *Miss Granger*."

Hermione checks the clock again and sighs with impatience. The sound seems to echo in the living room of her cottage, although it came fully furnished and is now cluttered with the tokens of her life. Perhaps it's not just the tangible reminders of friends and love that is important, she thinks. Perhaps it's the living aura of laughter and memories that makes a place feel like home. Harry and Ginny are coming for lunch tomorrow, though, and maybe she can make a start on that, then. She's sure Harry's going to want to hear all about her date with Severus, as well.

She slides her fingertips across the curve of her bracelet, and she tries to will her heart to sink back into her chest so that she can breathe properly. His gift arrived in the box yesterday morning before she went down to write her DADA NEWT. While the beautiful bangle enchanted her, it was the accompanying note that made her exultant (and expectant and ecstatic and exhilarated...and all the big emotional and bright e's):

June has come at last. If you would agree to have dinner with me tomorrow night, the bracelet is also a temporary Portkey, which will activate at 7 o'clock.

While she watches the second-hand of the clock sweep past the twelve again (just three more minutes!), Hermione slides the hem of her long, summery dress up to check that her Shaving Charm has done a proper job, and she makes sure that the strap of her bathing costume isn't peeking out. It's maddening not to know where she's going, but she can't keep his promise of going beneath the divide out of her mind. She eyes the bottle of perfume on the coffee table and decides it would be overkill to apply another squirt. Her ruby-tipped toes curl into the leather soles of her sandals as the hour approaches, and she holds her breath, anticipating the tug of the Portkey.

When it comes, Hermione feels like it's the sharp jolt she needs to really make her aware that she's being pulled into the next phase of her life.

Hermione feels the steadying pressure of long fingers at her elbow before she opens her eyes, and when the disorienting sensation of the magical dimension shift has ebbed and she looks around, she gasps with surprise.

Lit by glass orbs of flickering Bluebell Flames, the wooden cottages that encircle the forest clearing look enchanted, like they've grown right from the soul of the trees. To the right, an arc of water glimmers in the twilight, and far across the water, perched atop a cliff, is Hogwarts...its windows are lit with golden specks of Lumos light, making it look like a castle from a Muggle fairy tale.

She turns to face Severus, more interested in seeing him than absorbing the view. Her heart skitters nervously and her throat is dry and tight. Because it's impossible for her to hold the enormity of such a moment inside without feeling overwhelmed, she feels tears try to prickle behind her eyes as she looks at him without an inflexible boundary obscuring her view. He's wearing the same jeans and boots as he did that afternoon in Sydney, but it's his shirt that makes her smile, takes her breath away with its bold yet sly implication: The Gryffindor-red cotton fits snugly across his torso, and nothing could hold greater truth than the slogan that proclaims, "The Chosen One."

"Hi," she says softly, and she's mortified to realise that a wash of shyness tightens in her chest, pulls on the tension between them and tightens it so hard that her cheeks redden.

He swallows and she watches the slide of his Adam's apple as he shrugs off his own web of nervousness, perhaps even his own astonishment that she's actually here. "Hello, Hermione," he says huskily. "You... look beautiful." His fingertips slide from her skin, and he gestures towards a table, which has been set for dinner, nearby.

She really wants to say, "Sod dinner," and get on with crossing the boundary properly, but the arrival of June seems to have brought nervous hesitation along with all the desperate longing. "Where are we?" she asks, giving him a smile as he pulls her chair out for her in gentlemanly fashion.

"This is the selkie village," he tells her as he takes a seat, and then he glances up at her through his thick eyelashes. "They generally use it around the new moon..."

Heat settles low in her stomach in a warm pool of molten desire. "Oh, yes." It's not quite full moon, now, but she remembers staring out of the window last new moon and wondering if Severus felt any special pull of desire around that time of month. "I've never seen it before." She smiles when he gestures to two bottles of wine and invites her to choose one. She glances at the large platter of antipasto in the centre of the table. "Uh... the red, please."

"It is heavily protected, particularly on the forest side," he explains as he deftly pours a glass of wine for them both. "You should be added to the security bypass when you start work." He smirks. "In fact... you may even be responsible for the upkeep of security," he drawls. The lazy crawl of his voice slips into the tension she feels and loosens it slightly.

"I'll be sure to do my best to keep the selkies happy," she teases him, and she delights in the way his eyes widen fractionally, his lips part as he searches for an adequate reply.

"I... think they would... appreciate that," he tells her after a few moments.

She smiles and picks up her fork, chooses her very favourites from the platter...bitter, black olives, artichoke, spicy salami, rich and sharp cheese. "Thank you; this is one of my favourite ways to eat."

Severus wraps a sliver of salmon around his fork. "I'm not fond of Hogwarts' stodgy fare," he says simply. "I'm pleased you feel the same."

They trade conversation and smiles over dinner, and the elastic bond stretches and pulls between them so that Hermione can almost feel the presence of his foot near hers under the table. And she's positive that he's stealing glances just like she is...she's building new images of him in her mind, memories of him away from the castle and away from a past life when he was her teacher.

When Hermione's just about full, she pulls an olive pip from between her teeth and tilts her head. "What are you doing over the summer, Severus?" she asks.

"I do not have Petrificussed plans, yet," he says vaguely, and he picks up a napkin and wipes his mouth.

She watches the way he avoids her direct gaze, now, and she decides that he's waiting to see, just like she is. The thought makes her want to disappear behind one of the large tree trunks and do a happy dance, squeal with delight. He rubs his lips with his index finger in a rather nervous gesture, and a glint of metal reflects in a sparkle.

"You're wearing your ring again," she notes.

He *hmm's* softly and glances at his hand. "I always have it with me. I usually wear it around my neck, out of sight. I'd Transfigure it into a watch or a bracelet, but it prefers to be a ring."

Hermione laughs at the way he attributes a wilful personality to the ring, although some powerfully magical objects do seem to develop a mind of their own. She's sure Hogwarts is practically sentient in some regards, observing and guiding generations of magicfolk who pass through it with an immense and detached wisdom.

"What do the Runes say?" she asks.

Severus shifts his chair until he's sitting next to her, and then he slides the ring from his thumb and drops it into the centre of his palm, tilts his hand towards her so that she can look at it. The flickering cerulean light slides and dances fluidly along the curve of the silver ring; it looks like the metal has absorbed the light into its very atoms.

Hermione tilts her head and tries to translate the line of Runes that are etched into the surface of the metal, but they don't belong to a futhark she is familiar with. "Which Runic alphabet is that?" she asks.

"It's Old Mermish."

Hermione remembers reading about rings and copper bracelets that can hold spells like Shield Charms and Chastity Charms within the ordered latticework of atoms. "Is it restraining some kind of protection spell?"

"No... Watch..." He touches the tip of his index finger to the ring, and it seems to swell slightly for a fraction of a second, pulsing with visceral magic that vibrates against her skin. And then the ring spills into a ripple of silver; falls through his long fingers with a metallic tinkle; expands into a fabric that looks like the finest silver mesh or woven strands of Pensilver.

"Oh!" Hermione breathes. "Is that..."

"My Airgead, yes."

"It's... absolutely beautiful." Her fingers hover in the air between them; she's uncertain of whether it's rude to just touch it because it is probably an intensely personal item for any selkie.

He chuckles softly. "Yes, you may."

She strokes her fingers along the silver skin...it's cool and slick, but when she examines her fingertips she sees they're not wet. "It doesn't feel like scales or skin," she murmurs.

Severus slides the skin through the 'O' of his thumb and middle finger, and he shrugs. "It's likely called a skin because it is worn as such in the water, but it is a magical item at the heart of matters. It wouldn't do to have a smelly fish skin lying around." He quirks a lopsided smile at her.

She traces her fingers along the fabric again until she meets his hand. "Severus," she whispers, "can we go into the water, now?"

"Would you please turn around, now, Hermione?"

Severus is standing, barefoot and bare-chested, at the water's edge, and Hermione realises that she's pressed the Gillyweed she's holding into a tight elastic ball with the sheer force of her desire for him.

"Oh... ah..." A warm blush burns up her neck, and she turns away from him reluctantly.

She hears the tantalising rasp of a zipper, followed by the whisper of denim sliding against bare skin. Awareness and arousal make her feel dizzy when she realises that he's standing naked behind her, now.

Once she's heard a loud splash, she turns back towards the lake. His skin shimmers subtly in the grey twilight, and she takes a deep breath before sliding her dress over her head to reveal the simple, black one-piece she's worn. She wades into the warm water and stops when she's at knee-depth.

"*Come, Cass*" he says, staring at her with such intensity that she cannot chew the Gillyweed fast enough.

It takes her a moment to adjust to breathing through gills again once she's in the water, and she steadies herself with webbed fingers as she turns in the green water, searching for her selkie. And then he swims into sight, streaking in a wide circle around her, his black hair streaming behind him like a silk banner in the wind.

When he stops to float in front of her, he's got a tentative expression on his face...fear, perhaps, that the heart of him is too foreign, too strange for her to love. But she's had months to absorb and consider the implications of a relationship with him, and she's here, now; she's made her decision.

She stares at him, greedily taking in all the ways he's different, all the ways he's exactly the same. His bright silver tail does not begin abruptly at his waist; the large scales grade into finer ones over his hipbones until they blend into his shimmering skin like specks of glitter. It's like the mesh of the Airgead has melted into his skin, shifts just below the surface. She can't help but notice a faint bulge right where his cock should be.

She drifts closer to him and smiles. "Hello, Gallchobhar," she murmurs. Her soft greeting bubbles to the surface on the light current. Perhaps, one day, he won't carry the foreigner's name with his family, but she hopes that he'll resolve that in time, find a way to forgive his mother eventually.

"Hello, Cass," he replies.

She reaches out her hand and touches him, traces her fingers down his ribs. She catches his eye and smiles again as she feels slick scales on the side of his hip. The magical world is a place where people step right out of the pages of the most beautiful fantasy books. This is her home, her place; it only makes sense that she'd have a love who is rather more magical than ordinary humans.

Severus slides his hand over hers and then pulls her so close that she's pressed right up against his tail and chest, and their clouds of hair mingle in the water. And when his lips touch hers, sending a thrill rushing through her blood, he begins to spin them in a lazy spiral through the water. She soon realises it's an advantage to have gills, not to have to breathe, because the slide of his tongue with hers is so sensual and erotic she never wants it to end.

Hermione doesn't notice that, far above them, the sunset has turned the silvering divide blood-red... like passion.

~The End~

A/N: Thank you to everybody who has read and reviewed *The Silvering Divide*. Writing this story has been a shining and silver experience. There is a short Christmas sequel to this story, called Silver Bells, which takes place six months after this chapter... coming soon.

And thank you, as always, to Gelsey. Big Hugs.

This is the original prompt from Mollyssister (thank you!), which set my synapses on fire and eventually blossomed into *The Silvering Divide*. Obviously, I've plucked certain threads from the prompt and twisted them inside-out so that they fit my own nefarious needs :D

What if the cause of Snape's pale skin is not caused from too much time in the dungeons or because he is a vampire. What if he is a merman? What if there is a secret tunnel from his room to the lake? He can pass for human for limited periods/days before he must return to the lake. I challenge you to take this theory and write me a non-crack SS/HG romance. She discovers his affliction while still a student or he tells her before they are about to make a merbaby? Can Hermione somehow turn mermaid and live with him? Why is bothering with life above the sea? Can you do it? Do you think I am crazy?